The Passion of Frederico Vigil

As Albuquerque turns 300, a gifted artist celebrates Hispanic culture in plaster and paint. MATTHEW JAFFE explores a one-of-a-kind work of art.
Sitting at a draftsman’s table, Frederico Vigil is surrounded by paints, brushes, and the other tools of his trade. He’s surrounded, too, by Madonnas, spirits, elders, philosophers, and scholars—some still pencil sketches, others glowing with brilliant, beautiful color—that seem to whirl skyward above him.

Vigil is at work on a monumental fresco, depicting centuries of Hispanic history and culture, inside El Torreón, the 45-foot tower at Albuquerque’s National Hispanic Cultural Center. From the outside, the terra-cotta-colored tower appears modest in size. Inside, the skylit cylinder’s concave interior seems a vast space to fill. But Vigil is less intimidated than inspired.

“This is a dream wall, an unbelievable space,” Vigil says. “It reminds me of those spaces I have traveled to in Mexico, Spain, and Italy, the national buildings and chapels. Walls covered in fresco.”
Vigil is completing his masterwork at an important time in the life of Albuquerque: The city marks its 300th anniversary in 2006. Vigil’s work gives the city and its people a powerful new symbol that incorporates very old traditions.

Since he began work in 2002, Vigil has painted about 900 square feet of the 4,300-square-foot fresco. Near the tower’s top, enormous hands, painted against a cobalt background, seem to reach inside through a skylight. Halfway down, a Madonna in gold-trimmed vestments stands beside a blazing sun, and nearby, a newborn infant is lifted toward the heavens.

The rest of the fresco remains a work in progress, curving walls covered with charcoal outlines. These depict imagery that will trace millennia of Hispanic civilization. Other sections will focus on the history of New Mexico. Vigil thought he would finish in three years; now he says he may not be done until 2009.

“Life has its own rhythm, and so does fresco,” he says. “Try to speed it up, and it doesn’t work. I can’t rush it. And I’m not going to rush it.”
Faced with the project’s demands, Vigil moved from Santa Fe to the Albuquerque neighborhood of Barelas to be closer to El Torreón. He says that Barelas reminds him of old Canyon Road. He loves to listen to the neighborhood elders’ stories about picking wild asparagus along the Rio Grande or running moonshine up to Santa Fe. He’s also focused on younger generations: the high school art students who assist on the project and the local university art students who have studied with him and produced their own frescoes. He ties these students to a tradition that reaches back to the 15,000-year-old paintings on the limestone cave walls at Altamira in Spain.

“The individuals who work with me know that they want to do this,” Vigil says. “They understand that this is something special, that they are working in a sacred space.”

El Torreón is currently open only during scheduled receptions; the next will be on Apr 12, 2006 ($5 members, $8 nonmembers; call for details). National Hispanic Cultural Center (10–5 Tue–Sun; museum admission $3; 1701 Fourth St., Albuquerque; www.nhccnm.org or 505/766-9858).