



Bunny Tobias

TUCKED INTO THE SANTA FE NATIONAL FOREST, JUST OFF OF Interstate 25, artist Bunny Tobias and her husband, artist Charles Greeley, have made a home, studio, and sometime gallery for the last forty-four years. Tobias, born and raised in Brooklyn and trained in painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York, has worked across various media, including painting, ceramics, mixed media, and most recently, bronze metal clay.

Visiting her studio and exhibition space, Gallery Zipp—where the couple held shows of local artists' work for sixteen years—is a special experience. The gallery is filled with art, but also friends, stories, and memories, intangible yet present throughout the intimate display of eclectic works. As *THE* sat down with Tobias to talk about her studio practice, she spoke with warmth, passion, and clarity on her dedication to her work, making a home in New Mexico, and what it means to evolve as an artist.





all photos: Clayton Porter

THE: Tell us about your studio practice. What is your workday like? BT: Basically, it's very disciplined. I go to work every day, and eagerly. We have our morning routines, of course. Charles makes breakfast. If it is a nice morning, we like to go out for a hike with the dog. I like to be in my studio by 9:30 or 10:00, and I work all day. Charles will call and say, "It's time for lunch!"—he makes lunch, too—because he works next door. And then I go right back to work. Years ago, I used to come back after dinner and work at night, but I'm not able to do that anymore.

I work all day. And I work every day, weekends, too. If I am not in my studio, working for a long period of time, if I get distracted with other things, then I feel . . . nervous. I just don't feel complete. I feel totally relaxed and who I am when I'm working. Charles is the same way: we have similar habits, so it works out very well. He's working in his studio, and I'm working in mine. I've always approached it like this: this is my job, this is my profession, and I go to work every day.

Describe your studio; how did this space come to be? I used to have a studio space in the house. At one time I shared a studio with Charles, which is now his studio. Then my mom came to live with us when she was 80 years old. She had cancer, and we always told her that we would take care of her if she ever needed it. We put up this log cabin for her to come live here. She was a really neat mom; we loved her. We were happy to do this for her, and it was a beautiful experience. But she didn't last as long as we thought she would, so she was here for two years. After she passed away, I really didn't know what to do with this space. It's nice to have

a guest house, but we don't have guests that often. So Charles said, "You need a studio!" At first I felt foreign in here. It took me a while to make it my own space. Eventually I did, and then it was this wonderful thing. It was almost like my mom had given me a gift. Now it's my haven.



How did you end up in New Mexico? Why Glorieta Pass? Charles and I both always had dreams to live in the mountains. We were both born, raised, and educated in New York, yet we both had childhood experiences visiting the mountains in the summers. We were living in San Francisco, so we looked in California, but it was difficult to find something we could afford. Then—and this has happened to us a lot in our lives—fate intervened on our behalf. Charles had a patron that felt that we belonged in New Mexico. He enabled us to take a trip here with friends. When we ended up in Santa Fe, we looked at each other and said, "We've come home." We just knew when we got here. That was in 1970. So we rented a little casita in Santa Fe in 1972, and would go out looking for

our dream property. When we came out to see this property, we knew that was it. We have been here for forty-four years. We have never taken it for granted. It's always a miracle that we are here, that we find it so beautiful, that we belong in this place. It's so much a part of nature. For our time, we feel like custodians of this place, and we are very fortunate to have lived and worked here.

What is your history as an artist? How has your practice changed over time? I started out as a painter. That's what I studied at SVA. When I was in San Francisco, I had a strong desire to get my hands into clay. I didn't want to go back to school, so I decided to teach myself, which is something that I like to do. I bought a kiln and textbooks; I read a lot, I experimented, and I loved it. When we came to New Mexico, I was very taken by the Zuni fetish pots. When the objects weren't being used in ceremonies, the vessel was their home. The concept inspired me, so I started making vessels. In the beginning I thought that they had to be animals; then I thought (and this happens very often: you restrict yourself by your own rules—well, I created that rule, so I can break that rule) it doesn't have to be animals; it can be anything! It can be any theme. It totally changed my whole career. It was a real breakthrough. It took off quickly.

Elaine Horwitch represented me, and she told me she would buy outright everything I did for as long as she represented me, and I would have a show every year. For sixteen years she never broke her word, and she would sell out. These pieces that started out at a few hundred dollars ended up being several thousand dollars. That's when Disney wanted me to create vessels using Disney themes.

“well, I created that rule, so I can break that rule”

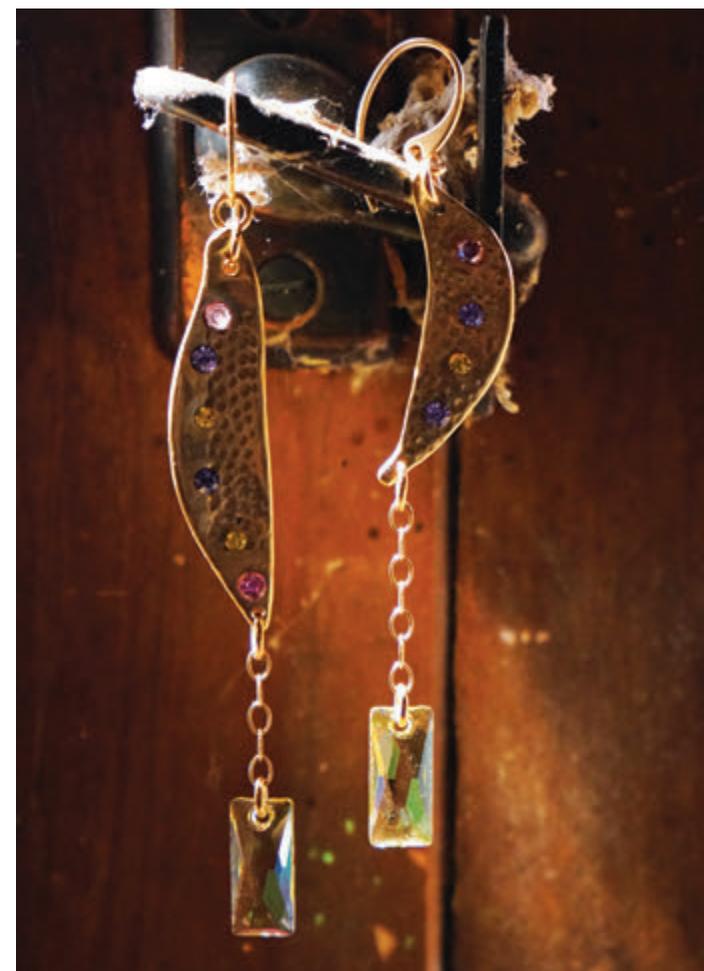
It really snowballed. It was the '80s. It was a crazy time for art, for the art world. People had a lot of money and they were spending it. In the '90s, things started to change. . . I also had a real desire to move on; it was time.

I started to create simple vessels with my own glazes that cracked. I got back into painting; I got involved in a book-art group in Santa Fe; I started doing things with collage and paper, then mixed media. The Museum of International Folk Art had an exhibition and fashion show about recycled art. I thought it would be fun to take rusted material I found on our property and turn it into jewelry to be part of the fashion show. I sold every piece I made. So that was a whole new awakening. I

world here. But things changed, galleries started to close, and more contemporary, younger artists were coming up. We thought about ways we could give back, so we created Gallery Zipp. Zipp is Zen Inspired Professional Pagans, which we thought was fun. The idea was to create theme shows and invite young artists without representation to show alongside our friends who were already well established. For sixteen years, we had five or six shows a year, with twenty to forty artists in each. Sometimes we had two hundred people come to an opening! We shared sales commissions with the artists, but never asked for anything else. That was a good thing, we felt. But it stopped working, so it was time to come up with something new.

supporting themselves totally by the sale of their work. That's how Charles and I have lived, and we've been very fortunate.

I love making jewelry and making beautiful things. I love the materials, the stones. I go to sleep thinking about it: what kinds of colors and imagery I'll use. I'm inspired by history, such as pre-Columbian and African gold forms. I can create abstract freeforms; I love making little bugs. No rules, I just go for it. I'm finding that when I wear something out, I get a lot of attention. When someone buys a piece, they really love it, so I think I'm on the right track; I want to do it more. I feel like I'm starting from scratch again, and I'm excited about it.



started collecting other interesting materials and called it mixed-media jewelry.

What was the impetus of your gallery space, Gallery Zipp? During the years that I was showing with Elaine, we were having a very successful time, which is unusual for artists. I worked my butt off, but it paid off. We were always represented by good galleries; we were always involved in the art

Where do you find yourself now, and what's coming up next? I took a class in Precious Metal Clay about ten years ago. But it was really when I started working with the bronze metal clay, about four years ago, that I felt like I was working with clay again. And it is a nice place to be at this stage in my life. I felt that it would open up another area of economic relief. It is really hard for two artists to live their whole lives together,

Tobias's work will be available at form & concept, opening on Friday, May 27. She will be exhibiting at the SVA Makers Market on June 11 at the Metropolitan Pavilion in New York, and will be included in the group show Readymade: 100 Years at Axle Contemporary, May 13 – 22. Her bronze jewelry is available at Origins of Santa Fe and can be seen on her website, bunnytobias.com.