

The New York Times

The artist Johnny DeFeo reimagined his wildlife paintings as a tiny adventure house that he constructed high in the New Mexican desert. (Vacationers, check Airbnb.)

Johnny DeFeo didn't think building a house shaped like the head of a coyote would be all that hard when he first started out four years ago. He already had a perfect plot of land, he said, on a corner of the property where he lives in the ranching town of Arroyo Hondo, just outside of Taos, N.M.

Plus, he had cash to spend. He won a contest, sponsored by Airbnb, that awarded \$100,000 prizes to people who pitched unusual ideas for creating novel spaces that might be rented through the online platform.

As a painter who spends a lot of time outdoors capturing fantastical scenes of the landscape and wildlife, coyotes were already a part of his visual repertoire. The artist, 41, calls himself an "adventure painter" and has trekked deep into national parks throughout the West, carrying his easel and brushes. He had rendered scores of coyotes, wolves and wild horses on canvas, he reasoned, so how hard could it be to convert his work into three-dimensional form?

"This was going to be my very first sculpture, and it just happened to be a house," he said in an interview inside the structure, which was completed in January. "And for some reason, I didn't see the flaw in that idea."



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Only now is DeFeo asking the questions that might have been better-answered at the start. What does an artist know about turning a “janky clay model” of a coyote into a building safe enough to shelter humans during a snowy, northern New Mexico winter? Or about bending steel reinforcing bars into the shape of pointy ears and a protruding snout that could get covered in plaster to give the house its distinct profile?

Or about all of the other tasks he took on mostly by himself, like permitting, landscaping, tiling, fence-building, hiring engineers or dealing with puzzled looks from neighbors wondering what, exactly, he was doing as he blew his way through his contest winnings, and then emptied his personal bank accounts to finance a project that he estimates cost about \$350,000 in the end.

“I also had to take out a line of credit on my house,” said DeFeo, who was born in Berlin, Conn., and received his M.F.A. in painting and drawing from the University of Colorado before cofounding Adventure Painting, a traveling artist residency. “And I borrowed money from my parents, too.”

The 550-square-foot structure stands two stories tall on a flat parcel of high-altitude desert covered in scrubby sagebrush. Visitors enter by walking through the open maw of the creature, passing by upper and lower fangs and through a wooden front door. Immediately inside, there is a pass-through galley kitchen that leads to the living room. The house’s walls are constructed from a product called Pumice-Crete, a mudlike material made from pumice and concrete, with a sprinkling of mica that sparkles when the light shines on it.



DeFeo, based in Taos, paints scenes of Western landscapes and wildlife. Dazzling details include the round, amber-colored windows that serve as the coyote's eyes, made by a Los Angeles-based glass artist.

DeFeo kept the interior simple, and in the pueblo-inspired style of architecture that is common in the Southwest. The colors are earthy and muted, the edges of walls and passageways are rounded and soft and there is no trim around windows or doorways. The ceiling is lined with planks of ponderosa pine that sit atop exposed lodgepole beams.

There are some dazzling details, including the round, amber-colored windows that serve as the coyote's eyes, which were made by Justin Olerud, a Los Angeles-based glass artist.

There is the bathroom shower, lined floor-to-ceiling with river rocks, into which DeFeo integrated tiles in the shape of animal fossils. A set of stairs leads to a loft bedroom that has its own front porch — cut into the upper side of the coyote's protruding nose. The views are the sort that make the Taos region a haven for tourists who appreciate the way the rocky, red soil of New Mexico meets its big, blue skies.



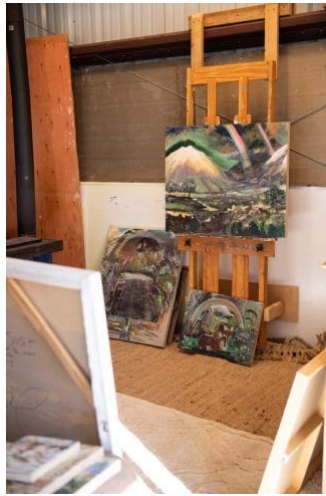
The bathroom shower is lined floor-to-ceiling with river rocks. A set of stairs leads to a loft bedroom.

“That’s the tail end of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains there, and that’s Taos Mountain on the right,” DeFeo said, as he stood at the balcony door pointing out local landmarks.

Framing exterior views of wide-open terrain is a signature of his professional life. His ongoing series of landscapes are set inside the living rooms of luxury vacation homes and mountain retreats, with the views of lush forests only visible through the homes’ large glass picture windows.

The paintings are cheeky and meant, at least partly, to be a commentary on how development has interrupted the way humans experience nature and made such views available only to the privileged. These houses, in remote locations, allow people to be among mountains and wildlife, while keeping a safe distance from them. The décor is Western chic — elevated to excess, with an abundance of rustic, wood furniture, animal-inspired art and wall-mounted taxidermy.

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"I like to call them 'Architectural Digest' magazine on steroids," said Katia David Rosenthal, whose KDR Gallery represents the artist in Miami. "He just lets his imagination run wild with them."

DeFeo balances that cynical part of his practice with intimate portraits of animals he encounters during his outdoor sessions. In addition to his own work, he runs a nonprofit called the Guild of Adventure Painters, along with another artist, Aaron Zulpo. The group has led tours to the Canadian Rockies and the Florida Everglades for extreme plein-air painting expeditions.

DeFeo's wildlife paintings have their roots in Impressionism. An observer can identify the deer and bears in his scenes, though the edges of his objects are loose and the colors expressed in imaginative, exaggerated tones. The animals are often gazing directly at the viewer, offering something of a soulful connection between subject and observer.



With the house, DeFeo said, he is trying to get visitors to understand coyotes through a more immersive experience.

“I’m trying to paint what a wolf means to me, or what I think it should mean to the world,” said DeFeo, whose studio is at the home he shares with Ari Myers, who runs an art gallery called The Valley, in Santa Fe.

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Rosenthal, his Miami gallerist, sees the building as a natural extension of DeFeo’s painting practice. “It allows someone to visit his world through the pure escapism of visiting this surrealist coyote home.”

The artist said he does not expect to make a profit renting out his coyote casita on Airbnb — currently about \$400 for a two-night stay — maybe just enough to pay off the loans he took to build it. He is now offering his services as a consultant for others who want to make unusual projects.

“What I’d love is for that to be the role I play in someone else’s life who wants to do something crazy like this,” he said. “To help them shape that idea from a dream into something tangible.”

— RAY MARK RINALDI