

In Her Garden: A Conversation with Bettie Ward

CHRISTOPHER KARR

JANUARY 9, 2026



Bettie Ward, "Swoon and Coo," 2025, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 40 x 40 inches. Image courtesy of Ruiz-Healy Art, San Antonio / New York City

The first time I encountered Bettie Ward's artwork was at Ruiz-Healy Art's 2025 exhibition *Vast and Varied: Texan Women Painters II*. Her painting, *Swoon and Coo*, struck me as an environment that is part garden and part imagination. Three birds emerge from dense fields of different flowers beneath a commanding, gold sun. I remember thinking, "Who is Bettie Ward, and how does she make objects in tandem feel so alive?"

Ward (b. 1947) was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, and has lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, since 2010. She earned a BFA from the San Antonio Art Institute in 1991 and works as a full-time artist, drawing deeply from her cowgirl upbringing and her receptive relationship

to objects, animals, and the natural world. Her paintings feel intuitive and deliberate, guided by memory, instinct, and a kind of quiet devotion to experiencing life as it comes over a strict necessity to control.

LewAllen Galleries in Santa Fe, which represents Ward, connected us after I reached out. I got to meet Ward in person during her late November visit to San Antonio. I learned quickly that Ward's whimsical artwork is as free-spirited as she is. We spoke about her life, her art, and the quiet magic that threads through her career. The interview below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Christopher Karr (CK): You have lived in Texas and New Mexico. Do you ever feel that the influences of each state compete in your work? What about Texas and New Mexico inspires you?

Bettie Ward (BW): There's nothing about the two states that competes in my work. The horizon line is what's important about Texas. I've often felt very close to that sense of horizontal-ness. I grew up in Texas. I remember looking out my window as a child and seeing the horizon line that clearly separates the sky and the earth; to me, that was profound.

In New Mexico, the quality of the light is extremely different. In Texas, light is a soft hue. But in New Mexico, light is crisp and lively. Also, I'm constantly looking at mountains. I have a fabulous view of the Sangre de Cristo [Blood of Christ] Mountain range from my house. When the sunset comes, there's this intense, bloody color. On the mountains themselves, there's these gorgeous, tall Aspen trees. And when it's fall, Aspen trees turn a bright yellow. There's this yellow over the mountains that seems to go on for miles and miles. It's beautiful.

Santa Fe is called the high desert. My house's altitude is at 7,000 feet. There's a different amount of oxygen that you receive with each breath compared to Texas.

CK: Tell me more about your work during the 1970s with the Akimel O'odham or Pima, a Native American community living along the Gila River in Arizona.

BW: I did embroidery. I learned how to weave and do every kind of stitch. The majority of the work that I was doing was needlepoint. I took some courses with the Pima on how to wash, carve, and spin wool. I was really interested in yarn and fiber. We washed yarn with yucca roots and spun with all sorts of spinning devices, including traditional ones. We also made

baskets with black devil's claw. I started making more abstract and narrative paintings after 2010 when I moved from San Antonio to Santa Fe. A lot of it is influenced by Native Americans, and they're really important to me.

CK: You went to school for art, and then took a break after. Can you tell me why?

BW: I started painting at Trinity University in the 1960s. Afterwards, I had to take a break from artmaking since I needed to make a living. I worked as a substitute teacher all over Alamo Heights. I got a job as the head art teacher at Alamo Heights High School for a year. By then, I'd begun to sell my work. For that reason, I didn't have to continue teaching, but I loved my students.

I marketed my artwork at the Alamo Heights H-E-B. I'd find women who were wearing colorful blouses. I'd start talking to them and would invite them to my studio. I had a studio on Austin Highway. I was raised in affluence, and went to not having much money at all. I needed to sell my artwork to raise my kids. I have three boys that I raised by myself.



CK: One of your recent artworks, *Cooing and Surprisingly Real*, features this extravagant white buck. What does the white buck represent to you?

BW: Things don't represent stuff to me. I can't be analytical about things like that. I get feelings about things and I search for pictures online. I was looking for photos of deer and I stumbled upon photos of a pure white albino deer with pink eyes. The idea of albino deer is perfect for my work. They're so magical. Maybe I will see a real one someday. I sure hope so.

CK: On that note, there's a sense of freedom in your work.

BW: I think everything I make is a self-portrait. Each painting is individualistic.



Bettie Ward, "My Cowboy Noble and Good," 2025, oil on gold leaf canvas, 87 x 55 inches. Image Courtesy of LewAllen Galleries, Santa Fe

CK: I get the feeling that *My Cowboy Noble and Good* is a tribute artwork. Who does this artwork honor?

BW: That artwork is not a tribute to any one person. It's a tribute to my life on the ranch. I grew up with cowboys and going to the rodeo. My father was a cowboy, and I have pictures of him on horses.



Bettie Ward, "Air," 2024, oil on canvas, 78 1/2 x 65 1/2 inches. Image Courtesy of LewAllen Galleries, Santa Fe

CK: Talk about your abstract paintings. How is your thought process different with these compared to your more representational artworks?

BW: Making abstract paintings is a feeling unlike any other. I feel like I'm in a garden and, atmospherically, the wind has picked up flowers and leaves and they're moving all around me.

That's the sensation that I get when I create an abstract painting. There's this brightness to it. I don't make dark artwork. My works are bright and cheerful.

CK: What's next for you?

BW: I'm really excited to have an upcoming book that's expected to come out in March or April 2026 with Trinity University Press. It is going to be called Bettie Ward: For Real, and its cover is going to be hot pink. We are toward the end of getting it done. It's going to have six chapters that categorize the different types of artwork that I do.