



"High Desert Prickly Pear," oil, by Cami Thompson

Balanced and on solid ground

Cami Thompson's show at Lumina Gallery offers succulent imagery

By Deonne Kahler

Cami Thompson is an artist with her right and left brains fully in balance. She's a passionate and committed painter, yet has a focused business sense that has enabled her to build an art career spanning 40 years, with collectors all over the world.

The newest featured artist at the Lumina Gallery in Taos, as well as a Top 200 Winner for the National Park Academy of the Arts' 2004 Arts for the Parks competition, Thompson's vibrant oils radiate with her adoration and respect for the natural world.

"I love nature," Thompson explains. "I grew

up as a camp counselor, swimmer, rock climber. When I was a little kid, I'd spend time in the cemetery in the little town where I grew up looking for fossils. The natural world is very important to me. I made a promise to mother nature to honor her."

Along with the outdoors, art has been a thread that has run through Thompson's life since the beginning, and her parents nurtured her interest. When she was 6 years old and growing up in Michigan, her mom and dad would drive 35 miles each way every Saturday to take her and a friend to the Grand Rapids Art Museum. She learned lessons she later brought to her own instruction of young artists. Thompson firmly believes in studying art history, but that every artist must then take

that knowledge and create something unique. "How can you reinvent yourself if you're copying someone else's work? You'll never come up with something new that way," she said.

Thompson paints a wide array of subjects, from wildlife to native dancers to architecture. But her current show at the Lumina Gallery, "Blooms of the High Desert," showcases her fascination with flowers.

She's always had a magnetic attraction to flowers, but it really began to emerge in her work when she spent a few years on Kodiak Island, Alaska, teaching and painting. It was a lush landscape to paint. She said, "With all that daylight in the summer, you can imagine how huge the flowers got."

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The Lumina show with its rich florals inspired Marco Barbitta to hang Thompson's work on the walls of his Downtown Bistro restaurant in Taos. She feels it's a good fit, and said of Barbitta's restaurant, "It's a palette for the eye and for the stomach."

Thompson's right and left brain connection becomes apparent when she describes how she creates. "When I'm painting it comes from my soul, I'm really out of body while I'm painting. But there's planning ahead of time, and there's also sales to consider, trends."

Business came naturally and early to Thompson. She began selling her drawings in high school, and while she continued to sell her art through the 1970s, she also started and ran a successful needlepoint business, employing other artists to help her produce more than 350 different designs.

Then in the 1980s, Thompson started a high-end clothing design business that eventually sold worldwide. "I had 10 painters working for me, seamstresses. I did whole custom lines for stores twice a year. You have to be very current, know what the trends are, know all about style, and then be really non-ego oriented, because not only was I feeding myself, I had all of my employees to pay," she remembers.

Thompson combines self-confidence tempered by a lack of ego with a savvy business sense, and feels strongly that her decades of professional success in art are planted firmly in that balance. "You have to consider when an El Monte Sagrao opens in town, or someone builds a new 5,000-square-foot house and they need to buy some art. They're not going to want it necessarily to go with their couch, but it has to go with them, it has to go with what they love." Thompson is happy to oblige. The fact that she has repeat collectors and commission clients speaks to how well she navigates the balance between creating art from the soul, and satisfying the customer.

"I have many, many clients that I've done commissioned work for — huge murals, small pieces, intimate

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portraits," she said in describing her process when doing a commissioned piece. "I would say they are 100 percent satisfied, and that's because I don't get my feelings hurt when they say, 'Could you make this color more intense?' We pick and delve, pick and delve, and I love that."

Thompson said she's never denied a client request, and this attention to client desires inspires loyalty. "One mural (I did) was for the Takah Sushi restaurant (in Aspen, Colo.). The mural was done with latex wall paint for a long narrow restaurant that was a dark hall, and the mural turned the hall into a glowing ember. (The owner) just moved to a bigger restaurant, and she cut (the mural) out of the wall and framed huge chunks of the dry-wall. That's how I like to have my clients feel."

Having just turned age 60, Thompson feels she's now hitting her stride and will be painting for many years to come. Her spiritual beliefs keep her grounded. "It's important to keep a clear mind (as an artist). I meditate daily. There's something bigger than us behind all this, and I do think there's the dharma of work. I'm a painter, I'm meant to do that right now. I'm happy every day that I get to do it."