



anne coe

An artist's unspoiled landscape fuels her creativity

Text by Cathy Cromell • Photography by Elliot Lincis

Artist Anne Coe grew up on a 500-acre ranch outside of Yuma, with seemingly endless desert to explore. Always enthralled with desert plants and animals, she bought property in 1983 in the shadow of the rugged Superstition Mountains near Apache Junction.

Coe and her late husband built their home themselves, taking several years to study the property and understand its natural rhythms—such as sun exposure through the seasons—before determining the site of their home. “We wanted a house that looked like it belonged to the land,”

she explains. In addition, Coe desired a northern exposure for her painting studio because the light remains the same throughout the day. Subsequently, the couple designed an adobe-style building with a small footprint and were scrupulous during construction to disturb as little of the native vegetation as possible.

“My art is an extension of my relationship with the land and the creatures of the Earth,” says Coe. “The relationship between the wild environment and what humans build is present in all my work in some form, although it’s more allegorical or sym-

Above: Artist Anne Coe takes time out from writing in her journal to enjoy the cacti and succulents she planted around her home.



Clockwise from top: Coe's tribute to a wolf-hybrid named Dakota includes a headstone and various rocks she painted. • Visible from the porch is the guest house/studio/warehouse where many of Coe's finished and unfinished art projects can be viewed. • A mourning dove nesting atop a cow skull is a regular visitor to the garden.

bolic than the real world." She describes her art as "somewhat darker" during the period her husband was dying from leukemia, but even at this difficult time she felt that her painting reflected "illusion over despair."

Coe lives in companionable proximity to the creatures that inhabited the desert long before human beings arrived on the scene. Quail lay eggs in pots planted with cacti, and every year a mourning dove builds a nest in a cow skull that hangs on

a post. She respects the nest-building capability of a resident pack rat that has constructed an abode worthy of the ancient pyramid builders, and accepts its energetic nature. "If my screwdriver is missing, I know exactly where it is," she laughs. "I hung a Chile *ristra*, and the whole thing disappeared to that nest." Coe let the critter keep the chiles but demanded the return of the screwdriver.

She keeps a low-maintenance landscape, incorporating such native plants

as mesquite and foothill palo verde trees for screening and shade. "I do have some exotic cacti along the pathway to the house," she says, explaining, "Friends give me cuttings, and I buy some small plants from a nursery." Desert plants provide a food supply for the creatures, and Coe doesn't have to worry about plants dying if she leaves town. "I sow a few wildflowers or put a bougainvillea in a pot for color, but for the most part, I refer to my landscape as the 'Garden for the Really Laid Back.'"

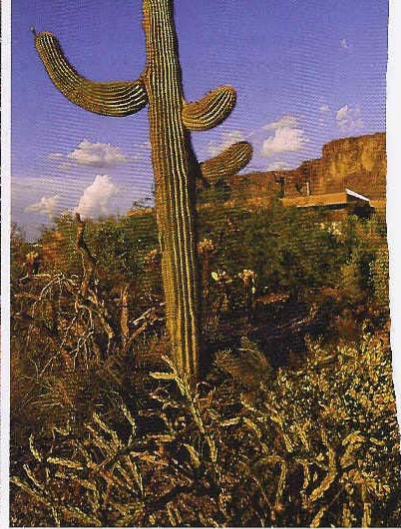
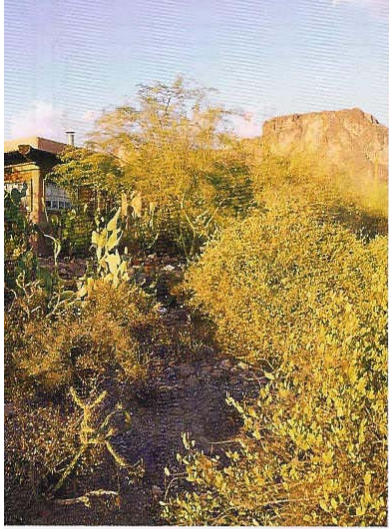
She lets dying plants decompose and return to the soil where they fall. Rain takes care of most watering chores, although she does nurse baby saguaro cacti during drought periods. Even the pathways that meander through her acreage follow trails made by animals.

"I don't feed the wildlife, because it's not good for them," says Coe. She once put out birdseed but stopped after having "cactus wren wars." Native flora such as the prickly pear, with its berrylike fruit, provides a regular food supply. She does, however, maintain a small watering hole. Coe believes that if you get animals habituated in any way you become responsible for them. Therefore, the pond is designed to refill automatically as the water level drops.

Her unspoiled landscape rewards her with frequent sightings of roadrunners, turkey vultures, Harris hawks, cactus wrens and hummingbirds. Mountain lions and bighorn sheep used to come down from the mountains, but it has been many years since she has spotted a lion. All this wildlife activity helps fuel her creativity. "I paint animals almost as self-portraits, although I don't always know what the story is until it's created," she comments.

In 1993 Coe became a founding member of the Superstition Area Land Trust (www.azsalt.org), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote conservation of desert land adjacent to the Superstition Wilderness Area. She believes the Superstitions are the community's greatest asset. "Getting all the interested parties to sit down to work on solutions is challenging," she notes. "But it's in our interest to do the best we can. If we can't preserve it, what is the best way to maintain the unique sense of place that it provides?"

During her home's construction process, a deliveryman commented that there



Left to right: Native flora suits Coe's desire for a low-maintenance landscape. • In celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the artist created a backyard shrine next to a cactus skeleton and other potted plants. • Undisturbed views of the Superstition Mountains and such stately specimens as this towering saguaro drew Coe to this location long ago.

would be "a lot of work to make this a lawn," mistakenly believing the lot would be bulldozed. "That was inconceivable to me," says the artist. "I try to maintain the landscape with the same integrity that

nature would. I don't force my will on it, because its own life and death is a beautiful process."

For Coe, who finds much inspiration in this rural setting, sharing her artwork

with others is something she finds gratifying. A tour of the artist's studio can be arranged by appointment; call (480) 982-0473. 🌵

See Resource Guide.