

WESTERN
ART & Architecture
From Cowboy to Contemporary

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Robert Rivera was struck by artistic inspiration one foggy autumn day in the early 1970s while he and his wife, Linda, drove from their home in New Mexico to their native California to visit her parents north of San Diego. “We passed this farmhouse with a whole field full of big round things,” he says. “I told Linda, ‘Stop the car!’” He knocked on the farmhouse door and was told they were gourds and that people bought them as decorative objects. “I got as many as could fit in our Volkswagen Beetle. They were dirty and smelly, and Linda was not very happy.”

Back in Albuquerque, Rivera cleaned and hollowed them, then — inspired by their distinctive, varied shapes — began turning the gourds into all manner of fantastical artworks, inspired by his and Linda’s explorations of Natives crafts and cultures, and by the natural colors of New Mexico.

He’d never considered himself an artist. But Rivera was exceptionally skilled with his hands, trained as a welder and working for a subcontractor at Los Alamos National Laboratory constructing apparatuses for nuclear



Untitled (Red Fetish Bear Gourd Bowl)
Gourd, Turquoise, Silver, Feathers, Raffia Stitching | 13 x 12 inches | 2023

tests. He showed colleagues some of his gourd creations. “They wanted to buy them,” he says, amazement still in his voice. But the gourds remained a pastime until late in that decade, when concerns about exposure to radiation led him to leave Los Alamos and make art full time. “My wife was shocked,” he laughs.

Undeterred, Rivera spent two days taking samples of his work from one gallery to another, with no takers. Finally, a small rug shop near Nambé Pueblo agreed to display two pieces. “And when I got home, they called me and said, ‘We sold them both. Can you come back? We want more!’ If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know what would have happened.”

Rivera’s reputation grew. Real galleries began to display his work, and serious collectors bought it. Today, almost 45 years after that leap of faith, the grandfather of nine continues to work as a full-time artist. He now buys most of his materials from the Wuertz Gourd Farm, an almost century-old, fourth-generation family business in Casa Grande, Arizona. “They have some of the best gourds and biggest variety, and they let me go out in the fields and handpick the ones I want. I already know exactly what each one is going to become.”

Back amidst the “controlled chaos” of his 1,200-square-foot Albuquerque studio, the transformations occur through techniques that might include cutting, breaking, etching,



Untitled (White Buffalo Mask)
Gourd, Anasazi Pottery, Buffalo Horns, Leather, Turquoise | 60 x 24 inches | 2023

stitching, scorching, sandblasting, wrapping, drawing, painting, and dyeing. In the process, Rivera might adorn a gourd with such materials as yucca fibers, raffia, leather, horsehair, broken pottery, turquoise, twigs, snakeskin, or buffalo horns. And the styles may range from centuries-old traditional to decidedly modern. “At the start,” he says, “I didn’t even realize how much fun it was going to be. This is just the beginning!”

See Rivera’s fine art gourds at the Palace Avenue location of Sorrel Sky Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where his work will be featured in an exhibition during Traditional Spanish Market, June 28 through 30, with Rivera in the gallery working on new pieces on the 29 and 30 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. His work is represented by Sorrel Sky’s location in Durango, Colorado; Kachina House in Sedona, Arizona; and Buffalo Collection in Scottsdale, Arizona. ■

Based in Los Angeles, **Norman Kolpas** is the author of more than 40 books and hundreds of articles. He also teaches nonfiction writing in The Writers’ Program at UCLA Extension.



Untitled (Tan Hummingbird Bowl)
Gourd, Acrylic Paint | 12.5 x 14 inches | 2023

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