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# Technicolor NATURE

**Barbara Meikle** infuses art with color and charisma



BY ELIZABETH L. DELANEY

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A BIRD PERCHED on the back of a burro. Horses galloping across a field. A dazzling sun-drenched landscape. These are the scenes that imbue Barbara Meikle's life with beauty and wonder, and by virtue of that, drive her art. Meikle brings her world to life through a lens of ultra-vibrant colors, kinetic lines, and palpable atmospheres that are also infused with the lifelong passion she has for her subjects. A deep respect for the animal kingdom and the natural world serve as the most basic foundation for her work, which elevates and amplifies her subjects within their physical and emotional space.

Born into a large family in Albuquerque, NM, Meikle began drawing at the very young age of 3. Eventually she would become known as "the artist" among her seven siblings, and she was frequently called upon to be in charge of birthday cards and other creative projects. As she observed the world around her, she became particularly interested in its animal life. Her earliest work centered on animals she encountered at the zoo, in the wild, or on television, and she spent many hours gazing at her subjects.

The daughter of teachers, Meikle grew up in an environment that encouraged exploration and learning as part of a life rich with culture. Trips to Santa Fe and Taos exposed her to the region's art, and she quickly developed an affinity for the work of celebrated Southwest artists like Georgia O'Keeffe. Additionally, she learned to ride and care for horses and spent a good deal of time cultivating what would turn out to be a very special bond with them, both artistically and emotionally.

Meikle earned a bachelor's degree in painting and printmaking from the University of Denver, and following that, she studied watercolor at the University of Cambridge in England. She then worked in galleries in Denver, Chicago, and New York to learn the corporate aspects of the art world while continuing to hone her own craft. Meikle returned to New Mexico in 1990 to work full time as a fine artist, studying with noted artist Ned Jacob to further refine her technique and aesthetic.

In 2006, she opened Pippin Meikle Fine Art in Santa Fe with fellow painter



▲ Mayor of Who-ville, oil, 20 x 20.

◀ Ode to Autumn, oil, 30 x 48.

Aleta Pippin. She took over full ownership of the gallery in 2012, renaming it Barbara Meikle Fine Art and cementing her roles in that community as artist and gallery owner. Today Meikle carries her own work as well as that of six other painters and sculptors. Running a gallery in addition to working as a fine artist has its share of demands, but it has also proven motivational for Meikle. She is both humbled and encouraged by the wealth of artwork in Santa Fe, as well as the broad range of collectors who travel there. "It's very exciting to know that people come from all over the world to visit Santa Fe, and to collect artwork from the cornucopia of galleries that are here," she says.

As it turns out, maintaining a commercial space stimulates her creatively as well as intellectually. "The business side of art for me has always been fascinating, and I think it can be creative, too, in terms of marketing strategies, planning shows, and fundraising events. It's so rewarding to work toward these yearly goals, succeeding by learning



### representation

**Barbara Meikle Fine Art**, Santa Fe, NM;  
**Cobalt Fine Arts Gallery**, Tubac, NM;  
**Third Dimension Gallery**, Kamuela, HI.

### upcoming shows

**Cowgirl Up!**, Desert Caballeros Western Museum, Wickenburg, AZ, March 18-May 8.  
**Passport to the Arts**, Santa Fe, NM, May 7.  
 10th Annual One-Woman Show, **Barbara Meikle Fine Art**, May 27.  
 Hold Your Horses Exhibition and Sale, **Phippen Museum**, Prescott, AZ, August 1-September 27.



**Cavalcade, oil, 36 x 60.**



**Spring Chickens, oil, 30 x 30.**

from past efforts and taking chances on new ideas—so much like painting itself,” she says. Meikle is looking forward to celebrating her gallery’s 10-year anniversary this summer, and remarks, “I’m so excited for the next 10 years.”

**AS A PAINTER,** Meikle has gained marked visibility for her vivid, expressive depictions of the animals she feels connected to, as well as the space they occupy. Affectionately known by some as “the donkey lady,” the artist devotes

much of her creative energy to portraits featuring furry and feathered subjects. Donkeys, burros, horses, mules, and birds populate her lively canvases, informed by the radiant light and open landscapes that surround them.

“I feel like I know them—I feel close to them,” Meikle says of her animal subjects. She frequently works in the field alongside her four-legged friends or explores the area around her rural home outside of Santa Fe on horseback. She often paints her own horses, or her neighbors’ equines, and has built an especially intimate rapport with them. This one-on-one interaction helps Meikle to harness each animal’s character and unique countenance.

Meikle’s love of animals does not end with her canvases but extends outward to support various animal-welfare organizations. Several times a year, she hosts plein-air painting events at her gallery with donkeys, horses, and raptors as live models. Such local rescue groups as the Equine Spirit Sanctuary, New Mexico Wildlife Center, the Horse Shelter, and Longhopes Donkey Shelter receive a large portion of each session’s proceeds. She has also published two books—*The Donkey Diaries* and *Horse Power*—and four prints to support these nonprofit groups as well. “I like giving back with the artwork,” says Meikle, who also enjoys the intangible, reciprocal benefits of her charity work by cultivating the synergy between her philanthropic and artistic endeavors. As she puts it, “Helping the animals feeds important elements into my creativity.”

Just as animals inspire Meikle to create art, so, too, does the region where she lives. “The landscape of New Mexico definitely influences my work in ways that I am still discovering,” she explains. “The clear light of the high desert, with the dramatic clouds, mesas, and horizon, are a constant inspiration and source of ideas. My use of bright color is tied up in all that. It’s how my mind remembers what I have seen, or how I feel about the landscape itself.”

Meikle works exclusively in oil, applying her sumptuous pigments with both brush and palette knife to achieve high-frequency color and texture. Her expressionistic, stylized lines and hues



**Brillante, bronze, 13 x 6 x 11.**

reflect a profound enchantment with animals and geography, and have become her aesthetic signature.

“The way I paint is very intense,” says Meikle, who is not interested in proffering a direct representation of nature, but rather in using it as a “jumping-off point.” Thus, her work emerges not as a representation but as an echo of the natural world. With heady brushwork and an abundance of contrast and movement, she seeks to reveal the essence of her subject matter—its life force and energy—as well as the emotions brought about by her firsthand experiences with it.

Meikle’s animal subjects command their space, floating among the rich swaths of color that both anchor and free them. Foregrounds and backgrounds remain ambiguous, allowing each figure to define its own depth. Her land-

scapes employ similar compositional techniques, utilizing color and texture to reflect her impressions of the light and atmosphere that characterize the American Southwest. “I think the landscape is unique here in that every part seems to have so much contrast with its surroundings,” she says. “The deep cool shadows with the orange canyon walls, the blue sky with the soft and crisp edges of white clouds, the yellow chamisa as a background for bright purple asters—it’s wonderful to see it at every turn.”

Meikle’s creative process is an organic one. She embarks on each piece with a loose idea of what she wants to depict but ultimately is spurred on by the prospects of the various avenues the work could follow during the journey. She usually begins with a blank canvas, preferring to “dive in” directly with layers of thick, robust pigment and her

aesthetic instinct. As she paints, the piece evolves, with each element building on the previous one. This technique allows her to remain in the moment, affording her a freedom and spontaneity that she finds exciting. “The best work seems to happen as I’m doing it,” she remarks enthusiastically. “I’m involved in the process, just going down the path.”

Meikle’s path has branched out in recent years to include sculpture as well as painting. “I love working in different mediums,” says the artist, who thrives on process-based work as well as tactility. Adding sculpture to her repertoire was an obvious evolution for Meikle, stemming from the abundant texture and dimension always present in her paintings. Her bronze sculptures highlight the same animals as her paintings and are awash in the same brilliant hues, which she infuses into the metal surface using a hot patina varnishing process. Meikle’s bronzes capture energy through movement and pigmentation and capitalize on those elements to link her two- and three-dimensional work visually and conceptually. “I love the materials as much as the work,” she says. “Sculpture has helped me become a better painter. The mediums are very connected to each other.

“I’ve always focused on finding my own way to paint and sculpt,” Meikle adds. As such, she strives to communicate with her art the things that bring her joy: animals, her native landscape, and the enduring vitality that they contribute to her life. “I want to convey the color available in our lives that can energize us and make us happier—that can make us enjoy things.” Such genuine enthusiasm translates throughout her art, which invites viewers not only to look, but also to feel. ✦

Elizabeth L. Delaney is a freelance arts writer and publications editor based in Charlotte, NC.

See more of Meikle’s work at  
[www.southwestart.com/featured/  
meikle-b-mar2016](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/meikle-b-mar2016).