



VISIONS BEYOND CLAY:
THE ARTWORK OF TAMMY GARCIA

ROCKWELL MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART
MAY 23 – OCTOBER 4, 2009
CORNING, NEW YORK



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In the art world, Tammy Garcia is a rock star. Since her artistic debut as a teenager in the '80s, she has been responsible for creating some of the greatest hits of Native American art. Her success is built upon her keen ability to pay homage to artistic forebears while ingeniously defining new directions and traditions. Tammy Garcia continues to redefine herself and her art, evading the confines of a genre imposed on her by the art world, while remaining at the vanguard of its peripatetic tastes.

Tammy Garcia was born to a dynasty of celebrated artists. Her great great-grandmother, Serafina Tafoya, was responsible for launching the tradition of what would become the famed carved black- and redware pottery of the Santa Clara pueblo in the Southwestern United States. Serafina is legendary for having impressed the first patterns—abstracted avanyu water serpents and bear paw prints—into the large blackware storage jars that had long been part of the Santa Clara culture. So strong is the influence of Serafina that the bear paw has become almost uniformly linked to their clan, though bear symbols are ubiquitous among Native American tribes.

Over the near century and a half since Serafina's time, the Tafoya descendants have further honed the traditions of their matriarchs, intensifying the polished and matte surfaces of the vessels, elaborating on the vessel shape or symbol designs, or experimenting with variations of color. Tammy's great aunt, Margaret Tafoya, and great-grandmother, Christina Naranjo, both elaborated on their mother's ingenuity by more deeply carving patterns across the shoulders of the pueblo's traditional pottery shapes. Tammy's mother, Linda Cain, was a great influence on Tammy's work, inspiring her early use of white slip painted into the recesses of the carved shoulders of redware pottery and to create her own symbols from the world around her.

The family's accomplishments succeeded by not straying too far from Tradition, with a capital T. From the beginning of the mod-

ern renaissance of Southwestern pottery—around the late 1800s when the completed Santa Fe Railroad encouraged visitation to the Southwest and stimulated appreciation of Native American art and craft—a certain aesthetic tradition emerged. Its appeal to Euro-American tourists and scholars resulted in individual and collective prosperity, and so developed a sort of taboo around tampering with it.

Much of the appeal of Native arts to white audiences was not reliant on a certain appealing style, but rather on a commonly held prejudice that Native American tribes were both primitive and vanishing in the wake of Manifest Destiny. Tourists to the Southwest purchased objects that were symbolic as souvenirs of their travel to "exotic" lands, but also as anthropological curiosities. Inherent in that prejudice is a misconception that Native objects had remained unchanged over centuries, devoid of innovation or alteration.

That prejudice remained pervasive in the Native American art market. Higher sales to the foreigners continued to mean prosperity for the community. So repetition and mass production—both enemies of artistry—have long been encouraged. As successive generations of artists became more interested in the art rather than just the craft of pottery, they were forced to defend their works as traditional if they wanted to keep the often-lucrative label of "Native American artist" and likewise required to artistically mature beyond mere replication of past prototypes in order to be recognized as "Artist" by the larger world of fine art.

But in every sphere of art, similar conflicts occur. Struggling artists, musical, visual or otherwise, lament that it "has all been done before," while attempting to find original and appealing arrangements of past hits and personal invention. The rock stars are the few who navigate (or perhaps just flout) the rules of convention, while creating something truly inventive and not just new.

Bolstered by her family's famous connection with Tradition, Tammy Garcia should have almost unparalleled artistic freedom. She could,



conceivably, abandon the artistic conventions of her clan. Yet, her strength as an artist—the reason she has been able to escape the boundaries of her genre, without forsaking her cultural identity—is that while Tradition remains the foundation of her work, it does not confine her. She has encouraged her abilities to solidify, strengthen and crystallize during forays into clay, bronze and glass. By working in bronze and glass—media with little established tradition in Native American art—Tammy demonstrates enough confidence in her talent and identity to risk a clash with Tradition. In so doing, Tammy recognizes that Tradition is not something that is created and fixed in the past, but something that evolves, readily embracing worthy enrichment. She relies on her talent to be fire that fixes the clay, forges the bronze and fuses the glass, transforming them into icons of her heritage, and into startlingly original contemporary art.

Throughout most of her early career, Tammy's own evolution was a product of mastering facets of pottery creation. Tammy sought to perfect the precision of shaping, carving, and polishing pottery. As her reputation for excellence emerged, she began to push the limits of established convention: using the entire vessel as a field rather than just the shoulder; carving in multiple planes rather than just one; and experimenting with variations on the traditional colored slips to define her exquisite, multi-planar carving.

As Tammy's popularity soared, demand for her pottery surpassed her capacity to create it. Simultaneously, her art had become restricted by the physical properties of clay as a medium. So Tammy turned to bronze, a medium that held similar potential to clay for exploring texture and color, but one that could endure more dramatic sculpting and be replicated in limited editions. In this new medium, Tammy's work remained easily identifiable. While she explored this new means of artistic expression, she maintained continuity with her established artistic and cultural identity. Early works were small sculptures that deviated sharply from the utilitarian forms of pottery, unequivocally manifesting themselves as art. Later works, further exploited the medium's durability, resulting in monumental

sculptures and enormous wall-mounted panels. The classical proportions of these works clearly expressed Tammy's grasp of this ancient medium, while flaunting her talent of using the aesthetics of another ancient tradition to transform it into contemporary art.

Tammy's love of color and texture soon led her to explore glass as another vehicle for artistic expression. Like clay, it has been used for purposes both utilitarian and artistic. Recognizing this, Tammy's first efforts in glass returned to her pueblo pottery tradition. Collaborating with famed Native American glassworker, Preston Singletary, Tammy helped produce luminous glass pots infused with vibrant color and lyrical symbolism. Inspired, Tammy has employed the medium's translucence and durability to transform her art. On large glass panels, she finds new dimensions in which to employ her multi-planar carving and broad lexicon of symbols. Newer works also rely on rich colors to communicate tradition-made-modern at the hands of this artist.

The unique properties of each new medium compel Tammy's artistic growth. With every new instrument she tries, she coaxes previously unknown melodies, discovers new modes of expression, and attracts new fans. She is, right now, calmly planning her next set while we clamor for an encore.

VISIONS BEYOND CLAY: THE ARTWORK OF TAMMY GARCIA

Whether the medium is clay, bronze, or glass, Tammy Garcia continues to break new ground with her innovative blending of traditional Native American symbolism and contemporary aesthetics. Drawing on her heritage as a descendant of many generations of Pueblo potters, she has expanded her artistic vision to incorporate ancient images from a variety of Native cultures while forging new techniques and art forms that redefine and revolutionize every medium she embraces. Her work speaks to a modern era via an ever-evolving vernacular that simultaneously honors the past and embraces the future, formulating a timeless artistic expression.





POTTERY

In traditional Native cultures, pottery served more than a utilitarian purpose; it was an artistic expression as well as a way to record observations about life and spirituality via powerful symbolism, thus creating a lasting narrative in a time that pre-dated written language. "The original potters used imagery representing animal life, plant life, and religious beliefs," explains Garcia, "so their designs are like books in which they recorded the life around them. I like reflecting on the continuity of these symbols as I bring them into my designs—it's an important connection I have with my ancestors."

Using the traditional coil-and-scrape method of centuries past, she imbues her pots with a modern sensibility through innovative shapes and design techniques that involve using the entire vessel as her canvas. Eschewing calipers or other measuring devices, Garcia uses her keen eye and unerring sense of proportion to produce modern masterpieces with ancient roots.

BRONZE

Garcia embraced this new medium as way to create limited editions to keep up with the ever-increasing demand for her pottery. Immersing herself in a new world of color and patina, she is able to create sculptures of increased complexity and detail while retaining the storytelling and symbolic aspects of her pottery.

"After ten years working in bronze I've learned to add dimension, texture, and movement through the manipulation of the patinas," says Garcia. "For example, a base color done in a ferric gold color can be strengthened or lessened depending on the concentration. I can add a light dusting of blues and greens to emulate the colors of a dragonfly, or gold and silver leaf. Before I start to work I create a detailed color chart. I use a light ferric for a dancer's dress, then add a thin layer of cupric, which is a green tone, so you can still see the ferric coming through. If I go too heavy it becomes opaque and dull, so it's important to get the right concentration to create a translucency."

Another challenge, she says, is to combine warm and cool colors. "Patinas can make or break a piece," she observes, "so color is crucial. I enjoy bringing together tones that aren't naturally compatible and making them work together in unexpected ways. By layering the colors, I can achieve a greater level of detail and a more complex texture, as well as a sense of motion. The colors themselves have symbolic cultural importance as well."

GLASS

In glass, Garcia has found a new freedom that allows her creative inspiration to flourish, providing fresh challenges and opportunities for innovation. "She's gone beyond merely translating the elements of Pueblo pottery into new media—she's creating a whole new means of expression," says Sheila Hoffman, curator of collections for the Rockwell Museum of Western Art.

Her blown-glass vessels render the traditional pottery forms in a modern medium that expands her choices of color and introduces new aspects of luminosity and transparency to the art form. Her highly original sandblasted panels reveal intricate detail unique to the medium. "I design the shapes and sizes of the panels myself to match my ideas for the design," says Garcia. "The clear glass becomes frosted when it's sandblasted, so in the design process I keep the interaction of the colors and textures in mind. I blast at different depths to differentiate the various aspects of the design. Using these different levels allows me to achieve a greater degree of detail."

Unlike the vessels, where the design is carved directly onto the surface, these panels are designed on paper and then transferred to the glass, which has been covered with a rubber adhesive. Because she uses no measuring devices, Garcia adjusts the designs according space limitations or demands as she goes. "I love the transparent quality of the glass," she says, "and I create designs specifically to take advantage of the layered, dimensional effect of looking through the glass to the other side."



CLAY POTTERY

Handcarved and coiled clay • 63 x 9.75 x 2

This vessel was commissioned for a private collection by a couple that spoke to Garcia about their energetic young son who kept them on their toes with his spirited antics. In keeping with the tradition of using pottery as a means of chronicling one's personal story, she created a design that features a little boy and a koshari, the Hopi clown kachina that embodies a blithe, childlike spirit and teaches others by invoking laughter.



SEQUENCE

Diptych Bronze • Edition of 18 • 63 x 9.75 x 2

This rectangular diptych wall hanging features two figures on each piece and refers to the way the ceremonial dancers line up and pair off. The sculpture is notable for its liberal use of color: the red of the vestments and the spots that accentuate the women's cheekbones; the green, which symbolizes evergreens and eternal life; the yellow, which recalls the bounty of the harvest; and turquoise, which represents protection.



SISTERS

Bronze Sculpture • Edition of 18 • 74 x 15.75 x 15.75

The inspiration for this piece was the frequent participation of siblings in Pueblo dance ceremonies. As a child, Garcia was entranced by the bold colors of the costumes worn by pairs of sisters, a beauty captured here in the sinuous curves of the sculpture and the colorful depiction of the dancers' vestures. This sculpture was purchased by Mrs. Gene Autry for the collection of the Southwest Museum of the American Indian, part of the Autry National Center of the American West in Los Angeles.



TRANSCENDENCE

Bronze Sculpture • Edition of 12 • 88 x 28 x 28

A sense of motion characterizes this representation of a male eagle dancer who pays homage to the powerful bird, which is revered as a carrier of prayers that has a special connection to the Creator. Many believe that the eagle is a mediator between earth and sky, a relationship that is honored by the dancer. The sculpture's asymmetry follows the sweeping lines of the wings, while the patina adds flashes of light and color to represent the sky.



BUFFALO MAIDEN

Bronze Sculpture • Edition of 10 • 87.5 x 28 x 15

The buffalo is a powerful symbol in native cultures, representing abundance. Every part of the animal traditionally was put to use—the meat provided food; leather and fur were used for clothing and housing needs; even the bones served as tools and implements as well as decoration, leaving nothing to waste. This piece, which occupies a central space in the rotunda of the New Mexico State Capitol, shows a female dancer dressed in a historically correct veil, manta, and moccasins who dances to celebrate this spirit of abundance. The bolts of lightning overhead herald the arrival of rain, another life-affirming symbol.



MAGPIE TOTEM

Bronze Sculpture • Edition of 18 • 68 x 15 x 15

This design, meditative in its simplicity, represents a departure in style for Garcia. Rather than covering the entire piece with symbolic elements, she chose to leave open spaces to allow the colors to show through. She opted to depict aspen branches to reveal the rich patina of the bronze, and selected magpies because of their forceful personality. The result is a disarming simplicity of form, with the details provided by the overlapping of colors, patterns, and patina.



C R E S C E N D O

Bronze Tryptich • Edition of 18 • 48 x 18 x 1.5 (each panel)

Garcia called on her childhood memories of attending Pueblo ritual dances with her family to create her first monumental panel piece, a three-panel representation of the throbbing percussion that animates the singers and dancers and brings the ceremony to a peak of emotion. Note the intricacy of the costumes and headdresses and the vibrancy of the colors.



THUNDERBIRD

Silver Nitrate • Edition of 10 • 22.75 x 24 x 8.5

The story of the thunderbird, an ancient mythical creature, varies from tribe to tribe and region to region. Among Northwest Coast natives, it is believed that a tribal chief there, when faced with the imminent starvation of his people, prayed to the Great Spirit for them to be saved. In response, a great winged creature flew toward them from the sea, carrying in its talons a whale and thus rescuing them from famine. This piece differs from Garcia's other bronze works in that its shape constitutes a single design element, emphasizing the distinctive abstracted form of the thunderbird.



ABUNDANCE

Diptych Bronze • Edition of 18 • 72 x 16 x 16

The stylized stalks of corn depicted here represent the staple crop of many Native American tribes, their source of sustenance for thousands of years. The Corn Maiden's scarf is covered in gold leaf to symbolize the sun that gives life to the corn; in her hand is a bundle of evergreen branches, representing eternal life. The combined effect is a celebration of life and the abundant presence of all that sustains it.



RAIN MESSENGER

bronze sculpture • Edition of 18 • 88 x 28 x 28

Water's life-giving properties are venerated by Native Americans, particularly in the parched Southwest. This sculpture, which features three female dancers giving thanks for the rain, honors the Creator who provides the precious moisture and extends gratitude for the many blessings it brings. The figure is made up of two semicircle shapes that together form a spiral, the Pueblo Indian symbol for water. The dancers wear headdresses adorned with rainbows and carry baskets that serve as receptacles for the rain.



HARMONY

Diptych Bronze • Edition of 18 • 76 x 16.5 x 16.5

The distinctive shape, colors, and design of this piece suggest the beauty that results from the creative blending of voices, whose varied tones and singing parts produce a textured, harmonizing whole. Like those voices, the different elements of the sculpture combine to create a visually exciting mix of layers, hues, and forms that embody the notion of harmony.



SENTINEL

Diptych Bronze • Edition of 18 • 83 x 14 x 15

Three panels of differing heights form a vertical tower that symbolizes the vigilance of the sentinel, a powerful entity that provides protection from harm or danger. The abstract representation of the Cloud Kachina looks straight ahead, portraying the keen focus and unwavering alertness required of the sentinel, while above are clouds, lightning, and falling rain. The overlapping, layered effect and the precise lines and angles are hallmarks of Garcia's work.



PANSHARRA

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • Edition of 18 • 78 x 40 x 16

"Pansharra" is a Tewa word referring to the ceremonial dancing that reinforces a spiritual connection with nature and the Creator. In this piece, two female dancers sport headdresses that depict lightning and clouds as well as butterflies and flowers, all elements of nature for which the dancers express gratitude. They hold eagle feathers in their hands, and their scarves are adorned with flowers. The panel's background consists of abstracted symbols for lightning and clouds, while the base features feather designs, water symbols, and steps symbolizing the kiva.



OUT OF SIGHT

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • Edition of 7 • 92 x 36 x 18

This sculpture examines the challenge of the hunt, when the prey often senses impending danger and flees suddenly, thwarting the hunters' efforts. Here a hunter scans the forest, searching for the deer that has eluded him. To be successful, he must communicate with the animal's spirit so that it allows itself to be hunted. Garcia's first monumental glass piece, it occupies the entry to the Museum of Indian Art and Culture in Santa Fe.



MIMBRES FISH

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • Edition of 18 • 40 x 22 x 8

The ancient Mimbres people of southwestern New Mexico developed a distinctive artistic style that uses geometric patterns to depict the animals and plants of their habitat. Pueblo artists of today elaborate on the Mimbres legacy by infusing these traditional designs with contemporary flair and meaning. This sculpture's wavelike form represents the flow and turbulence of the rivers where the fish flourish. Garcia particularly likes using the fish motif because the forms can vary in size and direction, adapting readily to the contours of the panel.



SIKYATKI BIRDS

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • Edition of 18 • 18 x 42 x 8

The undulating panel's form is itself like the wind upon whose currents the eagles soar. Using pre-Hopi images for the birds, Garcia employs a rectangular shape to allow for a more ordered design, achieving a contemporary aesthetic grounded in ancient symbolism. She does all her drawing freehand, manipulating the design as she goes and maintaining flexibility to fit it into the designated space.



RAIN DANCER

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • Edition of 18 • 53 x 27 x 9

The Rain Dance is one of Garcia's favorite ceremonies because of its rich array of symbols; her challenge was to distill this elaborate range of visuals into something simple yet meaningful to express reverence for the element's life-bringing force. The dancer depicted here holds a basket in one hand to catch the rainfall, while in the other she brandishes eagle feathers and ever-greens. Her headdress is in the form of a rainbow.



STORAGE JAR

Blown and Sandcarved Glass • 20 x 16

Garcia collaborated with glass artist Preston Singletary to create a series of vessels based on historical pottery forms. This storage jar is rendered in black and clear glass to emulate the classical black pottery of Garcia's ancestors. The border design on the lip is a stylized feather motif handed down from the Mimbres people, with additional ancient symbols rearranged and fragmented to forge a contemporary look.



PINK STRIKER

Blown and Sandcarved Glass • 20 x 6

The Mimbres fish motif reappears in this delicate blown-glass vessel, another collaboration with glass artist Preston Singletary. A fisherman holds his catch above his shoulders on one side of the vessel, while additional fish swim about on the other. Garcia achieves a layered effect by blending clear-glass elements with sandblasted portions; the transparent quality allows the complex design to reveal itself from all angles, while the play of light adds dimension and lets the colors interact with each other.



ENCOUNTER

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • 47 x 27 x 5

This evocative panel was inspired by Garcia's childhood experiences socializing with Pueblo dancers in the home of her grandmother, where the solemnity of the ceremony would give way to an unchoreographed spontaneity as they relaxed after the event. The main image is a woman in traditional dance vesture with hand extended to catch the dragonflies that surround her. Garcia's affinity for dragonflies stems from her memories of fetching water from a spring where the graceful insects would gather, dazzling her with their iridescent beauty.



HOPI EAGLE

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • 47 x 27 x 5

Four panels, each with four layers of glass, feature Sikyakti-style eagles to represent good luck and protection. The highly stylized birds are accompanied by images of the water serpent and a feather design. Here Garcia elaborates a “design within a design” to add detail to the large design blocks that break the panels into discrete sections. The glass layers add complexity and detail as well: the tan-colored under-layer reveals a sandy tone that shifts according to the light, while the black tones are created with powdered glass that’s dusted on by hand, with another layer of steel blue dusted over the black.

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HUNTER'S BOUNTY

Kiln-formed and Sandcarved Glass • 47 x 27 x 5

Garcia manipulated the subtle hues of this triptych, which draws its inspiration from the colors of nature, to work with the imagery of a hunter surrounded by aspen trees and deer. The dark brown of the landscape gives way to the golden tan tones of the deer and the black specks of the aspen bark to unify the human, animal, and plant life within this archetypal scene.

