

Artist finds worldly inspiration

By Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer

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Santa Fe artist Ricardo Mazal in his Santa Fe studio. The Center for Contemporary Arts is hosting "Ricardo Mazal: A 15 Year Survey." (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Ribbons like light waves undulate across Ricardo Mazal's mammoth oils.

They could reflect the texture of tree bark underpinned by the horizontal geometry of a music staff. Light flickers across the raised ridges of paint like filaments.



Ricardo Mazal uses a variety of homemade foam brushes and spatulas. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

Santa Fe's Center for Contemporary Arts will showcase "Ricardo Mazal: A 15 Year Survey" beginning Friday, June 15. The exhibition runs through Sept. 23. Now based in Santa Fe, Mazal also works from New York and Mexico City.

An internationally celebrated abstractionist, the Mexican-born artist merges paint, photographs, video and technology to create virtual worlds of installation. The survey explores works from a trilogy examining the cycle of life and death and spirituality.

The three series began as a study of burial practices with "La Tumba de la Reina Roja" or "The Tomb of the Red Queen."

The tomb in question involved a Mayan queen who was entombed and mummified in red cinnabar at the ruins of Palenque, in Chiapas, Mexico.

"She was discovered in 1994," Mazal said. "She was buried in the year 600."



Ricardo Mazal paints in his Santa Fe studio.

He began photographing the trees orbiting the ruins at night. With the use of a flash, the pictures resembled drawings. Mazal began manipulating them on his computer, then translated them into massive red paintings.

His second series drew him to a German “peace forest,” a cemetery near Frankfurt where town members bury the ashes of their loved ones in biodegradable urns. Each birch tree wore a number.

“When I visited the forest with (my friend), I realized all the trees had this plaque,” Mazal said. “It was a cemetery. That fascinated me. I found it so poetic.”

The artist met the mayor, who wanted to get the whole town involved in the project.

“He gave me a tree, which was extremely moving.”

Mazal photographed the light in the forest into nearly abstracted shapes.

“Just imagine a cathedral,” he said. “It was almost like the light in heaven. I realized what I was doing was the spirituality of light.”

He downloaded 500 photographs, examining them for two months. Then he started sketching and painting.

A friend told him about the sky burials of 21,000-foot Mount Kailash in Tibet.

Located in the Himalayas, the mountain stands as the country’s most sacred site to both Buddhists and Hindus. Ferocious winds whip festoons of colorful prayer flags at its feet. Mazal photographed the black and white face of the summit, capturing a resemblance to his previous work on trees. He created digital sketches of the mountain, then translated them onto canvas. Enormous handmade foam brushes produced bold paintings of energy and force. “They bring the body,” Mazal said. “There’s a priest and the family. The priest cuts the body up and takes the organs out so the vultures take them to the sky.”

Mazal videotaped the pilgrimage of prostration. Buddhists from across the globe circle the mountain in a cleansing ritual. Worshippers take three steps, stand and pray, kneel and drop to the ground to kiss it. They repeat these movements over and over again. The 22,000 prostrations span 28 days.

Visitors will see Mazal’s video of the prostrations projected onto the floor of CCA.

His next series, “Night Transfigured,” emerged from photographs of branches against a Santa Fe night sky. At the suggestion of his daughter, he used the color violet for the first time.

“The color violet is the most spiritual of all the colors,” he said. “That is perhaps why it is so widely used in the Catholic Church and with royalty. I wanted to explore that spirituality in color.

“This is the color of blood, also.”

At the time, Mazal was asked to give blood to someone with leukemia.

“I said, ‘I’m painting with this color,’ ” he continued. “Blood means life in many cultures, beginning with the Maya. It gave me all the context I need.”

His painting “Violeta” emerged as a meditation on what he calls “the color of the spirit.”

“I’m thinking my next series is going to be Antarctica,” he said. “So this is like a premonition.”

If you go

WHAT: “Ricardo Mazal: A 15 Year Survey”

WHEN: Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, June 15. Through Sept. 23.

WHERE: Center for Contemporary Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail, Santa Fe

HOW MUCH: \$5. Visit ccasantafe.org or 505-982-1338.