

The San Diego Union-Tribune

VISUAL ART

North County folk artist promises a hands-on ‘Experience’



Ted Berryman working on a large wood sculpture in his art studio near Santa Ysabel. He'll be exhibiting his work in May and June at the new Union Hill Art Gallery in San Diego's Golden Hill. (Courtesy of Carl Fischer)

Ted Berryman, 80, will exhibit his sculpture alongside his late wife's abstract paintings at new Golden Hill gallery

“It's not fully alive until someone touches it.”

Ted Berryman often encourages patrons to touch and even disassemble his intricately peculiar sculptures. Inside his gallery space — a converted garage owned by the neighboring San Ysabel Art Gallery — Berryman is quick to point out that his work is meant to be interactive.

“It's just a block until someone interacts with it,” says Berryman. “And then that person comes alive and the art comes alive, too.”

This might sound folksy on the surface, but running a hand up one of the smooth surfaces of his totem-like wooden sculptures, almost all of which were dutifully formed and fashioned out of discarded and reclaimed natural material, one gets a childlike thrill.

One of the pieces, which he has tentatively titled “Family Tree,” consists of different parts of the same black walnut tree, each cut and fashioned to resemble the branching of family lineages. He points to a more nautical-inspired piece in the corner that uses a discarded piece of glass from a telescope he “found in the dirt” near Palomar Mountain.



“Family Tree,” a wood sculpture by Ted Berryman. (Courtesy of Ted Berryman)

Berryman has been in the Santa Ysabel gallery space for a little over a year. Before that, he barely showed his work at all, occasionally participating in a group show. But most of the people who saw his creations were guests in his home and studio.

“I just make one here, one there. I’ll give a piece away. I’ll destroy some of them,” he says nonchalantly.

The pieces he doesn’t destroy have found their way to his garage gallery on the nondescript corner in Santa Ysabel, and will soon find their way to San Diego. There, they will be showcased in “The Art of Experience,” a dual exhibition of his work alongside the abstract paintings of his late wife, Martha Moramay Cuevas opening Saturday as the inaugural show for the Union Hall Gallery, a new art and community space in Golden Hill.

Berryman says he hasn’t had a solo or duo show since “sometime in the 1990s” and jokes that he simply doesn’t “know how to do that.”

“Most of the people who’ve seen the work have been folks who just spent \$10 on an apple pie or something,” says Berryman, referencing the famous pastries sold just down the road in Julian. “I tell you, a lot of people cry. They say it’s the best art gallery they’ve been in, and I think it’s because they’re allowed to interact with it. They’re beautiful people. They might not be sophisticated when it comes to art, but their humanity shows.”



A mix of sculpture by Ted Berryman and paintings by Martha Moramay Cuevas, whose work will be exhibited May 4-June 16 at Union Hall Gallery in San Diego. (Courtesy of Ted Berryman)

‘Giving all yourself to it’

Berryman creates most of his sculptures just up the road at his multi-acre ranch, which has a large workshop and a home he primarily built himself since moving to the property in 1995. With art and sculptures nearly everywhere, the whole spread looks something out of a fantasy novel.

When asked if he’d always been primarily focused on woodworking throughout his career, Berryman is quick to rebuff the concept of “career.”

“It really hasn’t been a career for me,” he explains. “It was to make myself happy with my hands.”

This mindset isn't exclusive to Berryman. One could see him as working in the tradition of many folk artists who make art using reclaimed, found and even unorthodox materials with no actual intention of selling it. Rather, they simply craft because it's something that calls to them.

He says he would often trade with other artists in hopes that they may teach him how to craft out of other materials such as marble, iron and stone. Over the years, he worked as a professional carpenter and contractor for income, crafting things like spiral staircases, but also says that he just didn't have the mind or patience for the "business world." He didn't care all that much to immerse himself in the art community, either.

"Truthfully, I've never really been part of any art community because I've always lived in places like this," he says. "I just never had the chance to converse with many other artists."



A portrait of artists Ted Berryman and his wife, Martha Moramay Cuevas. Cuevas passed away in 2020. (Courtesy of Carl Fischer)

This solitary life suited Berryman until around 2010 when he met his late wife, a fellow creative spirit and artist in her own right. Having met each other so late in their respective lives, Berryman says he casually asked Cuevas why she wasn't currently with anyone.

"I felt like it was a thing you might ask when you're an older person like us," Berryman recalls laughing. "She looked at me and told me that 'no man has ever loved me the way I needed to be loved.' I didn't say anything at the time, but inside me I thought to myself this might be the one, because that matched my experience."

Cuevas was an artist before she met Berryman, but he says that the two of them developed a symbiotic relationship, while still giving each other space to create.

"She would be doing some art work and I'd be watching her," says Berryman, recalling Cuevas' methods of using a combination of ground marble, pigments and ink in her abstract canvases. "I'd often tell her, 'you know, you have a lot of talent here but you're not giving all yourself to it. One day you're going to die and all of this potential will be for nothing.' Of course I didn't know that she would."

At this, Berryman tears up and does so pretty regularly for the rest of the interview.



Martha Moramay Cuevas with one of her abstract paintings. She passed away in 2020. (Courtesy of Carl Fischer)

An early iteration of the couple’s dual exhibition at Union Hall Gallery was originally scheduled to be unveiled at a Tijuana art space on April 2, 2020, but it was canceled just as the COVID-19 pandemic was ramping up. Cuevas died on April 19, 2020, after being diagnosed with terminal cervical cancer just three months before.

“It was so thrilling to see this creativity come out of her,” Berryman reflects, pointing out one of the last pieces Cuevas worked on before her death. “When you have someone and get to see them really express themselves, that’s a gift. There’s more to love.”

He says he wasn’t really planning on revisiting the dual exhibition of their work, but was later approached by the owners of the Santa Ysabel gallery about showing the work at the Union Hall building they had purchased and refurbished. Berryman says he owed it to his late partner to “be open” to the idea.

“I’ve lost people before that I was close to, but I was always afraid. I didn’t let it affect me or devastate me,” he reflects. “So I let this one affect me. I had to turn it into some kind of positive.”

‘Details in the craftsmanship’

For Gina Farkas, part owner and gallery manager of the Union Hall Gallery, the decision to have Berryman and Cuevas’s work as the gallery’s “inaugural long-term exhibition” was an easy one.

“It really was as simple as looking around at the space and thinking ‘wouldn’t Ted’s work look amazing here,’” says Farkas. “I particularly admire the way Ted listens to wood. He sees new life in the wood, the environment and to the materials in general.”

Union Hall Gallery is located on the second floor of the historic, art deco-inspired San Diego Carpenters Union building at the corner of Broadway and 23rd Street. The structure has a long history of nurturing creativity since it was constructed in 1940. From the carpenters who once gathered there, to the punk rock concerts of the 1990s, and to the current businesses on the ground floor (a tattoo parlor, an alternative newsweekly, etc.), Farkas sees the “Art of Experience” exhibition as “emblematic of the origins of the building.”

“There are so many details in the craftsmanship of the way the building was built and who built it originally,” says Farkas. “The intention that Ted and Mora’s work, alone and together, has the same resonance that the craftsmanship that the building does.”

Farkas says she often gets choked up thinking about Cuevas.

“She was such a light of a human and when I see her work, I see her light. Her spirit resonates through her work, whereas Ted’s work comes to life interacting with people, with the viewer. So having his work with her work, and in this space, I truly see the two of them communicating.”



A sculpture by Ted Berryman, who lives near Santa Ysabel. (Courtesy of Ted Berryman)

'A need to say something'

It's hard not to read into the title of "The Art of Experience" exhibition. Back on Berryman's ranch, he remarks that the title was "just what I came up with last week," and says he still feels uneasy about it.

Still, he concedes that the title speaks volumes and in myriad ways. Given the fact that it's a dual exhibition of both Berryman and Cuevas' work, one could view it as tribute to a relationship, and how fortunate both artists were to have experienced one another later in life. Much of the work presented in the show wouldn't have happened had they not met.

On the other hand, it could be interpreted as simply a reference to the two artists having finally received an exhibition for their work after having experienced a life largely outside of the conventional art world. At age 80, Berryman says he will often “take a look back and reflect on all the different paths life could’ve taken.” Still, one gets the sense that if “The Art of Experience” could be the last public showing of Berryman and Cuevas’ work, and he might be OK with that fact.

“I think I swallowed a voice and that voice is always with me, wanting to speak,” he says. “I think there’s always been something in there.”

He pauses before adding, “There’s two different kinds of people: People who don’t have anything to say and people who have to say something. For the people who have something to say, some of them know what it is. For the others, they know they need to say something but don’t know what it is. And that’s what I am. That’s the only reason I do this. I know I have to say something but I don’t know what it is, and I’m trying to get it out. I’m always trying to find the words. And I probably never will.”

‘The Art of Experience’

When: Opens Saturday with a reception from 4 to 8 p.m and continues through June 16. Hours: 2 to 6 p.m. Fridays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; or by appointment via info@unionhallgallery.org.

Where: Union Hall Gallery, 2323 Broadway, Golden Hill, San Diego

Admission: Free

Phone: (619) 202-0711

Online: unionhallgallery.org

Combs is a freelance writer.