

Double life

Artist works as both a photographer and a painter

By MICHAEL MORE
For the Journal

Soon after Carola Clift won the New Mexico Council on Photography's 2003 Willard Van Dyke award, her explosive color paintings began to appear in Santa Fe and New York, and critics began to comment that few in the art world had created work in both media that was so successful on its own terms, yet so radically different in appearance.

Clift's best pictures are small stars. Her crystalline black and white prints glow with the power that only a darkroom master can command. Her abstract watercolors and acrylics burst with nuanced colors that evoke Cezanne. Her expressive brushwork recalls *les fauves*, the audacious "wild beasts" associated with Matisse. Clift's prints and canvasses radiate an uncommon energy that seems their common denominator. They also seem involved in some mysterious reciprocal exchange. It's as though they are alive and having a really good time. There is a lurking sense, too, that if the viewer cares enough to investigate — to contemplate them quietly — their secret might disclose itself.

Clift, a Santa Fe native, graduated from the University of California, San Diego, in 1997 and went on to study law at UCLA. Though engaged by the analytically demanding curriculum, she says that she realized she had to make a choice. She settled on art and photography and returned to Santa Fe.

Clift's Web site, www.carolacraft.com, offers a succinct statement of her ambition: "Music is composed of notes, sounds, rhythms. But the music itself — that which really affects us — is not contained in any one note, or even in the sum of these elements. It lives among them and through them."

Beginning tonight at photo-eye Gallery, visitors will get a chance to see one of the most intriguing exhibitions of this or any year. "Inter Views: Pictures in Paint and Silver" extends the idea of vivacious exchange between pictures.

Three pictures that will be hung together offer subtleties that newspaper reproduction can't capture, but which, by themselves, would justify a visit to the gallery.

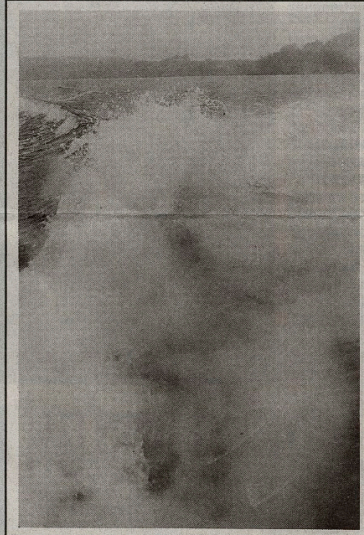
The gorgeous watercolor on the left, "26 May 2004, Kauai," suggests the ocean and the sky. The picture plane appears slightly fractured by the white cracks separating the chiseled patches of blue, violet and green pigment; they might delineate the foamy crests of waves. The delicate smudge of rose at its center seems almost an afterthought, yet it's the key to the painting, imposing calm in the center of chaos. It brings up all the associations of the Greek word "omphalos" — "the navel" at the center of the universe.

As our eyes move to the central panel, we see a photograph, "A Wake, 2003," taken just off the Maine coast. People have mistaken the mist for clouds before spotting the coastline at the top. The vertical composition is at once thrashing and relaxed. At the center, a barely visible dark gray



▲ Carola Clift's watercolor "26 May 2004, Kauai," suggests the ocean and the sky.

► The vertical composition of Carola Clift's "A Wake, 2003" is at once thrashing and relaxed.



◀ "Planks and Plastic" is a muscular record of grungy debris that might have washed up on some beach.

If you go

WHAT: "Inter Views: Pictures in Paint and Silver," an exhibition of photographs and paintings by Carola Clift

WHEN: Opening reception 5-7 p.m. tonight, runs through June 25

WHERE: photo-eye Gallery, 370 Garcia St., 988-5159

REVIEW

dot becomes the still stabilizing point of a churning world.

The third panel photograph differs more from "A Wake" than the middle one differs from the painting. "Planks with Plastic" is a muscular record of grungy debris that might have washed up on some beach. The more we look at this ball of black plastic and long flat board that forms its stem, the more we hear its

abstract music. If, as the painter Robert Irwin put it, "seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees," this picture, anchored by a dark triangular form in the center of its slimy knot, transcends its rank subject, driving home the realization of what an exceptional photographer Clift, at 30, has become.

More remarkable still is that each of these three pictures offers allusions to adjacent ones, secrets brought to light by comparison. As the horizon line in

blue watercolor aligns with the one in "A Wake," we see that both pictures reflect the sea's bright surface, peer into the depths below, and impart a sense of the salty air above.

A human figure seems to hover in the cloud-like billowing foam at the left of "A Wake," while another, like a scarecrow in repose, arises from the debris on the right.

As we step back and look at all three together, we start to sense a certain emotional quality to

each that is enhanced by the presence of the others. These are Clift's stars, her constellations, the product of a single eye. It's as though, in the manner of a gifted software engineer, she has found a way to apply her patented code across platforms. This creates the chance for multiple modes of seeing, any of which are available to a viewer. By looking closely, Clift contends, we can create our own constellations according to our own susceptibilities.