

# ARTIST PROFILE

## Jo Bertini IN ABIQUIÚ

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# Jo Bertini

## Deep in Land: Secrets and the Sublime in America's Southwest

Story PIPPA MOTT

**T**he American Southwest, as it exists within the white settler-colonist imagination, is loaded with complex and often contradictory narratives. Its low population density, heat, presumed barrenness, and sheer expanse belie the reality of complex ecologies, topographies, weather systems, and flourishing ancient and modern cultures. Jo Bertini has been courting these contradictions for several decades now, in an enduring love affair with the desert that has seen her traveling extensively throughout arid regions of Australia, Africa, India, Pakistan, China, and America. Her latest exhibition at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Gallery at the Ent Center for the Arts represents the culmination of eight years of knowledge and experience with the landscape of New Mexico, her adopted home. Bertini's paintings tenderly draw on the dichotomies of the desert; each work becomes an act of devotion towards an environment that is on the edge, in more ways than one.

When reflecting on her experiences of desert environments and cultures, Bertini is keen to emphasise both their idiosyncrasies and remarkable parallels. "All the deserts in the world are so particular yet have so many similarities. They are magnets for weather, for example. Right now, Central Australia is flooded; you can't go anywhere, the grevilleas are exploding to unimaginable heights.

That pattern of boom and bust, it happens here in New Mexico too." The limestone valley behind Bertini's house can transform from bone dry to a picture of abundance virtually overnight. During wet seasons, the river flows, wildflowers bloom with vigour, and the resident population of waterfowl, bighorn sheep, elk, black bears, mountain lions, and coyotes make their presence known. "Just because you don't see life," says Bertini, "doesn't mean it's not there."

When I visit Bertini's Abiquiú property in early May, the land looks parched but the river surges with snowmelt. A large herd of elk has made its home in a waterlogged pasture nearby – materialising en masse at dusk like clockwork every evening. Bertini's canvases sensuously craft the vitality and abundance of these ecosystems. "Researching and living in this high desert wilderness, where foreign birds and animals migrate, where sandhill cranes rush suddenly from a dune, where wolf and bear wander, means that the intrinsic human connection I have always had to desert places is simultaneously intensified and made stranger. My paintings serve as a kinship to the natural world and its creatures, known and unknown, a personal tribute to the seen and unseen, which itself becomes a form of devotion."









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01 Bertini at Plaza Blanca, photographed by Prue Roscoe, 2019

02 *The Water Tree of Doubtful Creek*, 2022, iridescent pigments and oil on French polyester, 203.2 x 203.2 cm

03 *Badlands – a deliberate forgetting*, 2021, oil on French polyester canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm





*“ Bertini’s paintings tenderly draw on the dichotomies of the desert; each work becomes an act of devotion towards an environment that is on the edge, in more ways than one ”*









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Her paintings respond with equal sensitivity to the cultural climate of desert places. Contrary to the notion of a vacuum or void, the archaeological, written, and oral historical record of central-northern New Mexico attests to an amalgam of human presence from approximately 9200 BCE. To the southeast of Bertini's Abiquiú property, a monumental Ancestral Puebloan complex (c. 1400 CE) sprawls across a mesa. As we tread carefully around this plateau, the earth clinks underfoot with a crust of pottery sherds. Bertini's partner Thomas Studer points out sparkling mica-ware and Abiquiú (Biscuit A) black-on-white pottery with remnant geometric designs, alongside a medley of stone tools. The ceramic tradition of the area continues to thrive, with the famed San Ildefonso workshop located not far away. Just down the road is Ghost Ranch – where Georgia O'Keeffe kept a studio for over forty years. Bertini's casita looks toward the same plateau-capped peak of Cerro Pedernal that O'Keeffe painted time and time again: "These places I have come to know intimately are sacred sites, sites of transformation, mysterious lands which have always housed creative human imaginings." The arid and semi-arid lands of New Mexico have been tended to, inhabited, and cherished by generations upon generations. Although Bertini's landscapes are usually unpeopled,



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04 Bertini at Abiquiú, photographed by Thomas Studer, 2017

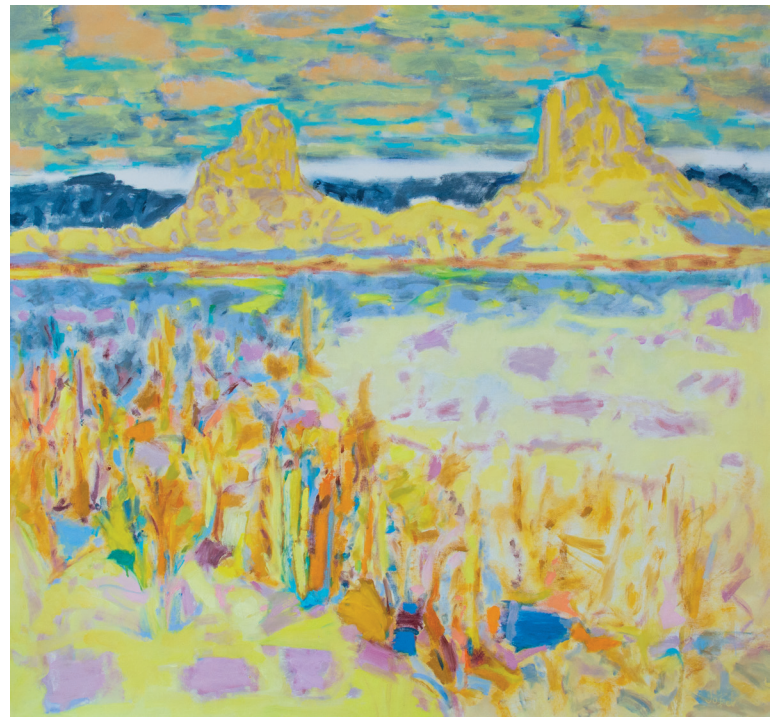
05 *Wind swimming Sierra Negra's upside-down country*, 2020, oil on French polyester canvas, 132 x 203.2 cm (diptych)

06 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, In a Niche Fifty Feet Above Present Cañon Bed*, 1873, Albumen silver print, 27.6 x 19.2 cm





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“ Although Bertini’s landscapes are usually unpeopled, they are infused with cultural knowledge and indications of land management practices, new and old ”

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they are infused with cultural knowledge and indications of land management practices, new and old. *Two Boys Dreaming*, 2021, speaks of the intersection between topography, mythology, and place-naming. *Fever Trees*, 2021, hints at the medicinal and hallucinogenic properties of desert plants that continue to be utilised by Indigenous populations with great ingenuity, whilst *Scar Tree* – “the love of man is a weed of the waste places” (Randolph Stow), 2021, makes reference to the practice of marking trees for way-or-water-finding purposes.

The theme of water saturates Bertini’s forthcoming solo exhibition. *The Water Tree of Doubtful Creek*, 2022, features a lone pine rising from the cleft of a dry valley, alluding to a secret spring. In *Breath of the last wild river*, 2022, Bertini takes the Gila River as her focus: the last undammed river in New Mexico. Canyon walls rendered in intense fuchsia frame pools of iridescent water that mimic a shimmering snatch of sky. Desert rivers vitally deliver unspoiled water to communities whilst representing ribbons of precious habitat that support diverse ecologies. Globally, desert waterways are critically endangered. Already ephemeral and seasonal in nature, they are experiencing dropping water levels as a result of climate change and increasingly complex human impacts. Whilst watercourses shrink, they are also diverted, dammed, and contained, disrupting the biologically embedded way-finding systems of migratory birds. Bertini explains that “desert birds, just as other animals and fish, often use watercourses as pathways on their migratory and breeding routes. Natural landforms are deeply

imprinted into their species’ psyche and sometimes even ‘skin mapped’ into their bodies.” *Wayfinding*, 2022, and *Wind swimming Sierra Negra’s upside-down country*, 2020, contemplate just this.

Whilst a great many works envision ecologies, many others draw on the immeasurable drama of the region’s complex and multifaceted geography, courting notions of the sublime and deep time. The first Western artists to venture into these landscapes were both captivated and unnerved by their seeming volatility. The landscape photographs by Timothy H. O’Sullivan from the official survey expeditions of 1867-69 and 1873-74 convey awe whilst portraying a fundamentally unforgiving environment. Geological formations, in particular, loom and lean toward the viewer. O’Sullivan’s work, of course, reflected the contemporary geological theory of catastrophism, which favoured the notion that the Earth’s features were the result of periodical upheavals rather than sustained and interacting processes. In sympathy with this perspective, Bertini corroborates that “the land lifts – as you travel north throughout New Mexico towards Colorado, you can feel and see this upthrust, this incredible elemental energy.” Standing atop a high point affords an endless vista in the cartographic sense, whilst exposed cross-sections present an altogether different perspective. Jo recalls trekking with the desert archaeologist Dr. Mike Smith,

07 *Saguaro Creek in Hollow Land*, 2021, oil on French polyester canvas, 91.44 x 91.44 cm

08 *Two Boys Dreaming*, 2021, iridescent pigment and oil on Belgian linen, 91.44 x 101.6 cm

09 Bertini in her Abiquiú studio, photographed by Thomas Studer, 2020









who described the layers of a cliff face, pointing out the strata concurrent with the emergence of plants, dinosaurs, and finally humans. *Basin of indifference*, 2020, is a peaceful rumination on the inconsequentiality of our existence. “Humankind’s presence in the geological record,” Bertini reflects, “is very small, very thin. Deserts have a huge depth of substance, and will continue to evolve and contribute to the planet long after our species has disappeared from the record.” To the uninitiated, this record can be disorienting. Despite its altitude, the sandy floor of nearby Chaco Canyon yields both Anasazi pottery sherds and debitage alongside fossilised bivalves – evidence of a late Cretaceous-era inland sea and extraordinary tectonic shifts.

In *Dryland Reef*, 2021, a symphony of sunset hues, Bertini intimates that the desert holds a memory of its marine past: “There can be an overwhelming sense that the dry, prickly cacti and low-lying shrubs resemble corals or sea plants . . . these remnant archaeological environments are just as beautiful real or imagined.” The permeation of pinks elsewhere throughout the series is as delightful as it is deliberate. Shades of coral, peach, fuchsia, and dusty rose, irradiated by flashes of aqua and ultramarine, enliven in 2021 works such as *Salt creep telling stories*, *Badlands – a deliberate forgetting*, and *Saguaro Creek in hollow loand*, with effervescence. Throughout her life’s work, Bertini has confronted and deconstructed predominately macho-





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capitalist perspectives of the land. She explains that the female experience and knowledge of wilderness have been overshadowed and undervalued for too long. Her employment of pink is an effort to “correct the imbalance.”

As I depart the village of Abiquiú, a forest fire is burning on the slopes of the Santa Fe National Forest to our south. A highly unusual event for the early spring, the air is thick with smoke and the early afternoon sun casts a golden light. The desert boom and bust cycle, so lovingly described by Bertini, is in jeopardy, with nine out of ten of the past year’s monsoons failing. Fires such as these are but a component of a broader system of interactions that stand to obliterate forests and grasslands. Studer, who contributed an original score and music video to the exhibition, explains *Deep in Land* as a chapter in an ongoing collaborative project exploring desertification in a dual sense. Whilst human activities transform drylands, the desert, too, enacts itself upon the human spirit. Jo describes the paintings in the *Deep in Land* exhibition as a love song to desert places, where “trees can talk, mountains can move, rivers bury secrets and grains of sand weave myth, knowledge, and culture from past to present.” ■

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## EXHIBITIONS

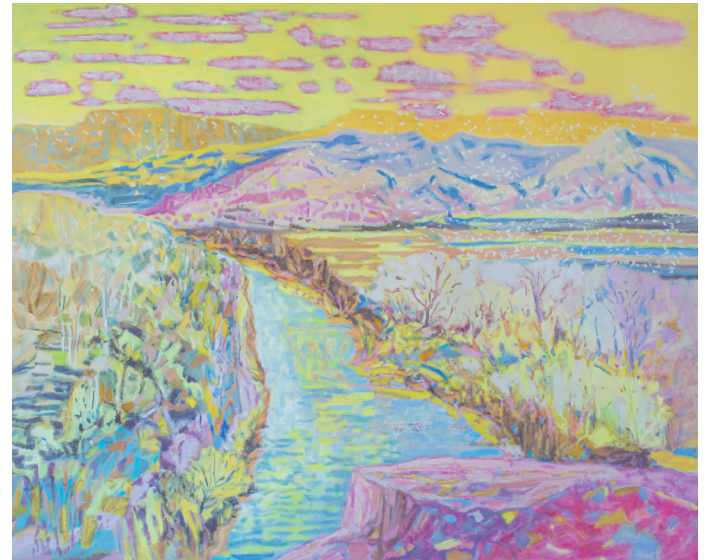
Jo Bertini: *Deep in Land*  
5 May – 14 July 2022

Marie Walsh Sharpe Gallery, Ent Center for the Arts Galleries of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Jo Bertini  
22 October – 12 November 2022  
Arthouse Gallery, Sydney



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10 *Breath of the last wild river*, 2022, iridescent pigment and oil on French polyester canvas, 203.2 × 203.2 cm

11 *Basin of indifference*, 2020, oil on French polyester canvas, 96.52 × 101.6 cm

12 *Scar Tree – “the love of man is a weed of the waste places” (Randolph Stow)*, 2021, iridescent pigment and oil on Belgian linen, 203.2 × 152.4 cm

13 *Wayfinding*, 2022, oil on French polyester canvas, 167.64 × 198.12 cm

Courtesy the artist, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and National Portrait Gallery, Canberra