

# Gail Roberts and the art of nests

## San Diego artists' work now showing at Scott White Contemporary Art

By [James Chute \(/staff/james-chute/\)](#) 4 p.m. June 12, 2013



[\(/photos/2013/jun/11/1035839/\)](#)

Artist Gail Roberts in her La Mesa studio. — *John Gastaldo / U-T San Diego*

To enter Gail Roberts' domain is to enter a world of collections.

Her work space is full of accumulations of dirt, animal bones, seed pods, feathers, leaves and bird nests, to name a few of her fascinations (some might call them obsessions).

"I like to gather things," Roberts said in her La Mesa studio. "I gather all kinds of organic materials, and at some point these materials make their way into the paintings."

For her newest work in an engaging solo show that recently opened at Scott White Contemporary Art, her collection of nests and feathers has made it onto the canvas.

Just the material aspect of Roberts' treatment of these nests, each different, each revealing uncommon complexity and ingenuity, is visually appealing.

But to say these are merely paintings of bird nests would be to miss the point entirely.

"I find them so powerful in terms of having a sense of metaphor," Roberts said. "I use them because they are symbolic of so many different aspects of our own lives."

The nests can represent a sense of protection and safety, a place for nurturing.

"But when the birds leave the nest, it seems like (the nests) also represent a sense of death and decay," she said. "There's a sense of emptying and absence, so that dichotomy is really quite beautiful."

Roberts, who has been on the San Diego State University faculty since the 1970s and whose work has been widely exhibited (including a piece currently on view in the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's "A Very Large Array"), has been working with nests for about four years. But only her most recent work concerns itself with the idea of a nest as a "spiral" — the title of her show at Scott White.

"The term 'spiral' seems to have a sense of movement," Roberts said. "Like spiraling out of control, or spiraling down or spiraling up; in the newest ones I'm trying to create more movement."

While most of the canvases in the exhibit have a nest as the central element, one set of paintings of feathers on marble dispenses with the nests and refers to the spiral only in the most abstract sense. If depicted in mathematical terms, a spiral follows the Fibonacci series (a sequence where each number is the sum of the previous two numbers).

In a *tour de force* of 12 separate panels, each representing a number in the series (starting with a depiction of a single hawk feather and ending with 233 turkey feathers), Roberts draws on much of her feather collection.

She won't hazard a guess as to what will jump onto her canvas next, but she's in no hurry. There's still more to be done on the nests. Several are still waiting on her work table.

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