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TODAY'S MASTERS™

Three Eastern Artists and One Western Museum Create the Perfect Storm

By MARY CASSAI



Most Americans are familiar, if only through the popular book and film of the same name, with the Atlantic weather pattern known as the “perfect storm.” This once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon stems from the collision of a Nor’easter (coupled with arctic air pushing downward) with moist, southern air pushed upward by hurricane-force winds.

Perfect storms can also happen in the art world when certain elements line up perfectly, even if they are vast distances apart. Such a storm began in 2004, when three respected New York State artists —

the realist Judy Abbott (b. 1946), the expressionist Katharine McKenna (b. 1956), and the symbolist Eva van Rijn (b. 1936) — happened to appear together in a group show. There they realized they all had been spending a lifetime of summers capturing the West in oils. This coincidence inspired them to exhibit together, which made particular sense because their styles are so distinctive. The only question unanswered was *where* to exhibit.

Meanwhile, some 2,500 miles west of Manhattan, a new director had been appointed at Flagstaff’s Museum of Northern Arizona

(MNA): Fortunately, Dr. Robert Breunig had supervised McKenna during the summers she worked at that museum during college. Since its founding in 1928 by the anthropologist Harold Colton and his artist-wife Mary, MNA’s longstanding mission has been to interpret — through science and art — the Colorado Plateau, which encompasses much of Arizona and Utah as well as portions of Colorado and New Mexico.

McKenna soon visited Breunig, who noted that MNA would celebrate its 80th anniversary in 2008. They agreed it might be appropriate to mark this milestone with an artist residency and exhibition of the works produced during it, but, as McKenna pointed out later, new museum directors have many issues to address. A more urgent task was filling the curatorship of fine arts vacant since the 1980s. In 2005, Breunig hired scholar Alan Petersen, who specializes in 19th-century American art, including the Hudson River School. Within the year, Judy Abbott, already visiting family in Flagstaff, met with Breunig and Petersen. “Your timing is perfect!” Breunig told her. “We’re on the

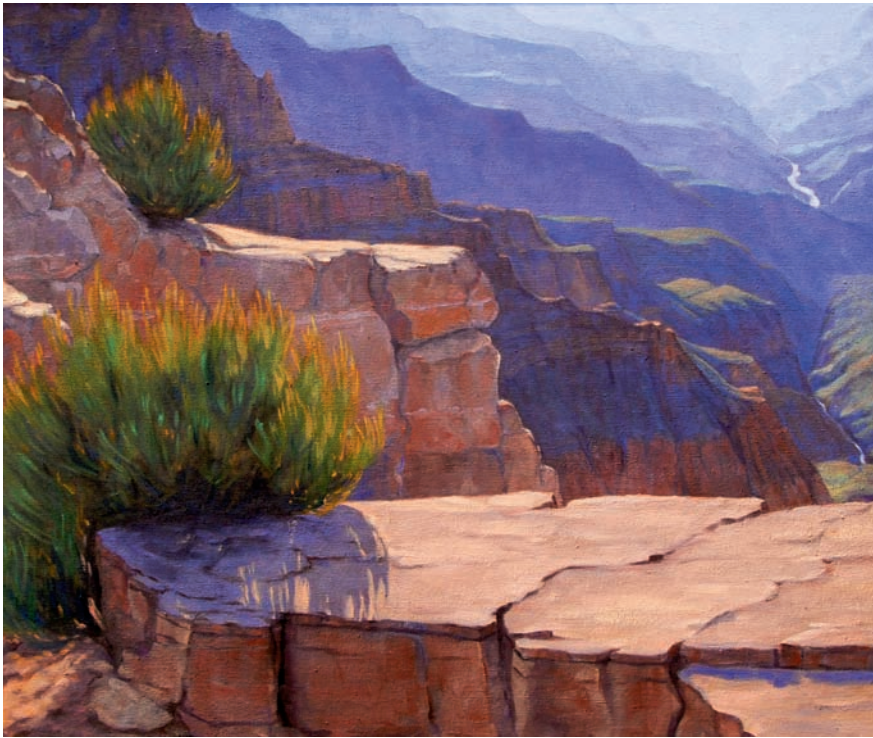


EVA VAN RIJN (b. 1936)

PIEDRA LUMBRE

2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 24 IN.

\$3,500 FROM THE ARTIST



EVA VAN RIJN (b. 1936)
THE BLUE DISTANCES
 2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 36 IN.
 PRIVATE COLLECTION

Eva van Rijn

During World War II, five-year-old Eva van Rijn was brought to the U.S. by her parents from their native Holland. She has lived in the Catskill mountains of New York ever since, and now serves as a trustee of the Woodstock Artists Association. If van Rijn has one mission in life, it is to restore the qualities of the Hudson River School to contemporary art: “Modern painting tends to be so flat-surfaced, so it’s always been my goal to imitate the Hudson River painters by introducing depth. I want to lead viewers into the painting, in a kind of search.” Indeed, this symbolizes for van Rijn the human search into life’s mystery.

Her painting *Piedra Lumbre* (Spanish for “glowing rock”) constitutes one such search. Cliffs of sedimentary rock rear up like packed pillars of stone pushed together to form alternating horizontals of saffron and off-white. Wherever sunlight strikes, the stone glows like a jewel; in the shadowed crevices, it glows metallic blue. The dark layer at the top, van Rijn says, is volcanic ash from a later eruption. From a distance, the great crevice here looks like a cave, or a passage through the cliff. “It does until you get in there,” says van Rijn. “But there is no exit!”

verge of announcing our first artist-in-residence program — and we wonder if the three of you would accept our first award.”

Naturally the answer was a resounding yes, and the trio’s residency began in autumn 2007 with 36 new oils (a dozen per artist). McKenna served as the project’s facilitator, while Abbott mastered the details and van Rijn kept the team focused on “the big picture.” In December 2008, their creations were unveiled to public and critical acclaim in the exhibition *Painted Journeys on the Colorado Plateau*, which will remain on view at MNA until May 26.

“Bringing artists to MNA for this residency,” Petersen notes, “honors their creative work and gives visitors the opportunity to interact with them, to see the amazing diversity of their perspectives. Visitors also discover that the longstanding migration of Eastern artists westward is alive and well in America. MNA benefits, too, of course. We have one of the finest collections documenting the Colorado Plateau — some 5,000 works, representing Native Americans like Harrison Begay, Fred Kabotie, and Dan Namingha, as well as Anglos like Merrill Mahaffey, Ed Mell, Edgar Payne, and Maynard Dixon. This residency increases our exposure, and we are particularly pleased that MNA has acquired one exhibited painting from each artist for its permanent collection.”

KATHARINE MCKENNA (b. 1956)
THE GRAND CANYON, AZ
 2008, OIL ON LINEN, 32 x 36 IN.
 \$7,500 FROM THE ARTIST





KATHARINE MCKENNA (b. 1956)
SACRED PEAKS, LEUPP, AZ
 2007, OIL ON LINEN, 28 x 32 IN.
 \$6,100 FROM THE ARTIST

all, the German Expressionists. Yet her early training in a different artform constitutes another powerful factor: Born in California and raised in Ward, Colorado, McKenna studied for a career as a classical pianist, which surely accounts for the rhythm of her paintings. Moreover, the summers she spent with her paleontologist father sifting for dinosaur fossils can be glimpsed in McKenna's heightened sense of the tactile — her love for the feel and heft of things.

McKenna's cubism and expressionism are nowhere better represented than in her scene of *The Grand Canyon, AZ*. This giant gash in the earth, truly a natural wonder, is presented as a riot of geological shapes and vivid colors, visible even in the brush-studded steps leading to

By artfully skewing the whole scene to the left in *The Blue Distances*, van Rijn throws open a dramatic vista packed with rock formations, atmosphere, and a memorable perspective. Like Cézanne, she grants us the normally impossible ability to view the foreground, the receding rock masses to the left, and the Colorado River a mile below — all at the same time. What the artist actually saw was not a stunning individual shape (as glimpsed in *Piedra Lumbre*), but an endless procession of staggering rock forms, all heaved up by a massive tectonic shift in the earth's surface millennia ago and now marching into infinity.

The haze is itself a mystery. "Usually it's the sun," van Rijn explains. "When the sun is low, it turns the atmosphere blue. But this was made in a year of great forest fires. Smoke blows in with the wind, and just hangs there, creating the blue distances." And the Colorado? The viewer knows it's there, but must search for it. There it is, thousands of feet below on the right: a hair's breadth of silver pressed by rock masses on both sides and disappearing from sight — until the last stretch, when the rocks appear to change their minds, letting the river break free.

The MNA exhibition is especially meaningful for van Rijn because 2009 marks her 50th consecutive year painting the West, an anniversary that might even impress her collateral ancestor Rembrandt van Rijn.

Katharine McKenna

Although she co-founded the Hudson Valley's Arts Society of Kingston in 1995, and currently serves as its president, Katharine McKenna makes brilliantly colored, stylized interpretations of the *Western* landscape. Her paintings suggest the influence of Cézanne, early Fauves such as Matisse and Dufy, and, above

JUDY ABBOTT (b. 1946)
LAND OF BIG ENOUGH AND TIME ENOUGH
 2008, OIL ON BOARD, 20 x 16 IN.
 \$6,000 FROM THE ARTIST





JUDY ABBOTT (b. 1946)
FROM RED MOUNTAIN
 2008, OIL ON BOARD, 12 X 8 IN.
 \$3,600 FROM THE ARTIST

the canyon floor 5,000 feet below. In the upper half of the painting, the muddy brown Colorado River meanders in and out among these geological forms.

By contrast, strongly defined green vegetation on horizontal planes of ruddy gold farmland creates an ordered beauty in McKenna's *Sacred Peaks, Leupp, AZ*. In depicting this place sacred to Navajo worship, the artist appears to use this treatment out of reverence for the spiritual. Plants swaying rhythmically in the foreground set the painting in motion and lead our eye toward larger growth in the middle distance, where branches rise like arms in praise. These are mountains sacred to the Navajo, who must always live in sight of them. Not only do these hills supply life-giving water with their melting snows,

but they also lift hearts to the Creator because they are so near heaven. McKenna's colors are particularly striking here: The gold of the volcano's foreground, its shape articulated by brushstrokes of crimson, its dark maw filled with banked fire, and the royal-blue peak with ridges formed by delicate dark blue strokes and hidden ravines caught by the sun — all set against a sky of light-blue verticals.

"I grew up in the middle of all this," says McKenna. "These colors are my interior garden, and when I paint them, I express my joy at being part of it all since childhood."

Judy Abbott

Although the Native American vantage is of interest to all three artists, it is curator-artist Judy Abbott who brings to the MNA exhibition a very personal outlook steeped in the Esopus heritage of her own mother. "I look at all of this as a Divine gift," Abbott says. Art imbued with such belief is not to be looked at, but rather to be meditated upon. "Every time I go out there and search for the right place, it's more as if it's looking for me. And when I find it, I am so awestruck I am unable to begin painting, sometimes for days."

Abbott's exultation bears fruit in paintings such as the luminous *From Red Mountain*, where her focus is on "the getting there." Every detail is meticulously recorded: the red mud clumps on the trail deposited during a sudden wash; the blue-green shrubs with each leaf catching sunlight; and the guardian pines farther along closing in on the viewer until suddenly she is faced with a blind turn. It is beyond this spot, Abbott shows us, that the scene bursts into a vast open horizontal.

Abbott herself was amazed by the scene depicted in *Land of Big Enough and Time Enough*. "I had just finished *The Colorado River from Navajo Bridge*, and when I turned to go back to my car, there it was! I stopped in my tracks and sank down in front of it." Indeed, if there is any painting in the MNA exhibition that will inspire a future owner to sink to his knees and gaze at it by candlelight, surely it is *Land of Big Enough and Time Enough*. Here Abbott lifts viewers thousands of feet into the air, face to face with a huge mass of red sandstone rearing up like a living thing. Then, still staggering, our eyes are drawn to the golden monolith at center: Soft pillars rise at its crest, resting on haunches of sandstone. Sunlight playing on rock folds conveys the sense that the monolith is spinning and the air swirling around it. "And to think," marvels Abbott, "that I almost missed it."

Delighted with such paintings, MNA curator Alan Petersen is amazed at how well the exhibition came together — "like a happy accident," he says.

Or maybe like a perfect storm? ■

MARY CASSAI, PhD, is a freelance arts writer based in New York City. She is currently writing *Blood on the Esopus: A Novel of the Dutch and Indians, which is set in 17th-century New Netherlands*.

Information: Museum of Northern Arizona, 3101 N. Fort Valley Road, Flagstaff, AZ 86001, 928.774.5213, musnag.org