

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, A High Desert Tribute, an exhibition by Sidne Teske, at the Western Nevada College Bristlecone Gallery from January 3 – April 13, 2023. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.

A HIGH DESERT TRIBUTE

Looking for the meaning of the universe with Sidne Teske

“This one is called *Thunderstorms, Independence Valley*.” Sidne Teske is showing me a pastel of the Independence Mountain Range ahead of her latest exhibition, “A High Desert Tribute.” In the drawing, it is mid-afternoon in Tuscarora as clouds emerge from woven-looking, cross-hatched lines — each purple, pink, and blue mark building towards that electric moment before a downpour when light is saturated and the only movement that happens, happens in the sky.

Out of frame, Teske’s house sits at the shoulder of Mount Blitzen — a holdout in a shrinking town where artists come for expansive views and inexpensive land, staying as long as they can in an environment prone to extremes.



Thunderstorms, Independence Valley, soft pastel, 12”x16”, 2021

“There’s not many people in Tuscarora,” Teske explains — her voice is soft and loping, catching on words that make her laugh. Teske turned seventy last year and still radiates the kind of “old soul, young person” energy that certain artists possess. “When I arrived, there were 14 people and now there’s three and I’m one of them. It’s not that nobody wants to be there, things right now are just such that there isn’t anyone.”

Over the years, I have made a handful of empty promises to visit Tuscarora. See Sidne’s studio. Visit her haunted house. Take in the vistas that have inspired Gail Rappa, Ron Arthaud, and all three Parks artists. I apologize and am rebuffed, am given hot tea and a tour of Teske’s Reno home. Annoyingly, I begin to search for traces of Tuscarora in the artist’s blue eyes, collection of houseplants, couch cushions, and several dozen pastel drawings and watercolors that will soon be hung for the exhibition.

Working Outside

One drawing — a close-up of Mount Blitzen titled *Independence Valley Rimrocks* — depicts a basalt structure near Teske’s home that has been “thrust from the valley floor.” Unlike the thunderstorm piece, this drawing deals with features that move considerably less than clouds and therefore need fewer tickmarks to document the changing colors. Smoother but still marked up enough to shimmer against the cadmium red underdrawing, the small pastel hones in on a rock-face overgrown with grasses and shrubs and divided in two by an alluvial fan. The composition is closely cropped around the edges of the cliff as if to distinguish it from other cliffs,

adding a sense of familiarity and affection that brings to mind Georgia O’Keeffe’s black hill paintings.

Another view of the same landscape, titled *Tailings on Blitzzen*, zooms out on the mountainside to reveal a small corner of sky. Like the title suggests, mining tailings make an appearance in this piece, though they look almost indistinguishable from ordinary rock outcroppings. Like the other rock-faces, the tailings run perpendicular to gently sloping foothills and behave as any berm would in the winter — growing anemic brush on their high sides and casting gray and lilac shadows away from the sun, which Teske tells me she is “always racing.”

One of six drawings in the exhibition that portray mining activity, *Tailings on Blitzzen* touches on a subject that is unavoidable for those living in middle-of-nowhere, Nevada. Predictably, Teske’s feelings on mining are resolute.

“I find it disturbing. It’s such an assault on the landscape and I have a hard time with that. But, you know, that’s what I paint.”

For plein air artists, recourse is a box of pastels or watercolors. And faithfulness to a landscape (contaminated or not) means rendering it in your own hand; trusting the honesty of the lines you’ve been making forever to make it make sense across different subject matter. In this case, the artist’s techniques just happen to complement the narrative that human impact can inject the wrong kind of disorder into a landscape. Hashmarks that previously brought to mind a weaving together of the most ephemeral aspects of place can also be looked at as a threadbare skein, a glitchy image, or a jarringly unstable idea.

The red underdrawing is doing a lot of work in this scenario, serving as a complementary base for other-colored tickmarks to melt or clash with — pushing and pulling the parts of the mountain into place and forcing the viewer to mix color with their own eyes. This act of labor, coupled with the uniformity of Teske’s marks (no matter their placement in the foreground or background) has the effect of both flattening and oscillating the landscape at the same time. It’s disorienting and harsh, like mining. Like nature, too.

This visual confusion — or vibrating excitement — is a through-line for the remaining 22 pastel landscapes, a number that feels overwhelming when it’s packed into a small studio closet but will no doubt feel right on the white walls of the gallery.

Some highlights:

Winter Light captures a snowy image that could be mistaken for a pair of sunken footprints if it weren’t for several brown, vertical marks in the left corner that hint at a structure. Teske identifies these marks as a water tank and I place the artist further back than I originally thought — on a hill or a mountain — overlooking a broad, beveled landscape with icy blue shadows and straw-colored hills embroidered with snow. Similar to the



Winter Light, soft pastel, 12”x15”, 2022

previous work, *Winter Light*'s individual hashmarks read as particular color temperatures when in proximity to one another and to their contrasting underdrawings (here, it is a lilac underdrawing for colder effect). Overall, the piece gives less O'Keeffe and more Monet.

Evening at the Water Tanks is a reverse composition of *Winter Light* with its opposite vantage point, opposite season, and different time of day. Also, it has bones — real shape and heft underneath the blurred lines of Teske's hashmarks, which stretch rather than float over the contours of the mountains and foothills. Reminiscent of Cézanne's ever-shifting mountain landscapes, Teske's color-play and stitch-like marks keep the tension between movement and structure alive.

Dugout is the largest of the pastel landscapes — almost 4'x 5' — but is most notable for its role as a transition piece between the artist's small plein air drawings and larger figurative work. Using the landscape from the former and techniques from the latter, Teske creates an image of Tuscarora that feels a little too calm and orderly, a little too studio-made. Though the piece depicts a familiar hillside, the sense of urgency in Teske's mark-making and shorthand color-swatching is gone, replaced by the steady lines of a hand that has worked and reworked the sky.

Going In

The struggle to extract Teske's thirteen figurative pieces from the studio closet is a ten-minute endeavor. Much of the work is large — at least 3'x 4' — and unwieldy with frames, but we manage to set up a makeshift gallery anyway.

The work is striking. Heavily silhouetted, featureless bodies assume dramatic poses that take up most of the composition space. The rough fabric of Teske's frenetic tickmarks have been replaced by slower, steadier lines and backgrounds have gone mostly dark and geometric.



Crossroad, soft pastel, 24"x36", 2021

Still looking for Tuscarora, I initially interpret the change in mood as a sign that it's not here. As usual, I'm mistaken.

In *Crossroad*, the glowing outline of a woman is seen from above. She crouches with her hands pressed onto an invisible floor — a floor that has been replaced by a color-field of magenta and deep purple. Shaded spheres and jagged lines hang in the expanse of color, too. Inside the boundaries of the woman's body, a heavily hashmarked landscape made up of mountain and sky peeks through, revealing either a physical portal into Tuscarora or a spiritual one.

Solace uses some of the same imagery, but instead of a woman whose body doubles as a portal, there are two figures — a man and a woman — whose limbs seem intact with normal-looking flesh and bones. Laid bare in postures of anguish, the figures bury their heads

in their arms, their bodies superimposed over a purple and black background dotted with lilac, opaque spheres. Unlike the woman from *Crossroad*, these people have visual weight. Existing fully within their bodies, the couple has no inter-dimensional window to escape through, only each other (and the spheres) to draw comfort from.

The glowing silhouette returns in *But What of My Children* - a large-scale pastel that the artist made nearly twenty years ago. The drawing, Teske tells me, is a response to a piece of Nevada history that happened during the height of the mining era in Eureka when air pollution was so bad that residents would move away to have children. Because no Anglo doctors would live in the town, Chinese doctors and their families were brought in. Teske was touched by the story and empathized with the wives' burden of living in a place defined by terrible air and social isolation.

In the drawing, a woman (perhaps one of the wives) stands with her legs apart, bracing her body for incoming harm as her right hand reflexively covers her face, protecting herself from polluted air. Blue Chinese characters that Teske copied down from the I-Ching scroll over the length of her body, referencing the divination text that has — for thousands of years — advised its readers on the meaning behind material change, the structure beneath the textile. Eureka hills and vague geometries wash the background in a blue, dusty solvent that promises a quick dissolution to the pain of living.

Journey takes us back to Tuscarora as a nude woman sits with her legs spread out, body bent over at the waist. Below her, the closely-cropped silhouette of another female figure has tickmarked trees, sky, and mountain in place of flesh — a body that would be lying face-up if it had a face, or even a head. Instead, the figure ends at the neck but continues on as a tree with yellow foliage grows up and out of her throat and into the purple, cosmic background, eventually disappearing off the page. No longer contained by the boundaries of her physical form, the landscape that is personal to this woman has become universal, floating in the ether alongside shaded spheres and her own corporeal form, blurring the (hashmarked) lines between veil and structure.

Since most of Teske's figures exist inside these ambiguously supernatural spaces, a small pastel, titled *Blue Eyes*, stands out for its portrayal of a real man in a real room. Made in 1995, the small drawing centers on an emaciated figure who is curled up on a bed and turned away from the viewer. All around the person — who Teske confirms is her father — colorful and wild lines scribble across the page like a leaking aura, shooting pinks, yellows, and blues convulsively into a black background. The colors are too volatile and the lines too erratic for the viewer to visually stitch them back together. The body is too far gone to live in the world of



Blue Eyes, soft pastel, 18"x24", 1995

the drawing much longer, but not far enough gone to exist in the world with the spheres yet. In the air, bright white scribbles converge into proto-circles.

The silence in the room lets me know that Teske is somewhere else, probably decades back. I want to know if the figurative work is hard for her, where her head is when she's making it.

"I'm totally internal when I'm doing these. Every mark has to be true...the first mark has to be absolutely, absolutely true." Teske looks over to make sure I am following.

"It takes a while, but these help me say things that I don't have words for."

It's almost time to go and so Sidne and I say our goodbyes in the living room. I am about to head out the door when I notice one last drawing hanging above the sofa. It's called *Cosmic Surfer*. In it, a strong, glowing silhouette of a man surfs on a tilted spiral-like galaxy made up of pinks, blues, yellows, and reds, all curving into some mysterious point of galactic singularity.

In the background, a pattern resembling a primitive pictograph wallpaper the edges of the universe as sharp planes of white glitch in and out. In the corner, a collection of quick, purple tickmarks glow against a dark void, resembling a stand of high desert scrub at night or a tear in the fabric of space-time. On the other side of the drawing, I imagine the landscape goes on and on, each mark barely holding back the cosmos.



Cosmic Surfer, soft pastel, 36"x54", 1999

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Sidne Teske

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