

Rabbit Peak No. 2 (2013),
oil on wood panel.
Opposite: Peter Burega
in his studio.



Chaos and Control in the Work of Peter Burega

Peter Burega is less an artist than a force of nature. Brilliant, restless, and abundantly creative, he hurls himself into his many endeavors with the dedication and focus one might expect from a brain surgeon or a head of state. Those are occupations he hasn't yet tried, but he did take successful turns as a pianist, a corporate lawyer, and a television director before launching his career as a painter in 1998. This current incarnation, he says, is his most satisfying yet, as it combines the structure of the contained surfaces on which he works his magic with the unfettered freedom to let his imagination roam.

And roam it does. Burega's abstracted renderings of the natural world as it intersects with the built environment reflect the seething energy that fuels his need to examine truths both mundane and profound—and he approaches his work with an honesty and passion that are, to say the least, intense.

"Truth is important to me, in my work and in my life," he says. "It's what people connect with when they view a work of art or listen to a piece of music. If the artist conveys some inner truth, it resonates and, hopefully, offers people a new way of looking at things."

Born and raised in Montreal, Burega left Canada to find his calling in the U.S., eventually settling in Los Angeles and, later, Palm Springs. Along the way he picked up a degree in liberal arts and industrial relations in his native Quebec, then a law degree from Whittier College in Los Angeles. After practicing corporate law, he became bored and switched to television production, directing features for HBO and USA Network as well as producing commercials. It was then that his painting morphed from occasional hobby to full-time endeavor.

"I had always enjoyed painting," he says, "but it was something I did just for myself. It helped me come down from the

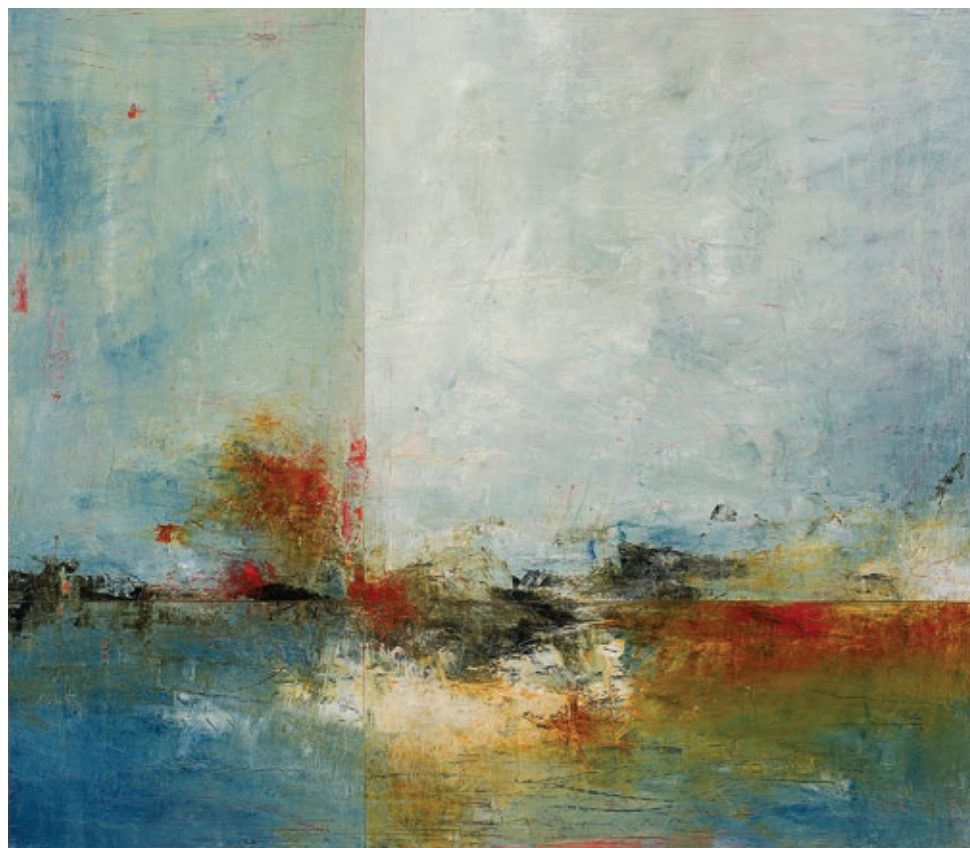
stress of working in the corporate world."

One day, when the headquarters of the television production company where he worked were being renovated, the interior designer came into his office. "He was basically jettisoning all the art because it was so bland and generic, but when he saw a painting of mine on the wall, he asked who painted it and how he could get in touch with the artist. He wanted to commission more of them. He was blown away when I told him I had done it, and he bought a painting from me for his own personal collection."

A gallery owner saw that painting and immediately offered Burega a show. That moment changed his life, he says. "I accepted the offer, pretending I already had a body of work, then quit my job immediately so I could paint full time to actually create one. The show sold out, and I never looked back."

Burega came to Santa Fe in 2000 with his architect husband, David Cofrances,

OPPOSITE, INSET, COURTESY OF HUNTER KIRKLAND CONTEMPORARY



Left: *French Cul De Sac* (2013), oil on wood panel. Right: Burega enjoys some family time with his daughter, Sofia, and their dogs, Luke (left) and Lola.

and settled in to paint. The life of an artist may be more fulfilling than his previous endeavors, but he still has to find ways to rein in his runaway energy in order to create coherence and resolution in his art. Working in oils on wood panels, he begins by deeply scoring his surfaces to establish a kind of order and structure. He then uses that framework to impose control as he unleashes his more chaotic, creative side, juxtaposing stillness and movement, light and color.

He eschews brushes, instead using a scraper to add layer upon layer of paint, then digs back through these layers, removing paint a bit at a time to allow his images to reemerge spontaneously. “My process is more subtractive than additive,” he explains, “which allows me to bridge Minimalism and traditional landscape painting. You don’t see the landscape in the abstraction, but it’s there. There’s always a small piece that, if you were to blow it up, would be a landscape.”

Burega travels frequently throughout the

world with David and their eight-year-old daughter, Sofia. He takes thousands of photographs, which he later uses to spark his imagination. “I don’t copy photos when I paint, but I select up to a hundred of my images, which I hang on the wall in my studio in a kind of a grid. The photos elicit a sort of subconscious memory, an emotional response, which is manifested in my work. Since I don’t draw or sketch, photography is my way of taking notes, and what’s on my wall determines my inspiration, my palette. I then use the grid to layer multiple images, abstracting, superimposing, and distilling them into a single piece.”

For example, he might meld a neon-lit urban scene with the natural light of a landscape, like sunlight reflecting off water or shining through clouds. He takes shots of his family, of landscapes, of bridges, of buildings—anything that catches his eye. “I’m particularly interested in the contrast between the natural world and the human-built environment, and the way these come together and coexist,” he says. “Because I’m

a self-taught artist, my work is experiential rather than a schooled notion of process.”

Schooled or not, Burega wields his tools and materials with confidence, and his roomy studio on Upper Canyon Road, tucked away in a storied compound that recalls the glory days of Old Santa Fe, evinces the same kind of controlled chaos that he translates into his paintings. His rambunctious dogs—Luke, a Rhodesian ridgeback, and Lola, an imperious cocker spaniel—roam freely when they’re not sprawled on the comfy sofa, competing with visitors for the prime seats. In a corner sits a miniature easel where his precocious daughter works seriously at her own art. The place is usually messy, sometimes noisy, and always charged with energy—but in Burega’s ongoing battle with issues of chaos and control, creativity invariably wins. ✱

Peter Burega’s work can be viewed at Hunter Kirkland Contemporary, 200-B Canyon Road, Santa Fe, or online at hunterkirklandcontemporary.com