

Making an impression



Andrea Pichaida carves a set of Stations of the Cross for Santa Fe's Church of the Holy Faith. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

For Andrea Pichaida, the road to the Stations of the Cross began with mud.

The Chilean artist asked her mother to sign her up for a pottery class when she was 6 years old.

"I was always building something with mud and sticks and rock," the artist said from her Santa Fe studio.

"I guess I was very shy," she continued. "I think I felt so comfortable doing it and it was my refuge. I used to hide in (the mud) from everything. That was my little world."

What began as an escape from a painful childhood grew into a passion as Pichaida evolved into a sculptor and art professor at the Art School of the Pontifical Catholic University in Santiago. She was commissioned to make Stations of the Cross for a cathedral, a church and a park. She also made contemporary sculpture, angels and eventually a clay vase embellished with the figures of Mary and Jesus that Pope John Paul II personally chose for the Vatican Museum in 2004.

Pichaida lived in Chile under the regime of President Augusto Pinochet, who seized power in a 1973 coup. According to various reports, from 1,200 to 3,200 people were killed, up to 80,000 jailed and 30,000 tortured under his rule. Pinochet died in 2006.

"In Santiago, everyone is afraid to speak of faith," she added. "We had 20 years of dictatorship. There are still people that haven't been found. He even got rid of the history books.

"In Chile, there's always a wall in front of you," she continued. "Everybody's always criticizing you.

It's a cultural thing. It's very isolated."

In 2008, a friend invited Pichaida to Santa Fe. She had lived in Angel Fire during the '90s when her ex-husband headed the Chilean Olympic ski team training there. Pichaida returned to Santiago and worked in marketing, eventually becoming an art professor.

Two years ago, Pichaida moved to Santa Fe and married Dr. Dave Gonzales, whom she had met through friends. A chance dinner encounter led to a new commission for Stations of the Cross at the city's Church of the Holy Faith. So far she has nearly completed 10, after beginning the project in mid-September. She also teaches at Santa Fe Clay.

The new stations will replace old reproductions now hanging in the church.

"What was existing was just a temporary solution," Holy Faith's the Rev. Kenneth Semon said. "We hadn't had them in the past and there were people who wanted to observe them."



Andrea Pichaida carves figures for the 10th Station of the Cross in Santa Fe.

Church members were hoping to find a local artist to complement the existing original art already in place, Semon said. That art includes a reredos by Gustave Baumann, an expansion, chancel (choir space) and sanctuary by John Gaw Meem and stained glass windows, one of which is dedicated to Hattie Childs, the first wife of Gov. L. Bradford Prince. Meem dedicated the altar window to his late father.

Pichaida completed a single piece to show parishioners what she could do. The donations flowed. The finished project cost about \$25,000, Semon said.

"I thought they were just wonderful," he explained, "– the simplicity and the depth of spirituality. We put one up and said, 'Here's what's proposed.'"

The money was there within a week, he added. Semon hopes to have all 14 stations installed by Lent (Feb. 15).

The subtle, earth-colored reliefs stand in contrast to every stained glass and painted depiction of the final days of Jesus' life. In relief, the artist chips and chisels away at the clay until the imagery seems raised from the background plane, the facial features and even the drape of a robe carved by shadows.

The Stations show various stages of Christ carrying his cross to his crucifixion in the final hours

before his death. The 14, 20-by-15-inch pieces will hang along the walls of the church at 311 E. Palace Ave. The images are designed to help the faithful make a spiritual pilgrimage or prayer through meditating on the scenes of Christ's suffering and death.

The images are subtly spiritual, with facial expressions conveying a depth of meaning.

"I don't like the bloody scenes," Pichaida said. "I think you can get the same message from the faces."



One of the carved Stations of the Cross by Santa Fe artist Andrea Pichaida.

Pichaida designs her composition with a razored focus on the principal characters. Everything from the facial features to the folds of Christ's robe flow with intricacy and expression; the background characters recede.

"You create tension by putting the characters close enough where they connect," she explained. "You have a rhythm in it, you have a tension in it. You shouldn't have to explain artwork. The viewer should be able to see it. You always find a climax within the composition."

The clay reliefs will hang on the church walls from a one-inch board to create the shadows of a frame.

"I start carving and then I carve again and again and again," Pichaida said. She often works from 9 a.m. until 11 p.m. to a background of Benedictine chants, salsa or The Beatles, depending on her mood, as a pellet stove flickers. TV is banned, and Pichaida deliberately painted the walls a stark white to dilute any distractions in a gesture of Zen-like simplicity.

The clay comes in 25-pound blocks; Pichaida sculpts nearly half of it away using wooden and wire carving tools. The continual scraping helps to pop any bubbles that might trigger an explosion in the kiln. When the figures seem complete, Pichaida adds her personal final touch — she presses a piece of cheese cloth to the top and bottom of the composition to add a veil of woven texture.

No one is allowed to touch them.

“This station has become a lot more meaningful to me,” Pichaida said. “The others were with a partner; he was very bossy. They were commissions. This is a gift for me, too. I realize I’m a piece of everything and I have to give back, too.”