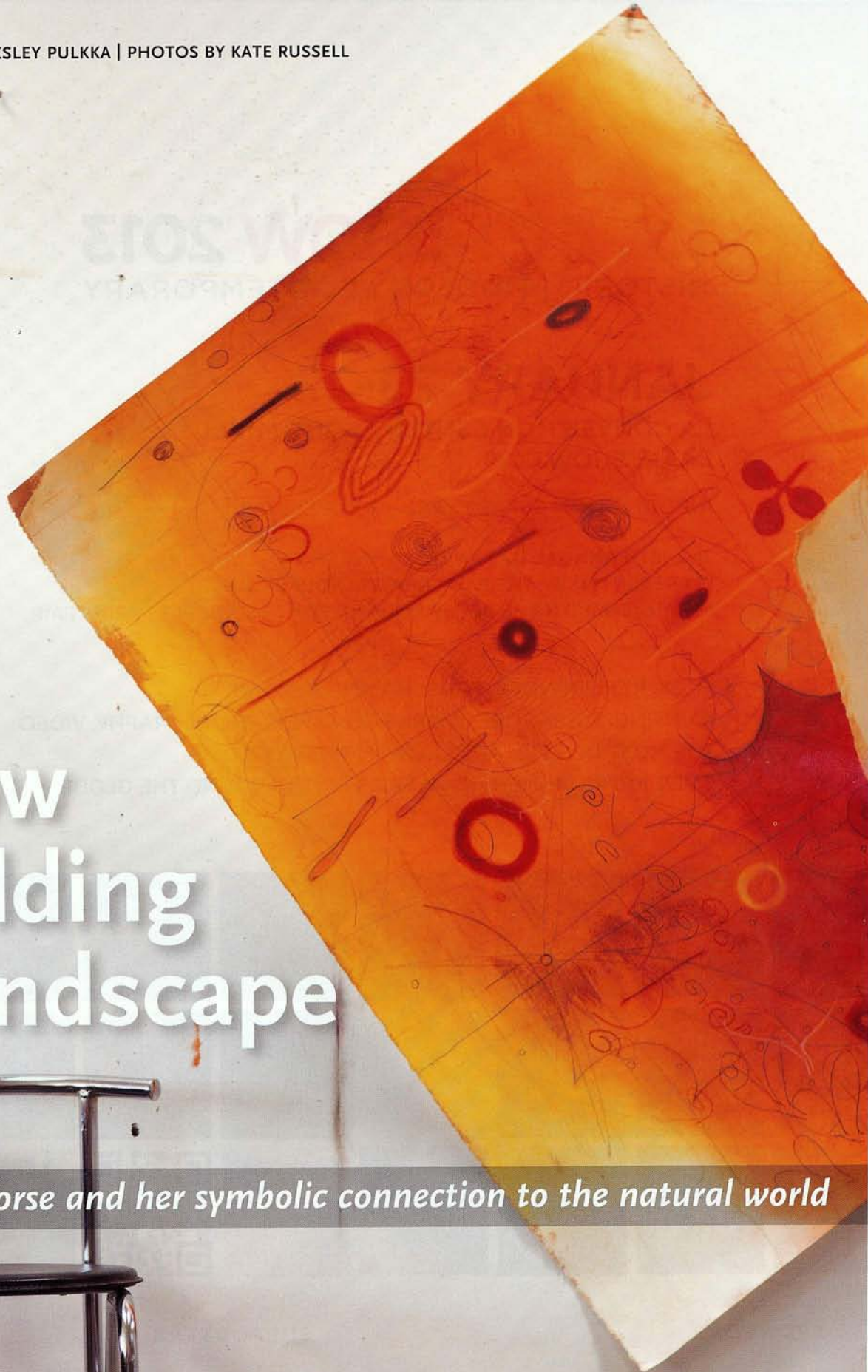


# A Slow Unfolding of Landscape

*Emmi Whitehorse and her symbolic connection to the natural world*







Whitehorse smooths wet gesso onto small canvases in preparation for mounting the works shown at right. Opposite: An untitled work-in-progress.

Artist Emmi Whitehorse is internationally renowned for her atmospheric abstractions that use color, symbol, and metaphor to celebrate the life force that makes our existence possible.

“I have chosen to focus on nature, on landscape,” she wrote in a recent artist statement. “My paintings tell the story of knowing land over time—of being completely, microcosmically within a place. I am defining a particular space, describing a particular place. They are purposely meditative and meant to be seen slowly. The intricate language of symbols refers to specific plants, people, and experiences.”

Whitehorse’s spacious studio ten minutes south of Santa Fe offers her the contemplative solitude and peaceful ambiance that her work demands. “I come to the studio to escape all of the noise and bother,” she says during a recent visit. “Here I can relax and focus on my work.”

Her studio is filled with work in preparation for a solo show at Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art Gallery in Santa Fe. These timeless, contemplative paintings, drawings, and prints emblematically embrace the fragile and ephemeral spirit and raw energy within our living environment.

Whitehorse entered the world 54 years ago on the Navajo reservation outside Crownpoint, New Mexico. Her mother was tending

sheep at a winter graze and went into labor during a heavy snowstorm. She had to ride home on horseback to catch a ride in her husband’s pickup truck down bumpy, winding, and unplowed roads to the nearest hospital in Crownpoint. The perilous journey consumed the rest of the day. Fortunately, Whitehorse waited until early the next morning to be born.

“My childhood was spent playing and tending sheep in a landscape that seemed magical and endless,” she says. “It was a gift to be able to spend time alone watching the animals. My only real frustration was with the goats—[they] always had their own ideas. The goats would wander, and, of course, the sheep followed.”

Whitehorse did not have conventional art materials as a child but she and her friends would make art with what fell to hand. “We used to draw on these really fine deposits of silt that we found in the washes,” Whitehorse recalls. “If you didn’t like the drawing you could just smooth them away with your hand. Like an Etch A Sketch®. The drawings we liked would be left overnight where they would collect lizard tracks or get changed by the wind. We also drew on rocks. It was fun to find them again and see if we could improve on them.”

The turning point came when Whitehorse won an award for one of her abstract paintings in a statewide art competition at her

high school. “It was a strong affirmation that I could really be an artist,” she says. “Once I realized that I could still make art and study, the academics came easily.”

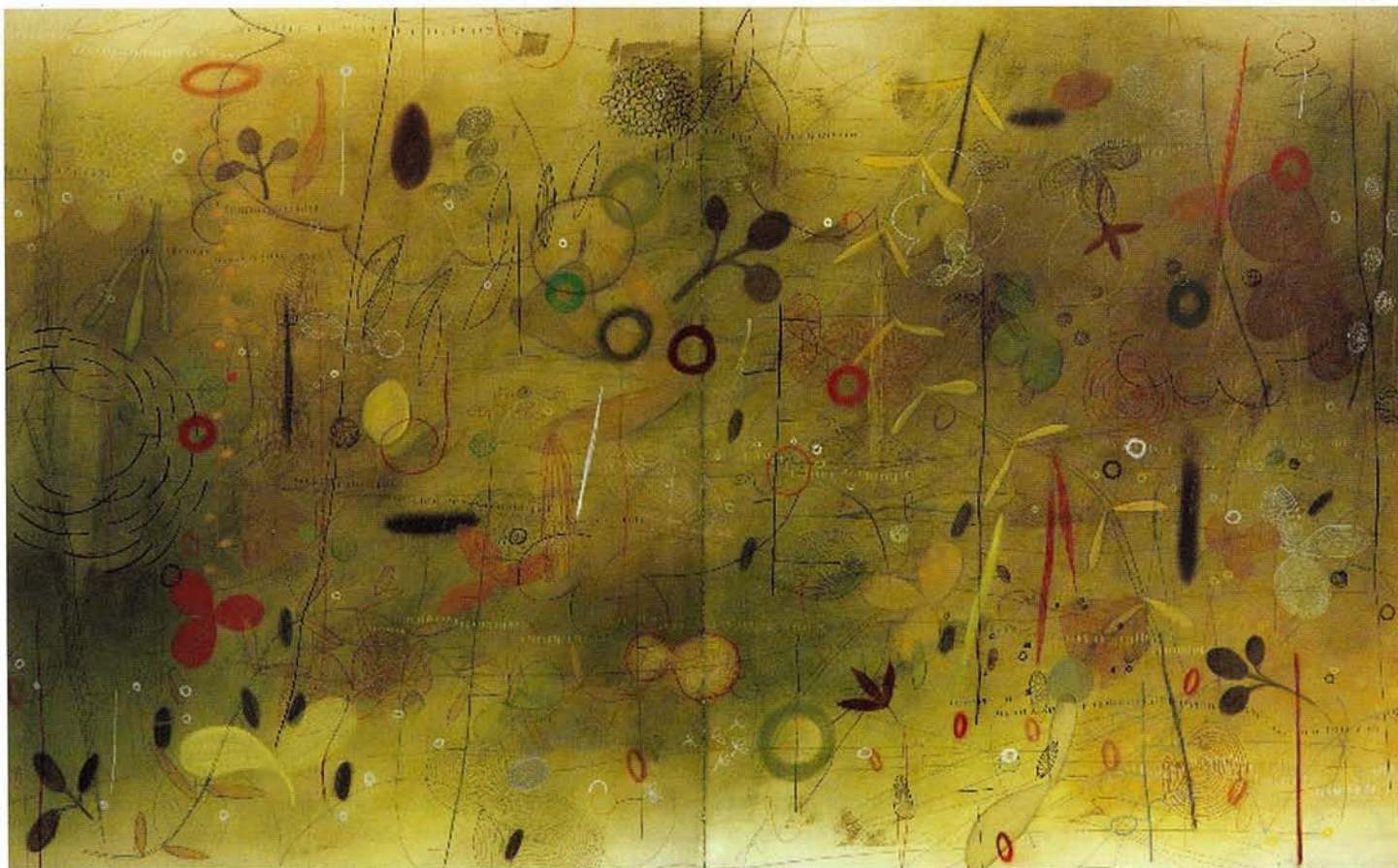
Though her parents and grandmother—who was a weaver—lived traditional Navajo lives, they wanted Whitehorse to excel in school and get the best possible education. “When I was accepted into UNM my parents hoped I would study something serious. I couldn’t bear to tell them I was an art major. They would have been shocked to know I was drawing naked people,” Whitehorse says with a laugh.

Her university path was not always smooth. When Whitehorse wrote an insightful paper on the influence of American Indian arts on mainstream contemporary art, she received pushback from her professors and fellow students. It’s a shame her teachers had not read artist and art theorist Marsden Hartley’s treatise on the same subject, written in the 1920s.

Though she fast-tracked through her Master of Arts program with the intent to become a Tamarind Institute master printer, Whitehorse soon realized that her heart was not in teaching. Instead she focused on making her way in the art world, and was soon exhibiting in galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe.

One of her early exhibitions was a 1983 show titled *Native Artists of the Eighties* at the Sacred Circle Gallery in Seattle, owned and operated by the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation. Former gallery founding director Jim Halliday (1981–1985) said in a recent interview, “Emmi Whitehorse was recommended to us by Jaune Quickto-See Smith, who was helping us identify emerging Indian artists. [Whitehorse] was absolutely one of the greatest discoveries that we came across. The thing that I loved about her work is that it had true depth that allowed the viewer to spatially enter her world. In a self-induced meditative state she pulled the images from her life experiences,





*Prickly Green II* (2012), oil and chalk on paper mounted on canvas

childhood memories, and imagination.”

The Sacred Circle show occurred in the third year of her professional career. Whitehorse had already exhibited in New York City and Venice, Italy. Since then her works have been exhibited in major museums and galleries throughout the United States and Europe, including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tucson, Santa Fe, Denver, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland.

Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art in Santa Fe currently represents Whitehorse, and gallery director John Addison has enthusiastically followed her 30-year artistic development. “Emmi’s career has grown over the years among those collecting Native American arts as well as making that crossover to mainstream collectors of all types of art,” he says. “She’s really in demand just as a painter, without regard to her Navajo heritage.”

Addison points out that Emmi has recently come full circle. Her early work was very much grounded in nature, but starting in the late 1990s it became increasingly abstract. In the last few years, however, her work has returned to more landscape-based

imagery, incorporating seedpods, ferns, and other recognizable botanicals—as witness her latest series, *Opuntia*, the scientific designation for a genus of cactus.

Author and critic Lucy Lippard wrote in a 1997 Tucson Museum of Art catalogue essay: “In the recent work, Whitehorse has traveled into more remote territory, looking through one world into another . . . There is a weightless quality to her images . . . Her paintings seem to catch the momentary pause before these light transparent creatures blow away again . . . The forms in her new works appear to be pressed into the retina, mediating between self and landscape, melting boundaries, forming and reforming from one painting to another.”

Whitehorse’s renderings are both spatially expansive and highly detailed, bearing witness to bird calls, buzzing insects, rustling leaves, animal tracks by a streambed, spring breezes, winter snows, worm paths in the mud, and the omnipresent viscous mass of ambient air, water, and earth that are truly in constant motion—embodying the layered vibrations between the

microcosm and macrocosm.

Whitehorse is married to author and cultural arts business owner Mark Bahti, who earned an MFA in American Indian arts and is currently working on his doctorate. The couple has residences in Santa Fe and Tucson, and Whitehorse is currently working on a series of green paintings inspired by the cacti that dominate her Arizona home’s backyard.

“The cacti are what [confront] you when you live in Tucson,” she says, explaining her interest. “It’s kind of odd that you’re just surrounded by cacti. I understand why Jim Waid paints cacti as alien things. I’m also impressed by their strangeness. It’s the green that I find interesting as well as disturbing, so I’m trying to come to terms with it and make peace. Not my favorite color, but . . .” Whitehorse’s words trail off into laughter.

Ultimately, Whitehorse hopes that her artwork, regardless of subject matter, will help her viewers become more aware of their surroundings and connect to the energy and spirit that exists within the living environment. \*