

after the fall

abstracting the life of Eugene Newmann

“Art is a dead thing that claims to be alive,” says Eugene Newmann. “It’s inert material, just like you’re looking at a corpse, but it seems to have the capacity to engage you as if it were living.” The 73-year-old abstract expressionist painter is in his studio—a high-ceilinged space a few steps from his house near Ribera, tucked into the scrubby juniper landscape just north of Glorieta Mesa. As he rifles through collections of old studies, Newmann explains his dichotomous fascination with corpses and human movement

His last three series, *Falling, Falling, Fallen*; *The Falls*; and *The Bodies*, draw heavily from two disparate spiritual realms: deposition paintings, which depict Christ being taken down from the cross, and the Hindu practice of yoga. These sources seem unlikely for the son of Orthodox Jewish parents who escaped Czechoslovakia in 1938 and immigrated to Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1940. But he says, “contemporary art even though it’s very secular, has aspirations in common with the sacred art of the past—because the elements remain powerful even when you abstract them from the original content”

In a blue sweatshirt and watch cap, Newmann looks like a Navy sailor. But his words convey a life spent immersed in creative inquiry. And his journey from religious refugee to award-winning painter—he took home a 2008 Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts—has a lot to do with the wildly diverse geographies and cultures he’s traversed. When he was 10, his parents sent him to Jewish parochial school in New York City, where he earned a math-and-physics scholarship to the University of Chicago. Once in Chicago, the young student embraced the liberal, left-leaning atmosphere, but never formally studied art “My whole relationship to the academic establishment is one of rebellion,” he says.

Between semesters, Newmann returned to Barranquilla, where he gravitated toward La Cueva, the same bar Gabriel García Márquez had frequented. “La Cueva was a bar for journalists, hunters, and artists,” he says. “They were willing to accept that I was a painter. They called me ‘maestro’ and hung my paintings on the wall.” While Newmann’s paintings aren’t exactly the visual equivalent of García Márquez’s magical realist literature, the romance and hardship of life in Colombia rubbed off on his work.

In 1972, Newmann and his wife, Dana (also an artist), landed in New Mexico. “As soon as we saw this place,” he says, “my wife said, ‘This is it.’” Almost 40 years later, he has cemented a reputation as a producer of some of New Mexico’s most powerful contemporary art. His work suggests a thickness of both paint and experience—and is, according to Linda Durham, who has represented him for more than 20 years, “usually inspired by something that doesn’t look too much like his final painting.”

Case in point: a 65-by-60-inch oil hanging on his studio wall, which he’s trying to finish in time for his June 18 opening at Linda Durham Contemporary Art. Temporarily titled *Elevation and Entanglement in Ribera*, the painting portrays pink earth dotted with a few piñon trees, and the focal points are slightly collapsed figures in various stages of falling. “Often my works have been so abstract that people have found them to be impenetrable,” he says. “In my current work I have no hard rule to eliminate the narrative element, and maybe that makes it easier to read.” As “easy,” perhaps, as a García Márquez novel, and likely as rich.

—Stephanie Pearson

Eugene Newmann and Milton Resnick: *Selections*, Jun 18–Jul 11, reception Jun 18, 5–7 PM, Linda Durham Contemporary Art, 1101 Paseo de Peralta, 505-466-6600, lindadurham.com



Clockwise from top: *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 24 x 30"; *Falling, Falling, Fallen*, oil on board, 24 x 18"; Newmann with the in-process *Elevation and Entanglement in Ribera*, oil on canvas, 66 x 62".