

“Wall Quilts” Bring the Feminist Art Tradition to the Land of Georgia O’Keeffe

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This summer I met up with artist Sabra Moore at Angelina’s Restaurant, with the big chili pepper sign, on Fairview Street just by the Rio Grande in Española. We were about to tour the district elementary schools where she has been working to create permanent tile mosaics created from individual paintings by the school children throughout the rural area.

Moore is a powerhouse of Northern New Mexico public art. She works in the landscape of Georgia O’Keeffe—Sabra herself lives not far from Abiquiú Realty where visitors catch the bus for the O’Keeffe House Tour. It’s very popular. But the O’Keeffe devotees hardly know what else they are missing in the area.

Moore was a central figure in the feminist art movement in New York City from the 1970s through the 1990s and active in numerous tactical art groups including the *Heresies* collective, the Women’s Caucus for Art, and REPOhistory (a group that placed “commemorative” signs marginalized neighborhoods). Her recent memoir/chronicle *Openings: A Memoir from the Women’s Art Movement, New York City 1970-1992* was published by the New Village Press in 2016.

In the nineties she left Manhattan for New Mexico, like her friends May Stevens, Harmony Hammond, and Lucy Lippard. Moore and Mignon settled in rural Abiquiú, but the closest town is Española, a micro city of under 11,000 founded as a railroad village in 1880. It is remote—not quite Taos. After the railroad declined and many historic buildings were torn down in the 1980s, the town’s modest growth included workers from nearby Los Alamos National Laboratory. The area’s populations are diverse in the extreme, including not only Hispanics, Latinos and the indigenous Tewa, and but one of the most diverse Sikh populations on the globe.

What I saw on our tour was the sublime Northern New Mexico landscape but little monumental art and architecturally the area is quite humble. Until you see the schools. These are mostly poor, built with small budgets—from Hernandez Elementary school, built by the WPA, to the modern

Alcade Elementary built in 2013. But the mosaics that now adorn their walls, inside and out, are colorful and spectacular, and bear rich aesthetic values.

For the last nine years, Moore has met with principals of various individual schools in the vicinity, from Abiquiú to San Juan Pueblo, one by one, to present her proposals for projects funded through the State's artists-in-the schools programs. Her only compensation, a small salary written into the grants, which usually goes back into the projects for materials and services, like the cost of firing all the tiles at Sunrise Ceramics in Española.

As wonderful as children's drawings are, in quantities they can sometimes become monotonous to adult eyes. But in these ensembles each piece comes to life. Moore's and her students' imaginative amalgamations take on symbolic themes like insects, birds, and leopards and dragons—the latter are the mascots of two of the schools. Each tile reflects an expressive identity at some stage of emergence, like a molecule of awareness growing within a larger organism. And the students know they are contributing to something that will last. Moore assembles the tiles to form the larger shapes of flowers, leaves, or even lightning bolts. One year, after an El Rito kindergarten teacher (Denise Archuleta) was killed by a drunk driver, and Moore created a memorial *banco* covered with portraits and symbols made by grieving students and their teachers.

But most of the mosaics embellish the schools' interior and exterior walls. Moore calls them "wall quilts" to convey their connection to the collectivist art projects of the women's movement, many inspired by women's quilts, techniques she knows well and now repurposes. In New York, she exhibited and curated countless exhibitions of handmade books, constructed sculptures, and installations (her own work and others') and her artistic and political legacy is being archived at Barnard College. But in Northern New Mexico, she is curating a great exhibition chain of collectivist art works that span a decade. They stretch from school to school, year by year, and these works are always on view, for those who seek them out.

Below is a list of schools and works by year, most recent first (list compiled by Sabra Moore):

- 2017: *Leaf*, Abiquiu Elementary school, 7 ½ foot mosaic shaped like leaf created with fifth and sixth grade students, Abiquiu, New Mexico
Memorial Garden mosaic banco, approximately 5-ft. wide x 3 ½ ft. tall honoring Denise Archuleta, a teacher killed by a drunk driver and created with students kindergarten through third grade, El Rito Elementary School, El Rito, New Mexico
- 2016: *Dragon Pillars and Wall Quilt*, two painted tile mosaic pillars and one twenty-foot wall, San Juan Elementary School, Ohkay Owingeh, New Mexico
- 2014: *Insect/Flower*, two five-foot mosaics, Alcalde Elementary School, Alcalde, New Mexico
- 2013: *Leopard/Sunflower* mosaic, nine-foot circle permanent indoor installation created with students and staff, grades kindergarten through sixth, Alcalde Elementary School, Alcalde, New Mexico
- 2013: *Bird/Leaf* mosaic, seven-foot circle permanent outdoor installation created with third grade students, James H. Rodriguez Elementary School, Española, New Mexico
- 2012: *Eagle/Bird*, two seven-foot mosaic spirals, permanent outdoor installation created with fourth and fifth students, El Rito Elementary, El Rito, New Mexico
- 2011: *Flowers & Faces*, seven-foot outdoor mosaic installation in the form of a flower created with kindergarten, first, third grade students, Hernandez Elementary School, Hernandez, New Mexico;
Petroglyphs, seven-foot outdoor mosaic circle permanent installation created with kindergarten, first and third grade students, Abiquiu Elementary, Abiquiu, New Mexico
- 2010: *Dragon Spirals*, two-six-foot mosaic spirals permanent outdoor installation, created with first grade students in collaboration with Iren Schio, San Juan Elementary, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, New Mexico;
Lightning Bolts, three eight-foot mosaics in the shape of lightning bolts, permanent installation created with fifth grade students in collaboration with Iren Schio, San Juan Elementary, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, New Mexico
- 2010: *Flower Banco, & Leaf Banco*, two outdoor four-foot benches with backrest, permanent mosaic installation, created with third and fifth grade students, James H. Rodriguez Elementary, Española, New Mexico
- 2009-2008: *Dragon*, twenty-foot mosaic next to *Dragon-Wheel*, nine-foot circular mosaic permanent installations created with fifth grade students in collaboration with Iren Schio, San Juan Elementary, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, New Mexico

Moore, *Flowers & Faces*, seven-foot outdoor mosaic installation in the form of a flower created with kindergarten, first, third grade students, Hernandez Elementary School, Hernandez, New Mexico, 2011 + detail (below)



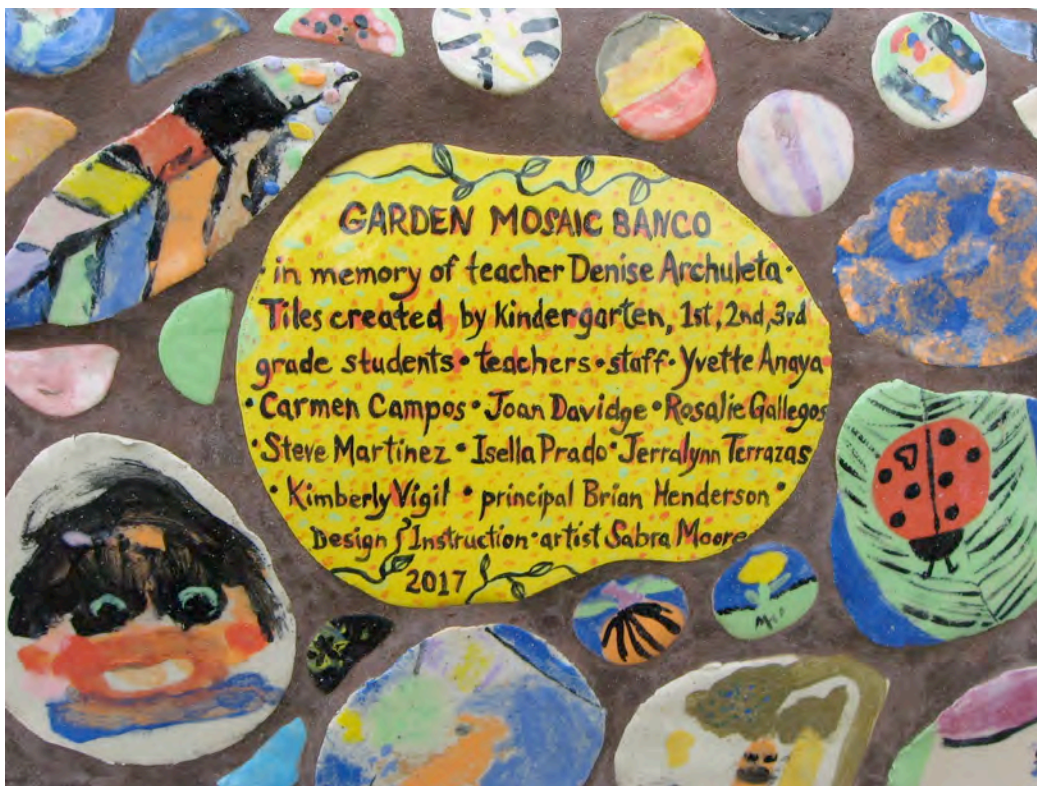
Dragon, twenty-foot mosaic next to *Dragon-Wheel* (below), nine-foot circular mosaic. Permanent installations created with fifth grade students in collaboration with Iren Schio, San Juan Elementary, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, New Mexico, 2008-09



Leaf, Abiquiu Elementary school, 7 ½ foot mosaic shaped like leaf created with fifth and sixth grade students, Abiquiu, New Mexico, 2017 + detail



Memorial Garden tile banco, approx. 5' x 3 ½', honoring Denise Archuleta, a teacher killed by a drunk driver and created with students kindergarten through third grade, El Rito Elementary School, El Rito, New Mexico + detail



Sabra Moore (top left) and third grade students,
Bird/Leaf mosaic, seven-foot circle permanent outdoor installation,
James H. Rodriguez Elementary School, Española, New Mexico, 2013

