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Hanging TUFF

Exhibit challenges viewers with harsh treatment of materials

by [Kathaleen Roberts](#) • [Journal Santa Fe](#)

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This isn't the kind of art that lures blockbluster crowds.

With its torn paper, clumped paint and hacked wood, "Tuff Stuff" confronts notions of beauty and harmony and a reverence for materials dating to the European guilds. These "shoulds" — that a paintbrush should stroke canvas fluidly, that handmade paper should be caressed rather than gouged and that wood should be carved, caressed and polished with the grain — all limit the vocabulary of art. "Tuff Stuff" showcases four New Mexico artists — Dunham Aurelius, Mike Diaz, Harmony Hammond and Jack Slentz — who may be hard to like. The exhibit opens at the New Mexico Museum of Art on Friday, June 20.

"I wanted to create a show that would allow me to examine the artists that some people would say were difficult," said Tim Rodgers, the museum's chief curator. "Intellectually, it's very interesting, and I can put aside my particular aesthetic preferences. This is not stuff that a lot of people would put above the couch or in the living room.

"I think art is a vehicle for an expression for a wide range of ideas," he continued. "They can be dark, they can be depressing, they can be angry, they can be filled with angst."

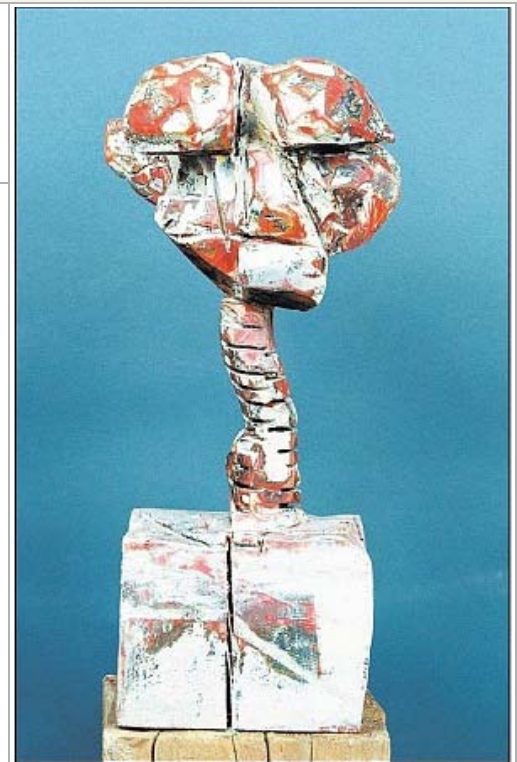
Attacking their work

All four artists approach their work aggressively. Hammond globs on the paint like a bricklayer. Slentz stitches reams of black rubber into the shape of a cross, only to watch it slouch and collapse. Aurelius attacks wood with a chainsaw, hacksaws and gouges, smothers it in multiple paint layers, then dismembers it. The end result resembles a skull attached to giraffe-length vertebral links.

"I work viscerally through the piece; I don't draw it out," the Santa Fe sculptor said.

Aurelius uses that damaged and mangled work to focus on the vagaries of human suffering, especially war and oppression.

"I'm not deliberately constructing something very dark, but they're tough topics for people to stomach and think about, so I'm not putting smiley faces on them," he said. "A lot of people



"Red Head" is a 2003 painted wood sculpture by Dunham Aurelius.

try to come from an intellectual level rather than appreciate it on its own level. They'll try to relate it to some outerspace figure."

The maimed figures, heads and torsos look like they've been slashed by someone determined to break through their skin.

"Red Head" grew from — of all things — an exhibit of Degas sculpture castings mounted at the New Mexico Museum of Art a few years ago.

"When I was really young, I had spinal surgery, so it all kind of correlates," Aurelius said. "When you look at that piece, I get a feeling of suffering."

Santa Fe therapist Michael Diaz moved from painting to drawing when he realized he was driven by a fascination with line. His work is subtle yet startling — small lines scarring Japanese handmade paper that the artist erases over and over.

"There's a compulsiveness about his work that I find fascinating," Rodgers said. "He even rips the paper. Most people who deal with paper do not want to ever tear it — especially through the erasure process."

Diaz discovered the process when he was on a retreat at a beach and started scribbling on a drawing tablet. A friend saw the drawings and including the work in a show.

"The marks are more kinesthetic, more visceral," Diaz said. "It's just out of the fascination with the line itself. That's all I'm concerned about. I love the way a pencil carves a line into the paper."

The results were too raw and immediate to be framed; originally, Diaz wanted to tape or pin them to the wall. He uses erasure as part of the composition, forming "ghosts" where lines used to be. The spareness of the work demands close inspection. Thinned, torn and damaged by the erasure, it turns nearly sculptural, yet always elusive.

"A friend said something about 'the edge of the familiar,' and that's exactly what it is," Diaz said. "I'm close to seeing something, and I don't know what it is. That experience is what it's all about for me."

Pushing boundaries

That reverence for mystery also permeates Hammond's work. Co-founder of the first women's cooperative art gallery in New York, she coedited "Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics" (1976) and wrote "Lesbian Art in America" (2000). She also taught painting, combined media and graduate critiques as a professor at the University of Arizona until 2005. Both conceptual and abstract, her work continually pushes boundaries. Her monochrome oils, thick with an obsessive overpainting, smolder beneath the epidermis.

"I've always thought of the paint application as a skin," she said in a telephone interview from her Galisteo home. "I try to use the paint as a material in and of itself. Therefore, it's not precious to me. That skin of paint automatically represents the body."

"If I cut into the surface like the painting 'Dark Grid,' I've taken the opposite end of my paintbrush and incised it into the paint," she continued. "Because of the lumps and bumps of the canvas, the grid appears and disappears. I believe the viewer feels that incision into the paint's surface almost as an incision into the body."

Now included in the permanent collections of many museums — including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art — Hammond's work has been reproduced, reviewed and dissected. Many have attributed her work to anguish.



Jack R. Slentz's 2003 "Rubber Tube" is a soft sculpture constructed of rubber and hemp.



Jack R. Slentz's 2007 "When does a Cross become an X" is a soft sculpture constructed of rubber and hemp.

"I'm not in pain," she insisted. "It's not about pain. It's about feeling things with the body."

If the color is elusive, so is the space.

"You sense something's there, but you can't quite grasp it," she said. "You can't quite grasp the color; it's like fugitive color. From a distance, you go, 'Oh, that's a black painting.' Then when you move up close, you see these wonderful colors beginning to show through. If you look at the bottom (of 'Noche'), there's a little bit of red that comes through underneath."

"Noche" consists of two panels with a dark space between them.

"The focus is on the crack between the two panels," Hammond said. "Metaphorically, I'm obsessed with edges. What does that energy feel like? It's often a place where blood is shed. Boundaries get negotiated, and moved back and forth. There's something very sensuous about it and mysterious."

Hammond is the first to admit her work is challenging. Another artist once asked her how she did it, as if she had added some kind of secret ingredient to her paint.

"It doesn't fit neatly into a category," she said. "People like an easy read. (But) there's something about the work. They spend time with it. They sit with it. There's something happening there that touches people." If you go

WHAT: "Tuff Stuff: Four New Mexico Artists with Muscles"

WHERE: New Mexico Museum of Art, 107 W. Palace Ave.

WHEN: Free opening reception 5:30-7:30 p.m. Friday, June 20. Through Sept. 14.

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Sunday. Free 5-8 p.m. Fridays. **COST:** New Mexico residents with ID free Sundays. Resident seniors (60 and older) free Wednesdays. Museum foundation members free. State veterans with 50 percent or greater disability free. Students with ID \$1 discount. Single visit: \$8 non-residents; \$6 New Mexico residents.

CONTACT: (505) 476-5072 or visit www.nmartmuseum.org

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