

# Tierra del Sol: a full-service center for exceptional artists

By Helene Seifer

Ericka Lopez is a remarkable artist. Her hand-built ceramic pieces are highly textured and detailed. Ropey coils, knobby spots, smooth slabs alternating with incision-laden surfaces, her vases and sculptures beg to be touched. There's a very good reason for that: Lopez is blind and shapes and bends the clay exclusively by feel. Lopez had some sight when she was a child, so when it's time to glaze her pieces, she will ask to be handed particular colors, referencing her memory of them, explains Paige Weary, gallery director. "Erica will say, 'The color of the sun; the color of the sky.'"

Lopez is one of 170 artists represented by the gallery, part of the Tierra del Sol Foundation, which helps adults with developmental disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and blindness live meaningful lives. Participants in their programs are referred from regional centers, the high school from which they graduated, or parents who come to them directly. Those who can work are trained and receive career support or help finding volunteer opportunities. Those with art talent can opt to join their studio programs in Sunland or Upland, where they have full access to art supplies that support their creative interests, from painting, ceramics, and collage to weaving and sewing.

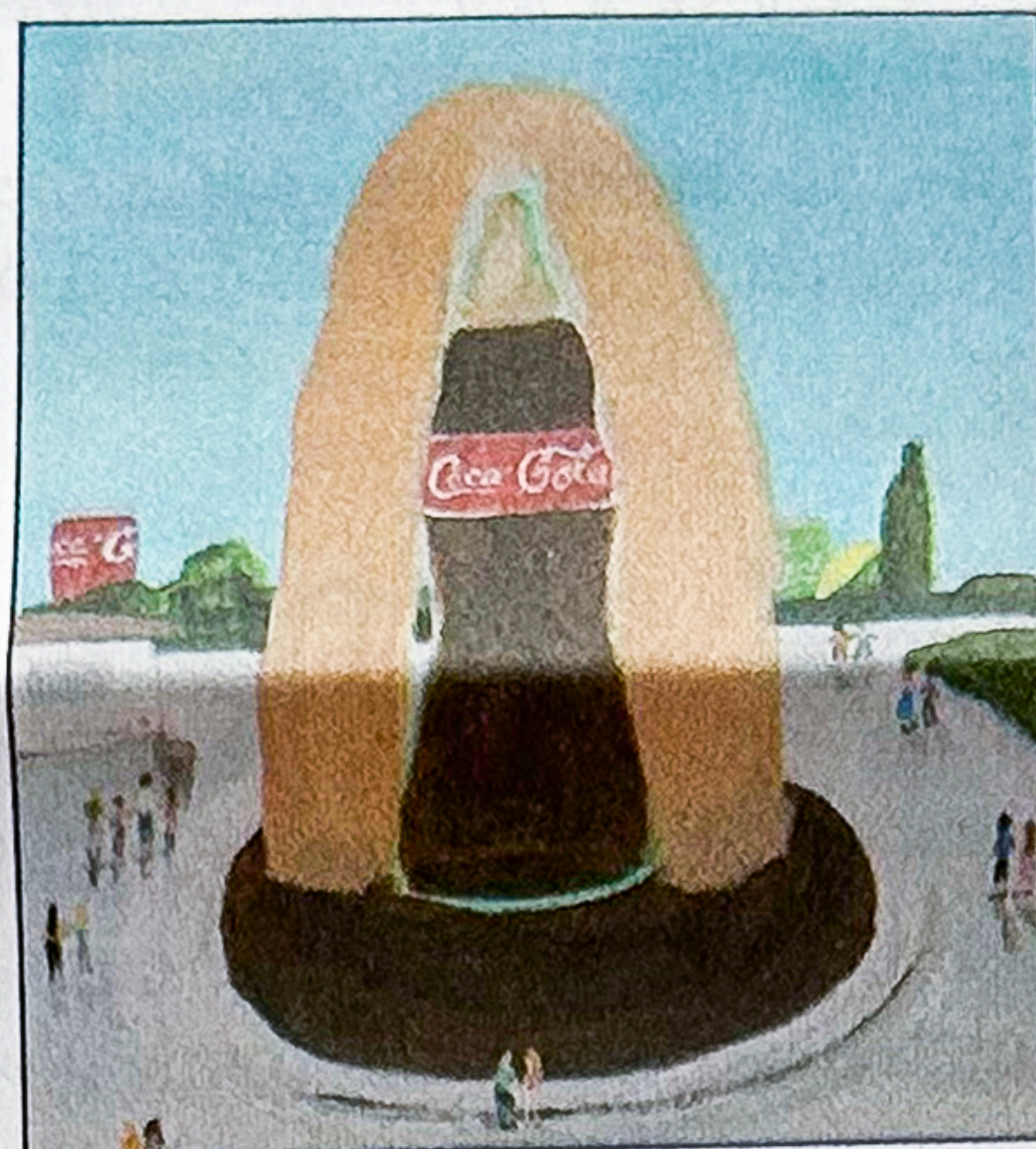
Weary is quick to emphasize the talent of the artists rather than their disabilities and seeks to provide them



**ERICKA LOPEZ** is a blind ceramicist who works by touch.

with the exposure that they deserve. The West Hollywood gallery holds six exhibits a year and participates in art fairs. Most recently several of their artists, including Lopez, were exhibited at Felix Art Fair in Los Angeles. In 2025 Tierra del Sol Gallery took painter Kyle Johnson to The Armory Show in New York—his first-ever plane trip. In June some of their artists will be exhibited at the Basil Open Invitational in Switzerland. Their artists have had work purchased by collectors across the country and abroad and some have art pieces in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the American Folk Art Museum, both in New York City.

Tierra del Sol's current exhibition is "Vessels," a group show whose theme explores the idea of carrying, holding, containing, and traversing water. An urn or vase might carry water; a body, such as the one depicted in an acrylic painting by Vincent Siso, contains it. Angel Rodriguez's painting of a fountain made from a Coca-Cola bottle dispenses with water and disburses soda instead. There



**COCA COLA** by Angel Rodriguez. Images courtesy of Tierra del Sol Gallery

are paintings of the shoreline and of ships crossing the seas. The fundamental nature of water is explored in myriad ways by the 13 artists selected for the exhibit, including pottery by Ericka Lopez, an expressionistic painting of a boat glimmering on the water by Catherine Benita, and Kyle Johnson's dynamic paintings.

Tierra del Sol's art program is often a lifeline for the artists and is open-ended. "Some artists have been there over 30 years," noted Weary. "Some are in their 80s. A lot of our artists look at magazines or look at their phones [for inspiration] or we set up still lifes. We take them to art galleries and museums. We do workshops, teach how to do zines. Sometimes they get paid for art jobs." Siso has been an artist with Tierra del Sol since 2012. When asked if he had other interests, he replied, "No, this is my thing."

Tierra del Sol Gallery; 7414 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood; [tierradel-solgallery.org](http://tierradel-solgallery.org); 323-243-0658. "Vessels" is on view Sat., May 9, to Thu., July 2.



**PAINTER KYLE JOHNSON**, pictured at the Tierra del Sol studio, showed his work at the Armory show in New York.



**UNTITLED #** cent Siso.



**UNTITLED** by Catherine Benita.



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