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Albuquerque Artists Exhibit in New York
by Elaine de Kooning

ALBUQUERQUE, impersonal and uningratiating as a gasoline station, nestles in the rockies under a sun forty percent brighter than New York’s. “Earth colors” in New Mexico are intense pinks and reds. Color and space are actors, changing role from hour to hour, constantly in flux. Light resounds and reverberates over the city, drastically magnifies and diminishes the buildings, brings the surfaces of the mountains aggressively close or thrusts them off to legendary distances. The sunsets here would have reduced a Barbizon painter to ashes. This opulent landscape has spawned hundreds of buckeye painters who try to pin it down and succeed only in reducing the grand to the picturesque. It might be said that the sun chased the modern artists indoors. The most inspired artists often seem to respond to their surroundings in reverse. Drenched in color, the Albuquerque painters generally work with palettes that are subdued, dense, introverted. Space-rich, they do not need to escape into big canvases as New Yorkers seem to and their forms are compressed and immediate.

Having certain attitudes toward their surroundings in common, these artists do not form a “school” as is usual in art colonies. Indeed, “art colony,” with its connotations of Bohemianism, exhibitionism and conformism, seems an inappropriate term for this group of individualists, almost rude in their insistent independence of each other.

The University of New Mexico is the cultural focus of the city. Two of the artists included, Lez Haas and Ralph Lewis, teach there; two of them, Enza Quargnali and William Conger, are students at present; and the rest, with the exception of Jean Armstead, a Hofmann student, studied there in the past under Raymond Jonson.

Mr. Jonson, an artist of tremendous energy and conviction, has painted some 1500 works over the last forty years. In 1949, the Jonson gallery was established at the university to house a permanent collection of his work. Jonson is probably the factor most responsible for encouraging the intense productivity and high level of professionalism (not characteristic of university towns) of the young Albuquerque artists by offering them one-man shows at his gallery. In his generosity and ability to stimulate other artists, Jonson is comparable to Hans Hofmann, and would undoubtedly be a nationally known painter if he had been working on the East or West coast all these years.

For the rest, the artists in Albuquerque relate to New York artists today the way New Yorkers related to Parisians in the thirties: they know what is going on but there is no recognition for them from the city to the East. Like New Yorkers, most of them were born elsewhere and have a fierce, defensive devotion to the city of their choice. Also
reminiscent of the New York art world of the 'thirties is the depression atmosphere—the impossibility of living by painting and the resulting bitterness and acrid humor. The outsize canvas might be uncommon in Albuquerque—as it was in New York not so long ago—simply because most artists can't afford them. There are several gloomy advantages however, to being neglected—the main one being that a kind of glorious, tough originality blooms in isolation and tends to vanish in an atmosphere of easy acceptance.

THIS ESSAY is reprinted from the program for the “Albuquerque” show, February 3 to 21, 1960, at The Great Jones Gallery, 5 Great Jones Street, New York. Albuquerque painters exhibiting were Jean Armstead, William Conger, Connie Fox, Alice Garver, Lez L. Haas, William Vaughan Howard, Don Ivers, Raymond Jonson, Richard Kurman, Ralph Lewis, Joan Oppenheimer, Enza Quargnali, and Robert Walters.