

# The Playful Dead

Local artist Emma Gardner gives life to her coquettish cadavers  
By Penelope Bass

## Film

Capitalism: A Love Story

## Beat

NAU Theatre presents 'Vanities'

## Music

The Beatles' remasters: 'Help!', 'Revolver', 'Rubber Soul'





Lookin' good ladies: Emma Gardner's new "Mexican Calendar Girls," which are untitled for the moment, will each be assigned a month for Gardner's own calendar. Photos by Ryan Heinsius.

Of all the adjectives that could be used to describe a skeleton—creepy, gruesome, terrifying—a word that probably does not jump to mind is “sexy.” But that is where Emma Gardner sees things a little differently. Her signature skeletons are not only sexy but playful, glamorous and always fashionably attired. “I just had fun playing around with the idea of skeletons, and then moved on to skeleton pin-ups, which is kind of like playing with the female image—‘skin is in, sex sells!’” says Gardner. “But yet, their attitude is what makes them so attractive, it’s not just their flesh. So it’s just toying with those ideas. The skeleton as the core of who we are I think is cool as an image.”





# The Playful Dead

Local artist Emma Gardner gives life to her coquettish cadavers

By Penelope Bass





Back in the day: Gardner, happily at work in her studio, offers a glimpse of the Barbie Goddess series. Photo by Jill Torrance.

In a new series of paintings, "Mexican Calendar Girls," Gardner has recreated the images from vintage Mexican calendars from the 1930s and '40s, replacing the original models with her saucy skeletons. The paintings represent a culmination of what locals have come to love about Gardner's work—the vibrant colors, the playful interpretations of Mexican culture, the bony babes. It's a style she has explored while living in the Southwest for more than a decade after moving to Flagstaff from the East Coast.

"It's definitely led me toward things with a lot of Mexican flavor to them, a lot of Southwest/Mexican flair. The first thing that got me interested was the Day of the Dead (celebrations)," says Gardner. "I was looking at a whole bunch of José Posada prints, and the imagery and the bicycles and the funny cartoons—it just seemed really fun. So I kind of recreated some of his images into color. And they were just fun, vibrant images. You can kind of do things with skeletons that you can't really do with people, as far as political humor and stuff. So there is a little levity to them."

Regardless of the subject being depicted, it's clear that Gardner has fun with her artwork. Another memorable series featured Barbie dolls in the roles of famous saints and goddesses.

"I use a lot of religious imagery and symbolism because I'm interested in human culture and the things those images evoke for us," says Gardner. "And that's probably why I cling to the skeletons so much, because it is such an archaic symbol, it evokes so many things for us on a basic level. I think that's one of the reasons that after doing the

traditional saint images, I was doing the Barbie goddesses. She's such a current iconic image to us, even though no one really thinks of her as religious. So it's interesting to put her in that different context."

There is Barbie as the Hindu goddess Kali, complete with a necklace of severed heads, an angelic-looking Barbie Mary, and the peaceful Hindu muse Saraswati Barbie. "One person said to me once, 'Don't you think that Saraswati is sacrilegious?' I think some people might feel like it is for them. But honestly, I think the Dalai Lama would laugh at it. I think he would see the comparison and not think of it in a negative way," Gardner says. "But I guess it all depends how much you hate Barbie. I don't intend for it to be sacrilegious at all. My intention is just to make us think about the different images that empower our lives."

Much of Gardner's artistic experimentation has involved working with old or classic images to create something that offers a new perspective on the subject. "A lot of the work I do is appropriate images that I find somewhere else and then I reference, which people have done throughout history, it's not like it's a new thing," she says. "But some people have the attitude that, 'You just copy stuff.' But even if you're doing something abstract, it's still coming from somewhere. So I think reexamining old ideas and seeing how they fit into our life today is a main theme throughout my artwork. And to make people think, and to be provocative in the presentation ... that is the reason I work with those images. I think they evoke something for people."



"Their attitude is what makes them so attractive, it's not just their flesh. So it's just toying with those ideas. The skeleton as the core of who we are I think is cool as an image."



It could be the reason that her skeleton paintings have been so popular. The sultry, smiling skeletons offer a greatly different perspective on—and even poke fun at—death itself. Imagery that would typically be somber and muted is instead vibrant with color and playfully alive.

"I just think the images are so much fun to paint and play with," says Gardner. "And since they are so colorful and fun and alive and vibrant, I think including the skeletons—because we usually associate them with death ... that contrast makes them more dynamic."

And though every piece could be examined for the multi-layered symbolism behind it, Gardner's inspiration for the "Mexican Calendar Girls" came from the simple joy of the subject. "I think their outfits are so cute, and they're always really happy."

Gardner's skeleton-ized calendar girls will be transformed into a brand new calendar as well. She has the first six paintings done and is currently working on the remaining

six. She hopes to have them finished and on display at her deliciously aromatic venue of choice, MartAnne's Burrito Palace, for the November Art Walk.

Check out "Mexican Calendar Girls" at MartAnne's, 10 N. San Francisco, and join Emma Gardner there for a Day of the Dead celebration on Fri, Nov. 6. Also on First Friday, Café Ole, 119 S. San Francisco, will have an unveiling party for the new mural Gardner painted on the façade of the restaurant. For more info, call 774-8272 (Café Ole), 773-4701 (MartAnne's) or visit [www.emmagardner.com](http://www.emmagardner.com).