

Pasatiempo

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Cynthia Fusillo's
art poetica



ART POETICA

By Lynn Cline
The New Mexican

Entering Cynthia Fusillo's basement studio is a bit like opening a book of exquisite love poems by Pablo Neruda or Rumi and diving into an ocean of language and lyrical beauty.

Fusillo's new series of paintings, mixed media on wood, glow with sensual layers of evocative color — ocher, umber, Venetian green, Tuscan orange, Aegean blue, sea green, sand, coral and ultramarine.

Steeped with poetry and invented sea imagery including delicate shells, mysterious fish and submerged gardens, paintings such as *Enter Wet and Lovely*, *Moon When Belonging Burned in Stones* and *Costa Brava Covers the Shore With Her Language* carry the viewer into watery, word-filled worlds.

"I'm very attracted to water," said Fusillo, whose energy and eloquence infuse her work. "I use a lot of sea images. I wanted to be a biologist before I was an artist. I loved studying plants."

Amazingly, though, a longtime fear of water bogged her down.

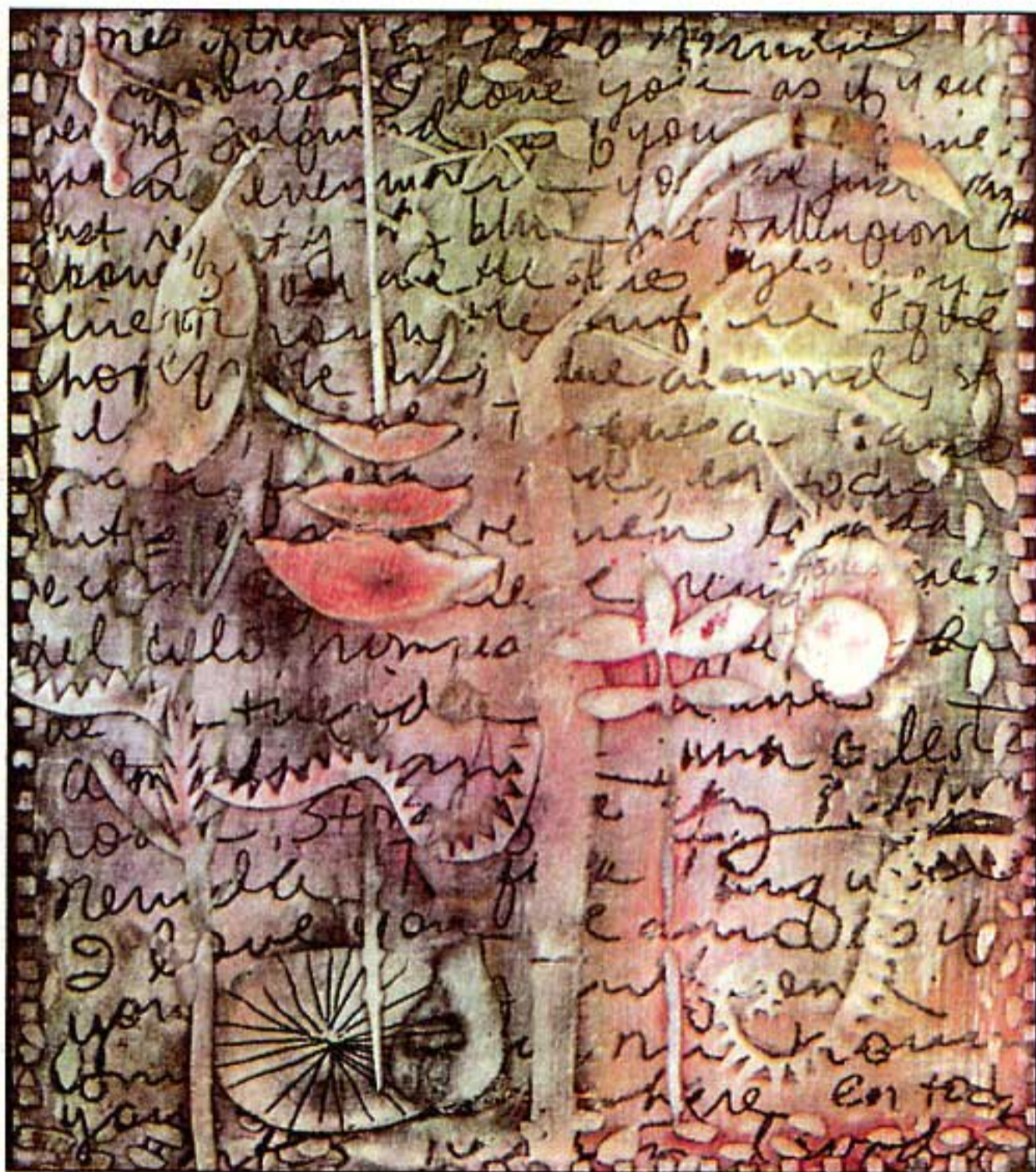
"I learned to swim at age 37," she said. "I was petrified by water. But I was determined to learn how to swim. When I first did I felt like I could do anything; it was a huge triumph for me."

Now 46 and the mother of two young daughters, she swims regularly, enjoying some of her most creative moments while moving steadily through water.

"When I swim I get a lot of ideas," she said. "It's like a thinking meditation. The water just washes away all other things that I'm thinking about — what to make for dinner, when to pick up the girls."

During time spent in pools over the past few years, Fusillo has had a lot to think about. She, her husband (Luis Navarro) and their daughter (Angela, 7), moved from their New York City apartment to Santa Fe 2 1/2 years ago, searching for a warmer climate.

The following month Fusillo enrolled in graduate school at the University of Santa Monica, committing to a monthly commute to California to pursue a master's degree in spiritual



'Ode to Neruda — I Love You,' 1999, mixed media on wood, 28 x 24 inches

psychology.

Two months after that Fusillo and Navarro adopted a baby girl, Sienna, now 2.

While in graduate school Fusillo battled another longtime fear — of writing.

"I lived with the false belief that I was a visual person who could not write," she said. "Going to graduate school taught me differently. I think poetry is the deepest expression."

For her graduate thesis Fusillo created a visual project, *History of Loving*, comprising 100

translucent vellum envelopes. Inside the envelopes she placed poems she wrote about important people in her life, along with letters to herself. She had penned the letters from viewpoints of life's various stages — youth, adolescence and old age.

Sewing the envelopes together, Fusillo created a giant quilt.

"I loved the idea of a quilt as a covering layer, almost like a skin," she said. "But with the vellum it's a transparent covering. It's almost like I

don't want you to see me but I do want you to see me; there's a little ambiguity there.

"I do like to be ambiguous. I like to leave things open; that fascinates me."

History of Loving flowed naturally into Fusillo's new work — paintings, monoprints and an installation, all of which combine a passion for water with a penchant for words.

Romance Languages, Fusillo's first solo show in Santa Fe, opens with an artist reception from 5 to 8 p.m. today, Feb. 4, at Guadalupe Fine Art. The event is part of the *Heart of Santa Fe Gallery Tour*.

Romance Languages centers around the installation *Women Becoming Poems*, which addresses the intimate and mysterious artistry of language. The piece contains an

antique bed covered with an ethereal organdy quilt of 117 love poems written by a total of 22 women poets who live in the Santa Fe area.

Fusillo slipped the poems inside translucent pockets that make up the quilt. On top of the quilt she placed satin pillows in shades of rose and purple, embroidered with words including "love," "romance," "desire" and "dream" as well as individual letters that spell out the word "poet."

An exquisitely lavish housecoat made from sheer organza-like material embroidered with the phrase "Women Becoming Poems" gives the piece a ghostly presence — shades of Sylvia Plath or Virginia Woolf.

"My mother wore a frumpy housecoat," Fusillo explained. "She sacrificed buying herself any nice clothes so she could buy her kids nice clothes. But this housecoat is meant to reflect beauty."

Fusillo assembled all the poems in an elegant book covered with organdy, inserting each poem in a pocket made of a swatch of wedding-veil material stitched with embroidery. Seamstress Debra Romero and embroiderer Jody Howell helped the artist create the installation.

Romance Languages also includes paintings and monoprints. Each of the paintings began with a poem Fusillo embedded into a plaster background, using a knife, pen or other sharp object. The artist then layered oil paints and additional plaster over the poem, leaving portions concealed so the words seem almost buried in the work, revealing their essence instead of every letter of every word.

"I use a lot of layers," she said. "I like the idea of concealing and revealing."

"The show is about celebrating language," said Fusillo, who has studied French, Latin, Italian, German, Portuguese and Spanish. She also has taught English as a second language in New York

and Spain.

"It's really about the poetry of everything," she said. "I don't consider myself a 'quote, unquote' poet; maybe a poet of color. But it makes me feel so good to write poetry; it taps into a part of my art."

Guadalupe Fine Art will host a public reading of *Women Becoming Poems* from 5 to 8 p.m. Feb. 13. Fusillo and many of the poets who collaborated with her will read from their works.

Fusillo, who grew up in White Plains, N.Y., has lived in Switzerland, France, Italy and Spain — where romance languages are spoken. She studied an array of art mediums in Italy and holds a master of fine arts degree from New York University.

And she has exhibited her work in museums, galleries and alternative spaces in New York City; Barcelona and Madrid, Spain; and elsewhere.

When Fusillo completes a painting or a series of work, she doesn't remain attached to the project.

"I'm finished with them," she said. "I want to make more things."

She is so immersed in the *Romance Languages* show, she hasn't given much thought to where she'll turn

next — except, perhaps, to return to the water of the Earth.

"I can think of a beach right now," she said, smiling broadly. "That's where I'd like to go. I'd like to dive into these paintings and swim with the fishes and the plants. I just see myself as swimming and swimming and swimming." ◀



'Silence Holds Her Shape,' 1999, mixed media on wood, 16 x 16 inches

DETAILS

WHAT

Cynthia Fusillo
Paintings, monoprints & installation

WHEN

Artist reception 5-8 p.m. today, Feb. 4
Exhibit through Feb. 23
Poetry reading 4-6 p.m. Feb. 13

WHERE

Guadalupe Fine Art
403 Canyon Road

INFO

982-2403



Jennifer Esperanza

Cynthia Fusillo with the quilt and housecoat pieces from her installation 'Women Becoming Poems'

ELECTIVE AFFINITY

When a Santa Fe Community College writing class that Cynthia Fusillo took ended, the class morphed into a private writing group. Working with other women poets from the course led by Barbara Rockman inspired Fusillo to write poetry.

Feet First

then legs
then torso
totally immersed
heaviness of body
fall into light shapes
enter wet and lovely
blue bones float in free form
transparent layer of skin separates
straight line horizon
rhythmic oxygen breathing
keeps me
alive
light years from
my true
nature

— Cynthia Fusillo