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Classical and Contemporary

The Dick and Susan Evans collection tantalizes with a mix of the familiar and the foreign

By Susan Hallsten McGarry
Photos by Jack Parsons

CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY. The two adjectives seem contradictory. But when used to describe the home and art collection of Dick and Susan Evans, the words blend easily, reflecting a refreshing dichotomy of the expected and unexpected.

This aesthetic philosophy can be linked to the Evanses' own artistic sensibilities. Susan Stamm Evans, a sculptor, works primarily in porcelain, creating classical sculptures of women caught in quiet, reflective moments. In her small studio off the living room



a two-story studio down the hall, the paintings are populated by Evans' signature trees and shrubs. The vegetation might evoke a serene impression of classical Italy, but unsettling juxtapositions of forms and colors soon erode any sense of calm. Raking shadows edge against one another, patches of sky both threaten and comfort, and lush trees are cast a vibrant red, causing you to question the line between reality and fantasy.

Dick no doubt speaks for both his own work and Susan's when he describes the "edge" he aims for. "There are certain ways of putting elements together that ring true in the inner psyche and that ring true to our traditions," he says. "But I like going against the grain. It's the difference between something chaotic and something that tantalizes, titillates."

Tantalizing and titillating surely describe the collection in the couple's hillside home, which faces the Jemez Mountains west of Santa Fe. Contemporary and classical elements mingle seamlessly in the works, many of which are by friends, former colleagues, and

ABOVE: THE EVANS' HILLSIDE HOME LOOKS OUT ONTO THE JEMEZ MOUNTAINS.

LEFT: THE SPACIOUS LIVING AREA IS FILLED WITH ECLECTIC ARTWORK, INCLUDING A LIDDED VESSEL BY ROBERT TURNER ON THE DINING TABLE, X FORM II BY DICK EVANS OVER THE FIREPLACE, AND SEVERAL OBJECTS AND PAINTINGS AROUND THE WINDOWS.

students from the days when Dick taught ceramics and design at universities in New Mexico, Texas, and Wisconsin.

From the moment you park your car near the tiny oasis of aspen trees in the driveway, you know you are in for some surprises. At the base of the trees is a large ceramic sphere by Susan that looks like a rusted seedpod bursting with energy. That same primordial quality underlies the wood sculpture by Robert Brady in the home's entryway. An interpretation of the attenuated figure with wings could go either way—Is it an angel or a grim reaper?

The house is full of high-ceilinged spaces lit by windows of different sizes, which are positioned at various heights and angles. Creamy off-white and ruby-red walls accentuate an eclectic collection of paintings,

of their home, there's a smattering of materials and "bodies in process." Often set in vague but suggestive architectural frameworks, the delicately wrought figures are reminiscent of ancient goddesses, yet their pastel clothing suggests a more recent past.

Dick's expressionistic landscapes are as colorful as Susan's sculptures are neutral. Created in

Looking for Emerging Talent

Although sales are not necessarily the goal of university exhibitions where faculty and students show their work, quite often the works are for sale—if you ask. Dick and Susan Evans have purchased early (and reasonably priced) works by students who have gone on to become renowned artists. You can do the same by keeping an eye out for exhibitions presented by the fine arts department of your local college or university. Following is information on such shows at major state universities around the West.

At the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, exhibitions are held at the John Sommers Gallery throughout the school year. You can add your name to the mailing list by calling the gallery (505.277.4001), or watch for listings in newspapers, such as Albuquerque's *Alibi*.

Nowadays it's just as easy to peruse the Internet to find out what's happening. The Web site for Arizona State University's fine arts department (www.asu.edu/cfa/), for example, offers information about student/faculty exhibitions at the Harry Wood, Northlight, and Step Galleries. At the University of Texas at Austin fine-arts Web site (www.utexas.edu/cofa/a_ah/), you can find listings for weekly exhibitions of student and graduate student works at the Flood and New Galleries. And at the University of California, Berkeley, arts Web site (www.art.berkeley.edu/), you can find information on a wide array of exhibitions at the Worth Ryder Gallery, including an annual ceramic sculpture exhibition titled *The Dirt Show*, which is curated by professor Richard Shaw, culling work created in his classes.

ceramics, and mixed-media works. The open floor plan, designed by architect Pedro Marquez, is warmed by natural wood floors and sandstone accents. Displaying art was part of the plan from the beginning: The walls are backed with plywood so that hanging paintings isn't restricted to the location of studs, and nearly every horizontal surface including the windowsills was designed to display art.

What's interesting about this collection is the prominence of finely honed objects that would've been flippantly labeled "craft" before the 1970s revolution, when so-called decorative objects gained recognition as fine art. Both husband and wife are drawn to works that make a statement about the sculptural possibilities of clay; and,



though they purchased many of them years ago, today the names of the artists sound like a sprinkling of stars from the firmament of cutting-edge ceramists.

"We bought what we liked and what we could afford on a professor's salary," Dick says. "Luckily, many of

the top ceramic sculptors were just making names for themselves." Such is the case with Peter Voulkos, whose large platter hangs in the rectangular walkway separating the kitchen from the dining area. Voulkos, who's said to have been among the first to "liberate" clay from its prison of traditional forms, remains one of the Evanses' heroes—as do British ceramic sculptor Lucy Rie and Robert Turner, whose lidded Akan vessel sits on the dining table.

Another interesting piece is an earthy, low-fired ceramic work that looks like a channel littered with objects. Created by University of Wisconsin professor Karen Gunderman, the work is based on ditches she encountered while traveling in South America. The ruins of ancient arenas dissolv-



LEFT: SOLDIER, A WOODEN SCULPTURE BY ROBERT BRADY, IS DISPLAYED IN THE HOME'S ENTRYWAY.

ABOVE: DICK AND SUSAN EVANS.

ABOVE RIGHT: PAINTINGS BY FRED STONEHOUSE, R.B. SPRAGUE, SHIRLEY PASTERNAK, AND DICK EVANS HANG IN THE KITCHEN; IN THE FOREGROUND IS A CERAMIC WORK BY KAREN GUNDERMAN.



ing into the landscape inspired a tabletop by the same artist.

"We found many of our favorite pieces at graduate student shows," says Susan, who remembers how excited she was when she sold her own first work at a student exhibition. In many cases their pieces are experimental, some by artists not widely recognized today. "There is never a guarantee that a student artist will

become well known," Dick says, "but if you buy the piece because you like it, so what?"

The Evanses juxtapose avant-garde works by students with more classical pieces, such as the traditional black pots by Maria Martinez in the guest bedroom and the celadon Ming Dynasty platter in the master bedroom. "Quality is our first inter-

est," says Susan. "We respond to forms that make a quality aesthetic statement irrespective of their function."

Many of the ceramics have an earthy feel, inspired largely by their materials. After all, clay is dirt, and when fired clay becomes as hard as stone. "Some of the oldest prehistoric relics are made of clay," Dick points out. "Even

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 147)

though they seem fragile, they have withstood the forces of centuries." Such durability can be seen in a commissioned series by Santa Fe ceramist Richard Mastersen. Decorated with a madcap array of domestic and wild animals, the sake cups and pitcher, bird feeder, and dinnerware are functional artworks that survive regular use as well as the arid New Mexico climate.

In addition to objects, the Evanses' collection also includes paintings, prints, and tapestries, many by New Mexico artists. A *trompe l'oeil* weaving by Janusz Kozikowski depicts yet another weaving thrown haphazardly across an overstuffed chair. Across the room is a Hopi woman's wearing blanket that Susan inherited from her grandfather. A small Ernest Blumenschein painting of a fishing spot on the Brazos River hangs nearby. "It was a Christmas card to my grandfather," says Susan, whose family has been involved in commercial and residential building in Albuquerque and Santa Fe for eight decades. An abstract painting by Raymond Jonson in the hallway was a gift to Dick from Susan's family. "Most of the artwork we own has a story that goes with it," she says. "It means something to us."

Paintings, prints, and photographs by Nick Abdalla, Garo Antresian, and Tom Barrow are from the early 1970s when Dick taught at the University of New Mexico. Other paintings are by Santa Fe colleagues, including an R.B. Sprague interior with its perplexing rendition of a sliced watermelon positioned in front of a chair in an altarlike archway.

There are undertones of both the surreal and the natural in the artworks, and these elements contribute to an overall primordial

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mood. As with Dick's and Susan's own work, the viewer is challenged to ponder what is actually happening in these scenes, such as in the fantastical north-woods landscape by Tom Uttech in the bedroom, a dark and eerie painting. Uttech was a colleague of Dick's at the University of Wisconsin; a black-and-white photograph hanging not far from the painting shows the two of them in the woods, wearing trench coats and sporting tree branches as if horns. "It was an era of change and challenge in the fine and decorative arts," says Dick.

Two small paintings by Wisconsin artist Fred Stonehouse epitomize the surreal edge that lingers beneath the surface of the collection. A disembodied head skims a pool of water in one and floats above a pre-Renaissance-type landscape in another. "I don't have to know what the artist had in mind to appreciate these works," says Dick. "I enjoy the mysteries they reveal to me."

Despite the range of work in the Evans collection, much of the art seems to suggest a quest, a sense of exploration. The Evanses are both attracted to the "searching" evident in student artworks, perhaps because they were once college art students themselves and then worked for many years in a student environment. "Students are full of questions," says Dick. "They are looking into the black abyss and hoping to see their futures. It's exciting to see that inspiration and to support it in a small way."

As both artists and collectors, the Evanses appreciate that which forces them to question what lies beyond the surface. □

Susan Hallsten McGarry is a freelance author, curator, and president of McGarry Media Group based in Santa Fe, NM.