



Fall 2025 Red Rock Canyon NCA Artist-in-Residence



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AGAVE

*Bitter leaves, sweet heart;
Love flows like molasses
A ceremony*

Hiking through Red Rock Canyon, one is bound to stumble upon a roasting pit, which were used to cook meat and edible plants, including agave. These areas offer a glimpse into an important cultural moment in the long and continuing history of the Indigenous peoples connected to this land. After the agave plant was harvested and the bitter leaves were removed, almost like an artichoke, the heart of the agave was tossed into the pit and roasted for one to two days. Celebrations were a common occurrence during the roasting, with much singing and dancing. When roasted, the agave hearts become dark, soft, and sweet like molasses; an excellent source of carbohydrates and sugars.

This particular agave plant was found not too far from one of these roasting pits, nestled in between the warm sandstone of the Calico Hills. Painting this plant felt like a direct link to the past; I couldn't help but imagine these celebrations and how the roasted agave heart might taste.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Calico Tanks





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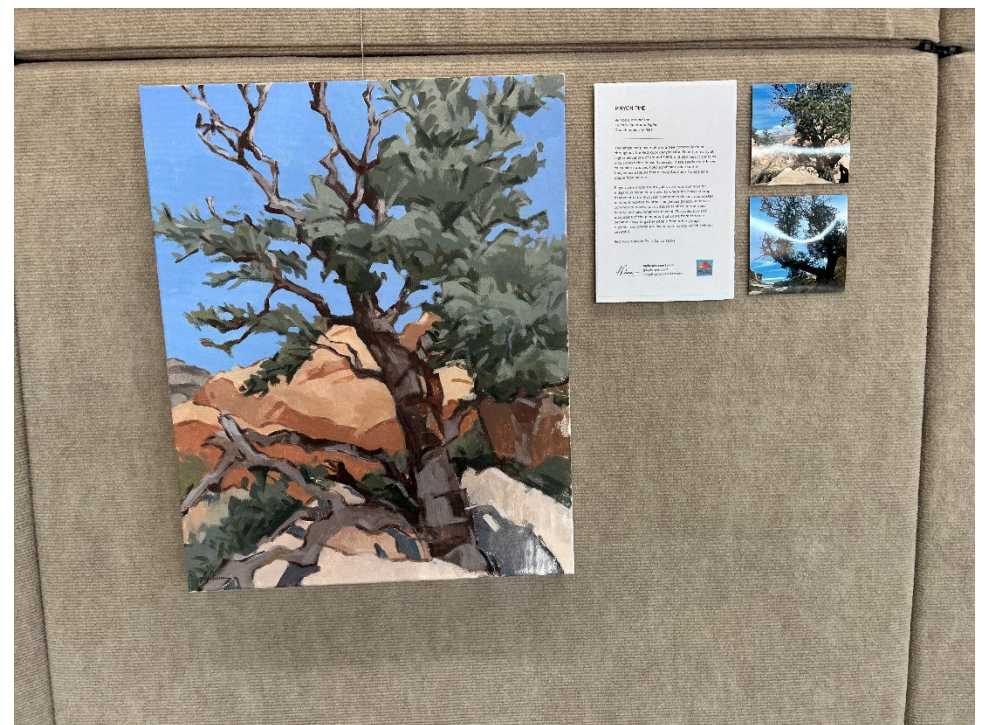
PINYON PINE

*Air cools around me
I climb higher and higher
Crunch under my feet*

The singleleaf pinyon pine is a tree commonly found throughout the Red Rock Canyon NCA. Found primarily at higher elevations of around 5,800 to 8,500 feet, it contains small cones that house its seeds. These seeds are referred to as pine nuts and hold significant value to the Indigenous peoples that occupy Southern Nevada as a staple food source.

Pinyon pine crops are irregular, so it was common for Indigenous peoples to travel to where the heaviest crops happened to be that year. Sometimes these crops existed on land inhabited by other Indigenous groups, so it was common to receive an invitation to share in the trees' bounty and take what was needed. The collection and processing of the pine nuts that come from this tree became a way to gather people from other groups together and create a sense of community, which I think is beautiful.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Calico Tanks





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RESILIENCE

*Scars tell my story
But they feel weightless, empty;
Rise from the ashes*

In July 2005, a fire started within the Red Rock Canyon NCA that burned almost 900 acres, leaving the earth badly scarred. Fires like this are devastating and take anywhere from 60-100 years for the land to fully recover. This slow recovery is due to the slow rate at which plants grow in the desert, making the presence of invasive grasses, like cheatgrass, especially dangerous because these grasses grow back quicker than native plants, essentially fueling fires. It is a constant effort to maintain these grasses in order to prevent the spread of future fires.

Despite this, visitors can see lots of new growth beginning to appear from the literal ashes. I believe that this scene speaks volumes of the resilience of life that can be found in the desert. Seemingly against all odds, life finds a way to bounce back, and teaches us an important lesson in resilience, perseverance, and patience that we can make connections to in our own personal lives.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Moenkopi Loop





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THE PAINTRESS

*The stone her canvas
She leaves her mark with lichen;
Her art comes to life*

Have you ever noticed bright spots of neon colors on the side of sandstone while hiking through Red Rock Canyon? Aside from being beautiful to look at, lichens are an excellent indicator of environmental health. The fact that lichens thrive in the Red Rock Canyon NCA tells us that the air quality is high because lichens attain the nutrients they need to survive from the air. Lichens are also considered to be a keystone species, which is an organism that's vital to the health and well being of an entire ecosystem. They clean our air, provide food and shelter for other animals, and protect trees and rocks from extreme elements. These small but mighty warriors are definitely worth admiring on your next hike.

I was fascinated by all of the vibrant lichens I came across during my hikes because up close, they look like an abstract painting all on their own. I really can't take much credit for this piece; Mother Nature chose the color palette and composition for me.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Lost Creek





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OASIS

*Leaves sway in the breeze
I look to the canyon walls
Water trickles down*

To find an area so lush and abundant as Willow Springs in the middle of the arid desert is nothing short of a miracle. Here, one can find a spring that functions all year, cool air that funnels through the canyon, abundant shade, and a large variety of medicinal and edible plants, including desert willow, prickly pear, mormon tea, desert almond, and yerba santa. Not too far away, a pair of handprint pictographs are displayed along the side of sandstone. In the ancestral Pueblo culture, handprints are known to represent a place of healing; it's really no surprise that we find evidence of human activity in this area, such as pictographs, petroglyphs, and roasting pits. Thanks to the aquifers located at higher elevations that trickle down into the spring, life can thrive in this little pocket of the canyon.

It's incredible what access to little bit of water can do to an area, reminding us of how precious this resource is to creating and sustaining life. How can we ensure that this resource is protected in our day to day activities?

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Willow Springs





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FOSSIL RIDGE

*Among the cacti
Life bubbles to the surface
Frozen in the rock*

It's hard to imagine that Red Rock Canyon NCA was once underwater, but the presence of marine fossils in the area's limestone give us an idea of what that might have looked like nearly 270 million years ago. With a keen eye and a little bit of patience, we can spot these ancient fossils scattered among the cacti and yucca, including sponges, Brachiopods, corals, and Crinoids. Fossils are created when a plant or animal is buried quickly and the living material is eventually replaced with minerals, and the covering material totally encases the plant or animal and hardens around it forming a mold. Major events like upheaval of landmasses and sediment shifts often trapped animal & plant life, leaving behind many fossils.

When speaking about the Mojave Desert, the last thing I would expect to make a connection to is a large body of water; However, looking out into the valley from the rocky bluff of Fossil Ridge, one can almost imagine an ancient sea. Can you spot the sponge ring fossil hidden in the limestone?

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Fossil Ridge





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MIGRATION

*Like the red sandstone
I travelled a great distance
But now I am home*

We often think of rocks as these permanent structures; In reality, the sandstone in Red Rock Canyon can be traced back to the ancestral Rocky Mountains. Sediment from these mountains were transported to the area by wind and rivers, which accumulated enough to form large sand dunes. Eventually, time and the elements compressed this sand into what we now recognize as sandstone.

I am intrigued by this concept of migration, especially as it relates to something as large and immobile as rocks and boulders. Similar to the sandstone, I am not originally from here, yet I have made a home for myself in the Mojave Desert. Sandstone and the desert have become synonymous with one another, and I feel the same when speaking about myself. It is places like Red Rock Canyon NCA where the desert's rugged beauty shines, and is the driving force for many behind why we choose to relocate to this unique environment.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Calico Hills





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SPINES

*Halo of sharp spines
Shimmering gold in the sun
Just a quick peek...ouch!*

Did you know that the spines of a cactus are actually modified leaves? They offer protection from herbivores that would try to eat the cactus and help to regulate the internal temperature of the plant by preventing water loss through evaporation. Even the small amount of shade that the spines provide contribute enough to keep the plant cool in extreme heat. In some species, like the cholla, a piece of the cactus will break off when the spines latch onto a passing animal (or unlucky human), helping to propagate the species.

The Red Rock Canyon NCA has an abundance of cacti, but I found the most concentrated clusters of prickly pear around the Willow Springs area. I love them for their quirkiness and they are an iconic symbol of life in the Southwest. For something as cute as a cactus paddle, they are probably best viewed from a safe distance.

Red Rock Canyon Trail: Willow Springs

