



PHOTO BY JOHN MCCARTHY

Breaking the Bounds

Pilar Pobil doesn't care what you think

DESPITE BEING FROM one of the most privileged families in Mallorca, Spain, one of Utah's most popular and prolific artists had to hide underneath tables so that she could read. Pilar Pobil's mother believed that too much reading was not good for girls.

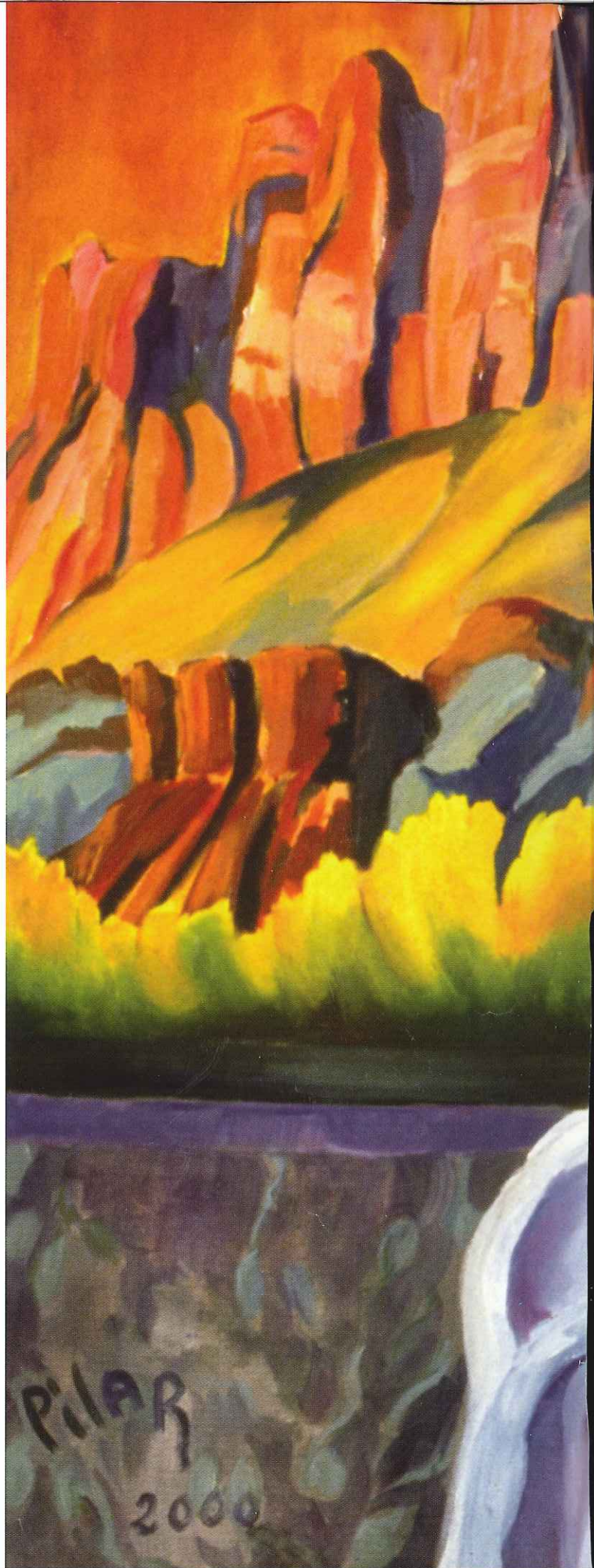
"If I had been obedient to my mother," says Pobil, "something in me would have died. I felt life was beautiful, and my will to live within this beauty was strong."

Sent to a convent school, she persisted in stubbornly pushing her boundaries to explore the fullness of life. At 78, she's still at it.

"I never paint to please," says Pobil, whose art can be found in private collections in the United States, Mexico, and Spain, as well as in most public collections in Utah. "I don't care if the colors are not comfortable with one another, or what is taught about these colors. I let the painting tell me where to go."

While enjoying success as a late-in-life artist (Pobil began a new life by teaching herself art at the tender age of 43), in 2007 Pobil temporarily shifted artistic disciplines and published her first book. The memoir, *My Kitchen Table: Sketches from My Life*, tells dramatic stories of the war that changed her life forever, and her eventual settling in Utah in the 1960s, where she blossomed.

For the past 14 years, Pilar Pobil (above) has hosted Art in the Garden, a fundraiser benefiting local artists. Pobil's experiments with color often result in vibrant combinations, as in *Window to Southern Utah* (right).





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Pobil was just a child when the Spanish Civil War broke out. Her sheltered life crumbled. It was 1936. Her adoring father, an admiral in the Spanish navy and the one family member who had encouraged her talents, was executed alongside all of his officers. Her sisters and mother were forced to go into hiding. Pobil was 7 when she was sent to the convent school, where she remained until she was 17. For 12 hours a day, Pobil followed a strict Catholic regimen. She attended chapel daily, was "obligated" to keep silent, and was told that if she walked in front of a group of men who were struck with lascivious thoughts, it was her fault. In her book, Pobil writes, "The time eventually arrived when I had to make a choice: either conform and lead a submissive life, or run the risk of eternal condemnation. Since I had never personally faced the devil or any of his surrogates, I decided it was better to believe only what I could see, and I became an agnostic at the tender age of 11."

Love struck when Walter Smith, a Utah native, rented a home next door to Pobil in Palma de Mallorca. They began by talking over the fence. Soon they were leaving notes beneath a flat stone under the jasmine vine to arrange rendezvous. The two married when Pobil was 26, and she soon learned that babies were actually not conceived through the navel. "I knew the first time I met Walter, that he was the man I would marry," recalls Pobil, whose marriage spanned 45 years. "He was fiercely intelligent; just by living with him, I became better educated."

P OBIL NEVER ATTENDED art school. She signed up for a pottery class to pass the time while her son was in a photography class at The Art Barn in Salt Lake. While waiting for a turn at the pottery wheel, she began molding sculptures out of the wet lump of clay in her hands. She recalled the silt-laden clay she would play with when the ponds at her grandfather's estate were being cleaned out. Shortly thereafter, she quit the class, purchased a book on basic ceramics, and started working away at her kitchen table. After just a few years, Pobil sculpted a 35-piece, large-scale nativity that became part of the Utah Museum of Fine

Left: Pobil's paintings reflect women in situations that are both oppressive and celebratory, such as her oil on canvas *La Salsa*.

Arts's permanent collection.

"Beauty feeds our spirits," says Pobil, who now uses a wide palette of different kinds of art mediums: clay, woodcuts, cloth, tiles, watercolors, and oils. "The beauty of life is simply about expression, and seeing and feeling the beauty within that expression."

Many of Pobil's paintings reveal women from around the world who are often snagged in the heavy fabric of poverty, ignorance, oppression, and even tradition. In *The Net*, a Mexican woman is seen behind the veil of her loom, signifying the inescapable subjugation in which she's trapped. In *Mourning*, our eyes are drawn to an African woman suffering a deep loss, perhaps the loss of her child in a war. We do not see the eyes of the man standing behind her; it's the heartache of the woman that we must feel.

"I understand women and like to observe women," offers Pobil. "I paint her expression and feeling at that exact moment." Her painted women are elegant and sensual, long-limbed and full-breasted. With polished nails and lips like red tulips, they're immersed in celebration or pensiveness, flirting or reverence—regardless, a defined moment is felt.

And like high-tide waves on a shoreline, Pobil's paintings spill over onto the frames. "This gives her work a sense of reaching out beyond the frame—the inside is being pulled to the outside, and the outside back to the inside," observes Robert Newman, dean of the University of Utah's College of Humanities. "There are no clear borders; I think this is an indication of how embracing her art is of the world around her."

The college has purchased more than a half dozen of Pobil's paintings, and Newman now counts himself among the artist's friends. "Pilar is someone who is very open to the world, very accepting of multiple dimensions of people, and someone who thinks and responds visually," says Newman. "To me she is an artist not only in her paintings but also in the manner in which she lives."

P OBIL'S HOME in the Salt Lake City Avenues is an exhibit in its own right—a head-turning treasure hunt of visuals, with fuse boxes painted into bird houses, electrical cords transformed into serpents, roses and mermaids



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Above: No type of object escapes Pobil's creative touch. She works in many mediums including oil, clay, woodcuts, cloth, tiles, and watercolors.

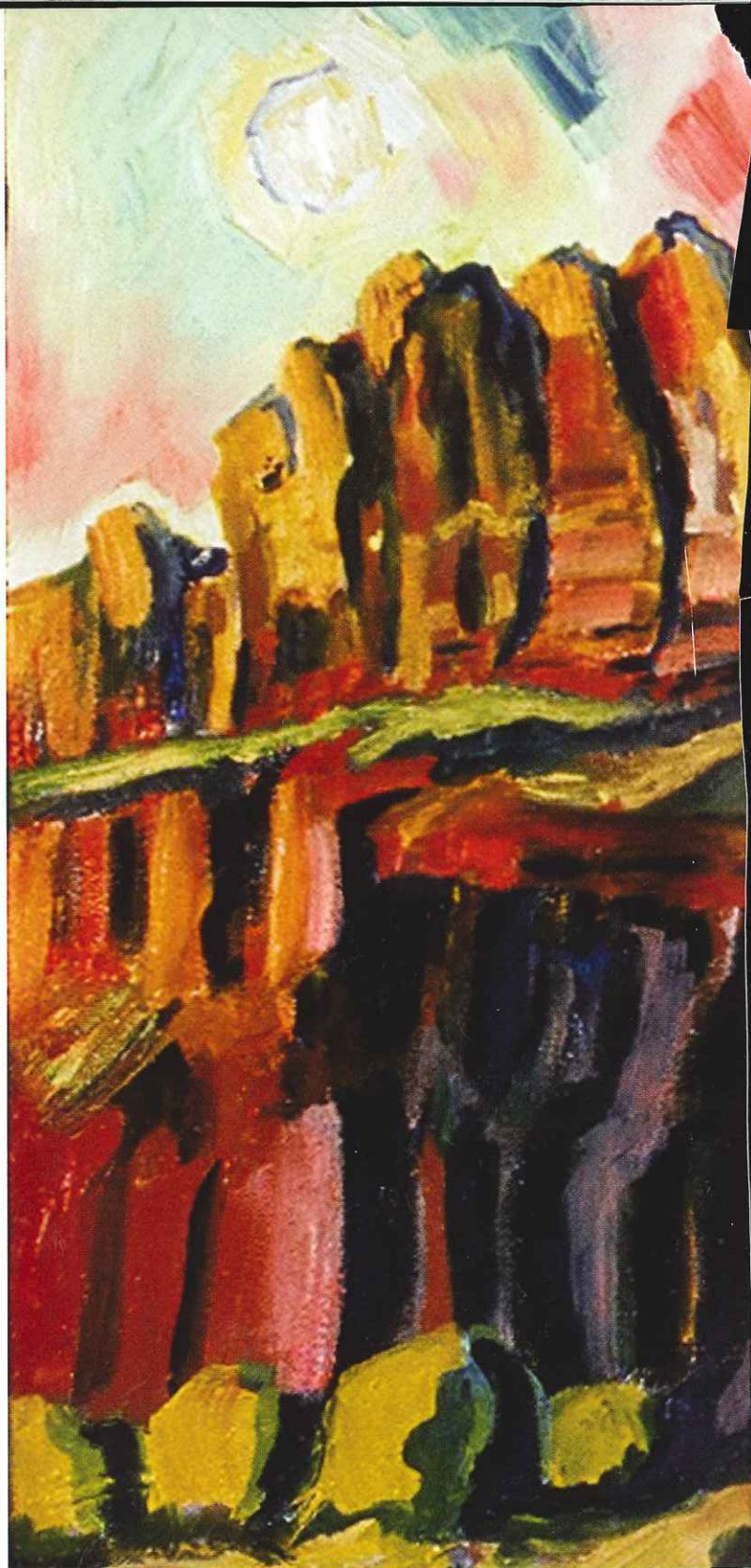
Right: *Morning Moon in Zion* displays Pobil's zest for Utah's unique scenic beauty.

splashing against otherwise ordinary doors. Freshly painted peacocks sit upright on straight-backed chairs; folkloric sculptures humbly visit you in each room; sensual and spirit-broken and sturdy women from around the world appear in her paintings throughout the house.

For 14 years running, she's opened her garden in the summer for an art show and fundraiser. In June 2008, the show included popular Utah artists such as Edie Roberson, Polly Plummer Mottonen, Angelo Maggi, Susan Slade, and Kindra Fehr. The event has become so popular that it's hard to get in. Pobil has started to charge admission, with the funds going to the Utah Arts Council grants for individual artists. The event draws many people who want to see what's happening now in this unconventional woman's work.

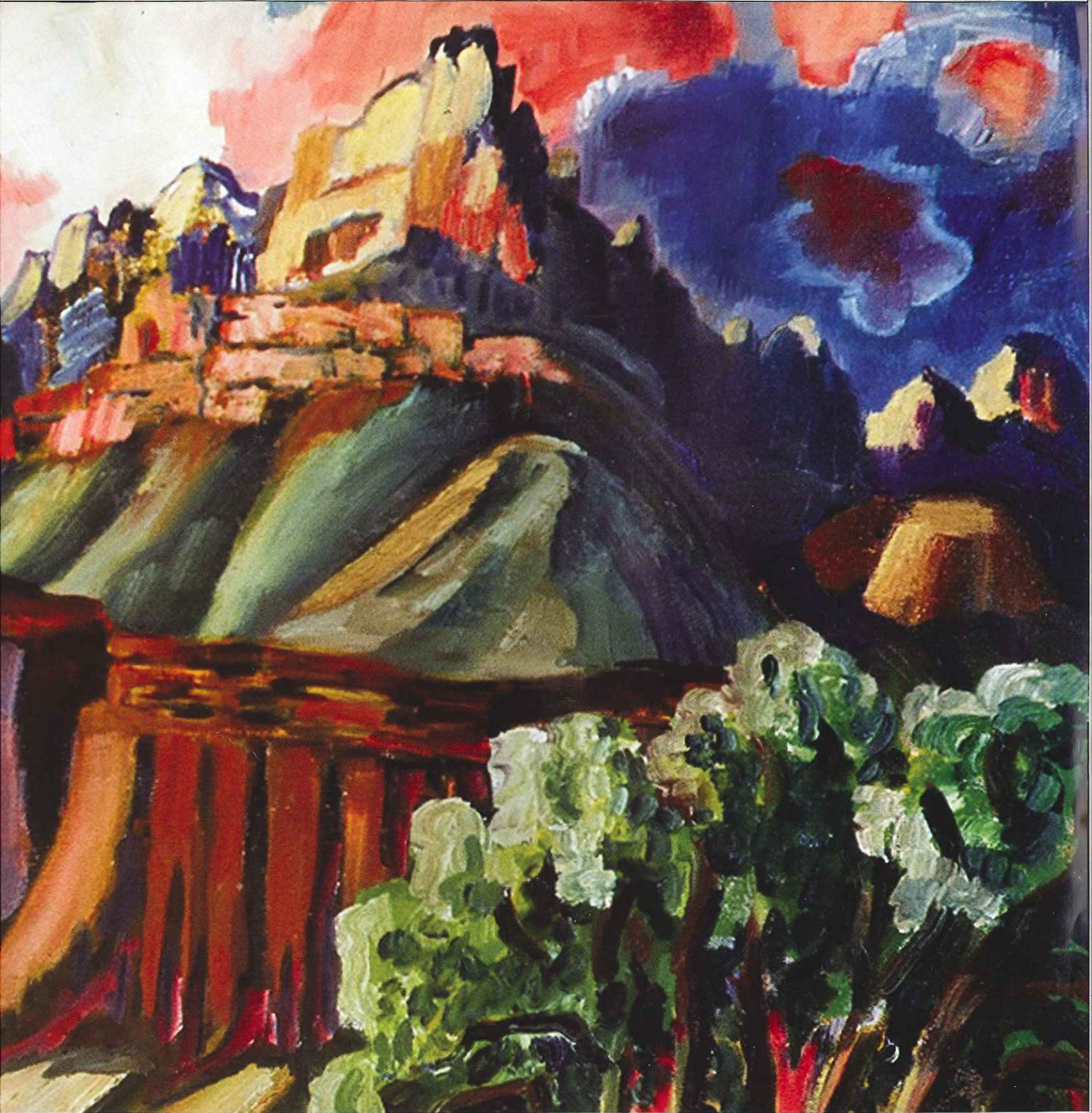
"Art has to be a reflection of your life, where you are at the moment. It can't remain static," Pobil says, adding, "I myself am often surprised by the result."

Like olive oil stirred into ice cream, Pobil's Spanish sensibility never melted away. Assimilating into America never happened. While homesick, she still opened herself up to the beauty unique to Utah. In a 2006 self-portrait, Pobil and her beloved dog, Kiva, sit between two worlds—over one shoulder is a painting within the portrait depicting her grandmother's 600-year-old home in Palma. To Pobil's left in the portrait, an arched window reveals a snow-cloaked pine tree and the autumn colors of Utah. "I am thinking in this painting, how it is that I have come to be here:



Could I ever have imagined this path that has lead me so far away?" muses Pobil, whose blue eyes reflect not sorrow but wonderment. Her right hand is clasped over her left hand in her portrait, as she is a widow now, alone on this journey. "I live in the present, but the past lives in me."

"In a culture that constantly says it is too late, my mother



showed me that it's never too late to do something new or to change directions and succeed at it," says her daughter, Monica Pasqual. "For me, that's probably one of the great gifts from her."

As she nears 80, Pobil continues to be in her prime as an artist, never tiring of experimenting with new mediums, and too restless to let beauty hibernate. "She approaches life in

a sort of hungry, fearless way; she wants every minute to matter," says her daughter.

"I'm the type of person that likes to live, live, live, and then ... die," says Pobil with a sudden clap of her hands. And then she smiles, perhaps the same smile she wears when stepping back from a finished painting. WJ