

Return of the Magnificent Six



Painting the High Desert-
Alabama Hills and Randsburg

James Trolinger

Painting the High Desert - Alabama Hills and Randsburg

After many years of loving and painting amazing desert scenery, in 2012 I organized a paint out with artist friends to Death Valley National Park; we had so much fun we returned on four different occasions. After the first two Death Valley paint outs, we painted Joshua Tree National Park, Anza Borego State Park, and Monument Valley Navaho National Park. 2016 paint outs included a Death Valley super bloom and Monument Valley, Utah. Six southern California artists who eventually traveled together to paint Monument Valley called ourselves the Magnificent Six and vowed to continue such outings on a regular basis. The Magnificent Six includes Jesse Fortune, Steven Nakamura, Geoff Winnie, Zeke Guspan, Jim Trolinger, and Pauline Abbott, our official photographer. In April 2017 we honored the vow and took on the high Mojave Desert for two and a half days in Alabama Hills followed by a day and a half in the ghost town of Randsburg. On this trip, Lynne Bolwell, friend and New York desert artist, joined the group, making it The Magnificent Six Plus One.

To clarify, Alabama Hills is not in Alabama; it's in California . (It was named by locals in honor of a notorious Confederate battle ship.)

Located in the northwest part of the Mojave Desert near the town of Lone Pine, Alabama Hills is an amazing array of ancient rock formations along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada in Owens Valley.

This area has been a popular filming location for many television and movie productions, starring Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, The Lone Ranger, Bonanza, and Gunga Din. Many renowned westerns like How the West Was Won were filmed in Alabama Hills. More recent productions include Gladiator, where Russell Crowe rides a horse with Mount Whitney in the background. Star Trek Generations, Iron Man, and Transformers were filmed here. With today's technology, one can easily view movie clips like famous ambushes in Lone Ranger Canyon on YouTube . Alabama Hills is a perfect venue for desert lovers and painters. The maps below give an idea of the basic layout and places we chose to paint in our limited time.

Getting There

To transport six artists and equipment, we rented a twelve passenger van, with the rear seat removed to increase cargo space. Even so, the van was stuffed. A couple of these guys paint large and use large easels. Everyone tends to carry at least twice the amount of supplies needed. We all over estimate how many paintings we will do.

I had recently undergone a surgery with orders to lift no more than 5 pounds and all of the guys helped to make sure I followed doctors orders. Jesse accepted the role as official driver, and Steven, the food aficionado, agreed to be in charge of meals. As planned we left Costa Mesa at 9 AM on a Friday, headed north east towards Barstow and turned on Highway 395, straight up through the Mojave Desert.

Our first stop, as always, was The Roadhouse at Kramer's Corner. The original intention was to make a leg stretching, coffee and cinnamon roll stop, but one look at the menu turned it into a lunch stop.

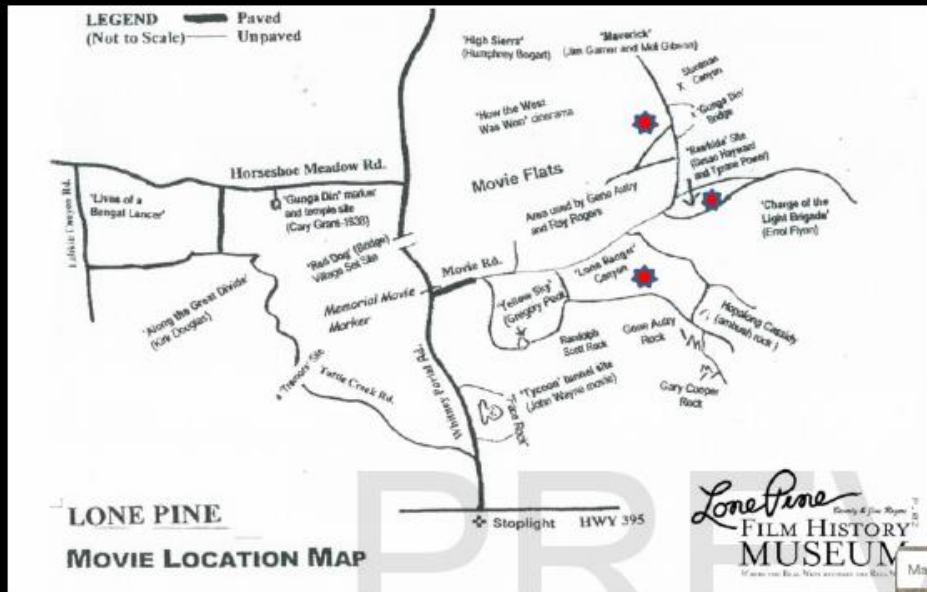
The heavy rains had turned the desert into a colorful array of flower carpets known as a super bloom, and the scenery became more and more beautiful along highway 395. We arrived in Lone Pine at 2 PM and checked into the Comfort Inn, just south of Lone Pine. Lynne had arrived the day before to scout out the best painting places.



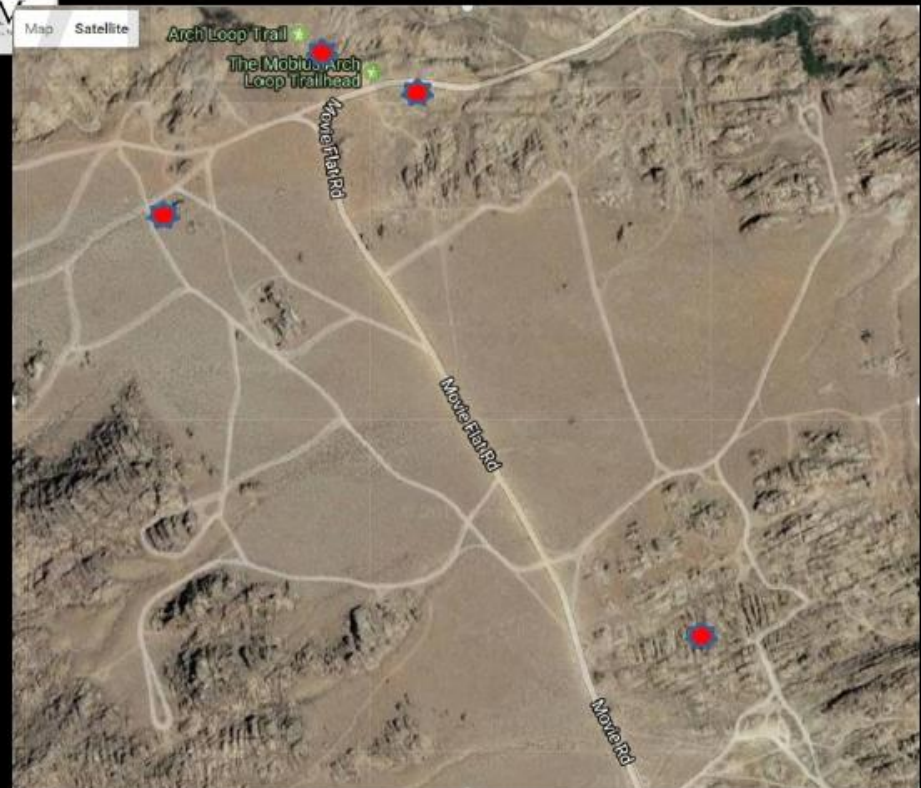
Mojave Superbloom shot from the van at 70 MPH



View from our hotel



Map of Alabama Hills (left) and satellite map (below). Red stars indicate our painting locations



Approaching Randsberg
Our official driver, Jesse Fortune at the wheel,
sketch by Jim Trolinger

Mobius Arch Trail Head

Alabama Hills starts just outside of Lone Pine, and the first main turnoff is Movie Film Road. The Mobius Arch parking area is about two miles up the road and we found Lynne immediately as we approached the lot. After a few greetings and discussions we scattered along the canyon leading to Mobius Arch and found many great scenes to paint. I settled on a spot with a rugged canyon wall with the snow-capped Sierra in the background. Before the day was done, some of the guys hiked the short distance to Mobius Arch and made sketches with the idea to come back the next day.

Everyone was delighted with the days painting, spread out our works back at the hotel and had a brief critique over drinks and snacks. Since no one was interested in a restaurant dinner we fixed turkey sandwiches in the room with supplies Steve had brought.

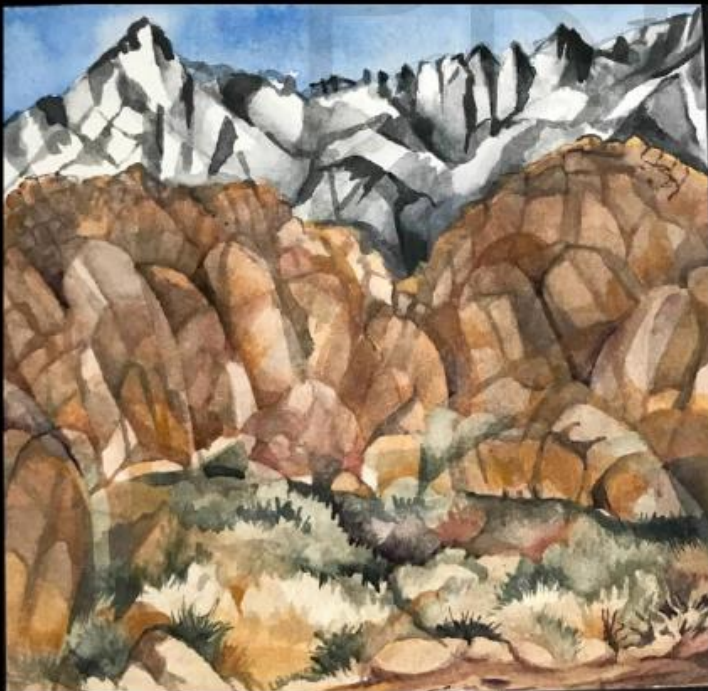
When we began discussing the next day, the suggested breakfast times started late and worked their way backwards with Jesse's insistence and all agreed to meet at 6 AM and leave for the hills by seven.



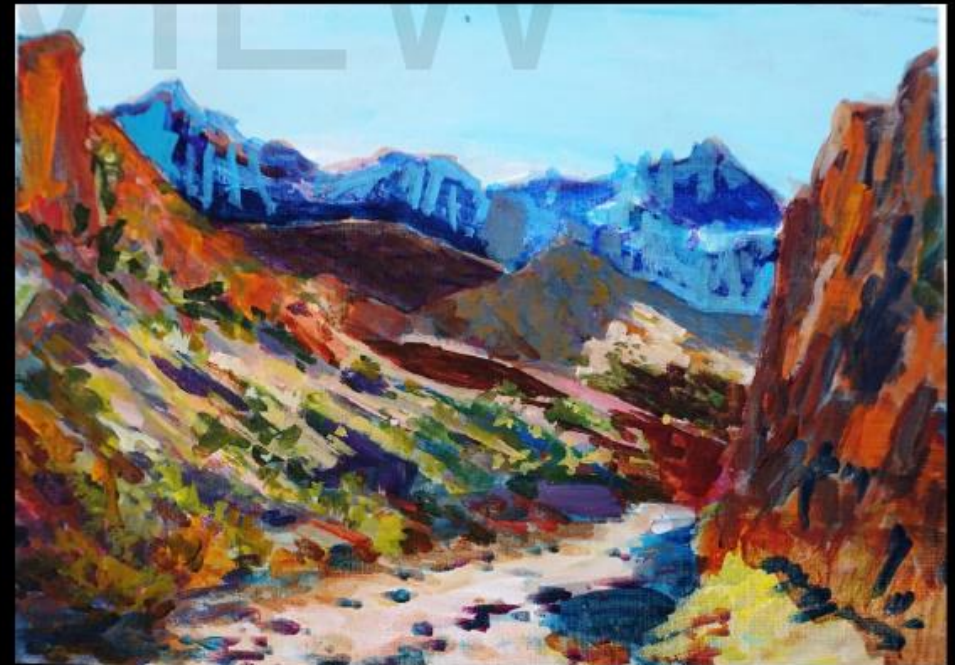
Jesse (left) and Geof at the Mobius Arch trailhead with the snow capped Sierra in the distance. Jim set up further down this trail .



First evening critique on paintings at
Mobius Arch Trailhead



Sierras from Mobius Arch Trail head, 8x8
watercolor on paper, Lynne Bolwell



Geoff Winnie, Mobius Arch Trail Head, 11x15 Acrylic on
canvas 5



Rising before sunrise was a good decision; we immediately spotted the beautiful pink dawn glow on the Sierras. It was washed out soon by bright sunlight before Pauline could get outside with her camera. She vowed to rise earlier to capture this the next day, and she did.



Pauline Abbott-The Sierra viewed from Lone Pine at the crack of dawn.

Mobius Arch

Mobius Arch was also a good choice, since the light and shadows were perfect in the morning. Each of us completed at least one painting of Mobius Arch: Jesse finished two. We guessed in advance that this area would be loaded with tourists, but it was not as bad as expected. There were always one or two asking permission to take photos and telling us about a grand son who painted, and some times this is part of the fun of plein air painting.



Mobius Arch

Since the distance into town was so short, we decided to sit out the less desirable light of midday over lunch at the hotel.



Jim painting Mobius Arch



Geoff (foreground) and Jesse painting Mobius Arch



Jesse Fortune, Mobius Arch, 20x30, acrylic on board



Geoff Winnie, Mobius Arch, 11x15, acrylic on canvas

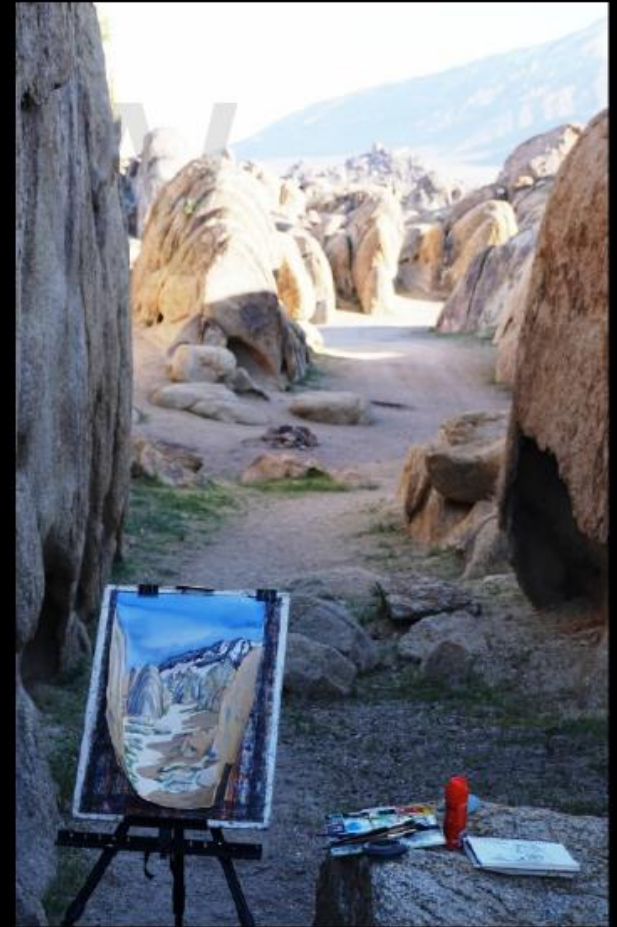
Lone Ranger Canyon

After additional discussions with Lynne, we agreed to meet in Lone Ranger Canyon where she assured us that we could find good scenes and shade for an afternoon paint. That also was a good choice, producing some of the best paintings of the trip.



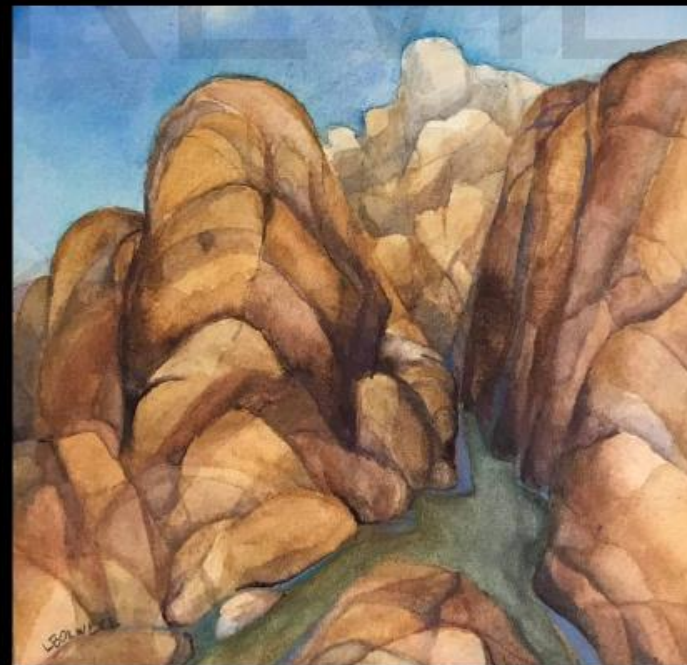
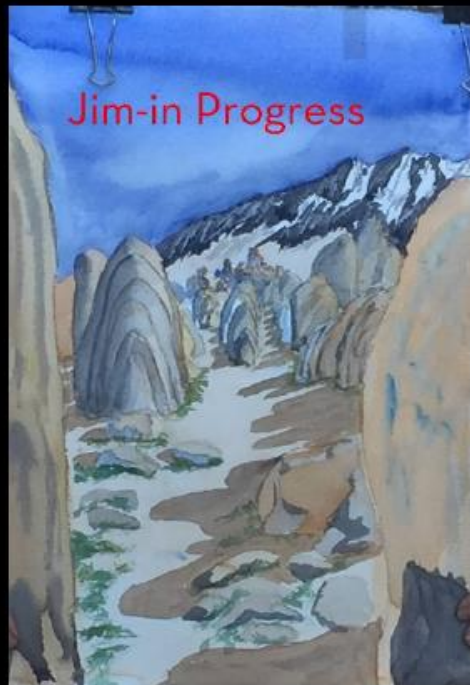
Dynamics is problem with plein air painting. In scenes like the one shown here, the shadows are constantly changing. The artist must choose a time to establish shadows in the painting. As shown here, the entire scene was in shadow by the time I was nearing completion.

Again, we finished the day with a critique, drinks, and dinner Chez Steven.





Geoff Winnie,
Lone Ranger
Canyon, 11x15
acrylic on
canvas



Lone Ranger Canyon, 8x8,
watercolor on paper, lynne Bolwell





Jesse Fortune, 16x48, Lone Ranger Canyon, acrylic on wood panel



Evening critique and planning session

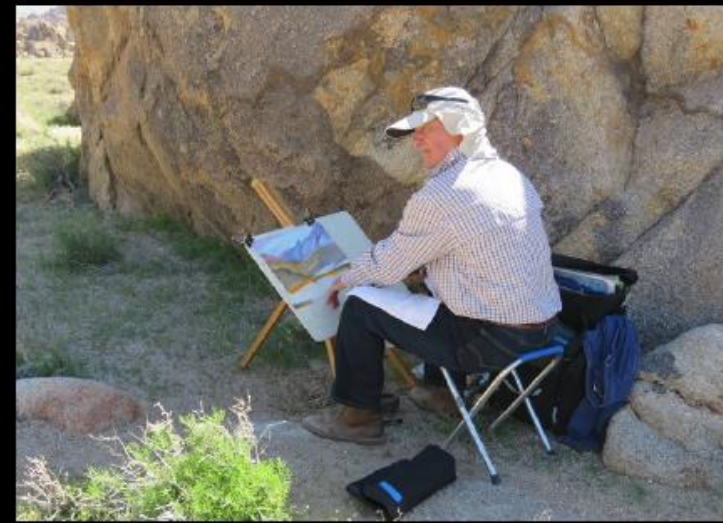
As Jesse discussed his painting during a critique, he exclaimed that something was missing. Staring at the painting in silence for a few moments, he suddenly grabbed a squeeze bottle of white paint from his kit. I prayed he was not about to do what it looked like he was about to do. Then he did it.. As if he was still back in the desert, totally engrossed in the process, he swept a perfect white trail across the painting that weaved in and out of the rocks. We all looked with astonishment and relief and agreed that the swipe he made completed a masterpiece.

A Windy Last Day In Alabama Hills

For our third days painting, we selected an area closer to the Sierras, where we spotted climbers the day before, a place where famous movies such as Gunga Dinn had been filmed. Plein air painters face many perils and have to compromise sometimes between the best painting view, shade, comfort, dynamics, and tourist interference. This day presented a different kind of challenge, the wind. When we arrived and began searching for the perfect spot, we faced 25 knot winds, which got worse as the day developed. Down in the canyon was out of the wind, but too difficult to get to and with less view. After moving a few times we found some large boulders, which we imagined could act as wind shields. Steve lashed his five foot canvas board to a large boulder. Others held their easels with one hand and painted with the other. I found a shady spot between two boulders, which was better than no shelter at all. Even then, I wound up chasing the painting sometimes as it blew off the easel. One of the funniest events of the day occurred when suddenly something whizzed by and flew high above, 30 or 40 feet in the air. It was Zeke's new hat that had gotten extra lift from the sun flap and had become airborne. Zeke recovered it a quarter mile away when the wind fortunately took a pause.



Geoff painting with one hand and holding on to his easel with the other



Zeke found shade and shelter behind a large rock 17



Jim sought shade and wind shielding with little success



Lynne, as she often does, painted in the shelter of her van rear hatch. She was painting small 8 inch canvases, which were easier to manage in the wind.



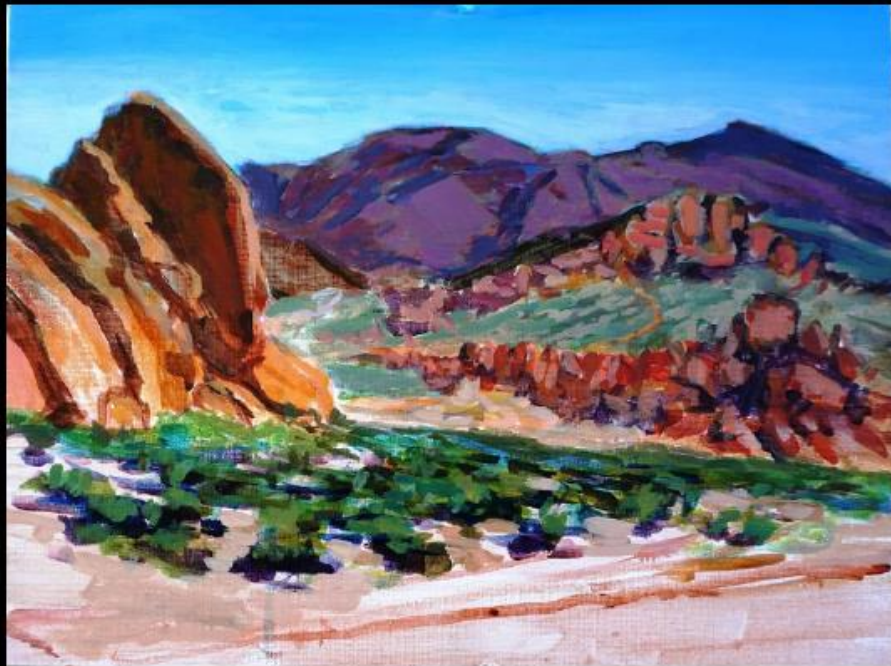
Zeke with his aerodynamic hat

Steve found a foolproof solution. He lashed his painting to a big rock.





Steven Seizo Nakamura, 10x48, charcoal and ink on board



Geoff Winnie, 12x14, acrylic on canvas

By early afternoon we had all neared completion of a painting, tired of fighting the wind, packed up and headed for Randsburg, which is about an hours drive south. Everyone felt a bit sad leaving Alabama Hills after such a brief taste and vowed to return. Randsburg lies west of highway 395 in the hills near Red Mountain where the most gold was found. As we rounded a curve onto the main street of Randsburg with a row of dilapidated, rusting buildings, I sensed a degree of skepticism, as I heard someone utter, "Is this it?!" Another comment, more of a statement than a question, "We left Alabama Hills for THIS? "

Randsburg



Randsburg is an interesting ghost town fifty miles south of Lone Pine. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the town boomed because of nearby mines that produced gold, silver, titanium, and other valuable metals. Actually, Randsburg is much too alive to be called a ghost town; it even has a post office and museum. Bikers and other tourists hang out in the bars and cafes that operate only on weekends. During our stay from Monday afternoon until Wednesday, we essentially had it to ourselves and most of the shops were closed. A sign in one business



read "Always Closed, Except When Open". The general store sign read "Open Saturday, Sunday, and Monday until everyone leaves." On one of our previous Death Valley paint outs Pauline and I had diverted and stayed here one night. I reserved the same place for the Magnificent Six. With 3 bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, two baths, a kitchen, a living room, and a back porch overlooking the valley, The Randsburg Inn was perfectly suited for the Magnificent Six .

It takes a while for an artist to fully grasp the beauty of such a place, especially just after leaving a place like Alabama Hills. Randsburg tells a story of a manmade place's rise and fall. Unlike an ancient Roman village, where all that remains are beautiful aging, thousand year old stone features and marvelous architecture, Randsburg will have turned back into dust before a thousand years passes. Ghost towns like nearby Skidoo have already turned to dust with almost nothing left. The buildings are all wooden with corrugated tin roofing. They are layered with varied patchwork to cover rotting and rusting holes and cracks showing attempts to keep the structure usable without rebuilding it.



View from "Randsburg Heights"

Every roof varies in color from shiny bluish metal to red rust. Each layer has its own color and texture depending on when and how the repair was made. Each aging, sun bleached board is an artwork itself, the dream of art photographers, and a challenge for painters. The buildings are in various states of repair and some, not having been repaired in years, are collapsing, gradually returning to dust.

After a late lunch in the General Store and a walk around town we drove along the road above Randsburg- Jesse named it Randsburg Heights- where we could look over the entire town and surroundings. I could sense the artistic spirit taking over everyone as they began to see the beauty in aging temporary architecture.



Where we stayed

Artists collected materials and scattered about the town to get in one painting before sunset. Jesse and I went no further than our back porch. I could see a mist forming over the mountains and sensed a spectacular sunset in the making; I wasn't disappointed.

Evening discussions cover a range of topics including newly discovered techniques, products, and ideas, some of which are described more below.

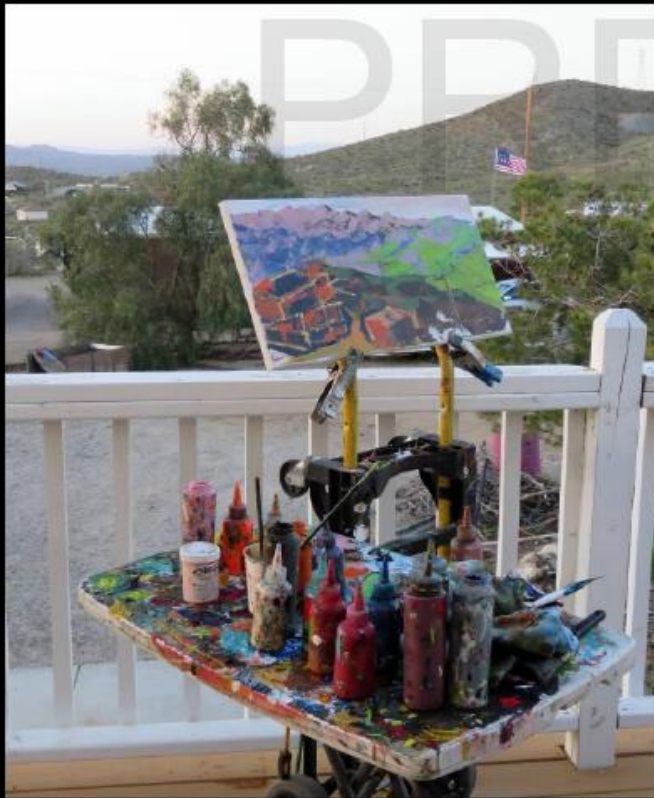
Zeke gave a demonstration of his technique for painting rusting corrugated roofing. The basic roof color is painted with cerulean blue with cadmium red mixed in wet in wet. I used his method the next day and found it quite convincing.



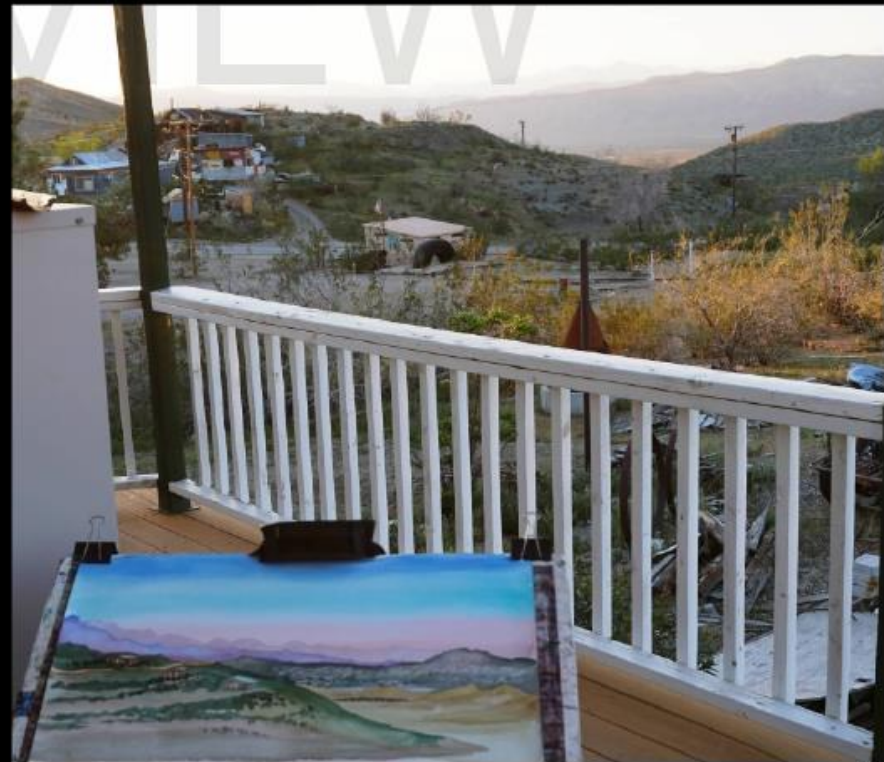
The evening critique proved that artists had successfully made the mental transition from Alabama Hills to Randsburg.



Jim and Jesse painted their first pieces from our back porch at sunset.



View from our back porch





Jim Trolinger,
Randsburg, 10x22
watercolor on paper

Jesse Fortune,
15x34, acrylic on
wood



Lynne had rented an old miners cabin not far from our place. The next morning as I stood on our back porch, I could see her already at work, so I walked across the field to see what she was painting. The ground between our two residences was covered with rusting cans, bottles, bits of metal, which under some circumstances could represent trash that should be cleaned up, but now, a hundred years later, their age, color, and variety actually add to the decor and even qualify them as a collectors items; it would be unthinkable to remove these relics now.

Behind Lynnes house a row of small houses that were, in better times, whorehouses were the subject of her painting. One even had a bathtub outside where the man could clean up before entering (or was it before leaving?). Artists chose one scene for morning painting and another for the afternoon. Scenes selected ranged between dilapidated cabins and old rusting vehicles. Steve and Zeke painted a colorful old truck, which over the years had developed a wide range of colors in the paint and rusting metal, not to mention a cracked windshield, which added to the mystique. Jesse painted an old colorful tractor, one of his best paintings of the trip. Geoff and I chose to paint cabins. Pauline was into her rust period and produced some spectacular shots of rusting artifacts, including hinges, barrels, cans, and roof tops (see the last chapter).



Ground decorations accumulated and aged over a century



Three whorehouses behind
Lynne's House



Lynne painting the whorehouses

Lynne Bolwell, Randsburg Cat Houses, 8x8 oil on canvas



Jim Trolinger, Ink on paper

Sketching Randsburg



Jim Trolinger, Ink on paper



Steven Seizo Nakamura, Charcoal on paper



Steve and Zeke painted this beauty. Steve began in the shade but soon found himself lit up.

Steve's Truck



Zeke's Truck



Jesse painting a rusting generator and being visited by the Randsburg dog

Jesse Fortune, Randsburg Machinery, 12x36, acrylic on wood



Critiques expand to include previous paintings with suggested refinements and additional work.



Geoff Winnie, Randsburg at
sundown, 12x15 acrylic on wood

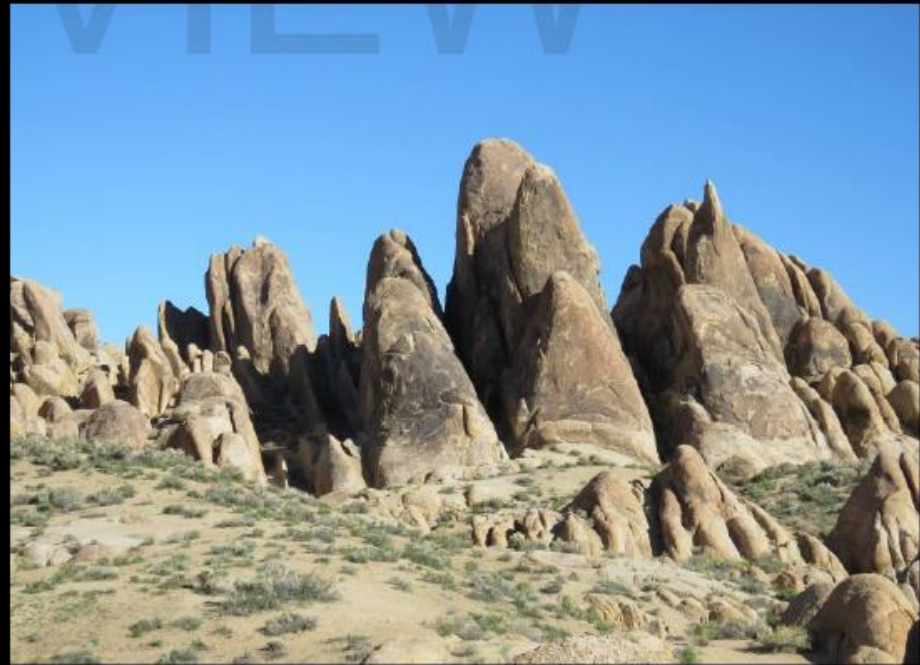


Jim Trolinger, Cabin in Randsburg, 15x22 watercolor on paper 31

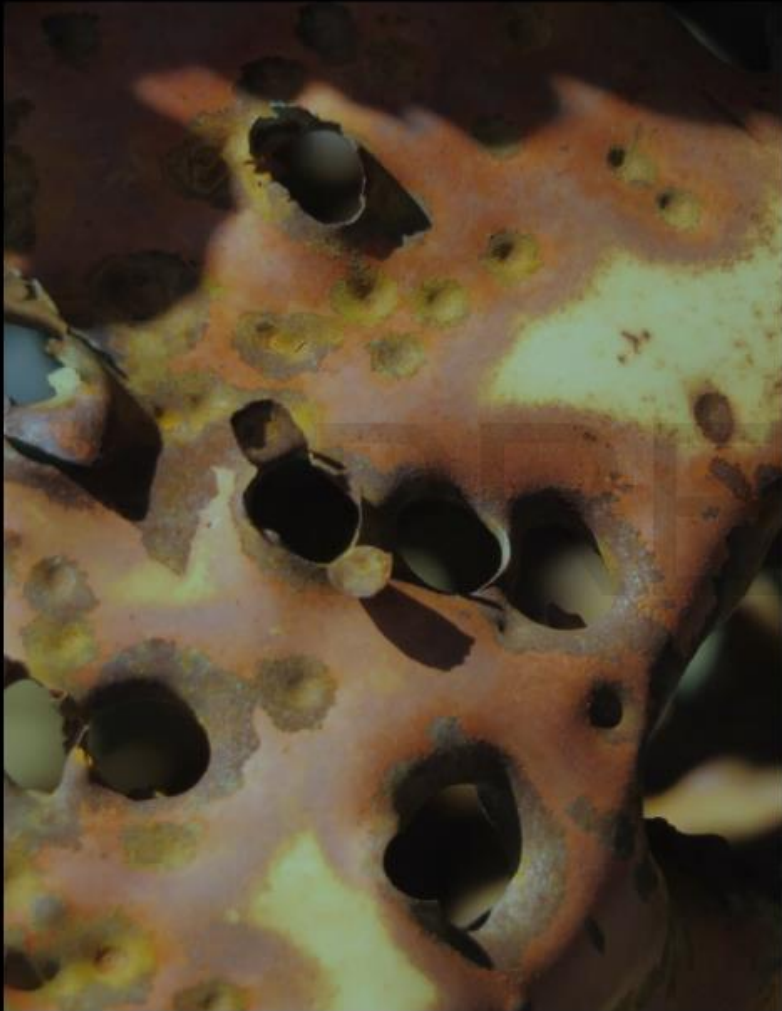
In the midday break, we discovered behind the post office a scaled mockup of old Randsburg, including a saloon and jail and had fun making photographs of the group in various interpretations of the times.



Art Photography
Pauline Abbott









What can a plein air painter say to a talkative tourist?

1. My grandson paints.

I would like to meet him HE sounds interesting.

2. You are so talented. I could never do that. I can't even draw a straight line.

Talent has little to do with it. Anyone who is not too lazy to practice can draw.

3. I don't see any orange in that rock.

Don't you wish you could?

4. How long have you been painting?

Just started this morning.

5. Do you paint a lot?

Yeah, when tourists don't interrupt me.

6. I don't mean to bother you, but I'm nosy. Can I see your painting?

7. Do you sell your paintings? How much would that one cost?

Make me an offer.

8. Will you take our picture?

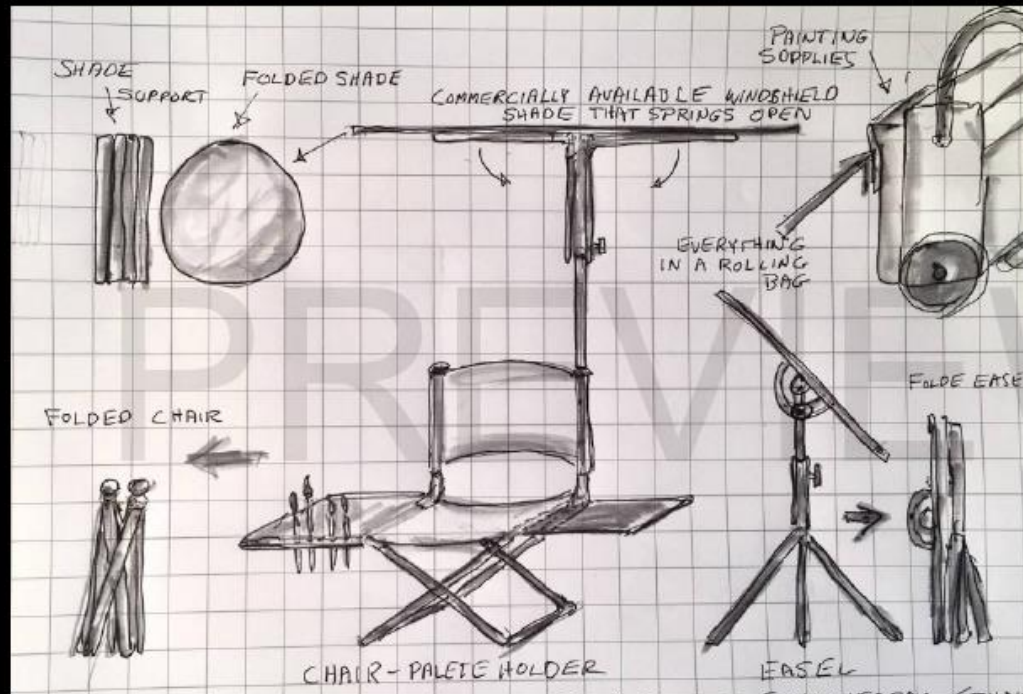
No. Can't you see that I'm working?

9. Is it okay for me to take pictures?

Every plein air painter has many funny experiences to relate. Some of the most delightful involve children and dogs. These are mostly enjoyable experiences. For some reason both love to hang out with plein air painters. As I was painting behind our Randsburg hotel one afternoon, a friendly dog approached me, begged to be petted then hung around for a while. Later, I found that he had visited each of us scattered over the town.

The most unusual child experience was related by Jesse. While painting in a park, a three year old boy, walking by with his mother, ran over to Jesse and gave his easel a hard kick, sending the painting flying across the grass. The mother was horrified. Jesse, seeing that no serious damage was done, became amused by the scene.

In another evening discussion we invented the perfect plein air painter's portable universal studio (PAPPUS) by combining easel, chair, umbrella, painting table, and palette holder. Before the end of the evening we signed and witnessed a sketch of the contraption and vowed to build one.

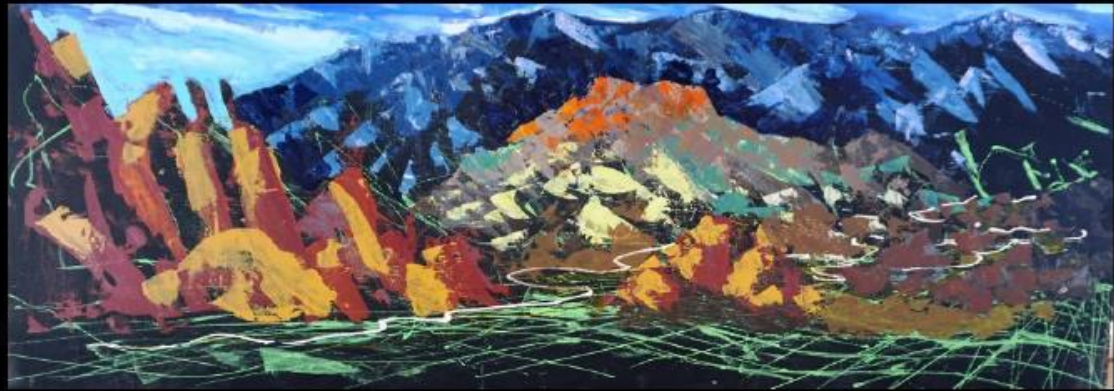


Plein Air Painter's Portable Universal Studio (PAPPUS)

Heading Home

On the last morning, most of us, especially Jesse, who was driving, expressed a preference to leave early to avoid the major traffic hassle of rush hour. We allowed some time for sketching and were on the road back before noon.

There is no doubt that we will return to Alabama Hills for a follow up paint out. I'm not so sure about Randsburg; we shall see.



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