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MAGAZINE

Many Artists Began Painting Outside During the Pandemic—And They Might Never Go Back

BY DODIE KAZANJIAN

Ragnar KJartansson
"Hell yeah, I'm a *plein air* cat," Kjartansson says."I've been doing it always."*Skálarfjall at Sunset,* 2020.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, I stopped going to my studio for several months," says Patricia Treib, a Brooklyn-based painter of subtle, melodic, poetic abstractions. "Just traveling the 20 minutes on the train or the 30 minutes on foot seemed perilous at the time. I brought materials to my apartment, but it was difficult to concentrate. Eventually, I began to work outside at various parks in Brooklyn, and it was more of a meditative activity. For several months during the pandemic, painting outdoors was my only means of working."

Treib had worked in parks before—she and her best friend, artist Aliza Nisenbaum, had painted each other's portraits in 2015 in Fort Greene Park. And as it happened, another portrait project turned into an outside adventure once the pandemic limited her movements. Patricia Treib's former student, Heidi Howard, had planned to paint Treib's portrait in her Long Island City studio. But when gentrification drove the artists out of the building and then COVID struck, Treib suggested to Howard that they all meet and paint in Prospect Park. "It was such a beautiful day, with the blooming trees," says Howard, who painted Treib that day. (She often does her portraits in a single three- or four-hour sitting.) "I loved being in the park, discussing ways of seeing as a shared experience, without the baggage of the studio. Sometimes the art world can become too self-reflexive, so actually experiencing the pleasure of sun and flowers together is very important."

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Patricia Treib and Heidi Howard
"Sometimes the art world can become too self-reflexive," says Howard, who painted her friend Patricia Treib, "so actually experiencing the pleasure of sun and flowers together is very important." Patricia Treib, *Billows,* 2021 (above); Heidi Howard, *Patricia Treib Spring,* 2021 (right).

"It seemed like the safest way to get together," Treib tells me. "This is a very different act for me, and takes me out of my element, considering that I usually work in isolation. But, occasionally and especially now, I find it important to work side by side with other artists and to feel a connection among us." Or as the artist Jeremy Miranda put it to me, "painting outdoors has always been an intensely joyful experience. But now there is this layer that makes it feel as though I'm there seeking medicine."

The tradition of plein air painting—painting outdoors—grew in popularity with French artists in the mid–19th century, when, for the first time, they were able to buy portable easels and oil paint in tubes. The idea was to make portraits of nature under the changing conditions of light and weather and season. Going out into the landscape became an important element of French Impressionism, as it had in the United States with the Hudson River School and the Luminists, who practically deified Mother Nature in all her bounties—mountains, forests, wildlife.

Variations of the practice have popped up through the years, from Thomas Cole's 19th-century allegories of nature to the bravura abstractions that Julian Schnabel painted on his Long Island tennis court starting in the 1980s to Cecily Brown's first outdoor mural, a collaboration with local artists and students in Buffalo, New York, this summer. And of course, there's David Hockney, the granddaddy of modern plein air painting with his Grand Canyon works in the 1990s and the famous Yorkshire landscapes he made in the 2000s with his iPhone and iPad. He's continued in the medium, recently painting a 288-foot-long frieze that goes on view at the Musée de l'Orangerie, in Paris, this month. It celebrates the passing of the seasons at his property in Normandy, where he's had a top-notch COVID experience because he's been able to get so much work done.

The idea of an artist going out into nature with palette and easel had become a cliché—something for Sunday painters. Since the pandemic struck, however, more and more artists are working outdoors. The reasons are obvious: safety, freedom from masks, an escape from the great indoors and the ubiquitous online viewing rooms—not to mention that many artists lost their studios for financial or health reasons.

Over the past couple of months, I talked with a number of new-wave plein air artists about how and why they're reinventing the genre.

Esteban Cabeza De Baca
"Reality is so much more interesting than fictional painting in a studio," Cabeza de Baca says. *Medicina Lunar,* 2020.

Howard's partner, Esteban Cabeza de Baca—who joined Howard and Treib's springtime painting picnic in Prospect Park—has painted outdoors all his life. "As a kid, I would paint in the backyard of my great-grandma Bonita's farm," he emails me. "I love painting from nature because if we listen, it teaches us the best way to live. I became really serious about painting en plein air when I met Heidi and Patricia." Cabeza de Baca was born in San Ysidro, California, on the Mexican border, and his work imagines, as he puts it, "what America would look like without borders; but reality is so much more interesting than fictional painting in a studio. Plein air painting helps me talk to my ancestors, but also shows me how to really listen to the land."

"Hell yeah, I am a plein air cat," says Ragnar Kjartansson, Iceland's best-known contemporary artist and a galvanic presence on the international art scene. "I've been doing it always, seriously since around 2006. Love the performative quality of it." Kjartansson does it the old-fashioned way, lugging an easel and paint box into the countryside. The most provocative example is Architecture and Morality, his 2016 paintings of new houses in the contested Israeli settlements on the West Bank. "Anselm Kiefer says

there is no innocent landscape—and he is probably right. This plein air urge—it is almost the artist under the other artist who always wants to break free, the artist who just wants to go out in the weather and paint what there is. I love that approach."

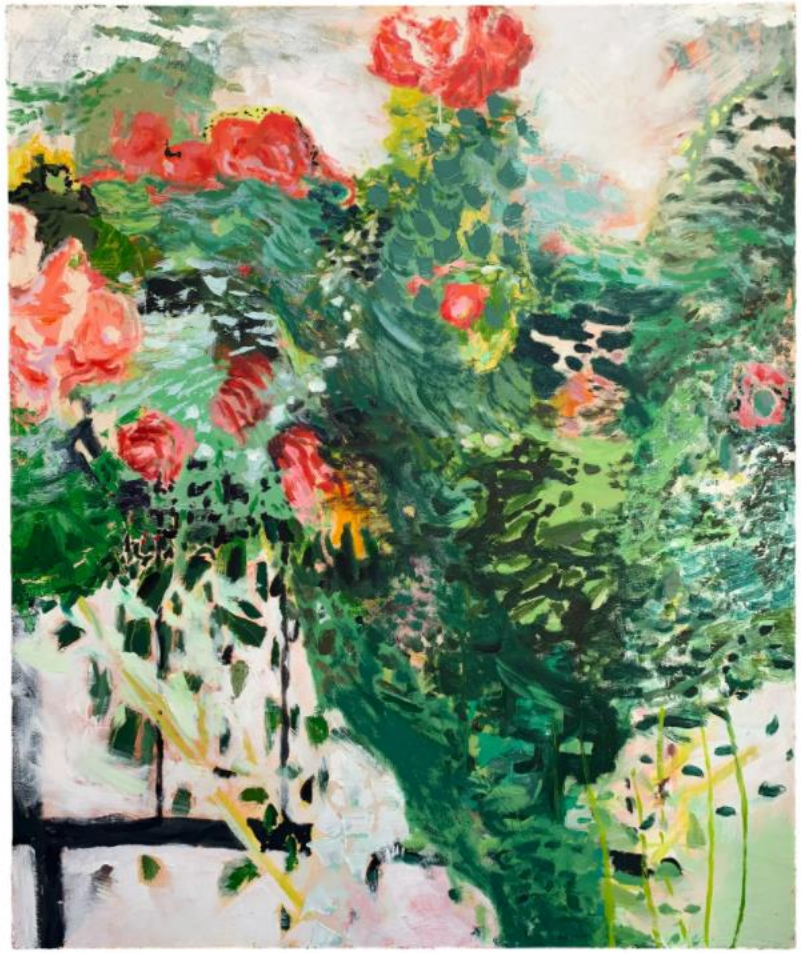
Kjartansson has a remote farm in the south of Iceland, where once a year he helps his neighbors round up the sheep in the highlands and move them to lower ground. "I do the shepherd thing to dig deeper, to get ready for my pastorale," he tells me. "The whole society is focused on sheep. They are like the Pinot Noir and the Chardonnay grapes in the Champagne region—the bass drum of life." He painted a grassy sunset landscape, a work that came to him like a thunderclap. "I was alone, fixing the roof of my house. I did not know how to do it and felt helpless, overwhelmed, and weak. I poured myself a drink and sat in the kitchen, alone at twilight, complete silence for miles. Then, I realized I have to paint, that's something I know how to do. I ran with the colors and the canvas out to the field and knew who I was. Always when I paint en plein air I know who I am."

Elizabeth Peyton
"The portraits took on the color of sunrises—the sky," Peyton says. *Lara, July 2020 #2,* 2020.

For other artists, firmly established in their style and approach, painting outside this past year has opened up new channels. Elizabeth Peyton made her mark with small, astonishingly intimate paintings of friends, celebrities, and historical figures she admires. "When the pandemic began, I wasn't able to have any sittings, inside or outside," she tells me. "Then, in July 2020, [studio manager and dear friend] Lara

Sturgis, and [the composer] Nico Muhly came to sit for me outside. I was grateful to be drawing from life again. I was becoming more focused on nature unfolding, watching the colors of the sunrise. This opened me up to the colors outside. The portraits took on the color of sunrises—the sky. I was echoing gestures of the way plants move, in the gestures of the way the sitters were sitting."

"I had been making small, abstract, nature-inspired paintings in my studio for many years, but when the pandemic hit things started to shift—I felt the need to paint from direct observation," says Brooklyn-based Lumin Wakoa. "I walked through the cemetery near my house every day with my two daughters, since all the playgrounds were closed. Each day there were at least three tractors digging graves. Refrigerated trucks were parked around the block at the hospital to store all the dead. On the other hand, spring was beautiful, and somehow it was easier to pay attention to this, with the city so still and silent. I started painting and sketching in the cemetery on small 8-by-10 canvases. I'd forgotten how exciting and intuitive that was. For me, painting from life is incredibly freeing."



Lumin Wakoa
"I had been making small, abstract, nature-inspired paintings in my studio for many years, but when the pandemic hit, things started to shift," Wakoa says. *Roses (Front Garden),* 2021.

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Izzy Barber, who lives and paints in Queens, also found herself confronting a subdued city during the pandemic, but she discovered inspiration in the empty urban streets. I think of her as a Saturday Night Live painter because, as she puts it, "Saturday nights became my big painting night during lockdown. My boyfriend would help me wheel around supplies and keep me company for a few hours." She had previously been making paintings of bars in New York City's Chinatown. "When I returned early in the lockdown, the same busy streets were silent, and the paintings took on a different feeling and meaning. The whole city was going through this collectively, even though we were so isolated from each other, and it was felt on the streets," she says. "There was an urgency to capture the experience of the transformed city, and it's reflected in the paintings—viewing strangers at a distance and feeling their hidden presence inside silent buildings." More recently, Barber has been turning to the reemergence of the city: "There's a lot of pent-up kinetic energy, and I see that celebratory chaos emerging in the newer paintings."

Piotr Uklański, born in Warsaw, is a subversive and continually surprising artist who lives and works on Long Island. "Initially, when I lost access to my studio in Greenpoint because of COVID restrictions, I used part of our home in Brooklyn to paint in," Uklański says. "After a month or two, I occupied the building's roof as well." He and his wife, curator Alison Gingeras, and their two children eventually moved to an Andrew Geller–designed house on the North Fork of Long Island. "I've embraced it so much that I'm orienting most of my practice to working outside during the good weather months," he says. Off the upstairs studio, Geller added a roof deck: "Naturally it became my outdoor studio," Uklański says. "In the Greenpoint studio, I had no windows, no daylight. Here it's all-day light—the changing outdoor light has allowed me to really hone the optical tricks in my painting. I work from dawn to dusk."

Shara Hughes
"I wanted to create something that the viewer felt engulfed in." *The Bridge,* 2021.

Shara Hughes and Austin Eddy also escaped the city, renting a house in the Catskills this spring. It was directly across the street from the historic home of Thomas Cole and a short walk across the bridge to Frederic Church's estate Olana, on the opposite bank of the Hudson River. Eddy went specifically to investigate plein air painting—he bought a bike and a portable easel. And Hughes, who often paints imaginary, vertical landscapes, made her first horizontal one—a 40-footer, The Bridge, which will be shown in November, in her exhibition at Yuz Museum Shanghai. The outdoor experience didn't exactly turn out the way they planned—it was more like inhaling the landscape than painting it.

"Though the new paintings were not made in the truest sense of plein air," Eddy explains, "they're in step with the way Frederic Church worked—go out and see the world, draw, come back, then paint in the studio. I did have every intention to paint in the landscape, but I found that there was more of a need just to be out of doors, to readjust and absorb the world again. There was a tranquility and stillness that I saw in nature that seemed important to bring back to the studio."

The work Eddy did—paintings, drawings, and bronze sculptures, which were shown at two galleries, Berggruen in San Francisco and Baldwin in Aspen, during the summer—was different from what he'd done before. "It became less invented and more referential," he says. "Not necessarily depicting the specific location but how the light fell on the river or how the atmosphere changed the color of the hills or how an area felt. After all this, plein air seemed to take on a new meaning for me. It became more about being in nature, internalizing the landscape, rather than depicting what was right in front of me."

Hughes took many walks across the bridge over the Hudson that connects Cole's house to Church's. "On the bridge, you have the feeling of being large and small at the same time. I wanted to create something that the viewer felt engulfed in. During the time I was in this region making the painting, I was experiencing a loss. This painting is about life and death—a full beautiful life over the span of one day, sunrise to sunset."

Austin Eddy

"*Plein air* seemed to take on a new meaning for me," Eddy says. "It became more about being in nature, internalizing the landscape."*Orange Morning Sun Looking Towards Home. (Rip Van Winkle Bridge, Spring 2021),* 2021. JSP ART PHOTOGRAPHY.

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How has the concept of painting en plein air changed? "In the past, it was about in-person observation," Hughes tells me. "I think the term has changed because our ways of seeing are not just visual. Psychologically we can 'see' things through other perspectives. Adding the human condition and personal experience into the equation, the same field could be painted completely differently from one day to the next. In today's world there is more—what's important is who's painting it and from what perspective. Surrounding myself in nature during this time helped me understand how nature can be so much more powerful than we are."

David Hockney couldn't agree more about seeing psychologically. "As everyone is now a photographer with a camera in their pocket, photographs have gotten more and more boring," he emails me. "It's much better to draw things. I made 220 iPad paintings in 2020, all plein air. I'm now doing eight iPad paintings that make one picture. I think they are much more real than photographs—remember, cameras see geometrically, we see psychologically. Think about it. As Edvard Munch said, photography can't compete with paintings, as it can't deal with heaven or hell."