

THROUGH THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S *eye*

story by TANIA CASSELLE | photos by KITTY LEAKEN

You've probably already seen the work of Santa Fe photographer Kitty Leaken, in books including *Cooking with Cafe Pasqual's* and *Cooking with Johnny Vee*. Leaken also shoots for *localflavor* and for *Native Peoples* magazine, and one project particularly dear to her heart was *The Art of Exile: Paintings by Tibetan Children in India*, published by Museum of New Mexico Press.

When publisher Gibbs Smith asked her if she had any other book ideas, Leaken most certainly did. The result is *Contemporary Native American Artists*, with photography by Leaken and words by Suzanne Deats. It's a colorful slab of a book, showcasing 18 outstanding artists, and portraying the artists' work, the artists at work, and sometimes the artists at play. On a first flick through, you register that the production is gorgeous and the photography vibrant and powerful. But unlike so many lavish coffee table books that become a part of the furniture after an initial read (at least in my house), this one draws you back, draws you deeper, revealing new layers in the intimate visual and written portraits.

Perhaps this richness is a result of the book's evolution over four years. During that period, Leaken visited and revisited the selected artists, a group originally assembled by Ken Lingad of Isleta Pueblo to exhibit together several years ago. The stellar lineup includes Ed Archie NoiseCat, Althea Cajero, Upton Ethelbah, Jr., Rhett Lynch, Fritz J. Casuse, C.J. Wells, R. Lee White and Kevin Red Star. They still come together to participate in Santa Fe Indian Market, working in media that range from pottery and painting to sculpture, jewelry, beadwork and clothing design.

It was Kevin Red Star who suggested Suzanne Deats as the writer for the book. Leaken knew Deats but hadn't seen her for 15 years. "I knew Suzanne from the *Santa Fe Reporter*," she says. "I was working there fresh out of college, and she was the arts critic. Suzanne Deats knows these people, she knows them inside out. So I called her up."

There were some false starts as the duo came to grips with the project. "And each one of the false starts made it better," says Leaken. (Apparently so: The book is selling so well that it's in its second printing.)

One turning point came when Leaken was working for the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA) at the Santa Fe Indian Market awards. She was shooting the award-winning art when she realized she was interested in photographing the artists themselves, not solely their work. "I wanted to photograph the winners with that excitement and victory on their faces," she recounts. "I had interns grabbing them away from the press crunch."

Then she pulled their families into the photos, too. "The artists are not here alone. They're not working alone, living in a vacuum. Their work is a product of so many things: their family, the tribe, the culture. Their expressions changed when they had their family around them."

Leaken was already working on the book, and her experience with these family portraits clarified her vision of it, her urge to go deeper into the artists' lives and explore what it is that informs their work. She visited homes and pueblos, spent time at studios, watched the act of creation. "I'd ask questions," she says. "How did you do this? How did you make this? They were thoroughly engaged with my curiosity." She also had to observe Pueblo etiquette and customs. "It's hard to shoot in a pueblo; you're usually not allowed to. I had to be sure that everybody was on board with the images."

Although most of the artists featured are based here in New Mexico, Leaken traveled to Montana to photograph Kevin Red Star. "He's Crow. He has a real distinguished air about him," she says. "The book is dedicated to his daughter who passed away. He was deep in grief, but he said, 'Come anyway.'" She describes how Red Star works on six canvases at once, rolling his chair among them; her photo of that scene in the book is evidence that a picture speaks a



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thousand words. "All his warriors have a red star on them," Leaken says, leafing through the book to show me. Then she finds one that doesn't have a star. "Well, most of them!"

Several times she echoes the bridge metaphor that SWAIA Director Bruce Bernstein mentions in his foreword to the book. "The artists are a bridge between the old world and the new," says Leaken, "the Native world and the non-Native world. Able to go beyond the tradition of [their] craft, to evolve into something personal, modern, but also respectful of the tradition."

The photo she's most proud of shows a pair of half-open wooden doors, through which we glimpse Santa Clara Pueblo potter Jody Naranjo wearing a traditional manta dress, bending to tighten her moccasin straps. "It ties in with the bridge," says Leaken, turning the page from this timeless image to another of Naranjo in modern jeans. "It's just these two worlds."

The book also nods to the future. Leaken points out a bronze called "Pueblo Deer Dancer," by Joe Cajero, Jr., of Jemez Pueblo. "He said that the detail is so correct and intricate that children in the future can study this for their outfits."

Leaken says she enjoyed witnessing the progress of the artworks. For instance, she observed Dyani Reynolds-White Hawk creating the painting "Seeing" and later photographed the Indian Market judging process when that same painting won Best of Class. "Being involved like that with an artist is so exciting," she says. "Dyani is going to be huge!"

Leaken was struck by the discipline exhibited by all the artists, citing Jody Naranjo as an example. "She's a rock star now. She sells out in the first minutes of Indian Market. Jody has three children, and she's raising them on her own. How she can find the time and energy to carve with such focus

and discipline is impressive. It's not like you go into a studio and shut the door and shut the world out. There are all these people coming and going, children and family and dogs. It's the larger community in your work. It's a flow, and I would feel part of it."

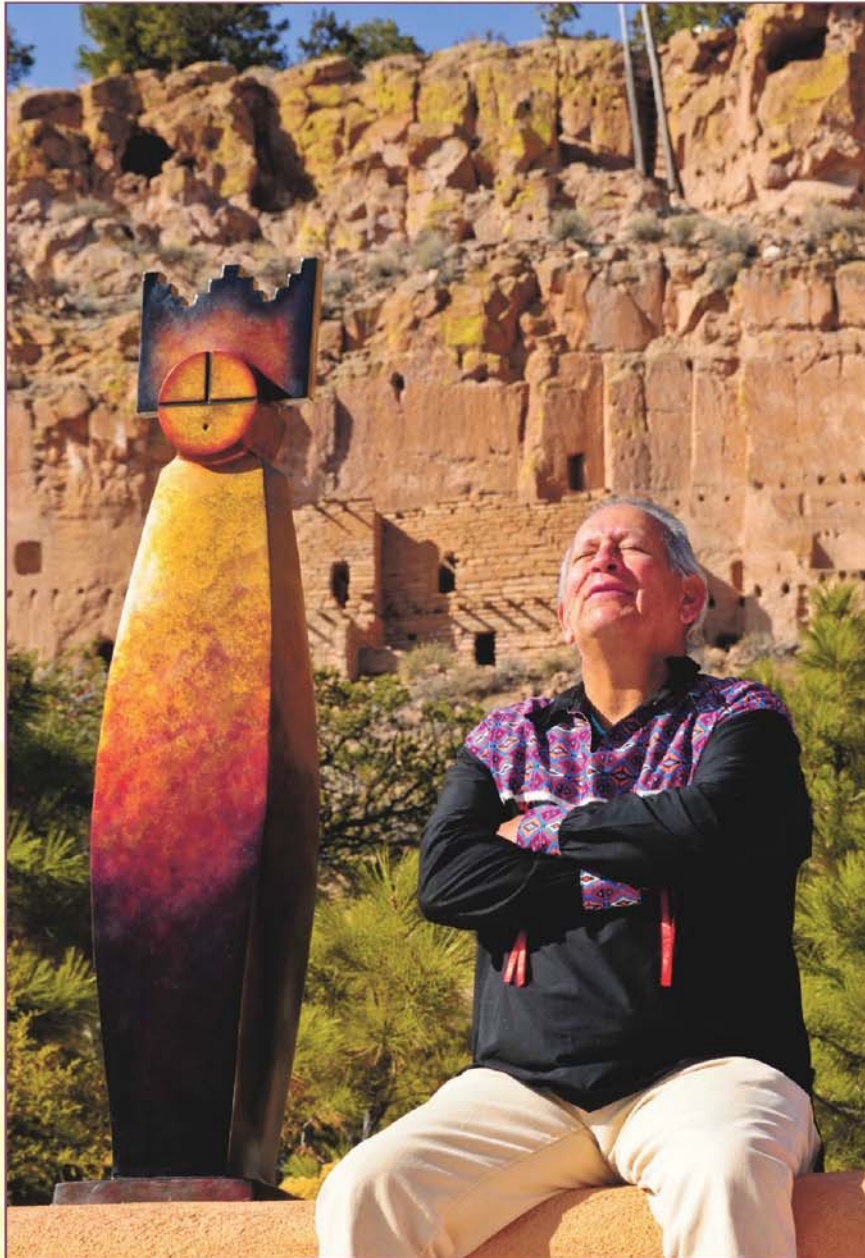
Going with the flow is also important to Leaken's own process as a

photographer. "I don't like to set things up," she says. "I'm a photojournalist by training, so I wanted to just respond. That's really important. I'm the fly on the wall."

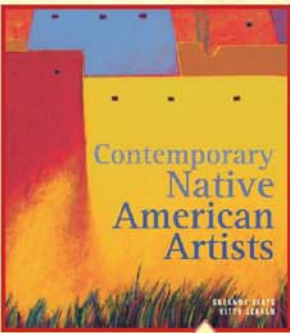
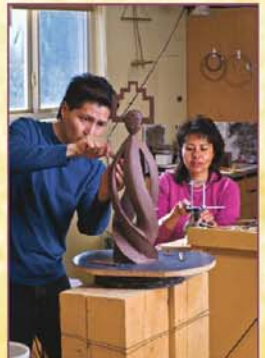
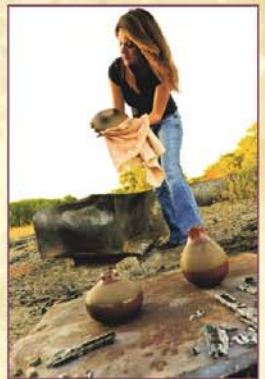
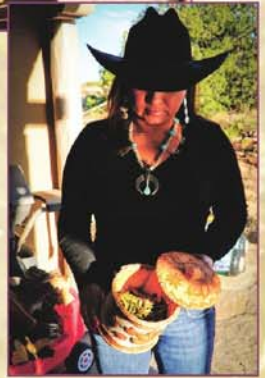
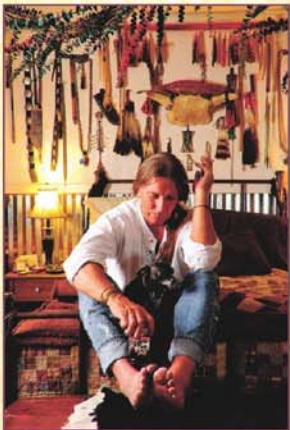
Still, there must have been moments she missed with the camera and wished she could capture? She shakes her head.

"I had a great teacher at the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Steve Northup, head of photography. He was retired from *Time Magazine* and the *Washington Post*, and I'd make him teach me something every day. Say you're shooting a press conference and someone's talking, and they make a gesture and you miss it, chances are they'll do it again. It's more about sitting very quietly and watching."

She emphasizes that a lot of her job is to honor the integrity of the people on the other side of the lens. It's about, as she puts it, "being patient and waiting for an image. You never go in with your camera on and ready. You always sit down and get to know the people. Getting that one shot is not as important as gaining trust. Steve said once, 'If you're shooting a whole bunch [of photos], it's not working.' It's one quiet click, you know? And everything conspires."



Kitty Leaken, Suzanne Deats, the publisher Gibbs Smith and artists featured in Contemporary Native American Artists will appear at a book signing benefit for SWAIA on August 15 at 4 p.m., at Collected Works Bookstore, 202 Galisteo Street, in Santa Fe.



| *Contemporary Native American Artists* by Suzanne Deats. Photographer: Kitty Leaken. Gibbs Smith Publisher, \$50 list.