

Pasatiempo

The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine of Arts, Entertainment & Culture



October 21 - 27, 2011





TAKE IT INTERPERSONAL

Jennifer Levin | For The New Mexican

“When you have people in your life who’ve died, they kind of get this saintly air to them. When people reference them, they tend to turn things about them that originally could have been pejorative into a positive,” Tanmaya Bingham explained in a conversation with *Pasatiempo* about her new exhibition, *Last Supper: Family Style*. The show opens at Box Gallery on Friday, Oct. 21. The mixed-media installation features a 13-foot-long table surrounded by 12 chairs that represent the members of her family. The people whose images appear on the chairs are dead; those whose images appear in the drawings on the walls are living, looking into the room from a post-apocalyptic landscape. Bingham’s brother, who died in a diving accident at Elephant Butte when he was a teenager, is the main focus of the work.

“The people at the table have already gained their saintliness,” said Bingham. “The reason why I’ve made him this centerpiece, made him Jesus, is that, because he died so young, he never really had to navigate through the wears and tears of life, never encountered the things we all encounter that

affect us and bring things out and change our personality in ways. He wasn’t faced with that, and so he’s been put on this larger pedestal than the others.”

Bingham’s mother died of cancer in 2003, so she also sits at the table. Her father is in remission from a bout with cancer a few years ago, so he is on the outside with Bingham’s stepmother. Bingham works in colored pencil; her drawing style is a mix of almost photographic realism with an edge of caricature. She concentrates on faces, hands, and feet, rendering the rest of the body boneless, doll-like, or even completely shapeless, filled in with a gesture. “To me, the hands, feet, and faces are the parts of the body that show the road maps of where we’ve been and what we’ve gone through. Whether it’s wrinkles or scars or lines, some darkness on the skin — that’s what’s most interesting. Also, I never draw hair. I like to leave it out because I find that a lot of people attach to it and get characterized by their hair. It’s our way of hiding, I think. I like to strip people down so that all they’re left with is bareness.” In place of hair she adds tall hat-like objects, some of which look like hives or enlarged



THE ART OF TANMAYA BINGHAM

brains, and some of which are influenced by religious paintings from the Renaissance. In general, there is an air of supplication or devotion in the figures.

Bingham was raised in Santa Fe, “super lax Unitarian. My mom was really an atheist to the bone. My dad is much more open-minded, really into Buddhism,” she said. “But after my mom died and he met his new wife, he became a Christian. It’s provided some sort of refuge, and I’m happy for him.” When she was growing up, her father was an art lawyer intimate with the local gallery scene, and she began training with professional artists at a very young age. Her medium of choice was drawing; she stayed up late at night to practice faces and didn’t allow herself to start painting until her teens. “I wanted to get down the technical work really well before moving into painting, and I felt like drawing was the foundation for that.” She worked in oil for several years before it began causing health problems. Now when she paints she uses acrylic and watercolor. Bingham initially set out to earn an undergraduate degree at

the Kansas City Art Institute, but she got to college just after her brother died and found herself unable to focus on school. She went to Italy and studied painting and then spent some time farming at work camps in Switzerland. After that, she taught English in Nepal and painted for nine months in India before returning to the U.S and putting in some time in Brooklyn while studying art history at New York University. In the next few years she lived, variously, in Paris, Santa Barbara, Montana, China, and Spain; she finished her undergraduate degree at Antioch University in Santa Barbara. In her mid-20s, looking for a place she’d never been, she decided to move to Australia and get her master’s. She met a man and got married. She began showing her artwork in galleries in Melbourne and, after she finished her graduate work at the

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Tanmaya Bingham: *DJ: LSFS*, 2011, colored pencil and mixed media on board, 24 x 60 inches

**LAST 2 WEEKENDS
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1:LSFS, 2011, colored pencil, mixed media on board, 10.75 x 8.75 inches

Australian National University in Canberra, she pursued a wide variety of academic and professional programs and certifications — in yoga, nutrition, public speaking, timeline therapy, life coaching, and neuro-linguistic programming. Eight years later, newly separated, she moved back to Santa Fe. She lives in Lamy and works at a gallery on Canyon Road.

“My drive as an artist is that everything I do needs to be in alignment with my art. So I learned about nutrition and yoga because I wanted to know how to take care of myself well, so I could do my art and not have to worry about that,” she said. Her interest in the psychotherapeutic approach modeled by neuro-linguistic programming stems from a fascination with interpersonal dynamics, which always factors into her artwork. She often draws couples, interviewing them first to learn about their relationship. She works from photographs rather than live models, as she doesn't like the distraction of other human beings while she is in her studio. For *Last Supper: Family Style*, she wanted to include her older brother and his family, but he stipulated that the only way she would get photographs of them is if she came to San Francisco, where he lives, and took them herself.

“I work basically seven days a week, and I don't have any money, so that wasn't an option.” Instead, she filled them in as representations, with gouged and weeping eyes. She and some other friends mingle in the barren, rainy background. “These are the people in my life who are like brothers and sisters to me, and I've integrated them into these slots, essentially playing the roles.” In her panel, she appears next to herself, whispering in her own ear. “I chose to have two of me because everyone else that's portrayed has their partner with them. I have a great boyfriend right now but I'm not married, so that was my way of giving myself some comfort, having another person there with me, so I didn't have to be alone.” ◀

details

- ▼ Tanmaya Bingham: *Last Supper: Family Style*
- ▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 21; through Nov. 26
- ▼ Box Gallery, 1611-A Paseo de Peralta, 989-4897