

returning to the land

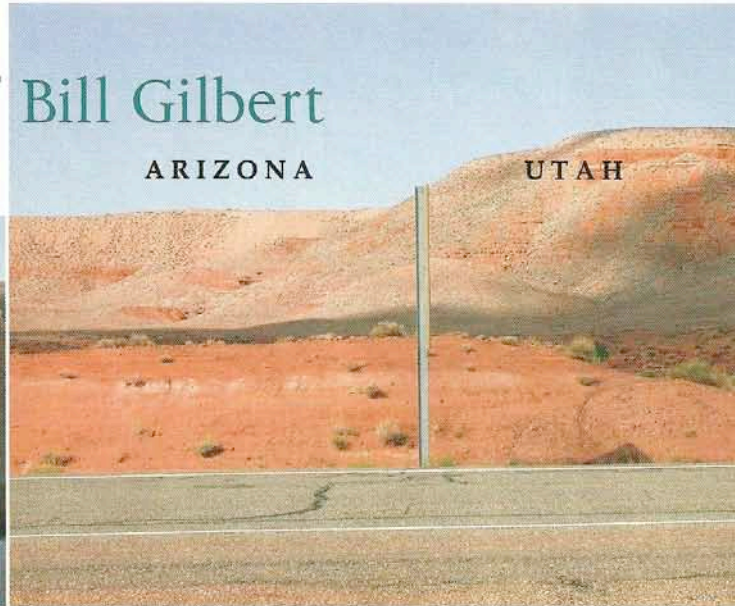
the art of Bill Gilbert

ARIZONA

UTAH



PORTRAIT BY GRANT DAVIS; ALL IMAGES COURTESY BILL GILBERT



Bill Gilbert carefully explodes in front of me. Like that beautiful firefighter's paradox, the controlled burn, the 55-year-old artist is methodical and disciplined—and on fire. As an 18-year professor of ceramics at the University of New Mexico, Gilbert is accustomed to heat. But right now, he's consumed with passion for Land Arts of the American West. More precisely, he's exploding with enthusiasm for the program of the same name, which he initiated six years ago—one that has grown from a studio art course into a social experiment, from a teaching gig into a personal provocation for his own work, and from making art into an unraveling of its secrets.

Gilbert's studio, on a flat expanse below wind-sculpted rocks near Santa Fe, is riddled with blackened pots, with dirt, with maps. Outside, a plastic barrel is ready to guzzle rainwater off the roof and a basketball hoop waits for the lanky six-foot-three-inch professor-artist to take a break. Inside, Gilbert's controlled burn is a verbal run-on tangle of history. Acoma pottery. John Wesley Powell. American landscape scholar J.B. "Brinck" Jackson. The tenuous nexus of earth and water. Government manipulation of civilian GPS units. All of this provides air and fuel for the fire Gilbert breathes from his belly when he talks about his program, his students, his latest work. "I was supposed to teach ceramics, but didn't really consider myself a ceramist, so I was always trying to play in somebody else's sandbox," he says. The art department at the time was less specialized than it is today, and Gilbert found welcome collaborators across several disciplines. Eventually, that led him to work with Acoma potter Mary Lewis Garcia. At the time, Gilbert's work was mostly what critics were calling environmental art. "I wasn't sure what the hell that meant," Gilbert says, "but I knew I was making art about this land, this place. And I knew that the Pueblo potters—well, everything they do is tied to the region and to a specific cosmology."

Soon, in Mata Ortiz, Mexico, Gilbert found Juan Quezaco, and pottery being created by hand using simple materials. "It was a completely different way of looking at contemporary art—it blew all arbitrary art boundaries away for me." Unfortunately, Gilbert's peers in academia saw his passion as little more than nostalgia for craft. But powerhouse philanthropist Patrick Lannan found Gilbert's odd inspirations intriguing enough to help get Land Arts of the American West off the ground in 2000. The idea, Gilbert explains, is to combine the experiences of ancient and modern, of minority and dominant cultures, and of land and art. Students, along with Gilbert



ARTISTS & EXHIBITIONS



Clockwise from top left: Bill Gilbert on the road; *MindLines: Arizona-Utah*, diptych, inkjet print, 8 x 22"; *Armload of Semis, Peanuts Underfoot*, wood-fired ceramic vessel, 13 x 12"; *For John Wesley Powell, Attempts to Walk the Grid, 200 Steps on a Side, Rozel Point*, inkjet print, 15 x 15"; *There are Days when it Comes in Waves*, wood-fired ceramic vessel, 15 x 14"

and the program's codirector, University of Texas architecture professor Chris Taylor, travel all over the West visiting sites ranging from archaeological digs to cutting-edge science laboratories and massive contemporary art installations. "We go to Chaco Canyon one day and to James Turrell's Roden Crater the next," Gilbert says. "We're out for 50 days each fall, and it's very intense." But as rigorous as the program is, it pulls everyone out of the academic bubble, gets dirt on their hands, and forces them to rethink how they look at the environment and the art that comes from it. "There's a continuum," Gilbert explains. "Instead of three hours every few days, we're doing something completely different. We're nomadic as hell, but we're in it every moment."

Gilbert is in it every bit as much as his students are. His latest work borrows from 19th-century explorer John Wesley Powell's urgings that the American West be developed in relation to watersheds rather than the standard square grids of property. "The grid originated in Egypt," Gilbert says, "but it seems to appear wherever a central authority has a need to quantify land. This is about dividing space, not describing land—J.B. Jackson pointed that out." Reinterpreting the grid has led to a powerful and multidimensional body of new work. At each destination of the program, Gilbert walks straight out from camp, 200 paces due north, then turns to the east and walks another 200 paces. He continues the process until he's approximated a square, each corner delineated with the click of a GPS unit. Back in the studio, Gilbert overlays his path onto 15-inch-square blowups of U.S. Geological Survey maps: a way of using his own body to impose a grid on the land. Accompanying each work is a diary of what Gilbert experienced during his walks. The result is graphically powerful and emotionally resonant: concentric ripples that move through politics, economics, and personal meaning. *Attempts to Walk the Grid: 200 Steps on a Side* will be part of *LandMinds*, a survey exhibition of UNM's Land Arts program, opening April 22 at Santa Fe's Center for Contemporary Arts.

Although absorbed with the spell of the land in all its forms, Gilbert never surrenders the physical. Lately, he's been firing pots in a massive wood-burning Anagama kiln. "It demands at least 15 people, working in shifts to fire the kiln for five or six days continuously—it's the kind of physical thing that most of us just don't have contact with anymore," he says. "Plus, it's a chance to play with fire." —Zane Fischer **SF**

