



CIBOLA ART

A clear and honest picture

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ACOMA - "Ghost Ranch and the Faraway Nearby," a show based on the body of work taken at Ghost Ranch by Santa Fe photographer Craig Varjabedian, opened at the Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum. This special event for photography aficionados opened Saturday, June 11, and will be on exhibit until July 31.

Varjabedian took his audience on a tour of his one-man show in the museum and gave personal attention to his guests, sharing a technique or two, and revealing details about some of the places in his photos.

For instance, for his black and white image, "Puerta del Cielo," Varjabedian explained how he had waited for the clouds to move behind the rock formation, as an accent, before capturing the image. "Cow Skull on Ghost House,"

Varjabedian explained, "is the logo of Ghost Ranch, which is now owned by the Presbyterian church," he told his audience.

He graciously answered questions from his interested audience.

"Do you need a special camera to capture shadows?" one woman asked. "Would you talk about the lenses?" another guest requested.

The show became possible from a grant from the New Mexico Humanities Council which produced the show and a book from the body of his work. It was designed to travel to out-of-the-way places beginning with the Convent Gallery in Española, the Martinez Hacienda in Taos and now the Sky City Cultural Center. The book was published by University of New Mexico Press.



The photographer, Craig Varjabedian, clearly enjoyed the question-answer exchange with patrons of his show, and patiently answered questions about his techniques and viewpoint. BEACON / MARMON

In a telephone interview, Varjabedian revealed that the Ghost Ranch was one of the first places he visited when he first arrived in New Mexico about 25 years ago.

“I was awestruck by what I’d seen up there and slowly began trying to photograph what I was seeing and was quite disappointed with the results. I could photograph the objects and what they looked like, technically, but there was a sense of something greater. There was something more there the pictures were not revealing,” he said.

The photographer relived the moment that changed the way he looked at the elements of Ghost Ranch. It was during a workshop demonstration with his view camera.

“I saw something and took a photo. I really had an ‘OMG’ moment,” Varjabedian said.

“What changed? Did I change? Did the place change? A little piece of me wanted to believe that the place came around and somehow communicated to me that I was ready for the lesson it had to give,” he recalled.

After that moment, he took pictures of Ghost Ranch for the next seven years. Finally, “the place came around and said ‘that’s all I have to teach you,’ and it sent me on my way. It’s kind of metaphysical in the scheme of things. I think the place came around and told me how to photograph it.”

Varjabedian admitted it was a struggle not to impose his own viewpoint because of the

obvious framing of the camera.

“A lot of movies and other photographs have been taken of the place,” he said, “and I think they try to force their impression of what that place looks like into their rectangle of the camera, whether it’s a movie camera or a film camera. In the pictures I wanted to make of this place, I wanted to say something more, something deeper. But, I also recognize that once I inscribe a rectangle on something, I begin to impose my impression. It’s almost akin to witching, like those persons who take a stick and find water. It’s almost like that, in a way.

“I don’t know the words to describe it. I came to a beautiful place, and I took some photographs of it based on the way it made me feel,” he said. Varjabedian’s personal involvement with each subject is apparent in the details of his images.

“I think that all my images, whether they are trees or people, are a form of portraiture,” he revealed.

But, people are different than trees, of course. The wind might blow or the sun might set, but a person can shut down and refuse to let the photographer see the humanity.

“Portraits take a lot more time, because I try to spend time with the subject and learn about them. It’s in the less guarded moments that you reveal who you are,” he said.

The photographer recounted how he had had an opportunity to photograph a high profile person once, but could not get the subject to reveal himself. He continued to pose and the resulting images were glamour shots. Varjabedian believed there was more to the subject than what he wanted to reveal.

Why is this artist, who has such a fine eye for natural black and white images, in New Mexico when his homeland, Canada, has so much natural beauty to offer?

“I left Canada when I was 14,” he said, “I’ve gone back and traveled there, but New Mexico is interesting for two reasons. First, because I feel at home and at peace here. I lived in New York City, and when I traveled, that was fine, but when I travel away from New Mexico, I find myself pining to go home.

“Second, if there is any truth to the idea that we carry with us some kind of genetic memory, my forefathers come from Armenia, and if you look at Armenia today, the buildings and landscape, there are a lot of similarities. Take Laguna, for instance. I can show you photos of Armenia that look like that. The landscape of that part of New Mexico, they’re really similar,” he noted.

Varjabedian’s fans will be happy to know that following his “Ghost Ranch and Faraway Nearby” show, another group of his photos will be on display at the Haak’u Museum beginning Aug. 27. Varjabedian will show 26 new images along with the photos of local photographers invited to join the show.

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