

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Big Deal* an exhibition by artist Joan Arrizabalaga. The show is at the Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from May 15 – September 12, 2024. 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.



# BIG DEAL

Joan Arrizabalaga is up to her usual tricks



Besides recreating the *Mona Lisa* as a face card, Arrizabalaga also took cues from the display in the Louvre, putting *Mona Casino II* behind glass and hanging it across from *Il Gluco d'Azzardo (Game of Chance)*, Arrizabalaga's version of *Nozze di Cana (The Wedding Feast at Cana)*.

What is it like to come face to face with the *Mona Lisa*? Is she mysterious? Do her eyes follow you? What is her secret?

I don't know. Like most, I have never seen the *Mona Lisa* in person. Also like most, she is not a stranger to me either I am a passive recipient of her image many, many times over – thousands of impressions in books, on T-shirts, with and without sunglasses, with and without mustaches.

At the moment, I am standing in front of another replica – titled *Mona Casino II* – a recent piece from Joan Arrizabalaga that is propped against an upholstered chair in the artist's living room, ready to hang in the upcoming "Big Deal" exhibition at the Bristlecone Gallery at Western Nevada College.

"Everybody knows about the *Mona Lisa*, so it is almost a trick. To me, it's fun to take off on it because it's exactly the face of a card."

As Joan talks, her hands gesture towards a portrait where a life-sized woman – larger than the original – sits at a three-quarter angle, undeniably *Mona Lisa* with her full eye contact and partial smile. Only in

this version, *Mona Lisa's* hands hold playing cards; the craggy Italian mountains have been replaced by a Sierra Nevada range; and her face is the face of a queen card.

The first time I saw Joan's likeness of *The Mona Lisa*, she was in a similar pose – preserved in oil at a three-quarter angle and depicted in the living room where we are standing now – hanging in the entrance to the 34th Annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko while radiating the kind of soft, familiar presence that Zoe Bray portraits often possess.

Plainly but not dramatically lit, Bray's portrait drew me in six years ago for the same reason that Joan's face draws me in today with its unassuming gaze and warm, collected aura. Then – and now – a smile plays at the edges of the artist's lips less coy than the *Mona Lisa*, skin-etched instead of muscle-bound, more of a statement than a question.



Cocktails, mixed media, 30" round.

As I listen to Joan, I come to understand that her smile lines are the result of eighty-plus years of being in love with her life and being loved, in childhood, by people who encouraged her curiosity. In between regular trips to her dad and uncle's hardware store to find shiny, new treasures, ten-year-old Joan would visit the dump in Fallon to find rusty, old treasures, "all these crazy things" for her ongoing art projects and experiments.

From a young age, Joan always wanted to be an artist but was made to go to business school first, just in case art didn't work out. Afterwards, she studied art at the University of Nevada-Reno, aligning her professional path with her passion and redefining her Wardrobe Mistress job at Harrah's casino as a means to whatever creative ends she was pursuing at the time. Embroidered costumes, practical pots, ceramic slot machines, animal busts made of gaming materials.

And card portraits. *Mona Casino II* is just one of many. Also featured in *Big Deal* is *Tondo*, where king and queen cards – stand-ins for Joseph and Mary – look over the baby Jesus, a jester lying in a manger made of green table felt and shredded cash, ringed by a round, gilded frame.

There's *Cocktails*, another casino-themed scene populated by face cards. A king and two jacks sit at a poker game, cards in hand, a pile of garish, plastic coins growing in the middle of the table. Their cocktail waitress – a queen holding a tray with wine – points a single finger upward, reminiscent of Old Masters' references to the heavens, to Plato's ideal, to God.

A third circular portrait, titled *A Little Help*, takes place around the roulette table as a royal flush of card people stare blankly – like they always do – straight ahead or to the side, outwardly unaware of the



Matt Sherer installed *Il Gloco d'Azzardo*.



*Il Gloco d'Azzardo (Game of Chance)* on full display behind red velvet stanchions in Bristlecone Gallery.

jester who playfully wields a magnet underneath the gaming table.

As Joan and I talk about her card portraits, it occurs to me that on the surface, these pieces sound two-dimensional. Literally, they are flat by design but the real shallow read of Arrizabalaga's work is the handful of conclusions that practically dare you to say them out loud. Capitalism-equals-bad. Luck-beats-religion. This is Arrizabalaga's first layer, so obvious it hurts. But then what? There are too many winks, too many contradicting messages that belie the artist's true feelings about the big questions that keep us up at night. *Is there a higher power? Do we make our own luck? Can we ever really know for sure that baby Jesus slept on a pile of money?*

In Arrizabalaga's hands, blasphemy is a jester's feather, tickling our very important sensibilities until we break character. You straighten yourself up and smooth your hair, but ultimately come out tousled – slightly more ridiculous and a little less sure than before.

This trickery is on full display with *Il Gloco d'Azzardo (Game of Chance)*, Arrizabalaga's showiest showpiece in *Big Deal*. Wall-sized and packed with face cards, plastic coins, and Renaissance references, the tapestry resembles a vague composite of several well-known frescos, including of *The Wedding Feast at Cana* – employing trompe l'oeil in heavy fabrics and varying shades of burgundy and gold. Here, Arrizabalaga's kings, queens, and jacks trade the wedding for casino night, complete with musical entertainment and cheating jesters. In the background, Lady Liberty and Benjamin Franklin dance on the stage under a shower of gold coins.

It's a lot, but you can't say it's melodramatic. The poker-faced expressions on the playing cards, hundred-dollar-bill-face, and stoic statue save each vignette from becoming a straight translation of the subjects' inner lives, relying instead on the viewer to project her own feelings and judgments into the scene.

Speaking of projection, I am getting the feeling that Joan and I are being watched by the animals on her walls as we make our way from room to room. A goat, a bighorn, and a wild boar all stare vacantly from behind their glass eyes, giving us nothing despite their loaded features. Realistic skins made of green poker felt, casino dice horns, and cards for inner ears add up to the same uneasy feeling you might have if you find yourself surrounded by actual animal heads in a hunting lodge – a discomfort that comes both from the animals themselves as well as the embarrassment of the brag being tossed your way. But instead of bragging, Arrizabalaga puts the bravado of holding an entire species' fate in our hands (and promptly dropping it) on display, giving new meaning to the term “big game” and renewed appreciation for who is really incurring the risk in this situation.

The last pieces that Arrizabalaga is getting ready to show are her ceramic slot machines – which are currently lying on every free surface in her home. One with cherries and cracked white glaze appears to be mid-operation on the dining room table. Though it is made of clay, there is clearly an electrical issue here, too.

“The motion sensor takes a little bit to warm up,” Joan explains. “It has all these different sounds and during the show it will be in there, so you won't see it.”

I wave my hand in front of the sensor and, sure enough, it triggers the sound of coins dropping in and whirring around.

Joan's face settles into one of her smiles. “It's got a jackpot in it, I think it's number eight in the order of sounds.”

Most of these sculptures have a similar base look – old school design with cherries on the frontplate, a 5-cent coin slot, and some wildcard element that has rendered the slot machine unbelievable as a slot machine. In one titled *Ants*, this feature is an army of ants that has seemingly dragged the machine underground long enough to strip it of its color and sandblast it into an artifact that now serves as a giant tunnel for the hand-painted insects.



*Comstock*, high fire ceramics.

Another is *8 Easy Pieces*: a raku-fired machine – with cherries – and a 5-cent coin slot – divided into eight pieces and sewn back together with twine.

My favorite, though, is *Comstock*, a slot machine that sits unceremoniously on the front entry table across from a collection of three original Harrah's machines. Unlike the originals (which Arrizabalaga scored at a steep discount from her former employer), *Comstock* is what you would call busted. High-fired and unglazed, its cherry emblem looks tan against the red-clay broken pieces of the machine. In its side, a handsewn, fabric pickaxe sticks out, revealing glittering, gold-painted chunks of clay through the cracks.

I suddenly have the need to blurt out something about “fool’s gold” or “striking it rich” but restrain myself. Then, a taxidermy shark made entirely of cards catches my eye above the doorframe and it occurs to me that this is a safe space for puns. I go with “fool’s gold” and get a real laugh.

The thing about Joan is that there is no pretense, despite building her body of work on trickster imagery. All the bells and whistles and gold paint and Old Masters references reside in her art as double negatives – stripping away false hopes and superstitions to reveal something like agency underneath it all.

“Do you think it's out of your hands, what your life is?” Joan asks. “Because I don't think that your life is out of your hands. I think you kind of make your life.”

Josie Glassberg

Reno, Nevada

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**Joan Arrizabalaga**

Photo credit: Josie Glassberg



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