

PAINTING A VARIED PICTURE OF ART IN NORTH CAROLINA

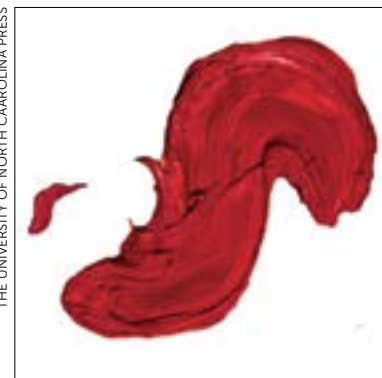
a review by Heather D. Wilson

Liza Roberts. *Art of the State: Celebrating the Visual Art of North Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

In the first line of her introduction to her wide-ranging examination of North Carolina art, Liza Roberts asks sincerely, though rather rhetorically, “What is North Carolina art?” It’s a question that she considers throughout the course of her 272-page survey, a book that provides a complex look at contemporary artists, collectors, galleries, organizations, and institutions, while also providing historical context for the state’s diverse, vivid, and essential arts community and its creative economy.

In well-researched prose, thoughtful interviews, and stunning photography by Lissa Gotwals, Roberts juxtaposes traditional and contemporary art, craft, and fine art, established institutions, and grassroots organizations, offering an examination of the art of the state that is as complicated and exciting as the population itself. The two hundred interviews she conducted paint a dynamic and multifaceted portrait of our statewide arts community.

In the book’s foreword, written by none other than the



Alo (polymer and dispersed pigment on aluminum, 54x40) by Donald Martiny

legendary former director of the North Carolina Museum of Art Lawrence J. (Larry) Wheeler, Wheeler posits that the air that North Carolinians breathe “for reasons natural and supernatural – infuses them with a love of making things” (ix). This is the type of phrase that we North Carolinians love, an idea that implies the uniqueness created by the shared experience of living in the landscape we call home. From Seagrove pottery to Appalachian basket weaving to the thriving contemporary art scenes throughout the state – there must be truth in it. Wheeler writes that Roberts “has engaged the magic of storytelling to create the first contemporary and comprehensive look at the rich diversity – of people, places, and materials – which characterizes the art of North Carolina” (ix). It should be mentioned that storytelling is another art that we North Carolinians love, and Roberts is a gifted practitioner of that art, one whose experience as a journalist and founder of *WALTER* magazine is evident on every page.

The arts are, as Roberts demonstrates throughout her book, one of our state’s greatest resources for education, culture, and economic development. Roberts organized her book geographically rather than alphabetically, so as we flip through the pages, we can go on our own mental road trip. Starting in the mountains and moving through the Piedmont and the Sandhills to the coast, we visit the studios of Mel Chin, the only visual artist in our state to receive a MacArthur genius

award; Cristina Córdova, who grew up in Puerto Rico, but has found her artistic home at Penland School of Craft; Juan Logan, whose work can be found at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History & Culture; Elizabeth Bradford, whose large-scale paintings are an expression of both love of the North Carolina landscape and a plea for conservation; Ben Owen III, whose father and grandfather were influential in the establishment of Seagrove’s modern pottery community; Thomas Sayre, whose iconic earth casts grace the North Carolina landscape; Beverly McIver, named one of the Top Ten in Painting in *Art-News*; and Burk Uzzle, one of America’s most celebrated photographers. Roberts’s interviews with each artist offer the reader an intimate glimpse into their work, their process, and what drives them to create.

Along the way, we learn about Lucy Morgan, the pioneering woman who founded Penland School of Craft in 1929 to empower local women; we remember the legacy of Black Mountain College and learn how it continues; we consider the line that now blurs between craft and fine art; and we learn about the arts institutions, galleries, and movements that created the thriving arts and cultural climate that we may take for granted. Roberts illuminates major themes in the art world that are being articulated at home in North Carolina, including diversity, inclusion, collaboration, experimentation with new materials, and social justice.



Bessie Coleman (pastel on archival sanded pastel paper, 24x26) by Richard Wilson

In her introductions to each geographical location, Roberts also clarifies another theme of the book: the way that the economy is tied to the arts in North Carolina and the continuing need for ongoing and sometimes radical government, corporate, and individual funding for the arts. Roberts reminds us that in 1956, the North Carolina Museum of Art first opened its doors as the only art museum built on a collection purchased by the state for the benefit of its citizens. She tells the story of Hugh McColl, the Bank of America CEO who built not only a thriving banking city in Charlotte, but a city that leads the state in its financial commitment to the arts. She highlights the visionary work of Stephen Hill in contributing to the arts, cultural, and financial successes of Kinston, as well as the creative placemaking of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park and Museum in Wilson that has sparked more than fifty million dollars in

investments in the community. While Roberts highlights the influential philanthropists of the past and those living now, the absence of writing about plans for our state’s arts and cultural economies for the future, particularly government support, should give all of us pause.

Roberts’s book is a joy to read. It draws the reader back time and time again to underline phrases and highlight quotes and inspires the wish to share aspects with others. It’s a book built to inspire and initiate action, as it is impossible not to read this book without wanting to get in your car and take a drive down I-40 across the state, stopping at galleries, museums, and studios along the way. Maybe that’s part of the author’s intention. We know that an arts community can only thrive with support, and reading Roberts’s inviting prose inspires readers to leave their homes and become an integral part of the thriving art community around them. ■