



VISUAL ARTS

David Douglas at Donabe

BY DENA MILLER

“THE VIEWER FINISHES A WORK of art,” said American artist Jeff Koons, and some of those viewers are so moved they go on to create their own works painted with words. It’s called ekphrasis.

The Greek-derived word — defined as “a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art,” according to Merriam-Webster — may be unfamiliar to many, but in reality, it is something that surrounds Taosños. A thriving local scene with both a plethora of fine historical and contemporary artists, and the authors whose inspired words bring new depth to our perspectives on the works surrounding us, are ubiquitous.

On Friday June 2, visitors to Donabe Gallery and Grill will have a very special opportunity to explore the concept of ekphrasis when photographer David Douglas unveils both his latest collection of stunning black and white photographs and his inaugural book, “Poetry in Black and White: The Poetry of John D. Call inspired by the Photography of David L. Douglas.” A reception will be held from 5 to 7 p.m., which is

open to all.

“Poetry in Black and White” is a serendipitous collaboration between Douglas and Call, who is cousin to Douglas. As Douglas relates, “Out of the blue, with no warning, poems about two of my photographs appeared in my email from Johnny. We never discussed this in any way. He simply looked at some of the photos on my website and started writing.”

The two were encouraged by family and fellow artists to continue the creative partnership. “This project may be thought of as a duet with photographer and poet, each practicing his own art, resulting in a kind of harmony greater than each art alone,” mused Douglas. “The harmony is not always a harmony of agreement, but is always a harmony of the soul — each one looking through the lens of his own art.”

The walls of Donabe will be filled with 40 outstanding selections of Douglas’ monochromatic work, including many of those featured in the book. While illuminating his technical mastery of contrast, shadow, shape and texture, they also speak to the depth to which his heart is engrossed with the beauty of New Mexico. Of course,



COURTESY PHOTO

‘Reaching for the Sky’ by David Douglas

some seize the enormity of land and sky; others, the intimacy of a spiderweb or small stand of thistles. In the abandoned buildings that dot the landscape, Douglas tenderly captures their forlornness while Call’s poems evoke the past, present and future with wonder.

“Reaching for the Sky to Embrace the Clouds” is one of Douglas’ iconic photographs and that which he selected to grace the back jacket cover of the book. It is a familiar sight to locals and visitors, standing sentinel at the upper mouth of the Rio Grande gorge; it is a tree that no longer blooms come summer. Of it, Call wrote, “The dead tree, still living in its naked beauty, reaches up to the heavens for one last blessing.” This is the emotional artistry of ekphrasis.

Douglas caught the photography bug when he accompanied his father, a college professor, to Ethiopia, where a new college was being established. “I kind of took over the Nikon camera he brought with him while I was doing my freshman year there.”

After returning to the States and graduating college, Douglas went back to Ethiopia with the Peace Corps, accompanied, of course, by the Nikon. “After my service, I moved to New York City where I worked in the administrative offices of the Corps and then met my wife, Karen,” and continued to pursue photography.

“I bought rolls of film, cut it myself and rolled it into canisters, and Karen let me turn our bathroom into a dark room. I loved taking pictures in New York,” he recalled, “immersing myself in its unique structural elements. Black and white photography was particu-

larly well-suited to it.”

Their move to New Mexico in 1988, however, gave the word “unique” a totally different context.

The sweeping landscapes afforded little with which he could get his bearings: “Sometimes, it was only a cloud in the sky that lent perspective to a horizon that stretched endlessly before me.” Yet, out of what he described as a time of “floundering” to acclimate to his new surroundings, Douglas built his most important collection of photographs to date, each depicting the land’s vastness and isolation.

Today, “I am honored to be offered a solo show at Donabe, and to [Donabe curator] Jim Gerkin for seeing my vision,” Douglas said.

Signed copies of “Poetry in Black and White” will be available for purchase at the reception. The exhibit hangs through Labor Day weekend, noted Douglas, who is on the board of directors of Taos Artist Organization and who will be making Donabe his stop along the T.A.O. trail.

Donabe Gallery and Grill is located at 133 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. For further information, please call 505-263-4011 or visit shutteringexperiences.com.



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‘Mailbox with a view’ by David Douglas