

1989 *Michael A. Naranjo's first visit to the National Gallery in Washington DC:*

"Yes, we have a touchable exhibit set aside for visually impaired people. But you can't just arrive—you have to make arrangements to see it."

1990 *The Naranjos' second visit to the National Gallery (having made prior arrangements):*

"Actually, you can see (ie *touch*) only some of them, just the stone pieces, not the bronzes . . . oh, and you must wear gloves."



Michael A. Naranjo Photo by Craig Anderson

The crusade had begun for Michael and Laurie Naranjo

Sculptor Michael Naranjo's hands, mostly his functioning left hand, are his eyes. Asking him to wear gloves while *looking* at a piece of sculpture is the equivalent of inviting a sighted person to an art exhibit, giving them dark glasses and then dimming the lights. An artist born in Santa Clara Pueblo who lost his eyes and much of the use of his right hand in a grenade blast as a soldier in Vietnam, Michael Naranjo longed to see the sculptural treasures in his country's National Gallery. And he had a warrior's determination mixed with his artistic tenacity.

" . . . limited access; you must wear gloves . . . "

After two years of this from officials at the National Gallery, Michael responded, "Here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to call the media; maybe they can help me". Success! A guide and a ladder with wheels materialized and Michael Naranjo, US Army veteran and artist, was able to see the sculptures, stone and bronze, without gloves, in our nation's National Gallery.

The Italians, bless their artistic souls, have a different view. In 1983, Naranjo was granted

a Papal audience in Rome and with a letter of introduction in hand, he was welcomed into the Italian museums. Then in 1986, at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, Michael was allowed to reach up and touch the huge foot of Michaelangelo's *David* which stands on an enormous block of granite. "Maybe one day they'll build me a scaffolding", he thought. And they did. A film crew brought Michael and his family to Italy and the scaffolding was erected around *David*. First, however, the Italians took advantage of the scaffolding to remove decades of dust from Michelangelo's masterpiece! Thus, the first deeply touching moment between the Naranjos and *David* came as their eight-year-old daughter stood on the scaffolding sweetly dusting *David's* toes with a feather duster. The second came when Michael himself stood on the scaffolding and touched the exquisite face, mammoth hands, perfect body of *David*.

Once you've touched the *David*, other access becomes easier. At the Louvre in Paris, the Naranjos saw Michaelangelo's *Slaves* emerging from stone and other masterpieces in stone and bronze. The experience was repeated in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and other world museums. All wonder-filled moments of touching and seeing sculpture.

Michael Naranjo's determination to continue to be an artist was galvanized during his difficult recuperation in Japan in 1968. Lying beneath a basketball hoop in a gym filled with rows and rows of wounded soldiers, Naranjo was asked by a volunteer if he needed anything. Remembering his youth when he would mix clay for his mother, Santa Clara potter Rose Naranjo, he asked for some water-based clay. His right hand had

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Michael A. Naranjo *In Disguise* 1981
Bronze 8" x 11" x 19.5" Ed 10
Courtesy NM Department of Cultural Affairs

TOUCHING BEAUTY · MICHAEL A. NARANJO

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been immobilized, but with the workable fingers of his left hand, he pinched off a piece of the clay and made a ball. He rolled it out and an inchworm was born. He added beads for the eyes. Next came goldfish, a squirrel, a crude stick figure version of Rodin's *The Thinker*. As each piece came out of the clay, it had a bit more movement, more life. When asked what he wanted at another hospital, he requested "a mallet, a chisel, a block of wood". One couldn't tell what it was, but Michael had created a piece of sculpture.

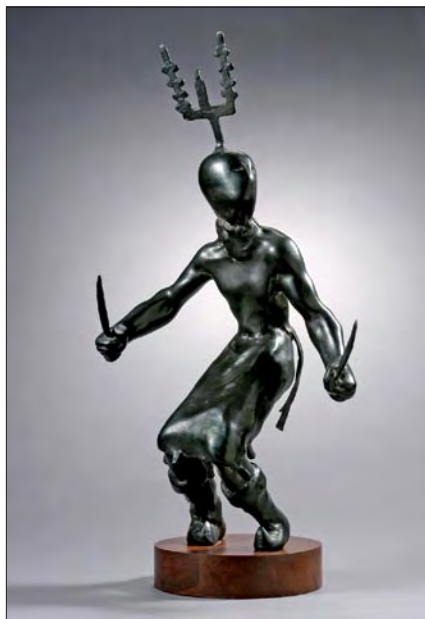
And the rest, as they say . . .

Today Michael says, "I wouldn't trade my life for anything. I like my shoes."

The patina of Michael Naranjo's human and animal figures in bronze is black, the

color he sees. Rather than defined eyes, the figures have faint suggestions, a facial feature that is understood, not prescribed. The bodies are lithe but strong, the images are meaningful and symbolic. What better extension of this passion than to create a place where anyone, regardless of ability or disability, can see art as Naranjo does?

In 2006, such a place was created in Santa Fe, New Mexico's capital. *Touching Beauty* in the Atrium Gallery of the Bataan Memorial Building in Santa Fe is a hands-on gallery of 25 pieces of Naranjo's sculptures. Each piece is at a touchable level and is accompanied by Braille name plates. Visitors are moved to tears by the story of the artist who made the gallery possible and by the works themselves.



Michael A. Naranjo *Devil Dancer* 1975
Bronze 22" x 12" x 8" Ed 12
Courtesy NM Department of Cultural Affairs



Michael A. Naranjo *The Deer Hunter* 1986
Bronze 12" x 16" x 25" Ed 10
Courtesy NM Department of Cultural Affairs

THE ATRIUM GALLERY of the Bataan Memorial Building is west of the Roundhouse, the New Mexico State Capitol. It is best approached from the Galisteo St entrance. See **Map B on page 29** for precise location.

A video (DVD or VHS) entitled *Michael A Naranjo—A New Vision* was produced for the acclaimed KNME-TV "Colores" series and is available for purchase through KNME in

Albuquerque, NM. Call 1-800-328-5663. On the web at www.knmetv.org

Museums or institutions interested in hosting a "touchable exhibit" of Michael Naranjo's sculpture may contact the Naranjos at naranjostudio@hotmail.com

The sculpture of Michael A Naranjo is represented by Nedra Matteucci Galleries in Santa Fe.