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Enhancing Mother Nature: Hopi carver takes on a giant project

By Megan Bennett / Journal North Reporter

Friday, November 2nd, 2018 at 12:02am



Gerry Quotskuyva, Hopi, from Sedona, Ariz., works on a piece of cottonwood root that he cured for 14 years for his project titled "The Gnarly Root Project (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

It's a project that's been 14 years in the making.

When Gerry Quotskuyva arrived in Santa Fe for an artist fellowship at the School for Advanced Research, he came with an untouched, four-foot-tall piece of raw cottonwood root.

It had been sitting in his garage drying for more than a decade. With cottonwood, the dryer it is, the easier it is to carve.

For many years, the Hopi artist had an idea of how he wanted to create something from this massive, uniquely shaped piece of raw material. But it wasn't until he recently started removing the bark that he clearly saw the story.

"The wood started talking to me," Quotskuyva said at his SAR studio. "And every day ... as I'm working on bringing out one of the figures, I get more messages."

"The Gnarly Root Project," with which he hopes to use carvings of katsinam and representations of Hopi culture to make a "statement of the time," is the focus of his residency here in New Mexico.

According to Quotskuyva, who is based in Sedona, Ariz., the wood was ready about two years ago and he now finally has the time he needs for the project.



This bronze sculpture by Gerry Quotskuyva is titled “Butterfly Girl.” (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

He started his Native Artist Fellow Program at SAR at the end of September and will leave in December. Quotskuyva will host an artist talk and open studio Nov. 15 to discuss the project and provide an inside look at his artistic process.

According to Elysia Poon, curator of education for SAR’s Indian Arts Research Center, the Native Artist Fellow Program is designed for artists with projects that can push their personal and artistic boundaries.

“He really believed this would push him to the next level,” Poon said of Quotskuyva and “The Gnarly Root Project.”

Large-form sculptures are a new venture for Quotskuyva, who has made a name for himself as a contemporary katsina doll carver for the past 25 years. Once dubbed the “Michelangelo of Hopi carvers” by a Tucson newspaper, he retired that practice earlier this year – something he said he did out of respect for his collectors.

In addition to more than 30 private collectors who own between 16 and 24 of his dolls, Quotskuyva has also contributed works to permanent collections at Cincinnati’s Xavier University and Indianapolis’ Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art. Now, he’s been exploring other media, likening the process to “soul-searching.”

He said he hadn’t found another form that “really spoke to” him like the dolls until he started working on large-scale projects “These guys are – the bigger pieces,” he said. The first piece he finished at SAR was a six-foot wooden sculpture with a handful of katsina figures carved within.



Gerry Quotskuyva, Hopi, from Sedona, Ariz., works on a piece of cottonwood root that he cured for 14 years for his project titled “The Gnarly Root Project”. He is the artist in residence at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Quotskuyva plans to use both sides of the big cottonwood piece. He found it in Arizona growing parallel to the ground along a body of water – an intentionally vague geographic description in the tradition of katsina carvers keeping their wood sources secret, he said.

The side that grew in the water is “gnarly” indeed, with several shoots going off in different directions. Some have fused together and others grew around a large stone, which remains entangled in the wood. Quotskuyva carved the wood into the shape of a hand that looks like it holds the rock.

The other side of the big root, which faced upward toward the sky, is completely smooth.



A detail from “The Gnarly Root Project.” (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

“There’s a lot of unique characteristics about this piece that you just do not find,” said Quotskuyva. “So, basically, I’m taking Mother Nature’s artwork and enhancing it in this case.”

While his project is still in its early stages – he plans to get started in Santa Fe and possibly partner with museums to host trunk shows where he could finish carving and painting the piece – he envisions sculpting about 30 katsinam into the cottonwood, mostly of female figures.

He described the work as a matriarchal piece and referred to how katsina dolls were originally created as teaching tools for Hopi children.

“Consequently, the most important figure is the grandmother,” he said, pointing to the top of the piece, where he has carved the grandmother katsina known as Ha Hai-I Wuhti.

“That’s why I have her at the highest point. Behind her is the Crow Mother, which represents your mother. She’s responsible for the ceremony, bringing the children into the societies and everything.”

Below the Crow Mother, who is looking down, he has plans to carve children at play.

Also on the “gnarly” side, he wants to carve female katsinam in flight. Between the figures will be representations of the art forms that Hopi women have traditionally been responsible for, such as basketweaving and pottery.

“In part, what this whole piece is, is a statement about the time, in that most indigenous communities are matriarchal,” Quotskuyva said. “And while they may have some political problems within themselves ... I think it’s important that we turn the tables and start looking at the wisdom of what I refer to as the feminine divine.

“It’s important that we start listening to the women in our lives, and start adapting and find some leadership that more so represents the people.”



Gerry Quotskuyva works on a piece of the cottonwood root that he cured for 14 years. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Though Quotskuyva’s original concept for the smooth side was to sculpt the evolution of pueblo architecture, he recently felt called to carve diorama-like scenes of a men working “in peace and harmony with Mother Nature.” He plans to depict what Hopi men have been traditionally responsible for – coal-gatheirng and harvesting, as well as a few of the male katsinam that represent those practices.

To show equality between genders in Hopi culture, he’s carved a katsina figure at the top of the piece in which one side is the male version and the other side is the female. Sharing one headdress is the cloud maiden, Shalak Mana, with male counterpart Shalak Taka.

“They individually worked their fields,” he said of the two groups. “But they also worked with helping each other and everything. The men have certain responsibilities and the women have certain responsibilities, both in everyday life and ceremonial life.”

On the edge of the cottonwood as Quotskuyva found it were two projections resembling horns. Quotskuyva said this reminded him of the clown katsina Koshari and he plans to carve him like he's hanging on to the edge of the root.

The clown's story is also one that he thinks is relevant for today. During ceremonies, clowns represent the life cycle. They go from being children to adults. Quotskuyva said that, as an adult, the clown becomes corrupt – something the artist said society is seeing a lot of right now. However, the disciplinary katsinam come out and turn him good again.

"He in himself tells a story that we all need to hear right now," Quotskuyva said. "Yeah, it happens, but if you allow yourself to be humble, you can bring yourself to be a good person and making good contributions to society. That's my statement with this piece."

The idea of seeing the wood itself as the art form and simply "enhancing" it is exciting to Quotskuyva, though he says that is not a particular challenge for him.

"Some of my best pieces came from the most unique shapes of wood, and someone would show it to me and, before they even set it down, I could already see what I wanted it to be," he explained. "It's something I truly enjoy exploring. In a way, I feel like I'm pushing the envelope a little more."

Contemporary style

Quotskuyva, who picked up the art of creating katsina dolls in his mid-30s, said he always had the desire to push the traditional craft "into the fine art world." He took up carving after working as a chef, including in the film industry for the crews of movies such as "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" and "Heartbreak Ridge," and nearly getting a degree in electrical engineering.



Gerry Quotskuyva took up carving after working as a chef, including in the film industry, and almost getting a degree in electrical engineering. After being taught ice-carving, he learned to visualize what he wanted to create out of a base material. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Toward the end of his culinary career, he had been taught ice-carving, a skill he said helped him learn to visualize what he wanted to create out of a base material. It was a skill that proved helpful when, 18 credits shy of getting his electrical engineering degree, he was in need of money. His mother told him to make artwork and she could sell it for him at craft shows. This is when he started carving the katsina dolls.

"What it did is sparked that creative side of me again," he said. "So I quit college to become an artist that close to having an electrical engineering degree. And I'm glad I did because I think I've already earned (more than from) a lifetime of being an electrical engineer."

His family is from the Hopi Second Mesa village of Shungopavi. But as someone who grew up near Flagstaff, outside the Hopi reservation, Quotskuyva said he learned about Hopi culture and traditions from listening to family members stopping to visit and from summers with his grandfather, also a carver.

"So I got a lot of exposure that way and a lot of fond memories from when I was out there; it's just I didn't grow up the traditional way ...," he said. "The carving actually took me back to that and got me more involved with what the

world out there is.”

His explorative stage these days has also led him to dabbling in glass art. Down the line, Quotskuyva says, he has ideas for sculpting ostrich eggs. He’s also been long been interested in painting and working with bronze.

Quotskuyva says he is often told that he needs to focus. But, to him, he’s already focused.

“A true artist isn’t one that creates an art form that the galleries can put in their shops and sell a ton of,” he said. “A true artist is one who realizes that art is about a message.

“Art is about recording the times, and sometimes a message is better conveyed in one medium than another. So, to me, an artist that can bounce around from medium to medium because of the message they want to send out is really connected to what the profession is.”

If you go

Gerry Quotskuyva artist talk, reception and open studio

WHEN: Thursday, Nov. 15, 5:30-7:30 p.m. **WHERE:** Eric S. Dobkin Boardroom, School for Advanced Research Administration Building, 660 Garcia St.

COST: Free and open to the public. RSVPs are encouraged to reserve a seat. RSVP by Nov. 12 on 505-954-7205 or at sarsf.info/gerryqtalk

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