THE RULE OF THREE

Margarete Bagshaw

BY KATE NELSON

Mathematicians call it the golden ratio, the mean of Phidias, the divine proportion.

Consider it the foundation of a well-balanced composition, a calculation of thirds comprising a whole that has entranced artists and architects since Luca Pacioli's 1497 work *De Divina Proportione*, with illustrations by Leonardo da Vinci.

Balance by way of the number three has also defined Margarete Bagshaw, be it three women connected by nature and nurture, the three phases of a life spent avoiding and eventually embracing an artistic soul, or the three-dimensional depths that define her most recent works.

The focus of a new exhibition at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, *Margarete Bagshaw: Breaking the Rules* (February 12 through December 30, 2012), she completes an artistic troika begun by her grandmother, Pablita Velarde, and mother, Helen Hardin. A latecomer to the family legacy, Bagshaw has latched onto the groundbreaking examples they set for her by pushing against the boundaries of what constitutes Native art and who ought to do it. From the muted tones of her early pastels to the huge canvases, exuberant brushstrokes, and limitless palette of her paintings today, Bagshaw has emerged as a defiantly independent voice—one ready, finally, to thread her life's meaning into the golden ratio she so long resisted.

ONE

"I did not grow up with the intent of being an artist," Bagshaw says. "It was just something that was always in the house."

Houses, to be precise. Remarkable houses.

By the time Bagshaw was born in 1964, Pablita Velarde had already made her mark as a internationally acclaimed artist. Initially employing the "flat style" that she had learned from Tonita Peña and Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School, Velarde recorded the daily lives and traditional ceremonies of her native Santa Clara Pueblo. Her success required bucking a host of notions, including her choice of painting over pottery, the accepted medium for Santa Clara women.

"It was always a struggle for Pablita," said Shelby Tisdale, director of the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture and curator of *Breaking the Rules*. "She married a European-American man, moved away from the pueblo, painted ceremonial dances. Tribal leaders objected to that. She was such an independent woman. She didn't like being married. She just wanted to paint."

The rigid focus complicated her relationship with daughter Helen Hardin, whose early forays into art met with her mother's disdain. Critics have cited jealousy and Velarde's then-fondness for alcohol, but Bagshaw takes a gentler view. "My grandmother wanted my mother to do something that would make a living," she said. "She knew that this choice of profession was so hard, and she didn't know if my mother had it in her to do it, too."

In her own hard-knuckled way, Velarde pulled Hardin into the family business. In 1960, Bagshaw said, seventeen-year-old Hardin was in Arizona attending a workshop led by legendary artist and designer Lloyd Kiva New but couldn't afford to come home. "She called my grandmother for money, and my grandmother said, 'You know how to make money. Paint a painting and sell it.'"

But like her mother, Hardin needed to leave home for her art to grow. While staying with her remarried father in Bogotá, Colombia, she was invited to mount a one-woman show. All twenty-seven paintings sold in a market where no one knew her lineage. A mother to three-year-old Margarete and recovering from an abusive relationship, Hardin followed her art across a personal boundary.

Her style soon progressed beyond a resemblance to her mother's into intricately detailed acrylic depictions of a bifurcated life—one foot in the Native world, one foot outside, neither fully planted. She moved into Cubism, then added a spray technique she "borrowed" from Cochiti artist Joe Herrera (who Bagshaw says borrowed it from New Mexico Modernist Raymond Jonson, who borrowed

Opposite: Margarete Bagshaw, *Out There from In Here* (detail), 2006, oil on handmade gesso panel, triptych, 32 × 62 in. Private collection. Bagshaw describes this painting as "a dialogue study with transcendentalism."

Above: This photograph of Margarete Bagshaw in an Apache cradleboard borne on the back of her grandmother Pablita Velarde was taken by Jerry Rose of Albuquerque for Margarete Chase of Enchanted Mesa Trading Post. Chase sold postcards made from the photograph, along with original work by Pablita Velarde and Helen Hardin. Margarete Bagshaw was named after Chase.

it from Russian Expressionist Wassily Kandinsky). Katsinum more from Hardin's imagination than from Native tradition emerged. Mimbres symbolism threaded in, then out.

"She would work on three paintings at a time and put so much detail into four or five square inches," Bagshaw said. "It was all condensed."

As a child, Bagshaw floated between the two women's Albuquerque houses. "They were very good at completely losing themselves in painting but keeping one ear peeled. I sort of ran my own world, but I could take off a week and go to my mother's and grandmother's shows and meet all these people that are sort of the who's who of Indian art—wholesale dealers, traders from the old days, trading post owners. They were my mother's and grandmother's friends. And now they're icons. They're historic."

A 1977 clipping from the *Kansas City Times* shows a photograph of up-and-coming Native artists, a group that Bagshaw calls "the brat pack." Grouped around Hardin were Allan Houser, Fritz Scholder, Tony Da, Charles Loloma, and R.C. Gorman.

"To me, R.C. Gorman was just 'R.C.,' not the great and powerful R.C. of Taos," Bagshaw said. "If he needed a place to stay, he was OK with staying at my grandmother's house and eating beans for dinner. My grandmother was the great example of being humble. She opened huge doors for those who came after, but she still scrubbed her toilets. She baked for bake sales."

That level of humility faced even more challenges than those presented to her by the art world. When Bagshaw was sixteen, Hardin became concerned enough about Velarde's drinking that, with her daughter in tow, she staged an intervention. Reluctantly, Velarde gave sobriety a try.

"She was really happy about it afterwards," Bagshaw said. "She was much happier being sober. And her artwork blossomed."

Opposite: Margarete Bagshaw, *First Sale* (detail), 1990, pastel on paper, 16 × 20 in. This is one of Bagshaw's first three drawings; she donated it to the Helen Hardin Memorial Fund auction for the New Mexico Women's Foundation, where it became her first sale. Private collection.

Above: From left, Helen Hardin, Margarete Bagshaw, and Pablita Velarde, ca. 1965–66, at the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial. From a family photo album, photographer unknown.

A year later, Hardin was diagnosed with a fatal form of breast cancer. Velarde, heartbroken, managed to guide the family through her treatment, pulling Bagshaw even closer. In 1984, at age forty-one, Hardin died.

Partway through premed studies at the University of New Mexico, Bagshaw hit bottom. "I couldn't focus. I couldn't focus at school. I couldn't focus in my life. I was nineteen."

A third of the troika was gone, along with the first of three arcs in Bagshaw's emergence as an artist.

TWO

Age twenty-six. Married. Working mother of a little girl. Pregnant with a son. Unable to sleep, Bagshaw began to draw. "I didn't care what anyone thought," she said. "I was very quiet about it. But I connected to a time in my life when my mother was painting and life was going on as normal. My mother and grandmother painting in our households—that was a very normal way of life."

Wary of being labeled by genetics, she entered a few blind-juried shows. She connected to artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who became a "sort of from afar" mentor. "She brought me into some very important traveling museum shows. She always gave me the encouragement to stay connected, try different things, don't listen to people who tell me I can't do things, and to use my art not just for my career but for my health."

Bagshaw's work in pastels and pencil mimicked her mother's with a chalky, blended, rough imagery. By 1999, Blue Rain Gallery in Taos carried her work. Owner Leroy Garcia prodded her to try oil paint. "I was terrified," Bagshaw said. "I didn't know what to do with it. I started experimenting. I didn't want to take lessons because I didn't want to fall into anyone's influence other than what came naturally."

The oils led her deeper into cubism with an air of three-dimensionality. Her production gained speed, and her paintings found a place in group exhibitions ranging from the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis to galleries in Dallas, Aspen, and Palm Springs.

Even as she passed such mileposts of success, the tether to family tugged, and she would take her canvases to Velarde for guidance. "She didn't get the abstract element, but she liked the color. It was important to me that she felt included in that part of my life. We'd go to other art shows together, and she would turn into the biggest art critic: 'I don't know why people have to paint ugly stuff like that.' She was just plain old grandma a lot of the time."

Despite that connection to an exemplar of Native art, Bagshaw declines to call herself a Native artist. In part, she bristles at the larger art world's condescension to Native art in general and to Native art by women in particular. In larger part, she sees the distance between the pueblo that defined her grandmother and the one she only visited. "I feel very connected to my Native spirituality, but also to a universal spirituality that's, in my mind, much larger. I answer to one God, but the spirits I talk to the most are my mother and grandmother."

Around 2003, Dan McGuinness, a musician who ran a charter yacht business in the Virgin Islands, was visiting Santa Fe when he first saw Bagshaw's work. "What hooked me in was the multicompositional aspect. It's almost a gallery trick. It wasn't just a single overall composition." McGuinness bought a couple of pieces right away, and soon added another. Eventually, their marriages already crumbling, the two met and began a long-distance friendship that soon turned into romance.

In January 2006, Velarde died, leaving her granddaughter in charge of her estate. By the next fall, Bagshaw's second arc was completed. "I needed to get out of the desert. I needed to get out of New Mexico and out of the situation of being 'the granddaughter.' So I went to St. Thomas. Nobody knew who my family was. Nobody knew the importance of art in my life. I was just another chick who had moved to the island."

THREE

In videos posted on Golden Dawn Gallery's website, the Virgin Islands come to life in the happy sounds of a calypso and the rich colors of the tropics. McGuinness made the videos in a music and film production studio that he, Bagshaw, and a local partner built on St. Thomas. For three years, tucked inside its creative foment, Bagshaw absorbed her surroundings, incorporated their colors, expanded the size of her canvases, "burned out" briefly on painting, and, in a seeming bow to her heritage, began working with clay.

The pottery alternated Mimbres influences with those of Mondrian and Kandinsky—artists whose innovations also appear in her paintings. Back in Santa Fe, the clay project confused some of her patrons, but the evolution was unstoppable. Watching the Virgin Islands sunrise one morning, Bagshaw felt a spiritual summons from Velarde, whose Tewa name, Tse Tsan, means "Golden Dawn."

"That was the signal from my grandmother that I needed to get back to New Mexico." It was time, she said, to open her own gallery, to "burst out of my limitations," and to weave herself into her family's story.

McGuinness, who manages the gallery at 201 Galisteo Street in Santa Fe, had watched as Bagshaw's powerful intuition—"something that's almost spooky and uncomfortable"—deepened into a painterly dialogue with her mother and her grandmother. "Pablita was more interested in the image, with recording the event," he said. "Helen was interested in the event, but also with the spiritual side of the event. Margarete doesn't care about the event or the image at all. It's purely the spiritual place. It's not about what it looks like but what she feels when she's doing it."

The self-knowledge and confidence it took to accomplish that represented Bagshaw's arrival on a third plane of her life. "I had become another person in St. Thomas and I was able to feel OK about who I am and what I was," she said. "I could see that my grandmother was who she was, my mother was who she was. We're individual women, but there's something special and sacred about

Opposite: Margarete Bagshaw, *My World Is Not Flat* (detail), 2011, oil on Belgian linen, 54 × 84 in. Private collection.

Above: Margarete Bagshaw (left) and her mother Helen Hardin at the Santa Fe Indian Market in 1981, when Bagshaw was sixteen. Photograph by Cradoc Bagshaw. Bagshaw sports a blue ribbon won for best in contemporary native apparel. She recalls, "It was the first clothing contest and there were only about five or ten of us . . .; everyone got a prize."

Opposite: Margarete Bagshaw, *Encore In Red* (detail) 2010, oil on linen, 30 × 36 in. Private collection.

Above: Margarete Bagshaw. Photograph by Dan McGuinness, 2010.

how we're connected together. I had to feel safe as my own person to realize that. My mission in coming back was to put to work everything that my grandmother and mother put together in their lives, fought for, and worked hard for, and make it mean something."

The gallery serves as the estate representative for Velarde's and Hardin's work but also as Bagshaw's studio—one spacious enough to accommodate canvases as big as 10 feet wide, with at least ten in progress at any one time. Amid two floors of paintings by all three women, she mixes their essence into her latest work, the Mother Line series. Stylized versions of the women emerge from her geometry, along with echoes of Velarde's headdresses and Hardin's katsinum.

In *Margarete Bagshaw: Breaking the Rules*, the Mother Line series will occupy the last of three sections. The first will be devoted to Bagshaw's early pastel work, the second to her oil paintings. There, visitors will see her first explorations of mathematical concepts like the golden ratio and the Fibonacci Sequence—the naturally occurring spirals appearing in everything from rams' horns to the Milky Way. In the earliest versions, she was simply letting the painting declare its direction. Only later did she discover that mathematicians had tracked and plotted those forms for centuries. "It's very spiritual, a perfectly harmoniously balanced composition," Bagshaw said. "When you look at Stonehenge, there's a proportion of spiritual balance that's plotted out very purposefully. There's an ancient reason for doing something that's still very contemporary."

Bagshaw and McGuinness, who married in 2010, will incorporate his videos of her working into the exhibition, along with the first painting each woman produced. Computer interactives will invite visitors to further explore their lives and art. The pair also plans to self-publish three books about the women in this family. The first 100 boxed sets of books will include an 8-by-10-inch original painting by Bagshaw.

The pace she'll need to keep to mount an exhibition while writing an autobiography and producing the 100 paintings may be daunting, but nothing new. "What's crazy," McGuinness said, "is that she works on all these paintings at the same time with all the paints on her desk at the same time. And it's not just the color palette that changes from painting to painting, but the design elements. It's almost like the old guy in the park playing chess with twenty people. He's moving from table to table, doesn't miss a beat. He always knows what's going on with the next table."

In *Timeless Spiritual Balance*, Caribbean blues and yellows swirl into the hint of katsina faces, while images of an abacus and computer chips haunt the edges. In *My World Is Not Flat*, the same tones take on the desert's sun-bleached hues, achieved only after layer upon layer of color and pattern were built onto the canvas. "I really have to go to a bizarre place inside my head to do that," Bagshaw said. "I'm not outside of my painting, I'm in it. It sounds esoteric, and I realize that. I see the hidden corners."

By seeding *Breaking the Rules* with experiential elements, she hopes to help visitors see those corners as well and, in doing so, connect their emotions to the artwork. "I always like to think of my painting hanging in someone's personal space, and they're standing in front of it at the end of the day with a glass of wine and getting lost, pouring out their day to the painting. I want the museum experience to affect somebody the same way. They can look at the artwork and see that it's beautiful. But I want them to feel that each of us—my grandmother, my mother, and me—is as independent of one another as we are connected. My work carries the same spirit, but it's so incredibly different from what they did."

Is that effect the product of nature or nurture? "Both, all the time," she answered, with the conviction of a woman who is both connected and free. ■

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