

ARTS/LIT

CULTURE SHOCK

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LIGHT AS AIR

Tracy Rocca works to translate experience into canvas

By Maggie Grimason


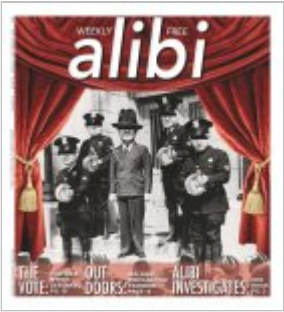


Tracy Rocca works in her Albuquerque studio

COURTESY OF TRACY ROCCA

"I'm not an angsty painter," Tracy Rocca explained as she led me around her orderly—serene, even—studio. The detached building where she paints, tucked behind her Downtown home on a deceptively large lot, was radiant with late afternoon light. Skylights and windows built high onto the walls lit up the single room studio and in turn, the handful of paintings waiting to—in just a few days time—be sent to New York City for the opening of a solo exhibition of Rocca's work at Winston Wächter Fine Art near Hell's Kitchen. The exhibition, titled *Public Lands*, showcases Rocca's large-scale paintings of national parks in the West.

On a broad table, brushes were ordered and

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from the outside world. It makes sense, that this practice was born out of a very different lifestyle that necessitated she carve out space to relax.

Just before she hit on this style of work, Rocca was living in the Bay Area and working in Silicon Valley. The pace of life, she explained was “just frenetic—absolutely insane.” She had always been a painter but in this style, she “found a way to slow down. To turn everything off.” She painted the desert, she painted the sea, exploring landscapes both on-foot and later, in her studio. Looking at her work, viewers might not see a landscape right away, however. What Rocca does is snap simple iPhone photos of these places, and uses them as source material—starting with very rough renderings, and slowly blurring the image through layer after layer of paint, until just the washed, melding fields of color remain. It is like looking at the world through a prism—the suggestion is there, but each object in the frame is distilled to color and light.



Rocca blurs photographs in a slow process that can take years

COURTESY OF TRACY ROCCA

When Rocca describes “slowing down,” she is describing both a mental and physical experience.



as much as a year to complete. The collection of pieces that will be shown in *Public Lands*, for example, took around two years to be created. Looking at the paintings so brilliantly illuminated in Rocca's studio, it was hard to believe they are paintings at all—so seamless is the end result, without a brushstroke evident across the gulf of the canvas—each of which are several feet in length and height. The harder you look, the more nuance you see.

“It's abstract—but the goal is that you're getting a sense of what it feels like to be in these places,” she explained. In this show, Glacier National Park, the Eastern Sierras, the Redwoods and more surface. As Rocca pointed to a painting of the Grand Canyon I suddenly recognized its colors—such distinct shades of blue, purple, red, the gleam of desert sun.

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Each summer Rocca and her family spend four or five weeks exploring preserved natural places such as these. “You come back and people say, 'How was your trip?' and all you can say is, 'It was beautiful,' ” she said—but those words don't quite sum it up. “It's like Georgia O'Keeffe said ” Rocca paraphrased



slowness—to experience the fullness of the place. “I often create compositions that are much more consistent with what I was feeling if it wasn't captured right in the photograph,” she said. “Having the experience as opposed to just the photograph is such a blessing because I often don't get the perfect picture, but I still got what I needed.” The painting created then has a sense of fullness; attached to each one is a snapshot of the place, sure, but also the story—a nine-hour hike in the Redwoods, an inside joke with her children, a long vista—not just the physical evidence. As she works, she puts this energy into her work—the feeling of being somewhere beautiful, among loved ones, and the sense of patience that comes with her style of painting. All cut through with a sense of light—which seems to infer calm.





what you see," Rocca described, the dappled light and shadow, all in motion, "that's the quality that I go for. I use the light as a path to the painting. As a way for you get enveloped by the location." In doing so, Rocca manages to calm herself ("it is absolutely for my mental health," she said of her practice) and aims to perhaps infer some of that calm to viewers as well.

Rocca's *Public Lands* exhibition opens Thursday, Sept. 6 in New York. If you're not making an exodus to the big city any time soon, follow Rocca's work and keep an eye out for openings via her Instagram (@tracyrocca) and on **her website, tracyrocca.com.**

ARTS PAINTING BLUR PUBLIC LANDS TRACY ROCCA

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