



*Please refer to this booklet if you would like further explanations of any of the retablos or sculptures in this exhibit.*  
**Work is shown in alphabetical order according to title.**

## The Poet's Eye, The Artist's Tongue Retablos and Sculptures by Judy Dykstra-Brown

### So, What is a Retablo?

The word “retablo” is taken from a Latin word that meant “the board behind.” It was the structure forming the back and shelf of an altar or a frame enclosing painted panels or sculptures in a church. In Mexico, these boxed metal or wooden frames traditionally contain images of saints or the holy family. I have extended the concept by honoring not only saints and the Virgin, but also family, friends and famous figures from art history as well as my own experiences, Mexican history and myth. All are story boxes whose symbols tell a tale. Each is unique and each item in the retablos is there for a specific purpose. Many of the pieces take over a year to develop, working on 5 to 12 at a time.

Although each piece tells a particular story, I prefer that viewers look closely and try to develop their own stories, as well. The names furnish clues. I often include mirrors that encourage viewers to see their own reflections in the box, to draw themselves into the story. I hope you enjoy looking through these windows into the life and history of both Mexico and me.

***Please return this pamphlet when you finish viewing the exhibit.***



## Adventure Story

This retablo started out as a depiction of my life's travels. Symbols of Africa, Australia, China and Indonesia fill the piece, which somehow went on to reflect more than those travels. Many people have found an affinity to this piece by infusing it with their own stories and memories, so to me it now represents adventure and exploration for its own sake.





### After 60

The pressures of creativity definitely set in for me after the age of sixty. How to get everything finished? What to set as a priority? The central image of the woman was carved by my husband, Bob Brown. The puzzle piece depicting the inner workings of a heart was painted by my friend Linda Richards. This piece was one of a series where I gave different friends a puzzle piece to paint whatever they wished on and then I developed a piece from it. Central in both her heart and mine was creativity, so that is what this piece turned out to be about. Four and three, the numbers on the dice and Mah Jong pieces, add up to 7, which has always been an important number in my life. It is about the road to completeness and perfection but also gives advice upon overcoming roadblocks—all good advice in art and life, where I have discovered problems can lead to solutions that “make” either the art or the life.



## Amor Interminable

Thirty years ago, my husband and I bought a box full of the windup mechanisms for music boxes. Wind up the one on the bottom of this retablo, and unless it has frozen up with time, it should play the song "Endless Love." The sombrero, the mandolin, hearts and flowers as well as tequila help create the mood.







### Between Two Worlds

This piece is about old and new, peace and conflict, blended cultures, freedom and confinement, the wide variety of what the world has to offer and the need to stay on target, to have fun and to spend our time wisely. I decided not to bring this piece as it is very large and unwieldy. You may come see it at my house! ;o)





## CHAMULA CHRISTMAS

The different colored candles, animal head, mirror, live chickens and Coca Cola are all parts of the shamanic rituals practiced in the church in Chamula, Chiapas. The pinata, the tiny silver figure of the saint and the cross represent the blending of Christianity with the older animistic religion practiced for centuries. Other parts of the scene like the shrine box and pieces of furniture are old pieces that I found in antique stores in San Miguel de Allende, Puebla and Oaxaca. The figure of the Chamula woman is hand carved, the clothes handwoven and embroidered. Each piece of this assemblage is a handmade work of folk art.





### Circus Muses

In the tiny notebook which the animals are jumping out of is written the story of this piece, which I have copied below:

*Did I ever have a fantasy of running away to join the circus? I did. The small-town traveling circuses of my American 50's youth still exist in Mexico, so maybe in running away to Mexico, I've finally come closer again to that childhood. For thirteen years, I traveled around the USA doing arts and crafts shows. Putting up and tearing down the tents, creating a new world every weekend, I felt that I'd finally joined the circus. What I learned was that circuses are hard work, but still carry magic. It's getting increasingly easier to move away to Mexico and never really leave the States, but the mystery is still here, and some of it assembles itself overnight in empty lots in small towns all over Mexico. I try to keep that mystery in my writing and my art by being more led by intuition than by logic; but in addition to this spontaneity, I also need the preciseness of repeated rituals. The circus only works if the tent stays up!!!*

The beginning of this piece was the assembled image of the woman muse. At first, she had the face of my mother, which I copied onto white cotton and glued over the face of the-old ceramic doll form. I know that much of my creativity comes from early writing sessions with my mother. The creativity which she chose not to pursue was handed on to me, and I wished to honor her. While I was working on this piece, however, Frida kept creeping in and trying to take over. I glued her face over that of my mother, then peeled it off, then glued on another and peeled it off. In the end, I covered all the layers with a mask, but later chose to raise the mask which now resides perched over one eye. What we do to expand the themes and techniques and legends of those who come before us needs to rise above imitation. What we can bring that is both authentic and new is the constant task of the artist. The painter clown, who is trying to paint something original, keeps ending up duplicating Frida's face and her cast-off images lie crumpled up and discarded on the floor.

Around her waist, the muse wears a bag woven of morning glory vines which contains a tiny paintbrush. In her hand is a small pair of silver scissors. The jewel in her necklace is one of a pair of tiny silver dice. The background picture of the blue lady is from a work by Ana Oneglia, my favorite Santa Cruz, CA artist. There are many more secrets hidden in this piece. Yours to decipher.





### **Dance of the Snake Woman**

In many cultures, the snake functions as a messenger between man and the gods or the conscious and unconscious minds. Number seven is the number of connection as well as the end result of adding numbers 3 and 4, two other numbers of special significance to me. The music box plays “A Little Night Music”—a serenade of sorts.

This piece is about connection to the world as well as one’s own nature. Movement and grounding are of equal importance, as is maintaining a keen eye, creative inspiration and practice., be it in the word of art, dance, music, photography, writing or human interaction. Each of these symbols of the universal truths of the world has a personal significance in my life, as well. My own image was captured in the glass of this piece as I took the picture. It turned out to be appropriate, I think.





### Erzulie Dantor

Erzulie Dantor is a loa or lwa (Vodou spirit) who is recognized as a patron of lesbians. Her name has many alternate spellings such as Ezili Danto. She fiercely loves and defends women and children, especially lesbians, independent businesswomen, unwed mothers, and those who experience domestic violence. She has a reputation for taking revenge on abusive husbands and unfaithful lovers. Scar-faced warrior Erzuli Dantor liberated slaves by helping to start and win the Haitian Revolution. She is fond of knives, rum and unfiltered cigarettes.

The Black Madonna of Czestochowa, one of the most famous Catholic icons, is the model for Erzuli Dantor. Traditional images of the vodou spirit are based on the Black Madonna. They even share the same two scars on the dark skin of the right cheek.

Our Lady of Czestochowa is among dozens of Black Madonna icons remaining from medieval Europe. The reason for their dark skin is unknown, but people speculate that the images may have been created black to match the color of indigenous people or they turned black due to smoke and aging. Some see her dark skin as a metaphor for the earth or a reference to the lover in Song of Songs who declared, "I am black but beautiful."

Black Madonnas are said to embody the shadow side of the Divine Feminine, the unconscious and unpredictable aspects that are usually buried or kept in darkness.

Legend says that the Czestochowa portrait of Mary was painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist while she told him the stories about Jesus that he later wrote in his gospel. The icon traveled from Jerusalem through Turkey and Ukraine, ending up in Poland in 1382. The painting is considered so important that it even has its own feast day: Aug. 26, the date that it was installed at its current home. In the 15th century looters pried two jewels off her cheek, leaving a characteristic pair of marks.

Events in Haiti soon took Our Lady of Czestochowa in a new direction. In the 18th century hundreds of thousands of slaves were brought from Africa to Haiti, where they were forced to do heavy labor and convert to Christianity. Through the process of syncretism, they developed a hybrid form of Christianity mixed with Vodou, an ancestral folk religion from West Africa.

Copies of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa were brought to Haiti by about 5,000 Polish soldiers who fought on both sides of the Haitian Revolution starting in 1802. She was transformed into Erzuli Dantor when Haitians merged her with Vodou.

Every year more than 100,000 people view the original Black Madonna of Czestochowa icon in Poland at one of the most popular Catholic shrines on the planet. John Paul II, the Polish pope, was devoted to her.



## Feed the Birds

This art print of Antonio Lopez Vega inspired the piece above. She is feeding the birds and in turn they bring her a message in the beak of one of the birds. Wheat from my father's last harvest before he sold the ranch back in the 1970's spills from a hand-formed copper bowl from Santa Clara del Cobre. A copper plate holds a loaf of bread and a split avocado. Copper leaf in the background surrounds the woman and completes the theme.





### Forever Young

Broken pavement doesn't stop this intrepid skateboarder from looping the loop. The items in this retablo were all discovered in Morehouse, Missouri—some on the street, some in a great little antique/junk shop that I visit every time I go there.





### Forget Paris

An antique miniature picnic basket, compass, ivory spoon, monarch butterfly, a metal miniature of the Space Needle and a pig milagro appear in this retablo. The spoon was brought back from African over seventy years ago and given to my Grandmother by her missionary grandson, my cousin. The antique artist's compass was among my husband's art supplies. I was born in the year of the pig, but this piece tells more than my own past. Can you contribute to the story?





## Ganesha

This elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati is one of the three best-known Hindu deities and is also worshipped by Jains and Buddhists. The Lord of Beginnings and the Remover of Obstacles, he is also known to place obstacles in the way of those who need to be checked. He is often invoked as patron of letters during writing sessions and is said to preside over both arts and sciences. He is sometimes depicted with a crescent moon or a third eye on his forehead and a serpent coiled at his ankles.

In five of his eight incarnations, a mouse is his vahana (mount.) In two of his four hands, he often carries his own tusk and an axe. Books and tablets in this piece contain miniature copies of my real journal entries and poetry as well as mathematical proofs that can be read with a magnifying glass.





## Heal the World

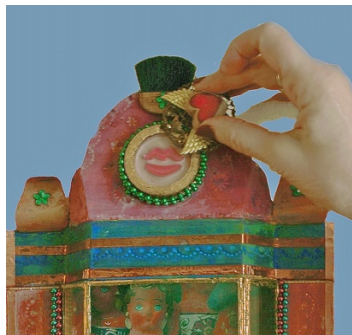
The image in this piece is of a very old patinaed shower head in the beach house that for many years I rented for a few months each year. I loved that shower head and sadly returned one year to find they'd replaced it with a shiny new one. Luckily, I had taken this photo of the water streaming down from it. The retablo I developed from it has to do with the importance of water in our world. The images have to do with health, grooming and thirst.





### Hidden Kiss

These dolls, much-loved and sold in *mercados* throughout Mexico, were originally markers placed in the windows of ladies of the night. This piece, devoted to women in general as well as those elements in their toilette calculated to charm, is entitled "Hidden Kiss" for a reason. If you haven't already found the hidden kiss, here's a hint:





## Huichol World

This is another piece I did while researching a story, this time on the Huichols. Noted for their string painting and beading, they are one of the oldest cultures in Mexico.

I prevailed upon a Huichol artist in the weekly market to find my beads for me the next time he went to his source in Guadalajara, then did the two outer panels, using the small piece on board made by him for the center panel as inspiration. All of the other beading was done by me except for the two butterflies and the two flower shapes at the top. All of the imagery depicts Huichol symbols. The tiny bowl contains pollen, the beaded plant is amaranth.

Although I initially pressed the beads into beeswax also provided by my Huichol friend, after working for weeks, I came out to my studio to find the beads dripping off the metal frame of the retablo. I ended up stripping them all off, boiling them to remove the wax, and rebuilding my images on white glue.

I made two beaded retablos of this type during a two-month period, spending all of my studio time exclusively on them. I had renewed admiration for the precision and skill of these Huichol bead artists after my two-month stint of trying to emulate them.





### In Balance

This fanciful photograph was one of a number of photos given to my husband by a woman who was a well-known photographer in the early 1900's. I unfortunately do not remember her name, but I have tried to do honor to her wonderful photographs in a few of my retablos. I have used the original of one of her photographs in this piece. It seemed to call out for the spirit of adventure expressed in her photos but also to call for a sense of balance. Life is short and the world is large. For me, balance had to do with seeing as much of it as I had the energy to see while going about my own business as well. This seemed to be true of the photographer as well.



### **Jaina Woman II, The Harvest**

I've used the Jaina woman in many of her manifestations in other retablos. This one oversees the harvest. You will find more of a description of the Jaina Woman under the description of 'Mayan Woman' later in the book.





### Juguetes (Play Things)

I snapped the central picture of this retablo in the home of Rudolfo Morales, a famous Oaxacan painter now deceased. It was a very large doll, sitting in a *nicho* on the stairwell up to his studio. It had obviously been exposed to the elements and in fact was breaking open. For years, I tried to think of an association to begin a retablo dedicated to this wonderful man, as well as to the image itself. Finally, the image won out. Toys and board games old and new surround her image.



### Love Charms “Letting the Fish Guide the Way”

(includes base)

I kept adding to this shrine for a number of years. It has, at different times, contained many different “charms” calculated to help guide my way as well as the way of different love interests. It started eight years after my husband death with the draw of three Tarot cards that I used to guide not only my own thinking and actions, but the piece itself. When one card disappeared, I looked everywhere for it without finding it, so I drew a fourth that definitely rounded out the good advice given. The minute I had drawn the fourth, I found the third in my apron pocket, where it had somehow appeared without my help. The addition of the fifth card must have been a design choice. I can’t remember.

The title is derived from a poem written by my husband Bob, who passed away in 2001. It deals with being led by intuition, a choice that has usually led me in the right direction. Each object in the box is there for a reason, representing different past romantic relationships over the past twelve years. During that time, friends have contributed their own “tokens” to the piece.





## Lucky Day

Life seems to me to be a puzzle whose solution is divided between luck, chaos and fate. Of course, planning helps, but it is not the only factor that determines our success in getting what we want out of life. Rolling with the punches helps, as does faith and a sense of humor.



**Luna 1**  
**"Our Lady of the Moon"**

Original oil painting on canvas with mixed media. 7 ½ by 8 ½ inches

I bought the small oil painting that forms the central image in this retablo when I was in Peru many years ago. I've been waiting to do special credit to her. The gold leaf, antique silver snuff box, plaster baby Jesus, flowers hand-fashioned of cloth or corn husks and the silver-painted moon embellish the beauty of the painting. It is suggestive of images of the Virgin of Guadalupe who is depicted standing on the moon, indicating that she is greater than the god of night, the moon god.





### Mayan Woman

"Representations of Maya women occur more commonly as Jaina figurines than in any other medium. These Jaina figures represent two kinds of women, both archetypes of female behavior. One is a stately, courtly woman who is sometimes shown weaving; the second is a courtesan who appears with all sorts of mates, from Underworld deities to oversized rabbits. The imagery of both derives from Maya concepts of the moon, perceived as an erratic, inconsistent heavenly body, whose constantly changing character follows the monthly cycle of female menses. This is a Jaina woman of the first category: stately and courtly.

This retablo is meant to be viewed with the glass door open. Do not shut the door as the flowers that surround her feet are fragile. On the back of the retablo is an adhesive strip that is meant to hang very heavy objects, so it is very hard to remove anything once it has been affixed to a wall. Although there is another metal loop to hang it from, the adhesive strip is a centering device to keep the retablo from hanging crooked due to the weight of the glass of the open door.

The best process for hanging it might be to remove the strip, align the piece holding it slightly away from the wall, perhaps using a level. Then, when you know it is exactly straight, slip the metal hanger over a nail on the wall and press the retablo firmly to the wall. Afterwards, raise the red silk rope into an inverted V above the retablo, put a small nail under its center and pound it into the wall so it looks like the retablo is hanging from the rope.



## Messengers

If you want to keep a secret, do not tell the snake, for he will tell the eagle who will tell the deer. Both the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest and the Huichols of Mexico believe in the power and interconnectedness of these sacred animals.





## Nostalgia

They say the sense of smell is the strongest trigger for memory. I was lucky to stumble on a cache of very old perfume bottles in an antique store in Morehouse, Missouri and to find the very old “toy” telephone in another. The image is not a collage but one photo I took at a fundraiser for the local FERIA. I was sitting at a table with a glass top. The woman’s face was reflected in it and the dresses, blouses and pants material of all the women sitting around the table was showing through the glass. I love the effect.



**Nuestra Señora de Adorno  
(Our Lady of Adornment)**

Madera, Tela, Hueso, Cuentas de Vidrio  
(Wood, Cloth, Bone, Glass Beads)



**Nuestra Señora de la Regeneración  
(Our Lady of Regeneration)**

Madera, Tela , Semillas y Vainas  
(Wood, Cloth, Seeds and Pods)

These two figures were made at my friend Linda's "Virgin of Guadalupe" art gathering that she conducts each year in Oaxaca. She provides the basic wooden carving and each woman decorates it as she sees fit. I had been watching her bed and breakfast for a month while she was away on vacation, so I had much more time to work on mine than the one day the others had. Enough to do two, as a matter of fact.





### **Nuestra Señora de la Merceria (Our Lady of Notions)**

The wooden Madonna which forms the centerpiece of this retablo was hand carved and painted in Oaxaca. She is surrounded by both the "notions" and implements necessary to create beautiful clothing, quilts and other fabric art. Attached to the shrine are various pieces of handicraft, quilts and garments, many of them made by my grandmother. The three tiny much-decorated garments behind her have been presented to her as thank you gifts as well. On the top platform of the retablo, another drama is being enacted. Two tiny silk Chinese figures have cut themselves free of the pincushion they had been sew onto and have rigged bobbins and thread into an escape device. One has nearly made it to the bottom of the box. Another slides over the edge, armed with a needle, as a third struggles to cut himself free with tiny silver scissors. There seems to be some animosity between those escaped and those about to escape, as signified by the somewhat threatening position of their weapons as well as their steely glares. Other surfaces are covered by buttons, needles, thimbles and other sewing notions. On the platform is an antique Singer pattern marking wheel.

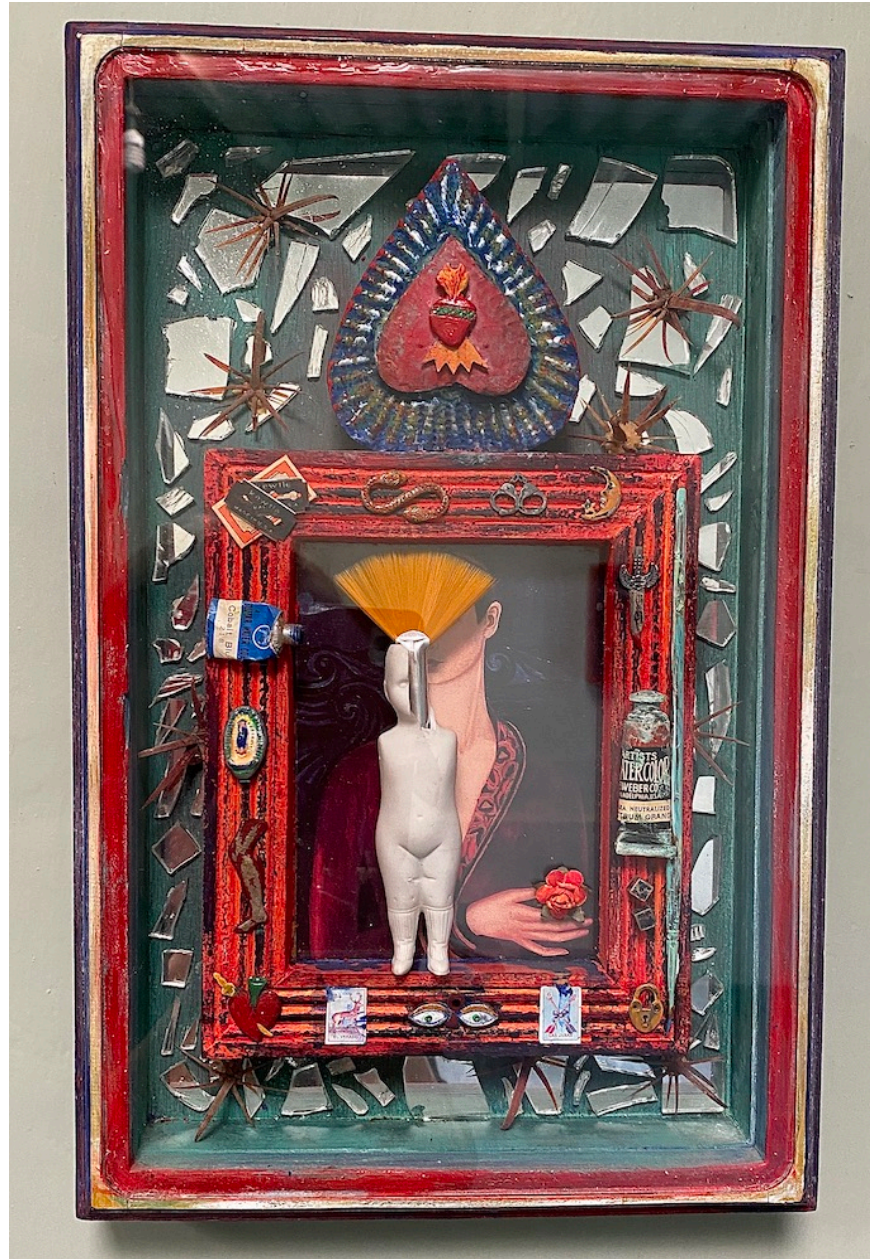
This piece was inspired by a church in Michoacan, Mexico where men bring their serapes to drape around the base of the male saint on the altar and all of the women bring gorgeously decorated aprons to drape around the base of the female saint. I had a woman make my basic tiny aprons and then I decorated them.



### Open Range

I took this photo on the Extraterrestrial Highway in Utah...just north of Tonopah, I think. No, I saw no extraterrestrials. Nor did I see any cattle on the road.





### **"Painterminable" (Pain, Painter Interminable)**

I was honored to be one of two non-Mexicans invited to display a piece about Frida Kahlo at the exhibition in Mexico City that honored the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth. The broken ceramic figure of a woman, the barbs and glass shards honor her remarkable capacity to create art out of and in spite of her pain.



### Prairie Moths

Many times I work on a retablo as I work on an article or poem. This piece reflects my book of poetry by the same name that deals with growing up on the prairies of South Dakota and my dreams of travel to distant places that finally came true.





## Red Pig

I'm not a connoisseur of beer but I am a connoisseur of pretty bottles, and I was born in the year of the pig!



## Route 66

Nine or so years ago, a friend and I took a driving trip from St. Louis to Santa Monica on Route 66. When we got back to Missouri, we visited the Route 66 museum as well. Fun. Here are some memories from that trip.





## Sacred Spaces

An elderly woman in San Miguel de Allende makes these one-of-a-kind dolls that I found irresistible. I chanced upon them in a hardware store, hanging on a wire rack that also held screwdrivers and wrenches and bought them all. In my mind, they were gringa dolls—reflecting the different types she saw walk by her en route to the art academy, antique stores and other more tourist-oriented galleries situated farther down the street.

Since then, I have added environments as well as shoes, jewelry, hats and other accessories to the rather crudely-rendered ladies, giving each a more distinct personality that reflects the different interests of those of us who have chosen to live and travel in Mexico. Perhaps you will find yourself or a friend depicted here.

These locales entitled “Sacred Spaces” are some of the places where women display their true selves and interests:

**The Arts and Crafts Gallery or Souvenir Shop:** Without the support of shoppers, artisans would soon vanish.

**The Beauty Salon:** One of the favorite spots for female bonding. In Mexico, they are even affordable!

**The Kitchen:** “Approach love and cooking with equal abandon.” —The Dalai Lama

**Behind Closed Doors:** One’s own living room can become entirely too comfortable. Living on memories seems a waste of life. Shutting the drawers to the past may open the doors to the future.

**Center Stage:** It’s never too late to be the star of the show.



### Sprightly Behavior

If you've got Chutzpah, you probably know it and need no explanation for this piece. The Mr. Peanut is from my aunt's beloved salt and pepper shaker collection which was shared with us at the first family reunion after her death. I snapped this one up right away and had to create a retablo around it. It just sorta called out for a sprightly treatment, I thought.





### "Sunrise Madonna"

The rays of the morning sun rise above this Madonna which has been carved from a block of wood by an artist in Dolores Hidalgo. I have chosen to decorate her shrine with Milagros, a third eye and floral offerings. The curtains behind her echo the stars of her cloak.





### The Blue Guitar

The background of this retablo is a picture I took at a pottery studio. I loved the patterns of the broken shards of pottery on the ground of its back patio. Tequila, music, bright colors and agaves tell the rest of the Mexican story.





### The Gleaners

Gleaners are the men and women who go through the fields after the threshers have finished their work and collect the grain that has fallen and that would otherwise be wasted. The wheat in this piece is from our last wheat crop before my father sold our farm/ranch in South Dakota in the early seventies. The insects that are depicted are themselves gleaners and in an unlucky year, they can devastate a crop before the harvesters have their chance. This happened just twice on my father's farm—once before I was born and another time when I remember the road getting so slippery from the bodies of grasshoppers as we were driving that we slid off the road. They were so crusted on the windshield that I used an entire bottle of 4711 cologne to pour over the glass so that the windshield wipers could clear enough area so I could see to drive.



## Twenty Twenty

This piece was the result of a challenge that I issued to a few other artists in 2020, when we were all more-or-less sequestering. I asked that each give the same objects or object to all of use and then to put a Covid project together that reflected their first Covid year. One of the women gave a cardboard Coke carton and a number of swatches of material which formed the background and sides for my piece. Look closely and you'll see how I spent my first Covid year. The black dog in front is Diego. That's a cookie in his mouth...the last of thirty that he pilfered off the kitchen counter. The rest of the items, most of which I added, should be self-explanatory. "Endless" might be a better title for this piece.





### Tzintzuntzan

Tzintzuntzan is the name of a town in Michuacan, Mexico that means “Place of the hummingbirds.” This little feathered hummingbird is a detail on a retablo of yet another Jaina woman. Look under the “Mayan Woman” photo for a description of the Jaina Woman.





### What the Heart Wants

The possibilities of life and what we choose to fill it with is so varied as to defy description. The bitter is mixed with the good, but once in a blue moon, or hopefully frequently, it works out just right.





### **"What's New, Pussycat?" Los Gatos**

A tiger and a housecat play tug-of-war with a serpent, while other cats inspect a mouse in a trap and a ball of string. Another wild cat overlooks the scene as well as the plates full of silver fish. The lyrics of the music in the background read, "Wild Cat raised his head and sang, *"Don't fence me in."* The picture of my cats, Squeak and Lulu, may be replaced with the picture of your own cats if you wish.

## Comments

Notes, doodles, comments, suggestions are welcome. Add them below:

***Please return this guide when you are finished viewing the exhibit. Thanks.***