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Susan Guy painting en plein air in Baja California. By renowned nature photographer Richard Herrmann.





QUEST FOR NATURE

By Anca Colbert

OJAI ARTISTS OUT *EN PLEIN AIR*, PART TWO

The natural beauty and the light quality around this valley have attracted artists since the 19th century, and continue to do so.

Many painters are drawn to work outdoors, immersing themselves in nature and adding the excitement and the challenge of completing their works within a few hours, before atmospheric conditions shift, which is the essence of plein air painting. The French expression “*en plein air*” means “in the open air.” It is not a particular style, as often believed. It simply refers to the act of painting outdoors as opposed to in a studio.

The appeal of working in natural light started around the mid-19th century, increasing in popularity with the French Impressionists around 1870-1880. Practical, technical improvements (premixed oil paints in tin tubes and the invention of the self-contained easel box with telescopic legs) facilitated the portability of a small studio into the outdoors. The trend spread to Canada and the United States; first to the East Coast and later to the West Coast, mostly California. William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), a foremost American

Impressionist, wrote: “I don’t believe in making pencil sketches and then painting your landscape in your studio. You must be right under the sky.”

The Southern California plein air landscape school flourished around Laguna Beach and Pasadena in the 1920s and inspires disciples to this day. In the Spring 2015 issue of the *Ojai Quarterly* we took a close look at that history and the continued influence of the Impressionist tradition on three local artists: Dan Schultz, Steve Curry and Jennifer Moses. We now consider another three Ojai painters who interpret what they see outdoors through a different lens.

Kristina Grey, Susan Guy and Karen Lewis are all members of the Ojai Studio Artists (OSA) group. Their works are currently on view at the Ojai Valley Museum of History and Art in “Condition Report: The State of OSA, 2015.” The exhibition runs through July 5 and offers a kaleidoscopic panorama of the contemporary visual arts in the Ojai Valley through the 55 artists exhibited. Kristina, Susan and Karen also paint *en plein air*: they do so on rather large canvases because

their technique allows for speed, which also satisfies their impulse for movement.

Major cultural shifts took place in the early 1900s. The advent of photography around 1850 and its growing popularity by 1900, provided the ability to capture “reality” and altered the rapport other visual arts had with their depiction of that reality. For painters, it altered their relationship with and experience of visible reality as “truth,” the notion of “beauty” and the role of art. Around the same time Freud, then Jung, opened the floodgates for individuals to gain awareness of their emotions and impulses; to value their dreams and be in touch with their unconscious. Huge shifts in consciousness occurred, which played a key role in the development of art movements like Fauvism, Dada, Surrealism and Expressionism.

KRISTINA GREY is a painter, sculptor and writer; a multi-talented artist who has explored and embraced her creativity with gusto. Born in Hollywood, Kris has spent most of her life in the Los Angeles area and Ojai. Well-educated in the arts, humanities and psychology, she is one of the original



Above: Susan Guy painting in the Grand Canyon.
Above left: Karen Lewis' Matilija Poppy Triptych.

members of OSA, who participated in their first Studio Tour in 1984. After a pause of a few years devoted to raising her grandson, she recently returned to her home in Ojai and her love of painting in her studio and around the valley.

We talked about the importance of nature in her life and work, and her experiences with plein air painting. Strongly inspired by André Derain, Matisse and the Fauves, she also attributes her main influences to Kandinsky and German Expressionists, Philip Guston and Abstract Expressionists, and Joni Mitchell. She credits Gerd Koch for teaching her how to load a brush with two or three colors, a technique which allows her to apply paint with large brushes, fast, in bold strokes, using her whole body, not just her wrist; Kris loves the exhilarating, physical experience of working on large canvases in the open air.

“I believe we all resonate to landscape whether we’re conscious of it or not. The earth is our sacred home, our mother. She imprints us, feeds us, protects us and inspires us.”

Kris shares vivid memories and

expresses them in a quiet, deliberate manner. She recalls the excitement of “total immersion” she experienced when she first discovered painting in high school. That intense joy in the sheer process clearly permeates her being when she talks about painting. She has always been drawn to music and dancing; painting feels to her “more like jazz.” Her love of motion and rhythm frees her feelings and guides her expression. In “Campos de Oro” (“Fields of Gold”) a plein air painting of the open fields off the road to Lake Casitas, the vibrational intensity of the colors brings to mind the French surrealist poet Paul Eluard’s words: yes, indeed, “the earth is blue like an orange”!

Her favorite time of day to paint is the early morning, when “everything is waking up” and her own energy is high.

“As a child, the smell of grasses, herbs and trees intoxicated me.”

“When I paint landscape, I attempt to merge into the scene. I want to become the trees, valleys and mountains. I don’t wish to reproduce what I see. I seek to engage in a dialog; to respond to it emotionally. While the natural landscape sounds its spiritual symphony of place and time, I attempt

to harmonize with it. If the tree trumpets tones of green, I might respond with notes of blue, turquoise, and yellow. I’m led by my feelings, unconscious, intuition and profound love of nature.”

KAREN K. LEWIS is an artist with an appetite and gift for painting everything and everyone in her life. Primarily a studio painter and printmaker, she prefers to paint her landscapes outdoors, in oils, and on location. To paint the mountains and beaches of Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, she braves the wind, and sometimes the cold, equipped with her home-made plein air studio on wheels. Her recent show at the The Oaks Gallery offered a perspective on her evolving, complex approach to plein air painting, which includes landscapes, flowers, fruits and vegetables, and anything that catches her eye: “I often set out to paint a ‘view’ — only to arrive home with a ‘still life.’ Matilija poppies in the field or in a friend’s backyard, artichokes in bloom, and even leaves on a grass lawn.” Speaking of “Matilija Poppies,” a triptych she painted on Ladera Road, she says: “The Matilijas

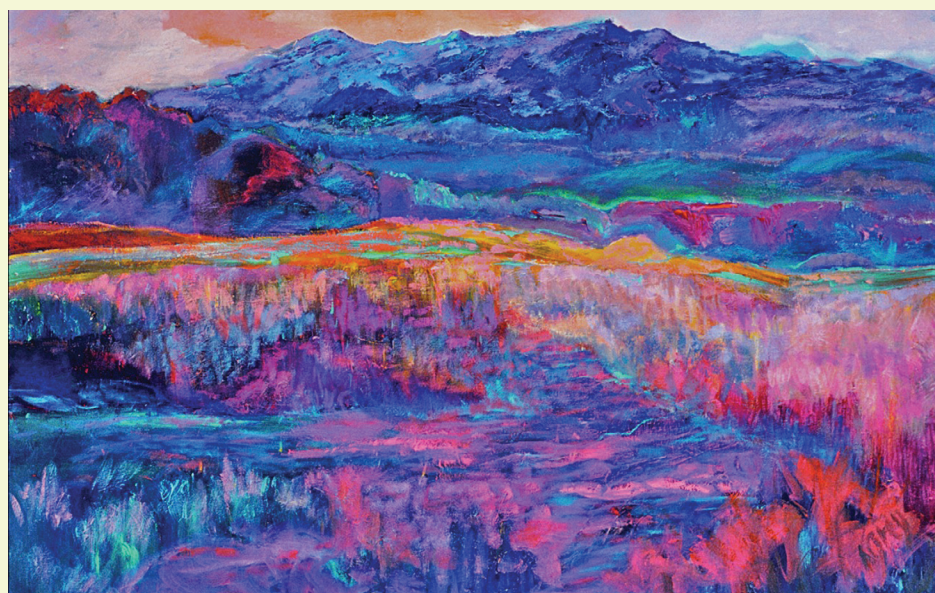
Right: Kristina Grey's "Campos de Oro." Acrylic on canvas.

Below right: Karen Lewis' "Blooming Artichokes." Oil on canvas.

Opposite Page: Susan Guy's "Topas from Mercer." Oil on canvas.

"LA TERRE EST BLEUE COMME UNE ORANGE." (THE EARTH IS BLUE LIKE AN ORANGE)

— Paul Eluard, *L'amour, la poésie*, 1929



move with the wind, like tissue, it's not easy being a plein air painter!" Karen loves to paint. "Almost everything I see inspires me to paint." That comes across in an abundantly clear manner. She loves to prime her canvases with black gesso on top of which she can contrast color wildly. She works large, in sweeping bold brushstrokes "saturated with ripe, richly textured colors." She loves her work. She loves every minute of it.

Spontaneity and passion are Karen's charming traits as a person and driving force as an artist. A well-educated artist (she holds a BA in Art from UCLA and an MFA from Lehman College, New York), a seasoned teacher with great knowledge of art history, Karen's work does not come from a lot of angst, sorrow or introspection, as is the case with so many of the German Expressionists (Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein) she admires. It's a visual response to everything around her. She goes with the flow of her finely tuned intuition for capturing on canvas what speaks to her. "I observe carefully, but I try not to paint carefully. I want to make sure that there's an expressive, spontaneous gesture as I paint. My strategy? Allow accidents to happen."

Born in Los Angeles, she lived in Washington, D.C., Dallas and New York. In

1990 she returned to California and settled in Ojai. A member of OSA since 1991, she opens her popular "Art Barn" studio every year for their October Studio Tour.

In the '50s, while at UCLA, she studied

with Jan Stussy and Anita Delano; discovered the Abstract Expressionists; and soaked in the effervescent Los Angeles art scene. After marrying and moving to D.C., she discovered Nicholas de Staël at



the Phillips Collection, the Rothkos at the Corcoran, and studied with Jacob Kainen, a painter active in Roosevelt's WPA program. Kainen, who had a Milton Avery approach, had a significant influence on her: "Get rid of the knife," he said. "Start using brushes and turpentine." In 1964 Karen moved with her family to New York. It is then, for the first time in her life, that she felt "I am an artist."

Through a long and prolific career, Karen's effusive and contagious *joie de vivre* emerges... She paints strong. She paints large. She paints light on dark. She paints wild and bold.

SUSAN GUY is a self-taught painter who draws her inspiration from the nature surrounding Ojai. Born in New Zealand, at the age of ten she moved with her family to San Diego. She secretly knew from age five that she wanted to be a painter, but not until years later, after completing college and establishing her professional career, did she embrace her childhood dream when she moved to Ojai 14 years ago. While resisting traditional training, she joined the TOPA Group of Ojai plein air artists for a few years, and started experimenting with watercolors before switching to oils. She likes to paint in the evening, sometimes even after dark, because she "feels it better"

at that time. What is that "it" for her? The interplay between nature and emotion. "Painting is dancing with nature. I open my soul to the mountains and trees and they speak. Our energy intertwines in paint." Susan, a practicing psychiatrist, is aware that painting is a form of her own therapy. Setting aside her analytical mind, she surrenders to her intuition: "It's like wearing glasses that allow you to see the energy and spirit." She feels physically different when she's in nature. See how her "Topas from Mercer" dance with the trees and the clouds!

She has been drawn to the early landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe and to Maynard Dixon's visions of the West, two great American pioneers. She also loves Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter painters.

Susan is a boldly intuitive artist and an adventurous explorer who has developed her own lightweight, highly portable backpack for her hikes in the Sierras and her daring expeditions *en plein air*. "When I paint, I go out into nature with my backpack. Instead of a studio I have this 25-year-old pack; old and worn and covered with splotches of color and filled with a box of paints, a cheap easel, brushes, duct tape, water, and a coat to protect me from the cold. I paint on larger canvases; they don't fit in, and so I carry those in my hands."

A sense of excitement permeates her story telling about her adventures in nature. She talks with great animation, hardly able to contain the joyful energy flowing through her. "The Earth is the key thing I'm trying to manifest in my painting. I don't plan anything. I don't sketch. I don't ever paint from photos; it's about catching the movement, the energy, the wind. The colors are not representational, they are energy."

Susan's plein air work reflects her explorations in our National Forests and National Parks, as well as the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy properties. It is shown on an ongoing basis at the Ventura County Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente, the Ojai Chamber of Commerce, and The Ojai Arts Center Gallery. Susan is a member of OSA since 2012 and will be participating this October in their annual Studio Tour. It is her hope that her paintings will help promote environmental conservation.

The shifts in perception of reality around 1900 are echoed in the subjective response to nature our three Ojai artists express in their works.

Fauvism was a short-lived avant-garde painting movement born in Paris around 1905; the first to distance itself from Impressionism and other traditional ways of perception. It is typified by the work of Matisse and Derain. The Fauves ("wild beasts") were characterized by vivid, non-realistic colors juxtaposed in vibrant contrast, the use of bold brushstrokes, and a free treatment of form. A little later, between 1910 and 1925, Expressionist artists (mostly active in Germany) took even bolder, more exaggerated steps in their urge to express highly subjective, emotional experiences rather than a depiction of the external world. Kirchner, Nolde, Kokoshka are among the most influential figures.

The relationship between nature and artists is a perpetual one. Artists continue to venture *en plein air* and paint in whatever style suits their temperament, with all the excitement provided by nature. The sunshine. The wind. It's different outdoors. The energy, impulses and gestures are different, too. The breath changes. It's easier to be open to emotions; the unknown; the wild; the spiritual.

For some artists, the illusion of painting "reality" vanishes. Their vision, transformed through the prism of the inner self projecting itself unto canvas, shifts from a depiction of the outer nature to a reflection of the artist's own nature. ☺