

Text Only: Aggie's view: Foley Art Center presents photos by Aggie Villanueva

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She is known as the "Grandma Moses of the American Southwest," and the nickname fits as comfortably as a well-worn pair of jeans.

Aggie Villanueva is a self-taught artist, a grandmother and something of a folk hero to anyone who opts to pursue a new vocation later in life. A photographer and writer, she lives in a modest cabin in the New Mexico mountains and draws inspiration from the dazzling beauty of the Southwest.

She also has a commanding presence online in [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and various online galleries including her own (www.cielosrojos.com). The name is Spanish for "Red Skies." Through her art she embraces new technology, using Adobe Photoshop to manipulate her images and re-create the world as she sees it. The photographs are fantastic, even surreal.

Mobile-Baldwin residents will have an opportunity to see Villanueva's art firsthand when the Foley Art Center opens a solo exhibition this week.

The artist shoots with a Canon 5D using a variety of lenses, "but the wide angle has become my favorite," she says.

"I'm saving up right now for a higher-end wide angle. I invested in a 70-200mm L series zoom lens, but I hardly ever use it. I wouldn't dream of doing a shoot without my Singh-Ray 3G and 5G neutral density filters. With those babies, you don't have to shy away from midday shots where the sun washes out all color and the glare on earth and water is extreme. I also constantly use my Singh-Ray warming polarizer filter."

Villanueva, 55, says she "paints" with light and shadow.

"Obviously, I'm the saturation queen!" she says. "My deep-color saturations are part of my style, but I literally paint my photos with light and shadow to create the 3-D effects. I'm often asked if I hand-paint my photos, as is becoming an art form once again. But I don't. All my work is digital."

This is Villanueva's first Alabama show. She met Bonnie Blaylock, manager/director of the Foley Art Center, through the artist's mother, Pat Crumby. Mrs. Crumby has lived in the area for about 20 years.

"I know that people in the South and East are often enamored with the Southwest, so I wanted to see if my Southwestern artwork drew interest in her area," Villanueva says. "Bonnie and the staff at Foley Art Center accepted me immediately."

Although Villanueva is a late bloomer, she is no stranger to photography.

"There has always been a desire that compelled me to document everything to share with others. That's why I've also always written. I've had two historical novels published. But I didn't pick up a semi-professional SLR camera until spring 2007.

"I was shocked when the photos, although of superior technical quality, didn't look at all like I saw the scenes with my own eyes. I thought my expensive new camera was defective! I started playing around

with the photos in Photoshop until they looked like I had seen them in person. It was then that I understood why people have always accused me of living in a fairy tale."

The Foley exhibit will include 90 images in all, about half of those framed, matted and ready-to-hang in sizes from quite large to 5-by-7s, and in several media from metallic paper, Giclee on various fine art papers, including the etched texture of watercolor paper.

"I'm even bringing my most recent artwork with me," she says, "including 'Blue Moon,' a 20-by-30 on my favorite new medium -- aluminum. . . . As you can imagine, it simply glows.

"I met with some photographer friends a few full moons ago at the Ghost Ranch area, of Georgia O'Keeffe fame. I was privileged to witness the full moon rising on one side of a cabin, and the golds of the setting sun throw long shadows from the other side of the cabin.

"People who know I manipulate my photos for effect informed me I had the shadows leaning the wrong way. Not at all. That's the beauty of this photo. That's how it really looked! I manipulate, but I don't much change the actual photos. I was lucky to get a handful of other shots that evening that will be just as stunning when I get them finished."

The photographer says she was 9 when she had her first encounter with a camera.

"It was one of those Brownie cameras," she says. "I went through film so fast my parents couldn't afford any more. Can't say exactly what the first photo was, but I know it was in my own backyard, just as my photo art is today, and always has been."

The name Aggie comes from childhood when, as a sixth-grader, she and a friend didn't want to be caught and punished for note-passing. They used the names "Agnes" and "Myrtle" on every note.

"Mine stuck and became shortened to Aggie," says Villanueva.

She was born in Kansas City, Kan., an only child. Her mother worked two full-time jobs and finished her education simultaneously and Aggie went to live with her grandparents when she was 5. Her grandfather was a Southern Baptist preacher and a poet who inspired young Aggie to write poetry.

"Though I started taking snapshots very young, it wasn't until the spring of 2007 that I picked up an SLR digital camera and taught myself how to shoot professionally," she says. "Before that, I was a writer and crocheter. I had two novels published by Thomas Nelson, the first before I was 30."

In 1996 she moved to rural New Mexico's Madrid/Cerillos area without water, electricity or plumbing. Her light source was a kerosene lamp. There was no phone service. Five years later she moved to a tiny log cabin in the foothills of the San Pedro Wilderness Area, where she is snowed in for most of every winter.

Her workspace is tiny, she says. "Hardly room to move with my huge Canon Giclee printer that prints up to 24 inches wide and holds huge rolls of fine art papers and all the other office equipment. But it is very restful for me. I only have only one small window so that I'm not distracted by the beauty surrounding my cabin."

Like many photographers, Villanueva was inspired by the legendary Ansel Adams, "the one who took pictorial documentation to an art form," she says. "He made photography a new art genre. As to style though, I have to say it was discovering the painter Thomas Hart Benton when I accompanied my daughter's class to a field trip at the Nelson Art Gallery in Kansas City.

"The soft textural smoothness and the 3-D quality of his work astounded me," she recalls. "It was many decades before I'd discover that I was so drawn because that is also my style, though in a digital medium."

Villanueva admits it is difficult to describe her own work, but she says the "fairy-tale quality of my style brings out the enchanted aspect of the 'Land of Enchantment,' but by its very softness contrasts, and therefore accentuates, the beauty and brutality of the land."

Another trait Villanueva shares with her fellow artists is the influence of her surroundings, the stunning physical presence of the Southwest.

"The beauty of the mountains that surround us in all their richness and harshness also shapes our attitudes," she explains. "Living so close to the brutal cycle of nature teaches even the stupid or unwilling to be thankful just to be alive."

"But the wise among us gather so much more from our daily brushes with the Almighty. And that strength of character and resilience is evident, from the smallness of daily life to the horrors of loss, in our ability to rise each day and smile, learn and love those around us, and thank God for it. That's what I feel when I'm in my beloved mountains. I call it 'going to church.'"