

ABQJournal Online » Growin' Them Big

One organization claims it's the biggest pumpkin ever grown in New Mexico. Displayed with other gargantuan squashes, it's big and beautiful. But is it art?

That's among the questions raised by a traveling display – a “mobile still life” – now touring around Santa Fe.

“It's a beautiful tableau,” says Matthew Chase-Daniel of Axle Contemporary, the art gallery in a van that has made mobile exhibitions its stock in trade.

The big fruits that are being shown by Axle (without the van) at various roadside stops around town were grown by an actual artist, Santa Fe glassblower Jannine Cabossel.

She got into producing big edible things about four years ago, after seeing the PBS documentary “Lords of the Gourd” about the subculture of giant pumpkin growers.

“I said, ‘What a bunch of nuts,’ ” Cabossel recalled. “The next year, I became one.”

Earlier this month, she hauled her latest crop to Colorado Springs for a “weigh-off” run by the Giant Pumpkin Commonwealth, an official governing body.

Her pumpkin “Mad Max” came in at 448 pounds, the largest ever recorded by the GPC for a New Mexico grower, she said. She also set state records with “Kryptonite,” her 340-pound green winter squash, and “King Zuc II,” a marrow squash that was weighed at 64 pounds.

She also grew an 80-inch-long gourd, “Jake the Snake,” but Jake was a half-inch short of the New Mexico record in his category.

So does Cabossel believe her giant pumpkins, arranged by the Axle Contemporary folks on a utility trailer that serves as a sculpture pedestal, are works of art?

She said the Axle folks like to challenge standard ideas about art and saw possibilities in her gourds.

“They're arranged like a still life, maybe like Vermeer would paint, but extremely large,” she said.

Axle Contemporary has produced a statement under the headline “What is art?” for promoting the big squashes.

If you go

See Jannine Cabossel's giant pumpkins displayed as art at these locations in Santa Fe:

Today: Baca Street Studios, 926 Baca St.

Saturday: 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Paseo de Peralta at the Santa Fe Farmers Market. Sunday: Canyon Road.

Monday: La Montanita Co-op, Solana Center on Alameda St.

Tuesday: Quick Fix Auto Glass, corner of St. Francis and Cordova.

Wednesday: Old Las Vegas Highway, at the roadside market near the Sunrise Store.

Friday, Nov. 4: Baca Street Studios.



Jannine Cabossel of Santa Fe shows off one of her record-setting squashes, a 64-pounder named “King Zuc II,” at a recent “weigh-off” in Colorado Springs. (courtesy of jannine cabossel)

It says in part, “Definitions of art can be malleable and fluid, but within all art is an element of expansive reach, a need for expression. We are pleased to have the opportunity to exhibit this vegetable art by Jannine Cabossel, and to highlight the ‘culture’ in ‘agriculture.’ ”

Baby those giants

Art or merely trophy food, Cabossel clearly enjoys growing her super-sized crops.

“You really do have to baby them to get them this big,” she said. “You have to fertilize them a lot. They’re big eaters.”

She’s quick to note that her New Mexico-record pumpkin Mad Max is “puny” by world standards. A Canadian grower this year grew a pumpkin that weighed 1,818 pounds.

But she’s proud of her smaller giants. She said there are only 92-95 growing days in New Mexico, compared to other parts of the continent where things can grow outdoors for about 120 days. Northern latitudes also have many more hours of sunlight during the day.

“And our dirt is really crummy,” she added. Cabossel heavily amends the soil at her place east of town off Old Las Vegas Highway, with things like horse manure, dried molasses and gypsum.

She grows organically, feeding her giants with fish emulsion and seaweed. And she handpicks the squash bugs off her plants.

The pumpkin takes 15 gallons a day of water – less than a shower, Cabossel said – through a drip system, and it can put on 15-20 pounds daily in July or August.

“You go out and look at it in the morning and come back after work and look at the pumpkin and say, ‘Wow, it looks bigger,’ ” she said. “You get a tape measure, and it’s grown two inches.”

“I’m thinking of teaching a class on this,” she said. “I’d really like to turn other people on to it.” Would-be students for now are invited to check out her blog at giantveggiegardener.com.

So what happens to a giant pumpkin after it’s been weighed and, in the case of Mad Max and his gourd siblings, displayed as art?

Cabossel said she has “a giant pumpkin bash.”

In November, she invites people over and they take turns going after the giant orange things with axes. “The pumpkins can be 10 inches thick. Everyone gets a whack.”

Cabossel said “all her cook friends” take home big pieces. “Last year’s pumpkin was 421 pounds, and I thought I’d never give it all away. I gave it away in an hour.”

And anyone who thinks enormous pumpkins aren’t good food hasn’t tried a piece, according to Cabossel.

“It’s very sweet,” she said, “like a melon.”

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-- Email the reporter at moswald@abqjournal.com. Call the reporter at 505-992-6269

