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Tualatin artist paints 'en plein air'

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Anna Lancaster pulls inspiration for her oil paintings from Oregon's scenery



TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Tualatin resident Anna Lancaster shares her process of plein air painting at Mountain Side Lavender Farm.

Lavender fields erupt down a Hillsboro hillside and an overcast sky slowly begins parting to make way for the sun. By the time the clouds clear, Mount Hood will be visible on the horizon and the sunlight will flirt with noontime shadows.

All the while, [Anna Lancaster](#) stands in front of a canvas and easel at the top of the hill, painting the scene before her.

"You're taking a little bit of a gamble when you do a larger piece. Because the difference between today and yesterday — the lighting is going to be totally different. Obviously, I can't see the mountain," Lancaster said, gesturing to the cloud-covered sky. "Fortunately, I got that part of the painting about finished. So as long as we get a little bit of the sun coming in, I should be able to judge the shadows."

Lancaster, a Tualatin resident, had only been working on this painting at Mountain Side Lavender Farm for a day, but already, the scene before her had shifted. And with plein air painting, time is always the biggest hurdle. Since much of outdoor

painting is centered around the light and shadows at a particular time of day, even the difference between morning and afternoon can change everything.

"When you're a plein air painter, the 10-day forecast is your friend," Lancaster, 57, said. "You have to work quickly."

Usually, plein air painters begin by finding the darkest note of a scene and marking it with a single brush stroke. Neutral dark colors are added to establish where the shadows are, she said, and then the artist begins to add in their best guess at the rest of the colors and finding where light needs to hit. During this stage, working fast is key because the light can change in an instant. Establishing whether the interpretation works better as a high key painting (lighter with low contrast) or a low key painting (darker with high contrast) is essential to remembering and maintaining the integrity of the scene.

"Now obviously, if I were starting today, it'd be a low key contrast. A lot more subtle contrast than yesterday when it was bright, clear sunshine," Lancaster said as she looked at the vibrant painting she was creating for the Oregon Lavender Paint Out competition. "The one thing that plein air painters always have to do is you go with what you start with."

TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Tualatin resident Anna Lancaster holds a painting she painted at Mountain Side Lavender Farm.

For Lancaster, morning clouds rolling in didn't mean anything except that she had to wait a little longer to get going, or to remember a little harder what the day before looked like. Formerly a graphic artist and water colorist, Lancaster has only been pursuing this style of painting in earnest for five years, and something that she feels keeps her constantly learning.



TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Tualatin resident Anna Lancaster paints a scene at Mountain Side Lavender Farm.



“Most artists will tell you that they’re always learning and always studying,” she said. “As you meet people, see things, have new life experiences, your work changes just with that.”

Lancaster grew up drawing at the encouragement of her artistically inclined father and older brother. Eventually, her drawing evolved into water color painting, which turned into a graphic art career in the age before personal computers. Back when she had her children in the 1980s, the graphic art world changed enough that Lancaster’s skills became obsolete. Though she’d ultimately learn many of the new tricks of the trade, the natural career break provided an opportunity to dive into oil painting and find a satisfaction that water colors had not provided.

Previously self-taught in her art, that all changed when Lancaster saw a flyer at a Beaverton art store for a painting class in 1993. That led her to work under the tutelage of Tigard’s Carol Stone, a former professional portrait painter. From Stone, Lancaster learned how to “indirectly” paint, a style that utilizes layering and time. She studied that style for years in the 1990s, not knowing that she would later adopt a painting style that called for the exact opposite technique.

Plein air painting, as Lancaster realized shortly after trying it the first time, relies upon the method of “direct” painting, a quicker style that allows the artist to catch the light before too much time passes.

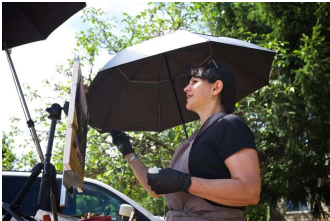
“I came to understand that I was going to have to actually learn a different method of painting,” she said. “Five years into it, I feel like a beginner in comparison to the talent that’s around Oregon.”

Because of its abundant natural beauty, Lancaster said, Oregon is a haven for many plein air artists. Others like her are driven to create outside and attempt to re-imagine the world onto their canvasses.

“I feel like art is an expression of just the beauty that I enjoy, that God has given us,” she said, watching as the sun attempted to peer through a break in the clouds. “It’s hard not to look at this and want to rejoice in it, participate in it and try to bring it inside.”

See the work

- A public showing of works from the Oregon Lavender Paint Out competition will be held July 11-12 at Chehalem Cultural Center, 415 E Sheridan St. in Newberg.
- Anna Lancaster can also be found at Tualatin's ArtSplash Art Show and Sale July 24-26.
- Next month, she will be participating in the Pacific Northwest Plein Air competition, Eugene! Create, and the Hillsboro Plein Air competition.
- You can regularly find her paintings at The Marilyn Affolter Fine Art Gallery, 325 N.E. Evans St. in McMinnville.



TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Tualatin resident Anna Lancaster shades herself with umbrellas as she paints a scene at Mountain Side Lavender Farm.

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