

CANYON VIEWS



VOL.28, NO. 2
FALL | WINTER 2021

A PUBLICATION OF GRAND CANYON CONSERVANCY

Catching Up with Artist in Residence Heather L. Johnson

Heather L. Johnson was the Grand Canyon Artist in Residence from May 3 to June 14, 2021. Mindy Riesenbergs spoke with her following her residency to find out what she learned during her time at the canyon.



What was the best thing about your residency?

The invitation to intimately experience, from so many angles, such a unique and complex place as Grand Canyon. I ventured into unique parts of the canyon most don't see and explored and reflected upon these places deeply. During my six weeks there I was able to see and feel contrasts reflected in everything from the raw fragility of the canyon's more remote areas to the gritty logistical realities of what it takes to ensure the safety and comfort of the millions of people who visit it every year.

The opportunity to share insights about the canyon through guided sketch hikes was equally rewarding. I created and led drawing tours meant to foster intimate connections to elements all around us that together comprise the landscape—flora, fauna, minerals, and traces of humanity that are often overlooked. The point was to walk, observe, select, and draw a subject without judgment—to allow an expression of feeling without worrying about whether the drawing is “good” or how closely it resembles its subject. Interpretive rangers were on hand to answer questions and provide historical context, while Grand Canyon Conservancy (GCC) staff members facilitated and documented the process. Each session ended with a group discussion, where participants described what they drew and why, as well as what they learned from the process.

How did you connect with Grand Canyon National Park?

Through conversations and many walks. I spoke to a facilities director, civic engineer, two water reclamation plant operators, a compliance manager, development director, marketing director, program coordinator, CEO, clinic doctor, museum collections specialist, several park rangers and hiking guides, a general store security guy (who is also a playwright), bartenders, retail workers, one superintendent, and many tourists. I walked out around the South Rim making drawings of things I felt attracted to, then fell in love with. And I dove deep into the canyon with half my weight on my back, barely making it out, with five blackened toes and a renewed level of humility to show for it.



What was your methodology to your time as Artist in Residence?

First, I had to let go of any assumptions I'd made about Grand Canyon (based on postcard images, scenes from National Lampoon's *Vacation*, hiking conquest Facebook posts, and a single two-hour visit I had made to the South Rim in 2017 during intense afternoon heat and at the height of the summer tourist season). I wanted to approach it with a clean slate, to see it with fresh eyes and allow the place and its people to guide my decisions, leaving room for some serendipity. Time management is not easy, given the enormous breadth of possibilities and volumes of information that exist about this place, and six weeks pass in the snap of fingers. I relied on intuition to make choices, pursuing a research track that unfolded naturally, spurred on by a growing fascination for what I was learning, amplified by my core interests as an artist. I crammed in as much activity as I could, grabbing opportunities for exploration whenever they emerged. I did not make a lot of art, aside from a collection of field drawings, which I see as byproducts of this research. That part happens now.

What was most surprising to you?

How incredibly kind people were to me at Grand Canyon. People of all ranks, opinions, and persuasions. Folks who are incredibly busy, whose decisions affect many, gave me their time and helped me gain access to sites and structures off limits to most visitors. Random people I met around the Village and in different parts of the park were uplifting and generous as well, providing all sorts of insights stemming from years of collective experience from working, living in, or visiting the canyon.

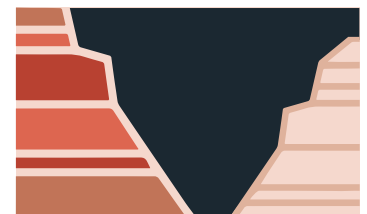
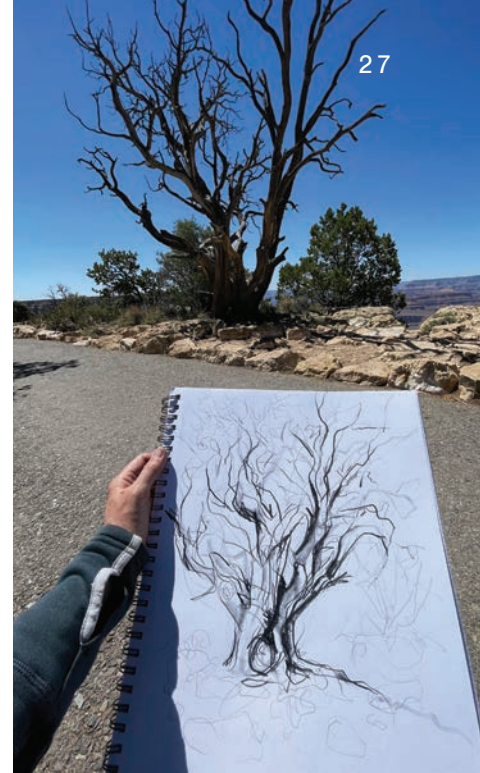
Tell us about things that may have changed for you from pre-residency to post-residency (motivations, influences, ideas, etc.)?

My time at the canyon underscored the rich experiences that arise from walking, listening, slowing down, and paying attention. City life does not encourage this. The hikes I made deep into the canyon humbled me by illuminating how vulnerable we are to dangers everyday life encourages us to forget. I was shown how incredibly vulnerable my own body is in the context of lack of water combined with extreme heat. How easy it is to hurt myself in a moment of lapsed attention. I also learned how beneficial it is to plan and to approach a new situation with humility, as I survived these hikes, and each one made me stronger. Such direct, personal experience has the power to change how anyone moves through life afterward if the lesson sticks. Now, post-residency, I see the vulnerability I experienced reflected heavily in complex larger issues that overwhelm human societies, especially as they relate to how we handle social equity and climate change.

What's next for you as an artist?

I have a great deal of raw material garnered from my canyon experience that is percolating into bodies of art: work that explores the tenacity and persistence of nature and humanity in the face of our own decisions—those bearing the potential to lead to its (and our) destruction, often manifested in the structures we build for our own comfort, entertainment, and ironically, survival. This dichotomy appears in so many forms and territories. I feel my job as an artist is to illuminate this through the filter of my own experience.

To learn more about Heather L. Johnson and her work, visit www.heatherljohnson.com, or follow her on Instagram at @lilbloody or Facebook at @thefrighteningandbeautiful.



**GRAND
CANYON**
ARTIST IN RESIDENCE



GRAND CANYON CONSERVANCY
P.O. BOX 399, GRAND CANYON, AZ 86023

WE INSPIRE GENERATIONS OF PARK CHAMPIONS
TO CHERISH AND SUPPORT THE NATURAL AND
CULTURAL WONDER OF GRAND CANYON.

GRAND CANYON
CONSERVANCY

grandcanyon.org

