

from the earth

sculptor Roxanne Swentzell reaches back to touch the future

Roxanne Swentzell greets me by throwing open the arched wooden door of her year-old gallery—Tower Gallery at Pojoaque Pueblo’s Poeh Center—and jumping out with both feet onto the stone landing. Wearing a floral calf-length dress, sneakers, and a warm smile, she says, “Gee, I hope I haven’t kept you waiting. I hate that!” Swentzell, it’s true, is every bit as warm and thoughtful as her expressive bronze sculptures, and the gallery itself complements the figures with its round straw-adobe walls and vigas. She gestures loosely at them and laughs.



PHILLIP KARSHIS

“We’ve been having fun playing gallery,”

she says—referring to her grown children, Porter Swentzell and Rose Simpson (also an artist), who help manage the enterprise—“and we’re all learning.”

The Santa Clara Pueblo sculptor and ARTfeast 2008 honorary artist, who has over the past two decades won numerous top awards from SWAIA and the Heard Museum Guild, plus a 2004 commission from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, equated learning with art early on: her first language was not English or Tewa, but sculpture. “When I was little I couldn’t talk right, so I made clay figurines to communicate,” says the still soft-spoken Swentzell. Fortunately there was plenty of encouragement, as she was born into the Naranjo family, renowned for its potters. “I would watch my uncle Michael Naranjo for hours,” she says of the blind artist “Mike was very influential [to me] because he was a sculptor.” But despite ancestral influences, Swentzell’s work, which she began selling in high school and was making a living from by age 18, was not based on traditional ideas. “For the Pueblo people, art has always been about useful things: things to cook in, store things in, wear, use,” she says. “What I did—figurines instead of pots—opened doors, and now artists are doing things differently.”

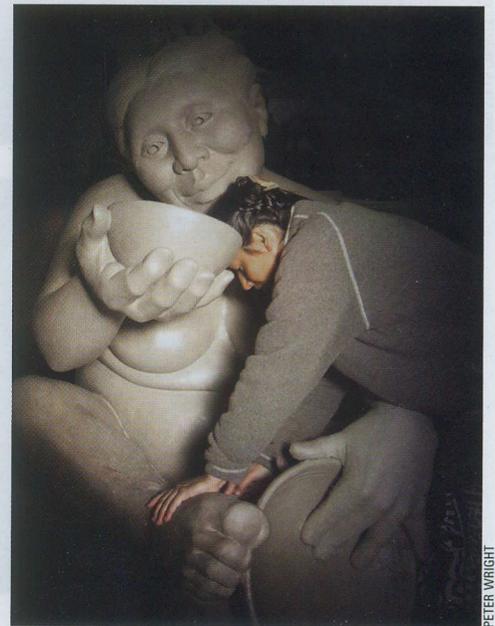
That core ethic of creativity within community soon reached far beyond art. In 1987, Swentzell co-founded the Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute, with ex-husband Joel Glanzberg, for research and education in the practice of permaculture—a sustainable living system that includes home design, habitat restoration, and keeping alive “genetically precious native seeds.” She started a seed bank of local plant varieties, and still sows and harvests the heritage crops each year in her backyard. Now, she says, she hopes that increased awareness of genetically altered seeds will get more people involved. “I desperately welcome interest from other Native people,” she says. To that end, she also teaches young men to build *hornos* (adobe ovens), which Santa Clara residents then use for cooking, and this summer hopes to have an all-girls group as well.

Speaking as an award recipient for ARTfeast, which supports children’s art education, she observes that most young people respond to the idea of art with fright, confusion, or numbness. “But seeing my clay figures opens up something bigger. I think my sculptures crack the shell of resistance and help kids let go of preconceptions or fears of what will come out” So she continues, relying on her elegant, earth-based clay work to stay in touch with herself while encouraging discovery in others. Indeed, her emotive sculptures evoke conversations about self-respect and our common humanity—and when she takes my hand for a warm shake, and then tentatively reaches for a hug, those values come through as clearly in her demeanor as they do in her art—*Aysha Griffin*

February 23, ARTfeast Dinner & Auction with Roxanne Swentzell, 6 PM, \$150, La Posada de Santa Fe, 330 E Palace
 Tickets: 505-988-1234, artfeast.com



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PETER WRIGHT

Clockwise from top left: *Medusa Mother*, stoneware, 29 x 19 x 24"; Roxanne Swentzell; Swentzell with *Admiration*, clay for bronze casting, 50 x 40 x 46"