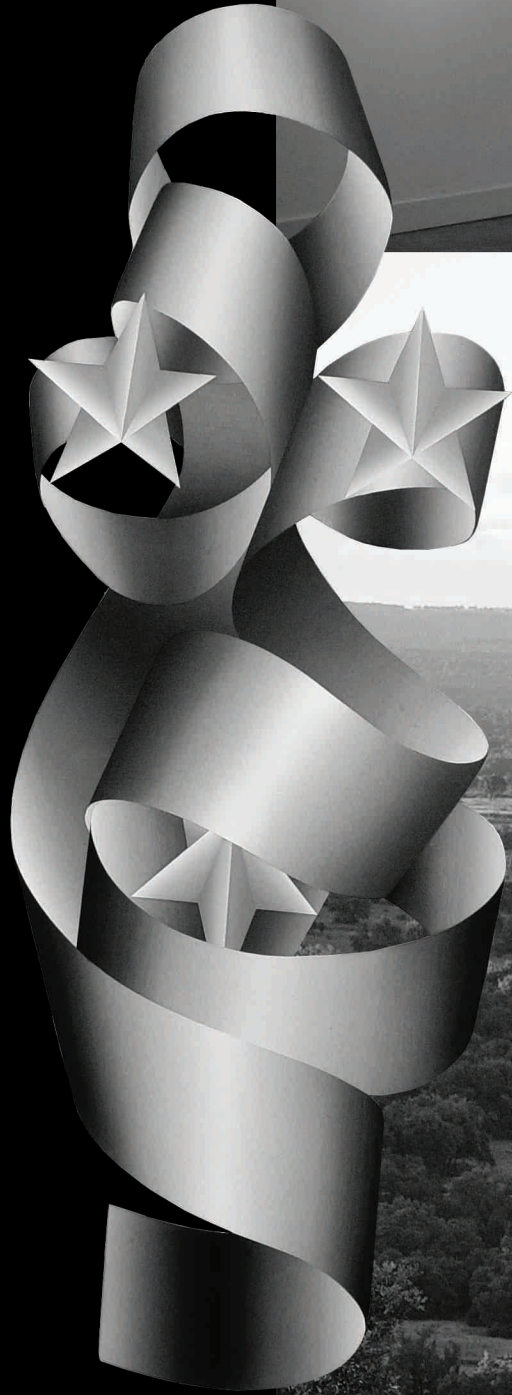


**The Texas Hill  
Country -  
long known for  
longhorn cattle,  
lanky cowboys  
and rugged  
terrain -  
has lately been  
drawing visitors  
for another  
interest...  
fine art.**



# BENINI

## ELEGANT TEXAN INTERVIEW:

*A painter, who occasionally assembles three-dimensional pieces, Benini has always worked as a maverick, far from the beehives of culture. Five years ago, he moved to Texas, to a ranch at the end of a caliche road, seven miles from Johnson City. Centered on the project, atop Rattlesnake Mountain, his cedar and limestone home overlooks a panoramic view, and the fields and hills around it showcase large-scale sculpture by national and international artists.*

*At the foot of the mountain, a 14,000 sq.ft. hanger-type building contains working studios, the fine arts library, and galleries that span 40 years of paintings.*

*To date, he has had 160 one-man exhibitions in universities, public institutions and museums.*

*How did an Italian raised in the war-ravaged years following World War II in Italy end up on a ranch he has named Le Stelle, (the Stars), in the Texas Hill Country?*

*Our Elegant Texan interview was conducted in the Studios Building and later, on Benini's sunset porch at Le Stelle.*

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Who is Benini?

**BENINI:** I was born in Imola Italy, on April 17, 1941. My first memories are ones that I recall in black and white, mixed with sounds of patriotic songs and speeches blasting from loud speakers. The war was all around us. The bombings did not really scare me at the time, as they turned into slumber parties in underground shelters. Even the final bombing, when

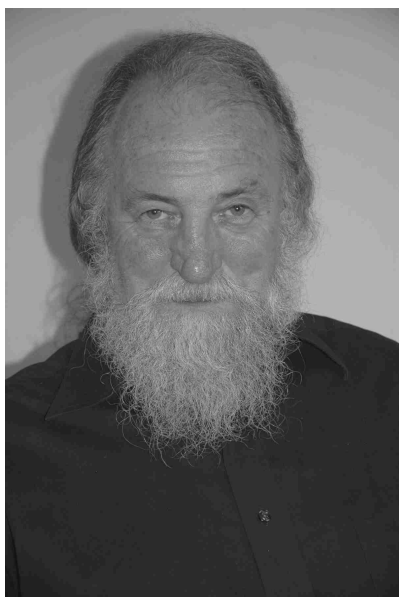
the allies broke through the German "Gothic Lines" between Florence and Bologna, that destroyed our home was not that bad, because we survived it hiding under the stairway, the only part of the house to remain standing. My mother, however, was a nervous wreck for years after that. My fear came months later when I saw flatbed trucks loaded with the corpses of former Fascists killed by partisans under the watch of the Allies, and fear smelled bad to me. To this day, the thought of war brings back that darkness.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** What influence might those memories have had for you?

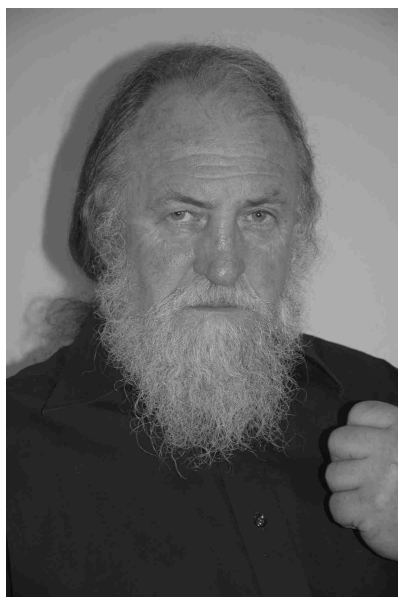
**BENINI:** Perhaps the lack of color of my early memories explains the

reason that, as a painter, I have chosen the path of color to express myself. And color has been the great ally in my work.

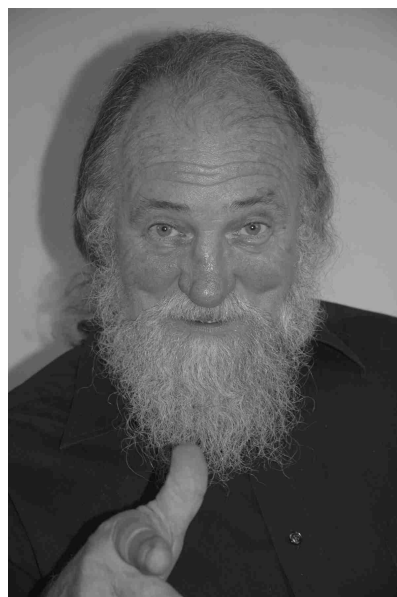
A deciding moment came early in my life: I received an award at the age of seven for a watercolor depicting the castle of the Estensi in Ferrara that got me started as an artist. I left home at the age of 15, going from village to village in Italy, as an itinerant painter, setting up my easel in the piazza, painting churches and small landscapes. I sold them for whatever the buyers would give me, and it was usually enough for pasta, wine and a humble lodging. On rainy days, I would complete portraits inside a bar or osteria. I soon learned that if I painted the eyes larger



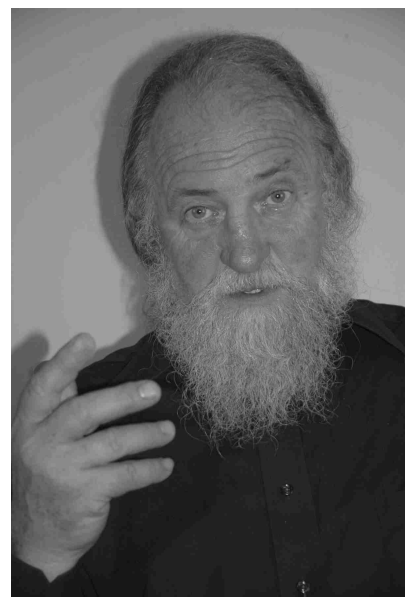
*"My first memories are ones that I recall in black and white, mixed with sounds of patriotic songs and speeches blasting from loud speakers."*



*"To this day, the thought of war brings back that darkness."*



*"The 'Rat Pack' was visiting Grand Bahamas regularly and to them, I was 'the artista'."*



*"The move to the Hill Country energized the work. Stars started popping in and out of the freeform canvases."*



*Benini painted the symbol of the rose for more than 20 years, in surrealistic and in symbolic paintings, and also as free floating roses.*

*Reds and White  
1985  
Acrylics on Canvas  
48" x 96"*

and the nose smaller, the clients would be more generous ... (chuckling..)

I would wait out the cold winters in large cities where jobs were menial but the libraries and museums were tremendous. Ever since my father took me to a speed-reading class in Bologna when I was nine, I have read a book a day. To this day I keep the habit, seldom fiction, mostly art-related biographies, and the work of contemporary visionaries/philosophers, as well as science and trade journals.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** How would you describe your career in art?

**BENINI:** Painting has always been my chosen medium, partly out of convenience to my lifestyle. As a painter, I could move from place to place with relative ease. As a sculptor, that would have been impossible; materials and tools would have been too cumbersome. In those early years, landscapes, still lifes and portraits took care of my basic needs.

As I matured, I realized the necessity of developing my own style - an identifying one, to achieve recognition, so the paintings became more stylized. Traveling from country to country, I noticed that artists have a tendency to compete with one another along regional lines. I never belonged to any region, so I was free to pursue my own path.

By 1965, I was working on board the Italian SS Oceanic, sailing the oceans, to Central America and the Caribbean. On impulse, I jumped ship. I was young and learning to speak English, and still rather nomadic. I settled in Freeport, Grand Bahama. At the time, it was a newly developed island with grand tourist ambitions.

I kind of grew up with the island, as a man and as an artist. And from there, I started a series of one-man exhibitions in different European countries, Canada, New York and other major East Coast Cities. I offered my work to any gallery I came across, and eventually one would give me a show.

Pop Art had taken over the art scene at that time, replacing Abstract Expressionism, that I greatly admired but could not get myself to emulate. SoHo was just beginning to be an arts

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*"I stopped exhibiting in commercial galleries, relying for exposure on universities, museums, and other public institutions."*

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destination. It was an exciting time to be in New York in the art world.

I would seek out artists whose work I would admire and I would make pilgrimages to their studios; I found that the greater ones were more generous with their time.

I was painting and exhibiting strong monochromatic works. They were not very pleasant to live with, and not so easy to sell. By the early 70's, I had moved on to large-scale nudes that my dealer in New York, an old Romanian hardhead, was selling from his S.A.G. gallery at Madison and 60<sup>th</sup>.

At the same time, in Europe, I was showing larger and larger paintings of single roses. The art critics of the time called them "Super Roses".

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Tell us about your life in the Bahamas.

**BENINI:** As the only known artist there on the 96-mile long island, life on Grand Bahama

Island was easy, I had collectors; Bahamians and international visitors would seek my work and the young island was affording me a rather glamorous life. The "Rat Pack" was visiting Grand Bahamas regularly and to them, I was "the artista". And a good drinking buddy, a habit I dropped thirty years ago.

As I continued my exhibit schedule internationally, a gallery in Houston exhibited my work from 1973 to 1975, a gentle older lady who put up with my Superstar ambitions until her death in 1976. At that time, I stopped exhibiting in commercial galleries, relying for exposure on universities, museums, and other public institutions.

In 1977, I immigrated to America. I leased a DC-9 to fly my 10,000 or so books, my paintings, a few personal effects and me, to West Palm Beach.

I found a century-old Florida cracker house in a little village, Evinston, Florida, 10 miles south of the library of the University of Florida in Gainesville. Here, a few months later, a young, blue-eyed reporter named Lorraine, came to interview me. She became my wife and continues to manage the various aspects of my career.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Why Texas?

**BENINI:** All through my life journey I visited great and beautiful places and yet, I never felt that I would fit into them. I have criss-crossed this country repeatedly, with Lorraine, from Florida to Eastport, Maine and Westport, Washington, usually to attend my exhibition openings. However, in most of the places that appealed to me, the closest espresso bar was 300 miles away!

We did settle in Hot Springs National Park, charmed by its similarities to the spa cities in northern Italy. And for more than ten years, we lived and worked in a beautiful 1886 Victorian 10,000 sq. ft. building that we had restored according to National Historic Preservation



*Paris's Dilemma, 1981, 47" x 38"*  
*The Pursuit of Silence, 1982, 38" x 60"*  
*The Question, 1985, 29" x 53"*

## Arts Encounters at Benini's!

Since January this year, the Benini Foundation Galleries and Sculpture Ranch have hosted a series of cultural programs in fields related to the arts.

A 14,000 sq. ft. Studios Building on the ranch features galleries, offices and the fine arts library. Here, the last weekend of each month, the work of artists and other creative professionals are highlighted during the Arts Encounters Series.

June 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, for example, sculptor Roland Mayer, from Raubling-Kirchdorf, Germany, is scheduled for a presentation of slides of his monumental works installed around the world.

Gary Simmons, renown for his elegant and precise pen and ink drawings, will present slides, and sign copies of his book, *The Technical Pen*, a popular manual for the medium.

Susan Kirchman, who teaches digital photography at the College of Architecture, Texas A & M University - and is planning to open her contemporary fine arts gallery in Johnson City within the year - will present slides of her photography.

A website was launched recently listing event schedules with artist information at

[www.ArtsEncountersAtBeninis.com](http://www.ArtsEncountersAtBeninis.com).

Past programs have included Sam Spiczka from Minnesota presenting his large-scale sculptures; C.L. Williams, Austin garden designer par excellence speaking on *The Art of Gardens: Design with Time*; Horseshoe Bay architect Marley Porter; Loren Impson's focus on *Ferro Cement Applications for Building and Sculpture*; Johann Eyfells speaking about the works he has on permanent exhibit here; as well as Amazon explorer/journalist Peter Gorman, whose writings have been published in *Omni*, *Wildlife Conservation*, *Mexico's Geo*, and many more international publications.

This cultural enrichment series is one of the components of the Benini Foundation. The name *Foundation* is patterned after the European concept whereby a recognized artist's work can be exhibited and studied, together with the work of artist friends, like the foundations of Cezanne, Leger, and Vasarely, etc. It is a foundation in name only, and not related to a 501c3 non-profit designation.

All events are open to everyone, free of charge. For further information, visit the website for Arts Encounters or call 830-868-5244.



photo by Carol Watson



guidelines. And yet, Arkansas, the Land of Opportunity, was not to be my last move. From there, fortuitous circumstances brought us to the Hill Country; it was love at first sight for this craggy hilltop overlooking a green fertile valley. It was as if all the glimpses of beauty we had found on our journeys had come together, and best of all, I found that in the Texas state of mind, there are no limits.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Has living in Texas affected your work?  
**BENINI:** The move to the Hill Country energized the work. Stars started popping in and out of the freeform canvases. The technique I had developed through the previous 20 years had allowed the paintings to appear three-dimensional. Now the color contrasts got stronger, increasing their depth. Texas even got into the titles: (a first) i.e., Lone Star Shooter, Deep in the Heart, etc.

I also found a quarry in Marble Falls that allowed me to roam into their “bone yard” and acquire unusual shaped granite pieces. So the assemblages that I had always done on a small scale became 10 to 15 foot sculptures.

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*“With this series – Courting Kaos, I felt that I had given up control of the pigments I had mastered in favor of the unexpected power of color.”*

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As we displayed these pieces on the ranch with other sculptures we had acquired over the years, other artist-friends visited and decided to display their works here.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Let’s talk about your paintings.  
**BENINI:** I seem to remember that in all of Leonardo’s extensive notebooks, not one time did he write about his own paintings or about their meaning. I am of the same mind: I would like for the viewer to participate on the journey of discovery of these works of mine.

On a different note, usually artists of my age, with a certain degree of success, have a number of assistants to help execute their work. I work alone, always have. When a painting is finished - and sometimes that is tough to know - I bring it out of the studio and hang it on the wall.

Two years ago, I suddenly stopped painting the dimensional, illusionistic paintings. Color started to direct me into a more abstract work. With this series – Courting Kaos, I felt that I had given up control of the pigments I had mastered in favor of the unexpected power of color. The more I worked on this, the more intrigued I became: first, on a 30” x 40” format and then on a larger scale up to 14 feet tall. I am still working on this series now. It is on an emotional level that seems to have left behind right brain dictum.

**ELEGANT TEXAN:** Who has been, and is, your audience?

**BENINI:** For almost 50 years of painting, I have never been concerned by the audience. I am not a performing artist, so I have the privilege of painting at my easel and showing and selling when and what I wish. Different places, different collectors

*Benini's technique to produce the illusion of dimensionality required as many as 20 layers of acrylics applied by brushes on canvas over flat aluminum.*

*Nightrider, 1990, 48" x 48" | Across the Border, 1986, 42" x 60" | Deep in the Heart, 2000, 80" x 34" | Zen-Trum, 1995, 27" in diameter | Life and Passion, 2001, 46" x 62"*

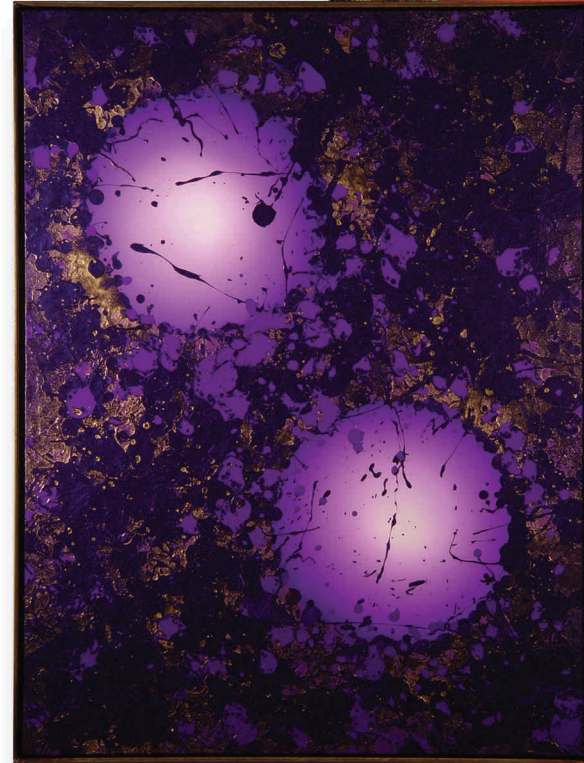
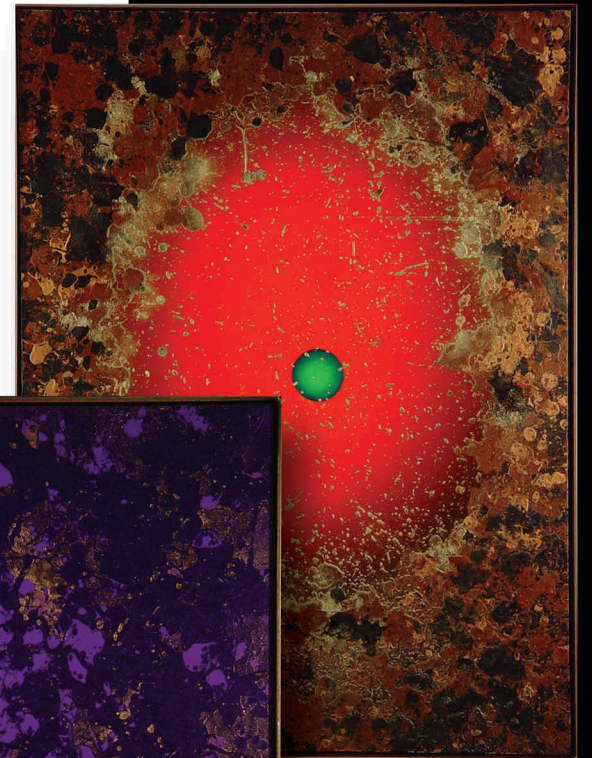
have allowed me to continue my creative journey and I am grateful to all of them.

But now, on certain nights (as I paint only at night), when I take a break, and walk into the exhibit areas of my Studio, I place a chair in the middle of this cavernous metal building and I play different music as loud as possible. At times Bach's Mass in B minor, Monteverdi's Selva Morale e Spirituale, Jerry Lee Lewis' Great Balls of Fire or Willie Nelson's ballads – and suddenly, I become the captain of this space ship hurtling through the universe at 66,000 miles per hour, and I find myself watching a young man in a faraway place 300 years from now standing in front of one of my paintings trying to break my code, and until he does that, he is forced to look at it.

I see that it's almost impossible for a being who, by then, has been genetically programmed to fulfill a special role in a world where almost all is virtual, and thoughts can be all that is needed to create anything. I would like to help him to understand that a primordial human being took the discipline and unthinkable (for him) time to make that painting, and yet this old "sangue Romagnolo" likes the mind wrestling and likes to win. This is my audience now.

Thank you.

*Editor's Note: The Benini Foundation and Sculpture Ranch is open free to all by appointment, by calling 830-868-5244, or visit [www.Benini.com](http://www.Benini.com).*



*(clockwise top to bottom) Courting Chaos: Kronos, 2005, 30" x 40" | Courting Chaos: Palle Sante, 2004, 30" x 40" | Courting Chaos: Into the Blue, Out of the Blue, 2005, 30" x 40" | Shaping Chaos: Love, 2004, 11' x 41" x 45" | Shaping Chaos: De Profundis, 2004, 130" x 147"*