

# MARCIA OLIVER

by Erin Elder

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Marcia Oliver lives in a long low house on a sun-drenched alluvial plain that spectacularly overlooks the Taos mesa. The house is made of adobe that she dug on site and shaped by hand. A chunky turquoise door marks its entrance. This is actually the second house that Marcia built — the first is round and oriented around the sun and moon — but this one, without interior walls, is better suited for big studio work. The rooms tumble into one another; light bounces off the white-washed vigas and hand-hewn walls. Shelves are stocked with varnishes, brushes, pencils, glues. On tables, art supplies share space with abandoned pots of tea, a half eaten cookie, photo albums, spare change, and notes written in a careful script that elicits care and whimsy and a commitment to beauty. Portfolios of collaged drawings lean against a chair. Her paintings and sculptures adorn each empty space. A cat named Josh waltzes through the room to Marcia's tiny blue bed that looks out through floor-to-ceiling windows at a cluster of piñon trees.

Marcia arrived in Taos in the fall of 1968 behind the wheel of a Volkswagen. She hailed from Pensacola, Florida by way of the San Francisco Bay, with a bunch of other adventures between. She came to Taos for a year-long residency at the Wurlitzer Foundation, an experience which validated her commitment to painting and introduced her to rising art stars like Agnes Martin as well as a few women friends who had built their own homes. Despite the hippie communes appearing throughout the area, Marcia made plans for a place all her own.

In the early '70s, Des Montes was little more than earth and sky. There was an alfalfa field, a few houses belonging to the Lucero family, and a ditch pouring out of the mountains with water clean enough to drink. There were no power lines, no paved roads — as Marcia likes to say, “nothing but a donkey.” One Saturday afternoon, Marcia found herself sitting by a stream in Des Montes and saw a rancher off in the distance. She hiked over to the man she came to know as Moises and asked if there was nearby land for sale. A few thousand dollars and some tactical gymnastics landed her with 5 acres and a place to call home.

“I always thought I'd live on a boat,” Marcia exclaims. “I wasn't sure there was a place I could belong. Lucky for me, Taos is a good place for artists and misfits!” She says this rather wistful statement with a wink and a squeak. A hand moves to her mouth as giggles bubble out. Marcia's laughter is not what you'd expect from such a strong, robust woman. Her laugh is effervescent, tinkling, a cooing revelation. Physical and ever-present, laughter easily consumes Marcia's whole being and then reverberates to everyone around her.

Soon after purchasing her land, Marcia fell in with the local hispanics who were kind and good to her, especially Meliton Montano, her “guardian angel.” Melaton was a misfit too and despite the fact that neither spoke the other's language, the two became friends, laboring together for over 40 years.

Marcia works hard. In the spring, she helped the neighbors clean the ditch. She was one of two women on a firefighting crew. She taught school in Ojo Caliente. Most of her years in Taos, Marcia ran a sign shop called Sign & Design. She isn't afraid of physical labor. The spiritual labor is a thing she can do too.

"There is a precious and unique sense of one's person that can emerge from periods of detachment, reflection, and solitude," writes Marcia in an artist statement. In fact, she built her life to allow for this kind of emergence. Paintings begin with an empty mind and in silence. One mark leads to another; the work appears slowly, formed by her intuition, the shifting energies, whatever arises. There are sometimes collaged bits, pencil scratches, thick washes of color, and abstracted forms. Words appear to be smeared away. Disembodied forms jag and bloom. Language and body dissolve gleefully amidst milky atmospheres of mood and dream.

*Gestalt* is a word Marcia uses to describe her work and in so doing, it's apparent that her paintings, despite their wholeness, are made of bits and parts, particles and leavings. They are wisps and whims and passing fancies. Her oeuvre, though cohesive, doesn't spell itself out. Instead, it hints at a sense of all things.

Marcia is 85 now. She's not building houses any more. Her back hurts and she's slowing down. But there are still interior worlds to explore, colors to blend, and shapes to conjure. As her mind expands into vaster and more spirited realms, her body continues to break into laughter.