



1. "Uncle Fidel's Cousin San Luis" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1987. Mixed Santa Clara and micaceous clay. 33" high (83.8cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Stephen Trimble.

Brown Earth and Laughter

The Clay People of Nora Naranjo-Morse

Stephen Trimble

Nora Naranjo-Morse sculpts *koshare* clowns, Pueblo women, village scenes, one-of-a-kind figurines, fetishes and animals, all with humor, affection, and an abstracted and refined sophistication. Nora came to clay in her twenties, in 1976, after leaving New Mexico to sell firecrackers in South Dakota and to sort mail in Washington, D.C., and after returning to finish her bachelor's degree at the College of Santa Fe. "I knew the basics," she says of learning pottery, "I just needed to remember."

Nora comes from a family of potters; her mother is Rose Naranjo and her sisters, Dolly and Tessie Naranjo and Jody Folwell. It was her older sister, Jody, who first reintroduced Nora to clay.

"I had come home to Santa Clara and was talking with Jody one day when I put my hand on the clay and held it with three fingers. It was the first time I ever felt a connection with something greater than myself. I became addicted immediately. I had come home."

At first, Nora tried making bowls, working with Rose and Jody. "They were making incredible things. I wanted to be different. In my life, if I have a choice, I always go for the more difficult, maybe because I am the youngest daughter in a line of women that are so exceptional. I needed to find something of my own."

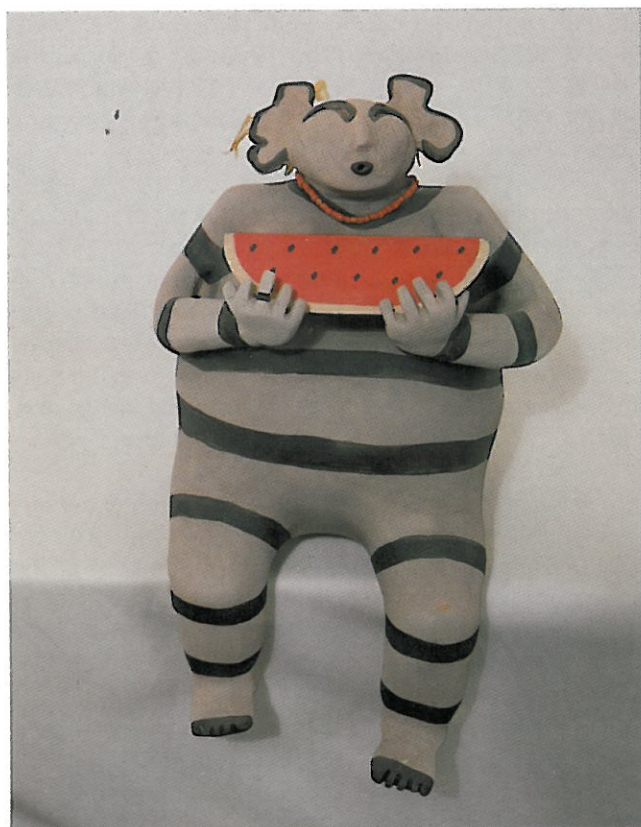
Nora started making figures, using a mix of Taos micaceous clay and richer Santa Clara clay, with volcanic ash for temper—a mix she says is very strong, strong enough to work into her sculptural forms. She has been winning awards at Santa Fe Indian Market every year since 1979 in clay and ceramic sculpture, clay scenes, and clay figures (though in 1986 her niece Roxanne Swentzell gave her some stiff competition!). In

1982 she received a fellowship from the Southwestern Association on Indian Affairs.

Nora works in a rich figurative tradition. When James Stevenson gathered the first documented pottery collections from Santa Clara in 1879, the potters were making polished blackware animal figurines (Babcock, Monthan and Monthan 1986:74). As the tourist market for pottery grew, so did the volume of *animalitos* produced at Santa Clara. In the 1960s and 1970s, the pueblo's potters added nativities and Storytellers to their repertoire. Nora has taken this tradition in a new and personal direction.

Pueblo potters do not really teach their children pottery making step by step. They tell them to watch; they give them clay to work with on their own. As Nora says, "American culture is real explanatory; Indian culture works more on trial and error." When she began potting, she remembered her mother's respect for the clay. "I heard a lot of 'don't waste it' and 'don't misuse it.' So now when I see a tiny piece of clay on the ground, I pick it up. But I rarely talk to my mother about pottery—that connection is instinctively there."

Nora is becoming more and more active outside of her studio as a speaker on pottery and poetry. Her poems have been widely published, and she speaks regularly at the University of New Mexico for the Women's Studies Program, directed by Navajo poet, Luci Tapahonso. Nora toured Denmark and Germany in 1984, demonstrating pottery techniques and talking about the cultural perspectives of Southwest Indian people. In December of 1986, she spoke on a panel at the Modern Language Association meetings in New York City, where she described how she creates. "I sit out-

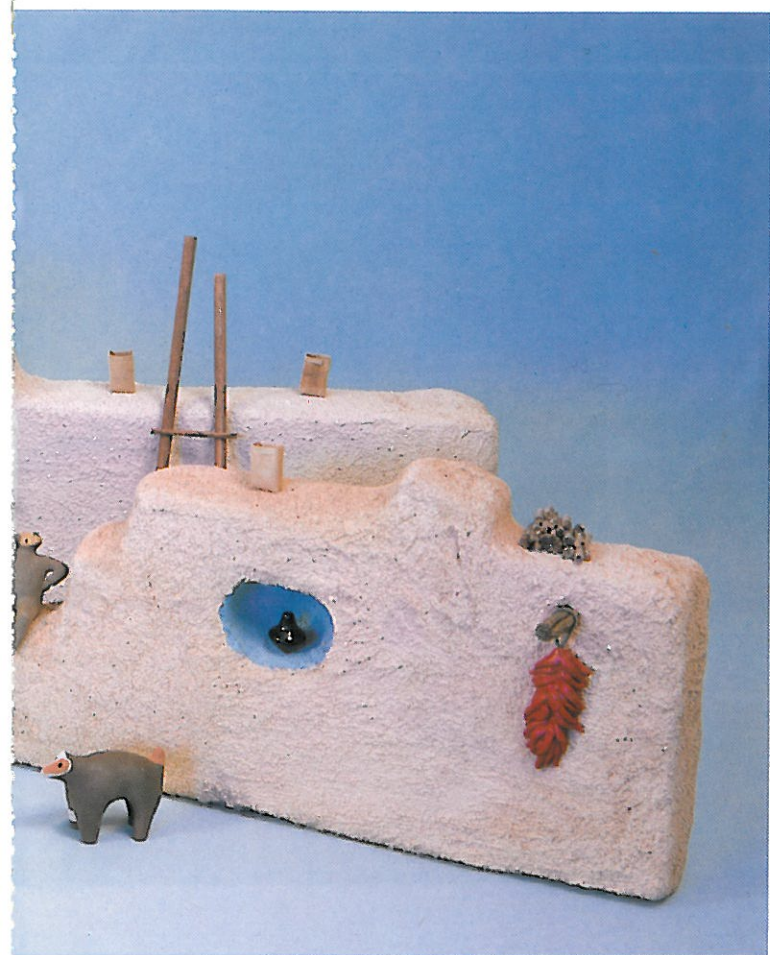


side for hours listening to the clay drip in the bottom of the bucket. I have six precious hours while my kids are in school. I enter a different frame of mind. I really feel that I let any idea come into my head; I rarely reject them."

And where does she get her ideas? "Going to the post office is inspirational. The angle of the body of a big woman bending over to open her mailbox...I dash home and do something in clay. Or I will be doing something so mundane as shopping. A heavy woman reaches for some macaroni, and the line of her arm—something gets stored in my head. The next day I'm driving down the road and I see...part of her, a line."

"Some of the best ideas I've had have come from simple things, the ladders at Taos where I grew up, or my children."

Nora's father, Michael Naranjo, was a Baptist minister, and when she was a baby her family moved from Santa Clara Pueblo to Taos Pueblo, where he worked as a missionary for twenty-seven years. Nora left Taos at sixteen, and her parents retired to Santa Clara, but there are still strong Taos influences in her work—from the Taos micaceous clay favored by her whole family to the images of ladders from the multi-storied pueblo and of clowns not seen at Santa Clara for years.



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"I love ladders. I remember going up and down them constantly as a little girl, real proud, feeling real secure. To me, a ladder against an adobe wall is beautiful, knowing it will take you up, up, up—and also that it will take you down into the kiva."

Nora uses native clay and coiling techniques; she fires both outside in the old way and in an electric kiln. But Nora also may make the hair for one of her clowns from electrical wire and decorate her figures with enamel or metallic gold paint. She says, "You could use commercial clay or anything you want, and still be connected, still be traditional. So I'm not afraid to use telephone wire.... All the things that affect me—an American Indian woman making pottery now in 1987—all, good and bad, come out in my work."

But making pottery that looks as different from carved and polished Santa Clara blackware as Nora's does, she is bound to worry a little about where she fits. When Nora was in New York City, she visited the Museum of Modern Art. She saw Henry Moore sculptures, Van Goghs "so close you could see the texture of the canvas," and the roomful of last Picassos. She saw that "the older they got, the more simple they became in their work. Everything had fallen away." She walked through the museum and she heard herself saying, "It's okay. Just go home and work."

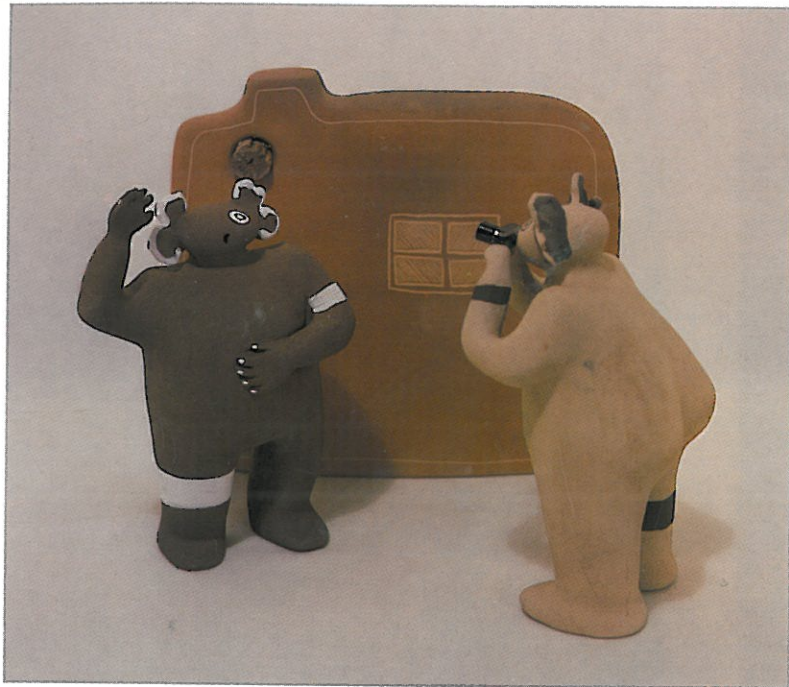


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2. "A Christmas Scene" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1986. Plaster-coated styrofoam buildings and Santa Clara clay. Buildings 16" high (40.6cm); figures up to 6" high (15.2cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Mary Fredenburgh.

3. "Uncle Fidel on the 4th" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1983. Santa Clara clay. 15" high (39cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Mary Fredenburgh.

4. Untitled sculpture by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1987. Wood and mixed Santa Clara and micaceous clay. 24" high (61cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Stephen Trimble.

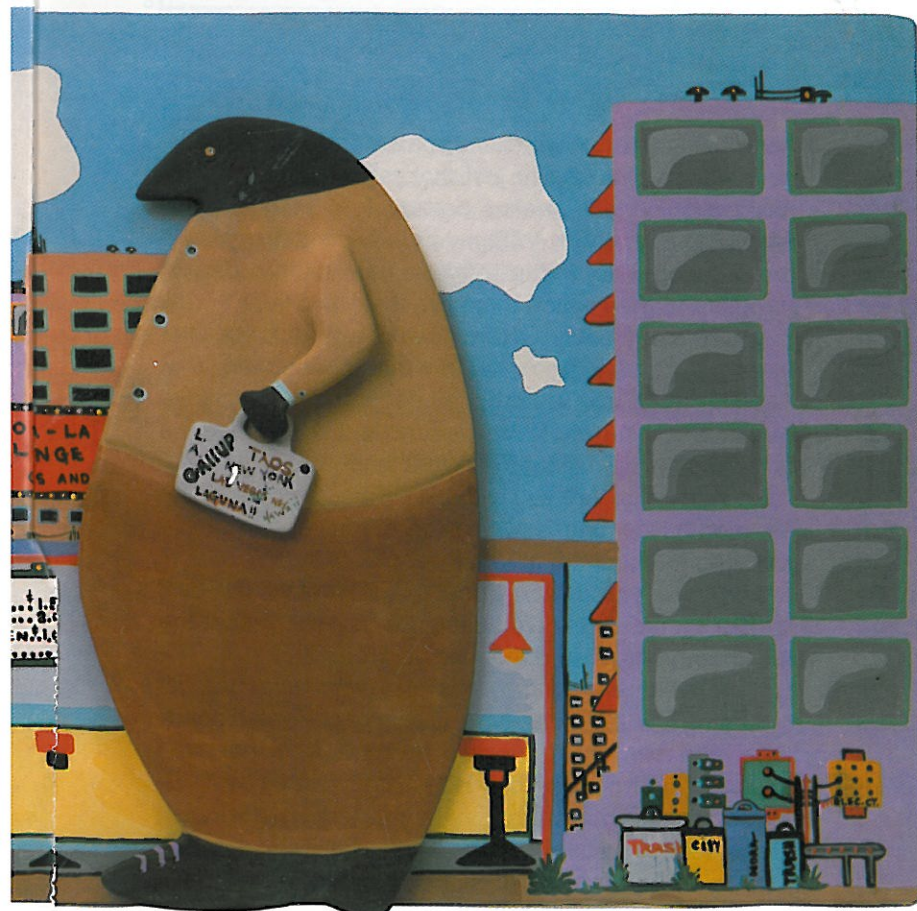


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5. "Clowns Taking a Picture" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1984. Santa Clara clay. 9" high (23cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Mary Fredenburgh.

6. "My Favorite Time of Night" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1986. Santa Clara clay and wood. 21" x 38" (53.3cm x 96.5cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Mary Fredenburgh.

7. "A Pueblo Man with Curiosity" by Nora Naranjo-Morse, 1985. Santa Clara clay on acrylic. 13" x 36" (33cm x 92cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Mary Fredenburgh.

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8-9. "Eskimo Dancers Meet Santa Clara Clay." Figures by Nora Naranjo-Morse; silverwork by Denise Wallace, Aleut; 1986. Santa Clara clay, silver and fossilized ivory. Figures approximately 9" high (23cm). Courtesy of Denise Wallace. Photograph by Stephen Trimble.

10. Nora Naranjo-Morse, Santa Clara, pictured with clown figure, 1986. Figure: Santa Clara clay. 4½" high (12 cm). Photograph by Stephen Trimble.



Recently, Nora has been making fetishes, clay figures wrapped with yarn and holding feathers and sticks, even decorated with hammered silver. Nora says, "My fetishes teach me about being brave. They make me strong, make me believe in what I'm putting out. I had them for six months and when someone would come to buy things, I would hide them. Finally I said, 'I have to be realistic.'...When it was time for them to go, they just went."

Nora's delight in discovering new clay people extends to watching other people discover her work. When collectors and tourists walk past her booth at Indian Market, she can see them looking at her work, coming back, trying to figure it out. She watches for that same spark of understanding she feels herself—"like a little baby tinkering with something"—when she is working and suddenly the piece works. "People need categories. It's almost as if things shouldn't be fun, things shouldn't be playful. Children look at my work and nod—and that's better than a ribbon....I think I've done okay when I've tugged at somebody, reminded them of an emotion they've had."

Walking past the wall of the south-facing windows that open into Nora's studio, her husband has surprised

her more than once with her arms around a large piece, embracing it. She says he just shakes his head knowingly and walks on. "He makes pottery, too, so he understands. I'm a catalyst. With my pottery I'm doing what a mother would do, trying to make her children decent people and then watch them live their own lives."

Like many potters, Nora speaks with distress over having to "put a price tag on that connection, that traditional feeling. The minute I pack things up to take to a dealer, it's a whole new reality. And sometimes the first thing the dealer says is, 'What family are you from?' It boils down to, 'Are you sellable?' This, after I've spent six months coming down to the studio at two in the morning to check on my clay people.

"I'll always look at my pottery before I take it to sell. It's like a football team huddling: we give each other the last 'humph-hah!' and then we go for it."

Nora is beginning to mix clay with other media, mounting low-relief clay figures as part of framed paintings, and she has done two bronzes from her clay sculptures. She says, "clay doesn't have to be by itself. It lends itself to many other mediums, but whatever else I learn leads me back to clay.

"I would always like to be creating, somehow. I



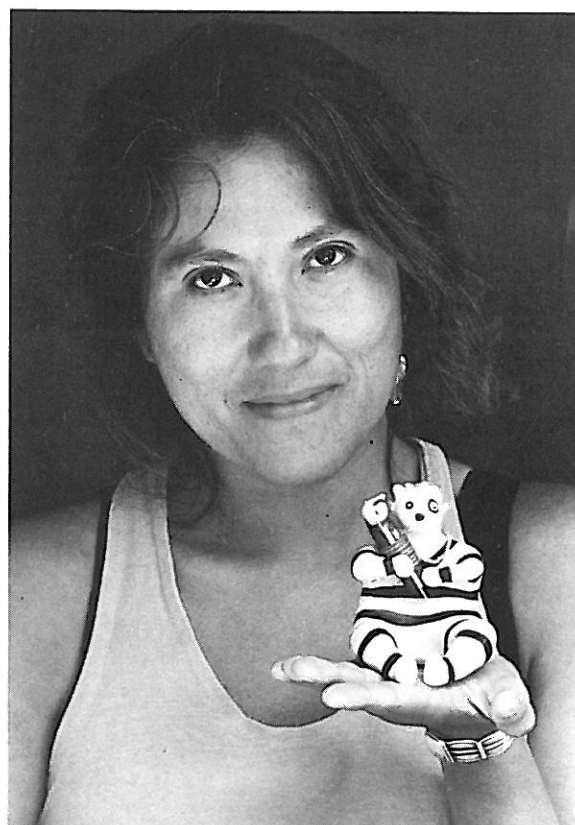
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don't know if I'll be doing clay figures in ten years. I hope so. But whatever direction I'll go, I'll be taken care of. What I like about creating is connecting, going beyond intellectualism, getting emotion from a piece of work. That's what I want to be doing in ten years."

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Stephen Trimble is a free-lance writer and photographer who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In addition to Talking with the Clay: The Art of Pueblo Pottery, his recent books include Our Voices, Our Land and Blessed by Light: Visions of the Colorado Plateau.



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