



THREE OLD BARNs, PASTEL, 16 X 20.

TRUE CALLING

IT TOOK ELIZABETH SANDIA YEARS TO FIND SANTA FE AND HER CAREER AS A PASTEL LANDSCAPIST—AND THEN IT ALL CLICKED
BY DEVON JACKSON





SAGUARO & FAR PEAKS, PASTEL, 12 X 10.

ELIZABETH SANDIA HAS AN EASY AND DISARMING LAUGH, one brought on as much by her own self-deprecating sense of humor as by finding amusement in other people and situations. She also appears to have moved through life with a kind of whimsicality—making important choices that from the outside look random but which have, in fact, been given plenty of thought and which, once made, have been carried out with the utmost drive and perseverance.

Like her pastel paintings of peaceful landscapes, inquisitive livestock, and weathered adobes, Sandia's easygoing demeanor belies a tougher, deeper, broader personality—her life and her work have been honed by years of hard work and a faith that whatever it is she's doing at the moment is exactly what she's meant to be doing. "I'm very focused and single-minded," says the 59-year-old.

Sandia was a city girl at the start. The daughter of a Lutheran minister and homemaker, she grew up in the Bronx before attending New York's High School of Art & Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology, back when the faculty there automatically routed most of its gifted young female students into commercial illustration and advertising. She dove in. "I wanted to paint as a career, but coming out of high school at 18, I didn't know anybody who'd gone into art," recalls Sandia.

Four decades later, Sandia sits surrounded by moving boxes and piles of books, having recently sold her Santa Fe, NM, home. She plans to relocate across town—or maybe to Montana, California, or Canada, as the spirit moves her.

But back to the past: "So I went into advertising," Sandia recalls. She married, moved up to 30 acres of farmland and apple orchards in the Adirondacks, and

worked alongside her husband as a commercial artist for 12 years. She divorced, went back to New York City, then moved down to Key West, FL. She remarried, to a Canadian, and eventually resettled in Ottawa, where she studied architecture. After earning her architecture degree, she returned to Key West, where she opened her own firm.

"I started off doing [work] for nothing," she says of her seven-year architecture career down in Margaritaville. "It was a dream come true." Yet, as satisfying as it was, "Every time I'd go into a museum, I always felt like those [artists] were my kindred folk," reflects Sandia. "There were paintings inside of me waiting to come out in Key West. People would be displaying their art and I was thinking, 'That should be mine.' It was one of my little urges. Eventually I just decided, 'After all these years, it's time to paint.' I didn't have a plan, I just had an urge, and based on the success of what I'd done I followed an inner guide, an inner voice. And, even though I loved architecture, I was flatlining."

As luck, or misfortune, would have it, around that same time Sandia discovered she'd become allergic to mold. So she began researching and visiting towns without mold problems. Towns like Santa Fe, where she'd vacationed four or five times before. "I just liked the way I felt when I was here—at ease," says Sandia, who liked the feeling, too, of being around other artists. "I liked the smallness of it. The handmade architecture and the adobe. When I decided to paint, Santa Fe was it."

SO SHE MOVED TO SANTA FE in 1995 without a job, without a car, without a plan—but with an inner resolve. "The first year, I rode around town on my bicycle," recalls Sandia, who lived off savings and credit cards her first two years. "That way, I saw things close up. I could notice the light—the changes in the light. I also got over the shyness, the conspicuousness, of painting outside on the street."

She avoided the typical. "I stopped doing blue skies—they're all blue here," she points out. "What if [the sky] were a gray-pinkish color? That's what I like to explore. Because there aren't always these lovely clouds. Sometimes it's really plain, and that's how I'll paint it. There's a part of me that steps aside and lets something else come through.

It's knowing when to do that." Acquiring that knowledge, that self-confidence, took time. "When I first started, I couldn't paint a tree—or foliage. I couldn't paint any vistas," laughs Sandia, whose early paintings, because of her architectural background, were mostly of adobes. "I'd study bushes, the foreground, the color of snow."

Inclined toward realism and intrigued by color and light, she began experimenting with serene realist landscapes. "There's a point at which the painting demands something of you that has nothing to do with light or location or being outside," muses Sandia. She started painting night scenes: "It's something that's very intriguing. If it's greenish or night light, it affects adobe. I



WOOLLY, PASTEL, 9 X 15.

don't paint outside at night. So I kind of invent or reinvent what it would be like. I'm playing around with night lighting, moody lighting."

She sought out Albert Handell, hoping to study oil painting with him in his studio. One of the other students overheard Sandia and said to her, "Come over to my studio afterward and play with my pastels." "Of course I only heard the word *play*," laughs Sandia. "She gave me a tray of pastels and it felt great. I never knew about pastels. It was like a 'wow' moment."

She then went back to Handell and said, "Teach me pastel." Handell took her on, and she learned some things, but as she sees it, one learns more by doing. "This is my big bugaboo—the teacher doesn't hold your hand," she declares. "You have to do this work yourself. Do your own thing. Find your own voice and vision." And yet the teaching does lead you down a path: "I've had so many teachers, and each one

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SHADOWS ON HIGH DESERT SNOW, PASTEL, 24 X 24.

taught me just the right thing I needed to know at just the right time," she acknowledges. One teacher got her over her fear of painting big, for example, and another taught her about color values.

Her breakthrough painting came during one of Handell's classes. "I did this scene of an adobe, and somehow, every single thing worked," she says, with a touch of marvel at the result. "It was the seventh painting I did, and I thought to myself, 'Oh, yeah. It really looks like something. There's a real three-dimensional quality to it.'"

An admirer of many painters and styles, among them John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla, and Quang Ho, Sandia's an attentive painter even while remaining open to the moment. There's plenty going on in her paintings of churches and daisies and lately, trucks. "It's just not in your face," she says. Able to produce about 150 paintings a year now, she gilded her own work until recently. "But not anymore," she says with relief. "Now I'm a human being. I can just paint." (She still does her own glazing, however.)

Sandia usually begins with an underpainting, a rough pastel sketch. "Then I move [the pigment] around with a brush dipped in turpentine," she explains. "It liquefies the brush and moves the pastel." After it dries, she goes back and starts forming shapes with more layers. "With pastel, you can't mix color," she emphasizes, "you have to layer it."

Pastels, or rather, the people who make pastels, are the key. When the pastel manufacturers came out with dark sets, that made all the difference in the world to Sandia, who relies on color to create the sense of depth and space in her work and who states unequivocally, "To live in a world of color, there's nothing as offensive as bad color or color not sensitively applied."

She adds, "I was lucky, the medium suited me."

While she's inclusive of horses and dogs, she's learned to avoid humans (one painting sold only after she took out the fisherman she'd originally had in). She also eschews painting's so-called rules. Consider her opinion of lead-ins, that vanishing-point kind of place where the viewer's eye would naturally gravitate at first. Her paintings tend not to have such a central focal point. "I don't usually do lead-ins to my paintings. I tend to move from side to side—which goes against the rules," she says with a roll of her eyes. "But I don't worry about that."

It's Sandia's nature to jump in where others fear to even test the water. But she's neither rash about it nor blindly faithful. She's just open to change, and to impulse. And as long as she continues to pay attention and stay the course of the moment, there's little room for self-doubt. "Once you key into what nourishes you, it's satisfying,"



TESUQUE PUEBLO TREE, PASTEL, 12 X 15.

she beams. "When you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, you will be taken care of. And besides, there's always a plan B—keep painting." □

Devon Jackson has also written for *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Outside*.

Sandia is represented by Canyon Road Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; Piñon Fine Art, Denver, CO; and Basalt Gallery, Basalt, CO.