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In Essence

Today's abstractionists pick up where O'Keeffe left off



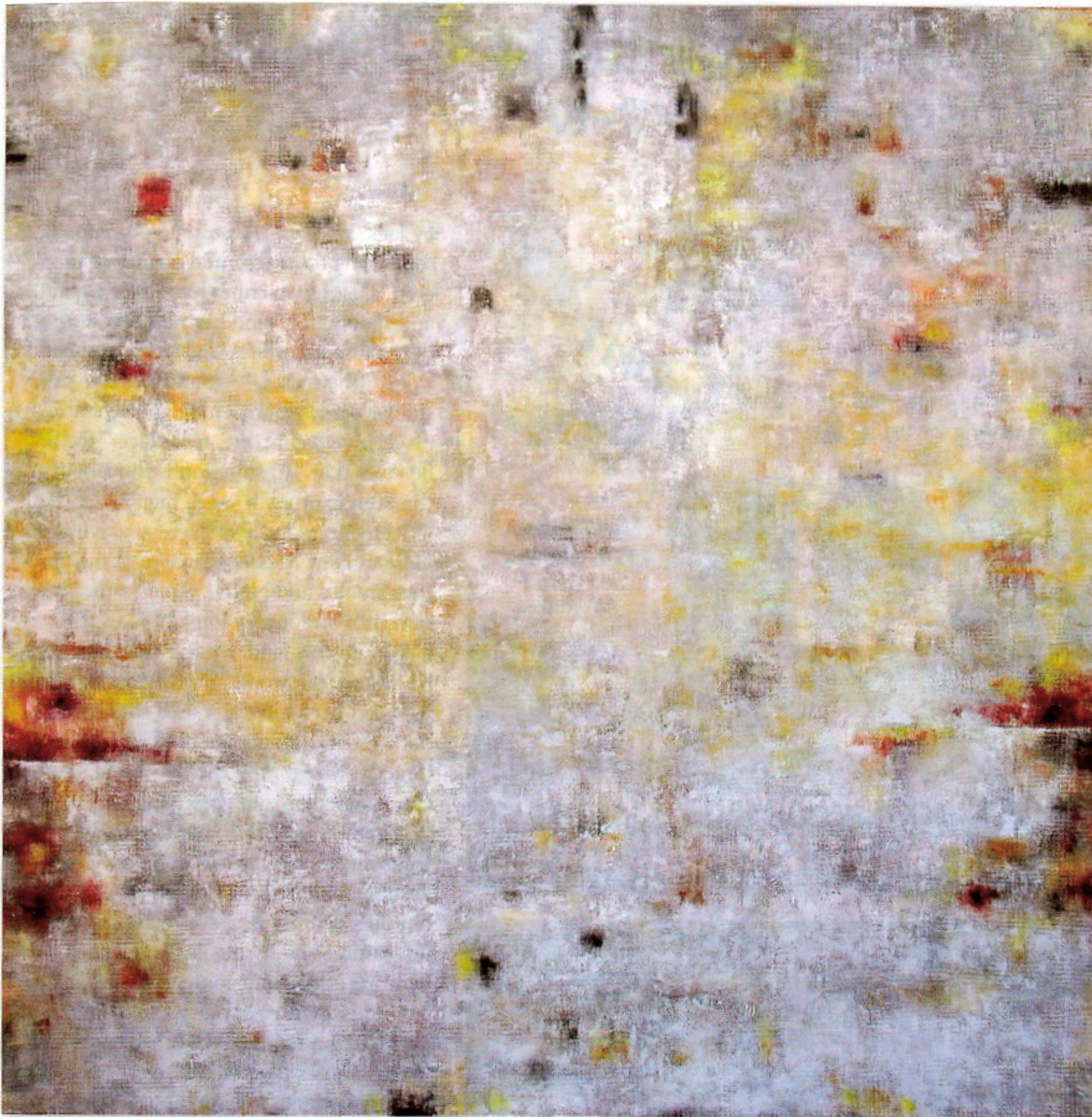
Santa Fe's Jamie Kirkland says "Abstract art can take on an ethereal quality," as with her painting *Stepping Forward*.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE isn't only America's preeminent female artist; she also helped bring abstract painting to the fore with such paintings as *Black Door with Red* (1954), a reductive geometric depiction of her Abiquiú house consisting of just five elements—red wall, black door, white stepping stones, yellow strips of ground and sky—and the even more famed *Red Hills with the Pedernal* (1936), in which streamlined, salmon-colored hills slope before curvaceous, blue-green mountains. O'Keeffe simplified forms to their essence, as did other 20th-century New Mexico modernist abstractionists, such as Agnes Sims, Florence Pierce, Andrew Dasburg, Fritz Scholder, and Beatrice Mandelman. That trend continues today.

"As a young painter at the San Francisco Art Institute, I started out painting abstractly," recalls Taos-based Ronald Davis. "I wanted to be a young avant-garde hotshot artist, so I started with abstract expressionism." Davis, now 73, built a hogan-inspired compound in Arroyo Hondo and today shows at Charlotte Jackson Fine Art,

in Santa Fe. He's world-famous as an abstract illusionist, with optical paintings in the collections of London's Tate Gallery and New York's Museum of Modern Art. "I look at things and put them into a perspective. Rather than do a painting as a literal object, my contribution is to introduce the element of classical renaissance perspective or engineering drawing into modernist painting," Davis explains. "Maybe you can make a connection that Taos is a very spiritual place, so I'm not just doing geometry or illusion or pretty squares on a canvas. Buying and selling art is a secular activity, but art is a spiritual quest for me. [Mark] Rothko suggested [that] when you looked at one of his paintings you would have a spiritual experience. I would say my best paintings would have a spiritual something that appeals to the soul and the heart, a connection with a higher power."

Albuquerque-based metal sculptor and University of New Mexico professor Constance DeJong, 60, who is also represented



Tesuque-based Diane McGregor, painter of *Marava*, characterizes her work as reductive abstraction.

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—DIANE MCGREGOR



Albuquerque’s Page Coleman describes abstraction as “shapes that are interpreted and reduced,” as with her *Blackbird Heaven*.

Going Places ARTSCAPES

by Jackson, says, "Abstraction is reducing something to its essential quality or property." DeJong describes herself as "rigorous and thoughtful," and her nonrepresentational sculptures as "reductive, somber work." She muses, "Art and Zen are a very similar process of reaching an authentic place, a very concrete, real place." DeJong believes that "Abstraction is the language of the 20th century. It was a huge, important movement and way of expressing content. Here in New Mexico, because of the art of the Anasazi and Native Americans, abstraction is so profoundly implanted in this culture in this land. It's the real stuff. It's heart and soul work." She divides her time between her University-area studio and her westside home on a bluff above the Río Grande, where "You can see the mountains changing color, and geese and bald eagles."

Santa Fe gallery owner Charlotte Jackson, who specializes in monochrome, abstract, and high modernist artworks, has her own definition of abstraction: "It's as if a painter says, 'I'm going to make you a painting and you're going to see what I was feeling—whether or not you're going to be able to define it as a lake or tree or river.'" Jackson notes that "We're seeing more and more galleries going into abstraction; I'd say, 50 percent of the galleries here"—a substantial number, considering that the Santa Fe Gallery Association estimates that this town of 73,979 has more than 200 art galleries.


"My work is reductive abstraction inspired by the vast desert spaces of New Mexico and the Southwest," says Tesuque's Diane McGregor, 53, who moved here from Hawaii and showed at The Edge gallery in Santa Fe until it closed. "The wide-open spaces, and the sky and air, and the mountains and the light—everything is simplified for you here. Hawaii was a jungle. Here, it allows me to get into a more minimalist meditation on the landscape because of the vast distances and the light. O'Keeffe wanted to express the essence of the landscape, and that's how I'm still influenced by her." A wildlife aficionado, McGregor lives with her astronomer husband, parrot, three dogs, de-scented pet skunk, and some baby raccoons they're rehabilitating. "Abstract art appeals to designers and interior designers and people

who are into poetry—people who are intuitive and sensitive and introspective."

Robert Ellis, 89, is an abstract painter who used to be the director of Taos's Harwood Museum and who now shows at Taos's 203 Gallery. "I was overwhelmed by the landscape here at first," he confesses. "I went up to the D. H. Lawrence Ranch, and looked down at San Cristóbal and saw the fields and the roads, and I began to see verticals and horizontals in the roads and fields, and I could see it as related to a Mondrian order. I did some rhomboid shapes and diamond shapes in the landscapes. Albuquerque Museum has one."

"Abstraction has come into its own in the last 20 years," believes abstract minimalist Tom Kirby, 48, whose shimmering, metallic-looking oil paintings are at Santa Fe's Winterowd Fine Art. "I'd like the paintings to look like they were created by an act of nature. There's a transcendent quality, and I'm working with dispersed metals and with resins that catch the light." Having grown up here, Kirby can recall when only one or two Santa Fe galleries showed abstract art. "The scene was dominated by Western, or cowboy, art. Georgia O'Keeffe had a great influence, and so did Andrew Dasburg."

Abstract landscapist Jamie Kirkland, 59, moved to Santa Fe in 2006. "I love the low horizon line, and how vast the sky is," says Kirkland, who strives to express in her work mystery, depth, and calm. She suggests that "Abstract art can take on an ethereal quality, especially where there's a lot of space around it." Kirkland's work, too, is represented by Winterowd.

Page Coleman, 57, an Albuquerque stalwart who for years ran the Coleman Gallery, describes her abstracted landscapes: "You can still see a landscape, but it's not an exact cloudburst in the sky. It's been reinterpreted and reduced to strong color and shapes, producing emotion." Coleman points out that "In New Mexico, there are less humans, and more land and sky. With the winds, the open air—abstraction is all around." 

Santa Fe-based **Wolf Schneider** has been editor in chief of the *Santa Fean*, editor of *Living West*, and consulting editor of *Southwest Art*.