

Artist falls for the Taos mystique

Mel Scully follows her muse from the Midwest to the Southwest

Imagine a girl born and raised in a one stop-light farm town in southern Michigan with cornfields in front of her house and behind it, deciding at age 21 to plot her escape from the Midwest. Mel Scully did exactly that first by taking an art class in London and traveling around Europe, and then taking a job in Grand Teton National Park.

She had no idea what was in store for her, but she said the moment she first glimpsed the Tetons she fell in love and for the next few years she traveled from beautiful place to beautiful place, painting and drawing all the way. She lived in Jackson Hole, southern Utah, Alaska, Colorado and Montana and then on a whim found herself visiting a friend in Taos. She loved it and ended up moving to Taos a few years later.



LOCAL
COLOR

Betsy Carey

“What I first loved about Taos was the combination of desert and mountains! I was drawn to the golden desert light in southern Utah, but missed hiking in the mountains among the aspens, flowers and creeks. My first introduction to Taos was Arroyo Seco. I had coffee at Casa Fresen (a coffee shop now gone) in spring when the apple blossoms were out and then took a hike in the mountains. I was in heaven.”

The other thing she loved about Taos was its mixture of people. “You go to a coffee shop on any given day and you’ll find someone who’s writing a screenplay, someone who’s planning a trip to India, another who lives in a teepee, a ski bum, a working mom, a Tiwa Indian who dances in ceremonies, an architect, a painter, a construction worker reading a book on Buddhism, a potter, a poet, science fiction writer, a chef with a passion for UFOs and cattle mutilation,” she said. “In other towns in beautiful places people talk a lot about skiing or their greatest gear-head achievement. This is great, but those conversations soon get boring. I love that our paper had an article about a Bigfoot sighting ... and who knows, in New Mexico it is all possible.”

Scully said that she was always interested in art, but it was very uncommon for someone to be an artist in her small Midwestern town. However, her mother was a painter and hung her paintings on the walls or propped them on her easel in the kitchen. Pastels, colored pencils and oil paints were



“The Guardians,” diptych, oil, gold leaf and glitter on canvas

Courtesy photo

scattered around the house.

On the other hand, her father was very practical. His parents lived two miles from her house and she said they were a big influence on her life. To them, if you got good grades and were able to go to college, then you should become something practical. They felt that painting was fine as long as it didn’t interfere with your full-time job. “When I chose to be an artist, it was hard for me to know that some part of my family wasn’t going to approve ... I went to the public high school in my area and there weren’t many funds available for art,” continued the artist. “Our high school art teacher was a great guy with a passion for art, but unfortunately, it was well known that he was a terrible alcoholic. Because of that, he didn’t really have the energy for his students, which was unfortunate, because he was a very talented artist.”

As an undergraduate, Scully attended Michigan State University, but she wasn’t an art student right away. She tried a few “practical” majors, but could never see herself doing anything but painting and ultimately ended up with a degree in painting. She



“Forest Prayers,” oil, gold leaf and glitter on canvas, by Scully

Courtesy photo

said she had a great painting professor named James Adely who was originally from England and had come to America to study with Clyfford Still. Still is one of the original Abstract Expressionists and a Clyfford Still museum is being built in Denver as I write. It was with Adely that Scully took her Art in London class where she met all of Jim’s old artist friends and talked with them about being professional artists.

After graduate school in southern Utah, Scully returned to Taos in 2003 to become the artist-in-residence at the Harwood Museum of Art. She said it was a fabulous experience; she had a beautiful painting studio and an apartment in town right above the museum. The staff were all supportive and kind during her six months there and she said the experience really pushed her forward in her painting.

While at Utah State University she taught drawing as a teaching assistant. During the last three years she has been teaching art through the Discovery Program, a grant-funded after-school program in the Taos Public Schools. During spring break



Courtesy photo

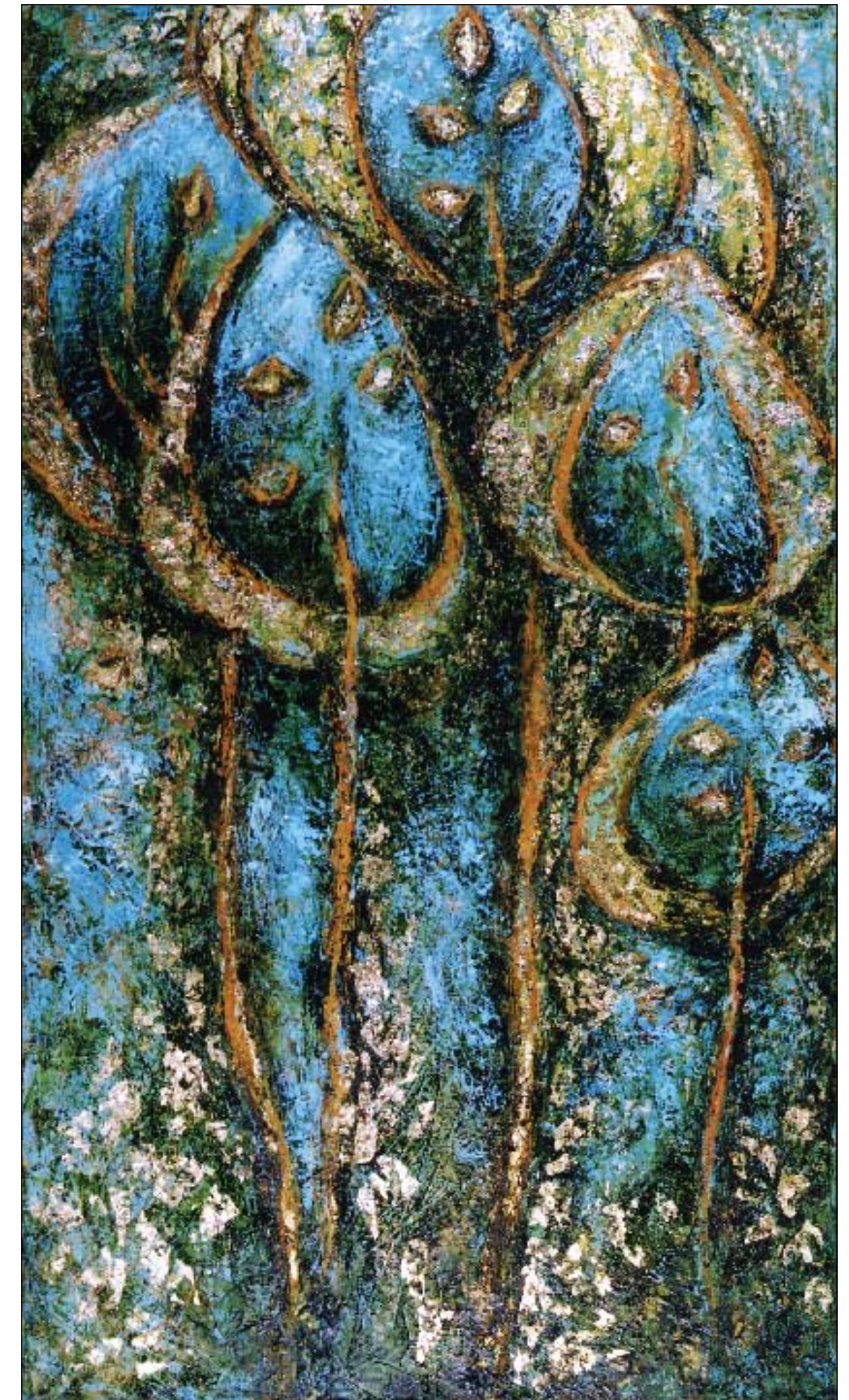
Taos artist Mel Scully

this year she will be teaching a “journaling and art” class for children at the Harwood Museum.

“When I first came to the mountains, almost immediately I found myself drawing trees, especially aspen,” she says in her artists’ statement. “I grasped onto them, drawing and painting them over and over, until I naturally began abstracting them. But I wanted to do something more. I wanted to capture the essence of being in a grove and looking up as the sunlight poured through the branches, lighting up the leaves like fireflies. I wanted to collect the

sounds of the last autumn leaves shuddering in the wind. I wanted their silent powdery bodies to grow through me, teaching me patience. I wanted to paint the religion of mountains.”

Scully now lives in Taos with her husband, Charles Clayton, and her work is hanging at the Taos Center for the Arts office behind Café Renato at 133 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. She does not have a Web site, but is available for studio visits. You can contact her via e-mail at melscully5@hotmail.com or by calling (505) 776-3473.



“Dreams of Leaves,” oil, gold leaf and glitter on canvas, by Mel Scully

Courtesy photo