

ART REVIEW for AnnArbor.com

Pierre Paul Gallery showcasing Leslie Masters' amazing Grand Canyon paintings

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"Grand Canyon, Purple" by Leslie Masters

BY JOHN CARLOS CANTÚ

Leslie Masters' "Canyon Color" exhibit at the Pierre Paul Gallery is easily this season's finest combination of subject and execution. A local arts educator, Masters has found the topic of a lifetime in this 24-work series dedicated to Arizona's Grand Canyon.

"This collection came from my rafting trip down the Colorado River in the canyon last year," says Masters in her gallery statement. "I started 12 small paintings while I was camping in the canyon, and painted 12 more large color paintings in my studio after I returned home to Michigan.

"The canyon is so awesome, the colors so gorgeous, and the breadth of the cliffs so incredible, that no artwork can begin to capture its glory; however, through this collection, I hope to share the beauty, color, and immense power of the Grand Canyon I felt when I painted these works."

Let's give Masters major props for being honest enough to admit that no painting can possibly convey the Grand Canyon's grandeur. But Lee Jean-Gilles' gallery statement offers some context:

"In her solo exhibit, 'Canyon Color,' Leslie Masters has elevated her already superior work to an extraordinary new level," says the statement. "The Grand Canyon is her muse as she takes the viewer down the mighty Colorado River.

“This 24 piece collection, like the Grand Canyon itself, tells the story of its creation through many layers. The first layer, (Masters’) preliminary sketches, was created while in the Canyon, surrounded by the awesome vistas and rainbow rock walls. Masters finds the vocabulary for her story by playing with color, light, and perspective in each sketch.

“Like Monet, she sometimes revisits the same location at various times of days to see how the light and shadows have transformed the landscape. In these sketches, the river itself becomes a reflection of Masters’ mood, flowing from tranquil serenity to darting rapids.

“From these sketches, the viewer now can truly understand and appreciate the intricate layers of Masters’ exquisite, larger works. Created in her studio upon her return, each of the twelve large paintings is a well thought-out expression of her experiences traveling through the Grand Canyon.”

Masters’ preliminary works, while masterly in their own right, are the effort of a talented artist carefully observing the ground upon which her imagination is going to work. Toward this end, her smaller paintings—like “Inner Gorge” and “Inner Gorge—Passage”—find Masters carefully recording her surroundings en plein air.

As anyone who’s rafted and camped down the Colorado or Green rivers (leading to the canyon) knows—and as Masters has readily told us—these walls and their surrounding environs are simply magnificent. And Masters’ paintings give us a keen glimpse of this area’s natural beauty. But Masters is more than a recorder. So her art really takes off with the larger acrylic canvases. She abstracts the landscape in these larger works until the Grand Canyon becomes nearly a visual analog for what it is she wants to say. Through this delicate decoupling from representation, Masters’ work asserts itself.

As local Masters watchers well know—and there have certainly been plenty of us through these last three decades—she’s nearly unparalleled in her ability to paint with color. Where most artists tend to circumscribe their palette to avoid unhinging their composition, Masters’ palette goes all in.

Masters allows her chromaticity to dominate her work. This makes her art exhilarating. It’s like a high-wire act, knowing that such unbridled excess wouldn’t work in lesser hands. Her heroic-scaled “Grand Canyon - Purple” shimmers with an authenticity reminiscent of the great impressionist painters. Subtly crafting an expert half-dozen internal visual planes until the canyon’s receding red and purple walls dissolve from sight, Masters maintains an unusually

disciplined palette that's resonant with the light one finds in the Grand Canyon's gorge.

Yet this is not so much the case with the equally brilliant "Canyon Falls," where Masters slips off the larger part of representation to create an artwork that's more reflective of 20th century gestural abstraction.

"Canyon Falls" is closer to Masters' virtuoso handling of acrylics that's excelled in local art competitions for some time now. This tidy and powerful artwork finds Masters expertly carving her up composition through a carefully thickened palette-knife facture that suggests far more than it states.



"Canyon Falls" by Leslie Masters

Yet "Canyon Falls" also visually speaks for itself with such brilliance, it could never be mistaken as abstraction for its own sake. Rather, Masters stays close enough to her theme to allow the viewer to get lost in her reverie while also steadfastly maintaining the truthfulness of her Grand Canyon.

"Canyon Color" will continue through Dec. 10 at the Pierre Paul Gallery, 3370 Washtenaw Ave. Gallery hours are 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; and 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday. For information, call 734-975-1050.