

# A World Beyond

There's more than aliens in Roswell, where the future of contemporary art is now

**BIG-EYED, FRIENDLY** extraterrestrial life forms greet me as I head down Main Street in Roswell—and I'm not even close to downtown's International UFO Museum & Research Center. Here, alien motifs shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, this city prides itself on the alleged crash of a UFO, which happened nearby in July 1947.

Sure, I'm a big fan of the 1951 movie *The Thing from Another World*, though I don't go bug-eyed over alien souvenirs. But I do love art—and that's why I'm driving into the Chaves County seat.

I know what you're thinking: landscape art—Roswell is close to the scenic Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge and Bottomless Lakes State Park. And cowboy art—the town is home to Burnt Well Guest Ranch (a working dude ranch) and the Cattleman's Steakhouse (though my third-grader son prefers the Snazy Pig's barbecue).

I'm here, however, for contemporary art. Roswell may promote its alien claim to fame, but the contemporary art scene here is truly out of this world.

"This is a great art community," says Diane Marsh, a painter of hyperrealistic oils who first came to Roswell from New York City in 1980 and has lived here since 2001. Roswell, she says, "really changed my life."

In fact, since 1967, the Roswell Artist-in-Residence (RAiR) Program has changed the lives of many contemporary artists. Established by artist and businessman Donald B. Anderson and the Roswell Museum and Art Center, RAiR has provided more than 200 artists with what they call "the gift of time": a year to work.

"It was an incredible psychological boost," Stephen Fleming tells me over lunch. "It gives you time to actually find out what's really going on." Fleming arrived from San Francisco as an artist-in-residence in 1986, then worked at the Kansas City Art Institute before returning to Roswell to become director of the Roswell Artist-in-Residence Foundation in 1994. The program has changed somewhat since then—it now operates



Heidi Pollard, painter of this untitled work, is among six artists in Roswell's 44-year-old Artist-in-Residence Program.

independently of the Roswell Museum and Art Center—but the basics remain the same. Furthermore, in June of 2002 the Foundation assumed full oversight of the residency program as well as Roswell's Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art.

Each year, six artists are brought in for a one-year term, and given a place to live and work and a monthly stipend (families are allowed; dogs aren't). Competition is stiff: For those six positions, from 150 to 200 artists apply each year. Their work is judged by three permanent and three visiting jurors.

The winning artists might find their

new lifestyle a challenge, Fleming says. "It's like somebody telling you've just won a chance to climb Mount Everest," he says, explaining that such a privilege also requires vision and self-discipline.

"It's so open," says Scottish-born Shona Macdonald, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts who has shown her work from Illinois to New Zealand, and who came to Roswell to work on silverpoint drawing, installations, and painting. "You have to come up with a schedule to work, or else you'd drift away," she says. "The business of being an artist takes time, but I have more



Roswell contemporary sculpture artist Nathan Craven used uniquely shaped components to create 4,517. "Through the act of arranging, stacking, balancing, and connecting porous ceramic units, I invite the viewer to experience how a wall or floor might contain space and direct flow through space in new ways," Craven says. "This architecture is not merely decorated, it actually grows from decoration."

COURTESY NATHAN CRAVEN

## Going Places ARTSCAPES

time to do things properly here."

Macdonald is talking to me in her studio at the RAiR compound, a cluster of buildings on about 50 acres in a rural subdivision surrounded by alfalfa fields and natural grassland. A few doors down, painter Heidi Pollard says she's having no trouble adjusting to Roswell after 10 years in Brooklyn, New York. "I love it," she says. "It's the first time in 10 years I'm sleeping without earplugs." Pollard admits that she paints "by the seat of my pants," but in Roswell she's rediscovered a passion for sculpture by working in the clay studio at the Roswell Museum and Art Center. "I call it the casino," she says, "because I can't get out of there."

That's another selling point of RAiR. "The artists are free to work on whatever they want," explains Nancy Fleming, a Kansas City Art Institute graduate who works for RAiR and the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art. She also teaches art at Roswell schools and is married to Stephen Fleming.

The Roswell Museum and Art Center



The view from his Roswell studio window inspired Eddie Dominguez to create *Green Fields*. The sculptor is known for his new interpretations of ceramics.

might not run the residency program, but it's still important for artists and art lovers. Since opening in 1937, the now-50,000-square-foot facility includes 12 galleries and offers art classes and other events. I'm here to talk to RAiR artist Dorota Mytych, who lives and works in Poland, Italy, and Australia, and finds much of her inspiration in watching people at the McDonald's and Walmart here in Roswell.

Mytych is guiding me through her exhibit in the museum's Marshall and Winston Gallery, which showcases sketches, drawings, paintings, found objects, and sculpture.

"Drawings are really very important to me," she says. "These are like a language for me to work things out right. In Western culture, we keep focus on the goal, but there are always steps, and then, once you have that goal, there are other steps to do."

Works from most of the RAiR artists of the past 44 years can be found at the 17,000-square-foot Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened in 1994. "You can see the diversification of the mediums," Nancy Fleming says.

Other current RAiR artists include ceramic artist Nathan Craven, of Mogden, Utah; sculptor, drawer, and printmaker Anna Hepler, of Portland, Maine; and painter Jennifer Moses, a professor at the University of New Hampshire.

Diane Marsh was a RAiR artist in 1980, but returned in 1986 and met her future husband, sculptor Eddie Dominguez, a Tucumcari native who was accepted into the RAiR program to install an artistic bedroom set. They settled here in 2001. These days, Dominguez is known for his new interpretations of ceramic dinnerware, aquariums, and gardens.

Did the residency help his career? "I would say it started my career," he says. "What could be a better help than that? It helped me understand what being a professional artist was, how committed you have to be."

But Roswell, I'm thinking, must offer something more than a residency program. Stephen Fleming came back. So did Dominguez and Marsh. "Artists come here," Marsh says, "and they are devoted to making this work. This creates a community."

"We have developed relationships with the artists," says Stephen Fleming, "because it becomes a personal experience and not just a working relationship."

**If you go:** Both museums are free. Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, (575) 623-5600, [www.roswellamoca.org](http://www.roswellamoca.org); Roswell Museum and Art Center, (575) 624-6744, [www.roswellmuseum.org](http://www.roswellmuseum.org)

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Works from most of the RAiR artists are on display at the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, including this 1973 fiberglass sculpture, *Progress I*, by Luis Jiménez.

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