

PHOTOGRAPHS ON DISPLAY AT UCC

Bright vision shines 'In Divine Light'

Focus is on Penitente morada structures of rural N.M., Colorado

By JAMES AUER
Journal Sentinel art critic

At first glance, the sensuous, black-and-white landscapes of Craig Varjabedian, on display until Dec. 22 at the United Community Center, 1028 S. Ninth St., bring to mind the existential mystique of Ansel Adams.

But no. Paul Caponigro turns out to be Varjabedian's muse, and that means a far subtler interplay between building and sky, windows and clouds, earth and heaven.

Varjabedian is dealing in this immaculately realized series of photographs, with the Penitente *morada* structures that dot the countryside of rural New Mexico and Colorado. The Penitente Brotherhood, which constructed these modest, utilitarian houses of worship, is an essentially rural phenomenon: an association of poor, reverent men devoted to Christ.

Operating independently of the established Church, the Brotherhood is at once a complement and a threat to traditional religion. Its members utilize whatever is at hand — adobe brick, stone, timber — to put up simple rectangular shelters which they can then furnish with altars, hand-carved representations of saints and manuscripts. Some *moradas* endure for centuries.

Rather than invade the *moradas* and lay bare the rites that take place within, Varjabedian contents himself with examining the spiritual and spatial relationships that exist between the *moradas* and the environment in which they stand. He calls his show "In Divine Light," thus pointing up both the spiritual and the ocular energy generated by these brilliant vistas.



"Cruciform Penitente morada and family chapel, late afternoon, autumn, New Mexico 1990" is among the black-and-white landscapes by Craig Varjabedian on display at the United Community Center.

By working with big-format (5-by-7 and 8-by-10-inch) cameras, and banishing color from his palette, Varjabedian succeeds, admirably, in generating contrasts and tensions between the rigorous lines of the rustic churches and the sensuously rounded cloudbanks and tree limbs that surround and surmount them. The settings are luminous. So are the pictures.

Exposing and printing with extreme care, he somehow manages to retain both shadow and highlight detail. This is particularly important when he is pointing up the near-melodramatic contrasts generated by the hard edges of the *moradas* as

they intersect with the soft contours of the southwestern countryside and the cloudbanks that float languidly above them.

What might in other hands have seemed artificial and melodramatic appears natural and right here. When a luminous white cross emerges out of an otherwise murky study of an old building, it is metaphoric rather than exploitive. A field of crosses, emblematic of modern and ancient blood sacrifice, bespeaks centuries of toil, prayer, death. It is beyond tears.

Writes Varjabedian, who spent many years documenting and depicting the *moradas*: "I wanted to create pictures that

engaged my own feelings and emotions regarding these simple buildings, where through the light the Creator makes His presence known. . . . Each *morada* represents the human soul's longing for a direct experience with the divine."

The resultant images constitute eloquent, if understated, proof of the enduring effects of faith, piety, love and brotherhood. Their elegance and simplicity, born out of isolation and loneliness, bespeak quiet faith and even quieter suffering.

"In Divine Light" can be seen from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Admission is free.

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