

Plein-air experience teaches artists a new way of seeing

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Imagine carnivorous, voluptuous plants poised on a stark but satin landscape saturated in cantaloupe orange or butternut yellow. Now add robotic birds or menacing bugs, perfectly oval clouds or perfectly cone-shaped volcanoes.

Surreal imagery like this can exist only in the imagination and art, right?

But look again, this time at your feet by the trail: false hellebore sprouts with straight stalks and unfurling leaves, all lush and green, swollen and silky, alien and within arm's reach.

"That false hellebore, I can maybe make that an orange plant coming out of the desert," said Linda Infante-Lyons, who paints fantastical worlds in her studio but finds form and vision "en plein air."

That French phrase means "in open air" and refers to painting or drawing outdoors. Nineteenth-century realist painters did studies outdoors before revising their work indoors; the Impressionists of the mid-19th century went outdoors with tubes of paint to express real light through color and put trust in the eye.

Masterful works by artists including Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir continue to dazzle us, but contemporary artists still paint from porch, trail, backyard and avenue. Infante-Lyons prefers the Chugach Mountains but doesn't exhibit her plein-air paintings or fine-tune them in the studio or even use them as studies for larger works. She goes outside to paint as "an exercise in observation, a way to capture on paper and in my mind the essence of the scene before me," she said. "The whole idea is that you get to stop and look and absorb what's around you. By painting, you see your surroundings in a different way." "Initially it's difficult," said Ayse Gilbert, whose work appeared alongside Infante-Lyons' in the Artique Ltd. gallery last month. "You're distracted by the wind, the bugs, other people interested in what you're doing. But I like how it loosens up the artwork. You have very little time; you have to make decisions very quickly. You have to call where the shadows are going to be, what colors you're going to use."

For her, capturing the right light is what it's about, and Wisconsin painter Larry Seiler agrees. "A photograph is made through the bias of a lens that captures light, pushes for light and in so doing reduces darks to extreme darks, losing a sense of color, indirect light and so forth," he explained in an e-mail. "On the other hand, when painting on location, one finds that the eyes do not have such restriction and are free to experience all of nature, including the shadows."

A WAY TO SEE AND TRAVEL

If you Google "plein air painting," you'll find workshops and outings in Tuscany and Slovenia, Italy and Ecuador, Canada and Scotland, Ireland and Greece, Juneau and Homer.

Judging from the options, many people think of plein-air painting as a good way to see the world, experiencing new environments, understanding different cultures.

Seiler certainly believes in the technique's capacity for elevating the power of observation. He spent 17 years painting wildlife art before realizing the absurdity of painting the outdoors while

Photo by MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News - Anchorage artist Linda Infante-Lyons paints with watercolors on a slope south of Flattop Mountain. Infante-Lyons leads hiking-painting outings for a tour company.



spending up to 18 hours at a time in his studio meticulously attending to every feather, every fish scale, every plant.

He even underwent a transformation of sorts after seeing an award-winning plein-air painting in a juried show. Close up, he found the painting hideous and sloppy, but as he walked away in disgust, "all those crazy, hasty, painterly expressive bold marks had in four or five paces come together to create the most convincing waterfall I had ever witnessed in a work of art," he recalled. "It is as though I could hear the roar and the splash of water over the rocks." He took up plein-air painting almost exclusively and now conducts workshops all over the country, including Alaska. He even wrote a book about it: "Landscape Painting: The Art of Seeing and Doing."

As far as Seiler is concerned, working in the studio means losing the immediacy, truth and beauty of the moment.

"Outdoors, I came to understand that painting is a means by which to see -- and to see more deeply," he explained. "The first months and years of plein-air painting is ... learning to observe, to see more deeply and painting to hold to an integrity, an honesty of that which is experienced and seen."

Catching the moment doesn't always come easy, said Steven Gordon, an accomplished landscape painter in Anchorage. The challenges of dealing with changing light and shaping a frame out of a scene that expands before you can make the work daunting, he said, but "when you do capture the energy of having to work quickly and get the colors just right and just grab it, there's nothing like it."

Gordon rarely paints outside anymore but taught a five-day plein-air workshop at the Center for Creative Renewal in Halibut Cove last summer and has taken people on plein-air llama treks too. Painting outdoors appeals to many people, he said.

"The natural landscape is so beautiful and really inspiring, so for people who have an interest in the arts, painting and drawing, it combines two things they like," he said. "Some people might not be naturalists, knowing the names of all the plants, but this just gives them a different mode of looking and being in a place."

Infante-Lyons leads one-day plein-air outings through the Xtremely Alaska Wilderness Guide Service of Anchorage. Visitors appreciate getting out into the wilderness for a change, she said.

"They're on trains, buses and cruises and they have a great time, but they never have a chance to sit and smell and look and listen."

Last week, she took fellow guides to the backside of Flattop for a taste of plein-air painting. They looked sure of foot on the trail but nervous about taking up the brush. After prompts and encouragement, each completed a postcard-size landscape painting in watercolor.

"This is great," said Jill Follett, a biologist who guides bird-watching tours. "Adults don't get to play with paint unless they're artists or something."

"Or they have kids," said Anthony Lapekas, a college student from Michigan who now works as a guide in training.

True enough, but plenty of people travel from continent to continent, state to state, town to town to paint in new outdoor environments and pay for workshops. In July, Seiler will instruct several workshops in Juneau and Gerald Brommer will teach a weeklong session at the Center for Creative Renewal in Halibut Cove.

Less-formal gatherings and hikes take place all the time, depending on Mother Nature.

SUNBURN AND BUGS

Painting outside has a romantic feel, but the elements can seem far more banal than quixotic. Rain can dampen your mood, and wind can ruffle your feathers; sunshine can stifle your energy, and bugs can drive you crazy.

Yes, bugs: Infante-Lyons re-creates them in oil, but Gordon re-creates them in memory. He recalls trying to keep gnats, flies and mosquitoes out of his face while dealing with wet brushes and a loaded palette.

"Oil paints dry slowly," he said. "Inevitably you get some on yourself, you get it everywhere, and then get little bugs and stuff flying around, so you swat at them and get paint all over your face." Over the course of several hours, the sun moves and often ends up at your face, he continued, which is why Impressionists often used umbrellas or wore wide-brimmed hats.

Painting in the studio vs. outdoors is "sort of like a comparison between cooking in your kitchen and cooking in a camp stove," said Gordon, who mostly paints indoors these days. "It's just a lot easier working in the studio as far as setup, weather, lighting, etc."

Nowadays he takes plenty of photographs and paints from them, partly because he likes working with oil in large formats and needs lots of time to do it. He uses painterly brush strokes and works and reworks the paint.

"To capture the light and color of the moment outdoors, you have to work quickly," he said, "unless you're working in a tiny format with tiny brushes, and I'm not really interested in that."

Gilbert works both large and small but sticks to smaller canvasses when outdoors, say 8 or 10 inches by 15 inches. She completes some of these pieces while outside but uses other unfinished sketches as preliminary work for bigger paintings she composes in her studio.

Since she paints on the California and Alaska coasts, wind comes as a matter of course and bugs are minor pests. But the sun sometimes burns and exhausts her.

As for Seiler, he paints year-round and has done it "standing knee- and waist-deep in snow, hauling my gear into remote places, at 13 degrees below zero."

Run-ins with people can be much more unsettling, Seiler said. Sometimes drivers get as close to him as possible when he paints on the roadside, and one time a guy drove right at him. Any unnatural noise can ruin the moment too, said Jan Thurston, a longtime painter and co-owner of the Center for Creative Renewal.

"One day I carried all my paints, board, stool, water, etc., out on the boardwalk at Potter Marsh, sat down to paint, and then the gunshots from the target range across the street started banging," she said via e-mail.

The shots ruined the moment so she left, but after she douses herself in insect repellent and finds quietude, she sometimes slips "into a near-hypnotic state where I seem to cease to exist and the painting becomes one with nature," she said. "It doesn't happen that way all the time, but it does enough to invite me back outside over and over."

It's not about painting a masterpiece, Infante-Lyons said. "The idea is to just enjoy yourself and pick up the essence of the landscape."