



The Artist's Life: Elizabeth Black

Colorado artist Elizabeth Black paints the canyons where she once worked as a river guide, participates in plein air events to celebrate and preserve the Western landscapes, and uses an adapted mobile home as her studio.

By M. Stephen Doherty

In 1974 when Elizabeth Black was finishing her studies in nursing, she started working as a professional river guide. She began painting small watercolors as a way of recording the landscapes she viewed while leading groups along the rivers in California, Oregon, and Arizona. “The first time I tried painting watercolor sketches, the boat carrying my supplies flipped over and my finished sketches got soaked,”

she recalls. “After getting over my disappointment, I realized that many of the sketches were improved by their swim, and I decided there was a lot more potential to watercolor than I had realized. I took classes and found out more about the medium.”

After two decades of painting Western landscapes in watercolor, Black took classes in oil painting from Rob Gratiot and Mark Daily

at the Art Students League of Denver, and began participating in plein air events. Those experiences led to a long list of exhibitions — including the Colorado Art Open, the Colorado State Fair, the Grand Canyon Celebration of

Last Light on the Tonto
2010, oil, 9 x 12 in.
Private collection

Art, and the Loveland Museum Biennial — awards, and sales, as well as inclusion in the collections of the Rocky Mountain National Park and the Grants Pass Museum of Art.

Although Black spends a great deal of time outdoors painting directly from nature, she also develops larger and more detailed studio pieces from her plein air studies, photographs, and memory. Her studio — built from recycled and repurposed structures and furnishings — is emblematic of her commitment to the environment. “My husband and I have an acre of land in Boulder, Colorado, where we live and operate a Christmas tree farm. We had enough space for me to set up a separate studio building,” Black explains. “A nearby trailer park was getting rid of some old mobile homes, so we moved one onto our property, built a slanted roof over it to support the weight of heavy winter snows and to provide more space for insulation, and gutted most of the interior.”

The renovations left her with a 10 x 30-foot workspace, and the converted back quarter of the trailer where the original bathroom and a bedroom had been became a 10-foot shop and tool room.



Sunrise Over the East Canyon

2010, oil, 8 x 16 in.
Private collection

Black decorated the exterior of the trailer with old hubcaps and license plates, and added a picture window a friend was throwing out to bring more north light into the studio. She organized the interior to include room for her easel, framing equipment, computer, and laptop.

The existing furnace supplies heat, and electricity was run to the trailer, but adding running water proved to be prohibitive and would have required constant heat to keep the pipes from bursting.

Afternoon at Shoshone Point

2010, oil, 8 x 16 in.
Private collection





Morning Traffic

2008, oil, 30 x 40 in.

Collection Best Western Grand Canyon Squire Inn



1. Elizabeth Black standing in the doorway to her studio in Boulder, Colorado.

2. The interior of the studio showing Black's laptop computer and the old kitchen cabinets that now hold art supplies. The large green object is a Morso chopper for cutting frame molding.

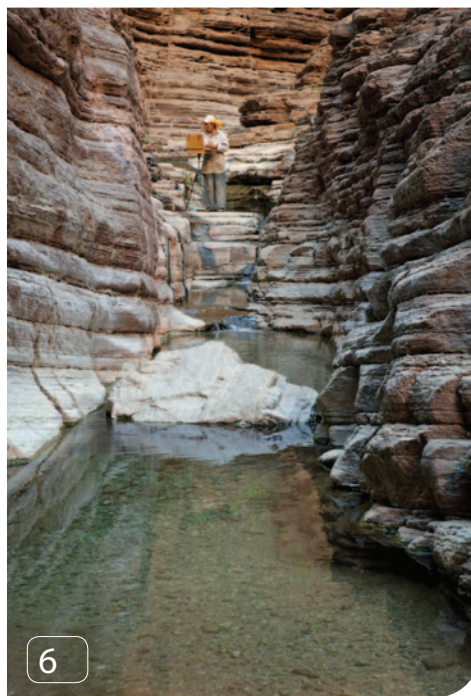
3. The interior of Elizabeth Black's studio from the location of the original kitchen toward bedroom space. *Photos: Christopher Brown*



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4. Elizabeth Black painting on the Yampa River: "Often the best views are from the middle of a river, so I work inside a boat or raft."

5. Black painting in the Grand Canyon near Little Nankoweap: "There were red ants all over the beach, so I had to lay down a tarp to keep them from crawling all over me while I painted."

6. The artist painting in the Grand Canyon near Matkatameba, a slot canyon made of gray rock that reflects the ambient and reflected light: "The challenge at this location was to wade through waist-deep pools of water and slippery rocks with my art supplies and camera to get to the best vantage point for painting." Photos: Christopher Brown

Using her laptop computer to enlarge photographic reference material, Black enhances the images in Photoshop and enlarges details. Insulated, light-proof curtains reduce winter drafts and block sunlight when she project images onto a canvas to draw the outlines of the big shapes. All the furniture in the studio except the drafting table is on casters so she can easily reconfigure the space for different work situations, such as paints in watercolor, which requires a large, flat work surface or accommodating visitors during open studios events. She keeps a Morso chopper in the studio for cutting frame molding because it doesn't generate as much sawdust as a chop saw would.

Black's husband, Christopher Brown, is a professional photographer who often travels with her when she participates in painting events or rafting trips. "We still love to explore the West by boat or on foot, carrying our art-making equipment to the most scenic spots we can find," she explains. She has participated in a number of painting events that aim to raise consciousness about the environment or money for worthy causes. "Recently, I did a series of Land-Use Paintings about the rapidly changing Western landscape, and I produced The Ditch Project, which celebrated the 150th anniversary of the irrigation ditches in Boulder. I've also been part of the Grand Canyon Celebration of Art, which raises money for a new museum." □

ELIZABETH BLACK earned a bachelor of science degree in nursing from the University of California at San Francisco in 1975, and worked as a professional river guide from 1974 through 1995. She studied drawing and watercolor painting at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass, Oregon, and oil painting at Denver's Art Students League. Her paintings have been exhibited with the Watercolor Society of Oregon; the Northwest Watercolor Society; the Blue Heron Gallery in Ashland, Oregon; and Mary Williams Fine Arts in Boulder, Colorado. She has participated in painting events organized by the Grand Canyon Association in Arizona, and the Foothills Art Center, Loveland Museum, and Boulder Center for the Visual Arts, all in Colorado. For more information, visit www.elizabethblackart.com.