

The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine of Arts, Entertainment & Culture



March 31, 2023

Pasatiempo

OUTSIDE THE BOX
Changing Perceptions at Container

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Shape-shifter

Spencer Fordin

Mar 31, 2023



Bow (2017), acrylic and clay paint on shaped canvas; courtesy Container

details

▼ Mokha Laget, *Perceptualism*

▼ *Friday, March 31, to May 15; opening reception 7 p.m. to 5 p.m., Friday, March 31*

▼ *Container, 1226 Flagman Way*

They appear as shapes you've seen before: Colored squares and diamonds but with a folded edge; triangles with shaded areas implying cubic depth; giant rectangles intersecting and folding within each other.

But the longer you look, the more they take on different dimensions.

This optical illusion is baked into the shape from the time the work begins its life as a black-and-white drawing, and it's an example of a type of art called geometric abstraction. If you ask the artist Mokha Laget, she'll tell you that she sees geometry not as a tool for precision in her work, but as a way of subverting reason.

"You can use geometry and make it do ambiguous things," Laget says of the art that will make up her *Perceptualism* exhibit that opens Friday, March 31, at Container. "When you do that, the whole idea of order and the rules of perspective that have been built up over time are subverted."

Laget, who has lived in Santa Fe for 28 years, is accustomed to taking big ideas and translating them to shapes on canvas.

Her instincts, she says, were molded by her childhood in Oran, Algeria, a coastal city framed by mountains and bathed in vibrant light.

Years ago, Laget made the realization that the two cities of her life — Oran and Santa Fe — have nearly the same latitude. Even as a child, she says, she was entranced by her home region's shifting shadows and framing of light.

"In the desert, you learn that what you see is not necessarily what's there," she says. "There's the whole idea of mirages. How can you see water if it's not there? You realize your eyes and your mind are in constant dialogue. You ask yourself, 'What's really the nature of reality?'"

Laget was initially unsure if she wanted to attend an art school because she thought that kind of education might be too rigid, but she ultimately attended the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C.

She studied under several members of the Washington Color School — a movement of abstractionist expressionists — while she was there and served for four years as a studio assistant to painter Gene Davis.

That time with Davis straddled her undergrad years and her early working life, which she describes as both fulfilling and exhausting. Laget worked for the Smithsonian Museum and as a public relations specialist for a gallery. She was writing articles. She was curating shows, and she was making her own art.

But she was running herself ragged — and ultimately made a decision that changed her life. Laget went back to school, earned a degree from Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, and spent the next few decades traveling the world as a French interpreter and translator.

Laget says she traveled extensively throughout Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe as part of her job, and that work helped carve out time for her art.

“I learned so much,” she says. “I loved it. But these were very timed assignments. Once I got home, 100 percent of my time was mine for the studio.”

Laget, who lives in an off-the-grid house on the periphery of Santa Fe, is intrigued by the idea of spatial orientation. She wants people who see her pieces to consider where the design begins and where it ends, and also which part is closest and which is farthest away. The cool part about those questions, she says, is that there is no correct answer.



”This was in homage of Gene Davis. We had a whole army of volunteers. The American Art Museum was having a memorial exhibition and that was part of the celebration. It’s 450 feet long and 50 feet wide. ... What was great about this project is people would walk by. You had homeless people, you had senate attorneys. You had all walks of life and wanted to be a part of it. Some of them actually just wanted the T-shirt and we said, ‘You can’t buy the T-shirt. It’s not for sale. But if you work for an hour, you can get one.’” — Mokha Laget on the Washington, D.C., 8th Street rainbow public art project “Gene’s Jubilee” (2007)

Courtesy Container

“You think something is advancing and something is receding,” she says. “But if you look at it long enough, it flips on you. And then you’re like, ‘Which is it?’ To the viewer, there is no figuring this out. It’s a conundrum. How do you feel about that? Can you let go of the mind chatter to just look at it and appreciate it and let it flip? Can you go in and then travel inside and come out and just allow yourself to be in that space of perceptual ambiguity?”

Laget quotes Kazimir Malevich, a 20th century avant-garde Russian painter, who said that art should be more than just a visual object; it should be an expression of an idea. Her canvasses all start as one-dimensional black-and-white drawings before they begin their journey of articulation.



Double Pylon (2021), acrylic gouache on primed linen, "alludes to the Egyptian gates to the temple, which oftentimes were these kind of pyramid type sections on each side," says Laget. "It's an invitation to go beyond. The ambiguity here is that not only these pieces are coming out at an angle, they're angled on the bottom and they're angled on the edge. The edge seems to kind of go through the wall and finish inside the wall. It's bringing in the architecture then it's coming out into the viewer's space and coming out into the architecture, but it's inclined both out and inside. The stripes are straight. There's a lot going on."

Laget has stacks and stacks of notebooks filled with designs she ultimately won't pursue. And she draws inspiration from Richard Serra, an American sculptor, when she says she's looking for an idea with a future.

"I draw incessantly, whether it's some spatial relation that I saw driving or walking or imagining," she says of the origin of her shapes. "I put that down, and then I just start doing iterations of it. A lot of the drawings start small, and then I can do many, many, many changes to it.

"Then suddenly it will be like, 'Oh, this one is really interesting.' Then I start blowing that one up bigger and bigger to see if it holds water."

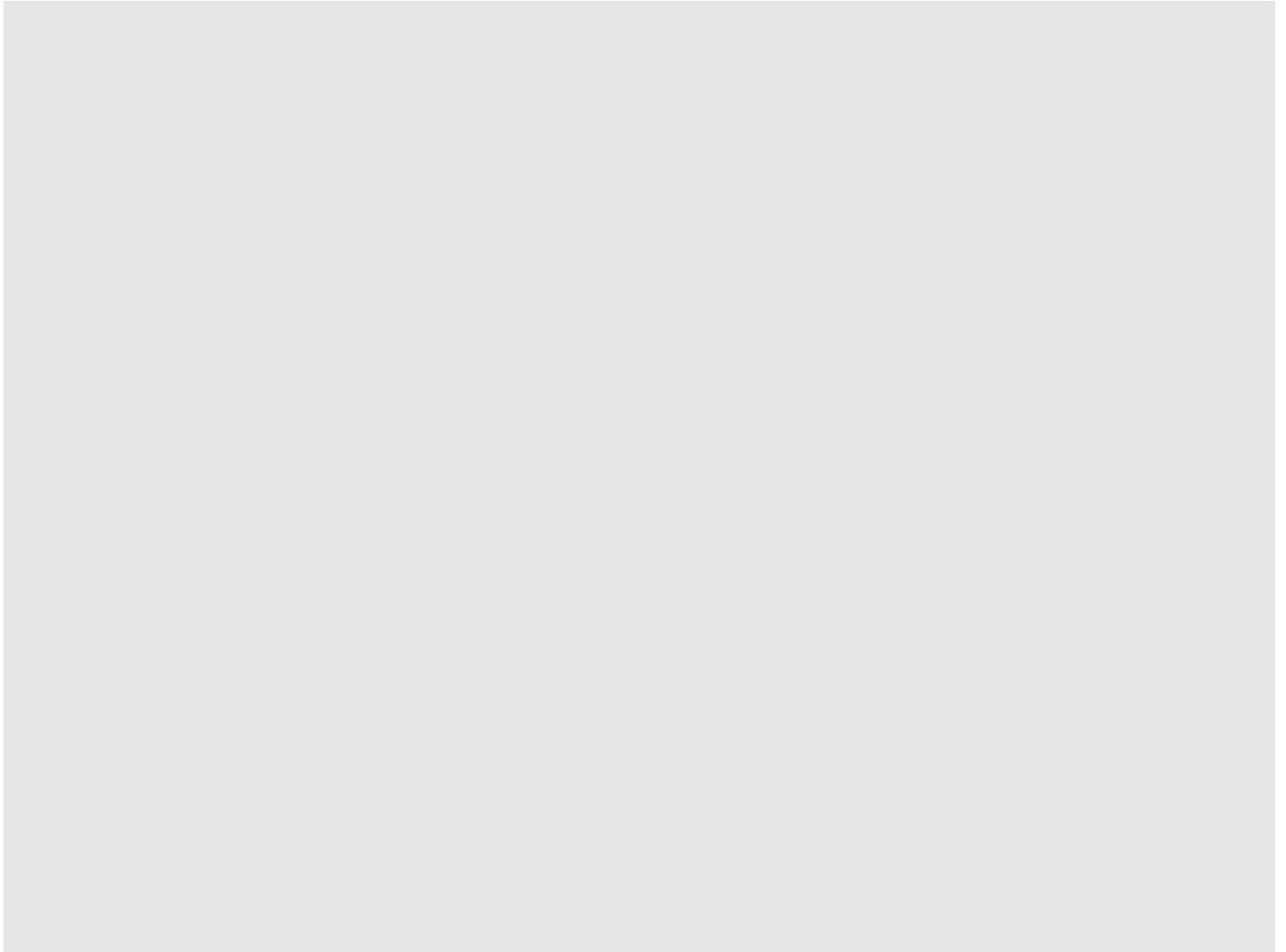
The pieces, many colored with contrasting shades of light and dark colors, are not complete until Laget considers how they should be embellished. The pigments come last; the artist allows the piece to dictate its shape and size before she ultimately decides on the colors.

"Once I decide on a drawing, then I start imagining light sources and volumes and weights," she says. "When I build the raw canvas, sometimes the outer edges are going to communicate with inner forms. Sometimes not.

"But what can also happen is that this drawing that I've built up and drawn, it can still change at that point. I don't want to just be executing something. I don't plan the color; the colors are literally flying off the cuff."

Laget's show is just the second exhibition at Container, an offshoot of the Turner Carroll Gallery that opened last October.

Michael Carroll, co-founder of the gallery with his wife Tonya Turner Carroll, says he was thrilled to host Laget in this space, and one challenge was to clear a wall for a 28-foot-long piece named *Watershed #2 (Remains of the Day)*.



Mokha Laget, *Watershed #2* (2022), asphaltum, vinyl emulsion on four shaped canvas panels. The piece occupies 28 feet of wall space at Container gallery. Courtesy Container

“This building is really an actor in our story of what we’re up to,” Carroll says of Container, which is housed in shipping containers with raised ceilings of nearly 20 feet. “We’re approaching museum level with 4,000 square feet of exhibition space. We went as far as we could with our place on Canyon Road, and the scale of the artists we show kept getting bigger. It became apparent that to play on the level I want to play on, I needed an additional space.”

Perceptualism will run through May 15 at Container, and Laget will also have an interactive art event at SITE Santa Fe on April 22. That event, shown in conjunction with Chatter, will feature musicians playing improvisations based on abstract musical scores that Laget created.

The artist, who will also have a show at Louis Stern Fine Arts in Los Angeles at the same time as *Perceptualism*, experienced a rare intersection of her worlds less than a decade ago.

She was invited to construct a piece for the American Embassy in Nouakachott, Mauritania, and by coincidence, she had just served as an interpreter in that city the year before. Her resulting piece, *North Light*, is a multi-panel geometric pattern that takes up more than 30 feet of wall space.

When asked what it's like to have one of her pieces adorning an American embassy thousands of miles across the world, a piece that millions of people may ultimately see long after she's gone, Laget smiles.

“I love that idea,” she says. “It’s better than a tombstone.” ◀

Spencer Fordin

Writer