



Above, Nora Naranjo Morse:  
*Swimming* (detail), 2012, mixed media  
and clay, 16 x 137 x 13 inches

Left, *Gatherings*, 2012, mixed media,  
67 x 90 x 25 inches

Below, *County Road 581 (b)*, 2012,  
mixed media and clay, 21 x 9 x 9 inches

**Nora Naranjo Morse: *Cause & Effect*, Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, 702 ½ Canyon Road, 992-0711; exhibit through Oct. 13**

Nora Naranjo Morse is one of the nation's most creative and innovative artists. Pay no mind that she is a woman, and pay no mind that she's Native American. Naranjo Morse is simply an artist of great ideas and is capable of executing those concepts into works that are thought provoking and beautiful. That's high praise, and one look at *Cause & Effect*, her current show at Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, is enough to warrant such regard.

With 16 recently conceived pieces of mixed media and clay, *Cause & Effect* is Naranjo Morse's first one-person exhibit since her representation in *Lucky Number Seven*, SITE Santa Fe's International Biennial in 2008, and it marks her second solo show at Chiaroscuro. The inspiration for these new works came from her realization that a sacred clay pit on Pueblo land was extremely close to a trash dump, which sparked concerns about global, human, and environmental issues and the way in which we, Indian and non-Indian, live in the contemporary world. Taking up two gallery spaces and the main entryway, *Cause & Effect* consists of both large and small works that stand freely, are suspended from the ceiling, and are placed on plinths and pedestals.

For immediate effect — and not just because it is the largest piece in the show — consider *Gatherings*, a magnificent work of whimsy and drama that greets you in the gallery's entryway. Hanging from above by thin wires, but appearing as though it's hovering in front of the wall, *Gatherings* is a biomorphic, ovoid-shaped construct that, despite its scale at 67 x 90 x 25 inches, feels lightweight and fragile, as though one could easily manipulate its shape by simply bending its wrapped wire construction. Its outer contoured, endoskeletal-like framework resembles not only a discarded snakeskin but also an armature for a yet-to-be finished sculpture. But the multicolored wrappings around the wires, along with that colorful juncture points that bind the wires together, clearly indicate a completed concept. Dispersed within the interior of the self-contained piece are polychrome rings of various sizes, assembled to perhaps imply a gathering of objects;



a gathering of people, tribes, or nations; or a multitude of swirling ideas. Or are we in fact looking at a section of brain replete with its network of nerves cells? Taking it further, if one envisions *Gatherings* set flat on a low platform, it could be an outsized basket or bowl containing imaginary foodstuffs.

Standing erect in the innermost gallery are four totemic wire sculptures that may strike you as small (the tallest is 106 inches, with a circumference of 14 inches), rickety cell towers posing as artwork. That interpretation would be fun enough, but *From the Bottom Up* numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are reinterpreted incarnations of more solid, painted clay totems that Naranjo Morse created in 2006-2007 (which were featured in the exhibition *Unlimited Boundaries: Dichotomy of Place in Contemporary Native American Art* at the Albuquerque Museum of Art & History in 2007). Unlike those works, titled collectively *The Black, White, and Brown of It — Transcending the Landscape of the Same*, the current pieces (like *Gatherings*) look like armatures with banded circles interspersed from bottom to top, some serving as critical support mechanisms. Like so many tree trunks or human bodies, each totem has a peculiar identity based on the height, number, and size of its banded rings; its color combinations (or lack thereof); and its distinct posture.

In the same room is another suspended piece that, according to gallery director John Addison, began as a totem but ended up turned into a circle. Smaller than *Gatherings* and not as colorful or as ovoid in shape — its largest dimension is 37 inches — the untitled piece dangles close to a wall and struck me as a see-through cocoon or some sort of egg sac, the eggs being the variously sized black orbs contained within it. On another level, maybe it's a manifestation of a black hole with asteroids held captive inside its matrix. Then again, it may be allegorical in nature, for what goes around comes around. I couldn't help but think that if this work were installed in another place with just the right lighting, it might allow for a wondrous play of shadows.

*County Road 581* is the shared title of four smaller pieces displayed on pedestals. Each wire-and-clay construct could be held in two hands, and each represents a dwelling of some kind — some raised on ball supports, one with a rounded roof, and others with pointed roofs similar to the tops of pyramids. Each has only one doorway, and one sports a yellow ladder running up the side. Some viewers might see these as funky bird cages, while others might imagine miniature sweat lodges or one-room shelters thrashed by harsh weather conditions. Whatever Naranjo Morse saw on County Road 581, her retelling of that experience is done with whimsy and fun, and perhaps with a nod to Native history.

Unlike the artist's wire-and-clay pieces, *Squash Pod* is a triad of free-standing, teardrop-shaped micaceous and Santa Clara clay sculptures — minimally colored in black and terra cotta. The tallest measures 34 inches, with a flared circular base of 12 inches in circumference. Despite their simple, abstract personae — think Disney-like creations from *Fantasia* — the organic shapes and gentle curves import a natural elegance as well as a sense of movement. In addition, the three rings that cap each squash pod add a touch of playfulness.

The only piece in the show that contains a figure — and a tiny one at that — is *Swimming*, an elongated, wrapped-wire sculpture (137 inches in length, suspended from the ceiling, with concentric circular bands running through it) that tapers to a point at each end. It reminded me of the whale skeletons hanging in the grand hallways of natural history museums. And knifing through this airy vortex of banded rings is a clay figure approximately 6 inches long — presumably female, based on the body shape — fully outstretched like a diver. I can only imagine the number of allegorical references at play here, not to mention possible creation myths. It's a powerful statement. But as with Naranjo Morse's untitled piece, the opportunity to extend the visual dynamics with shadows cast on nearby walls is lost — a minor gripe about a terrific show.