

The Art of Isolation: A Visiting Artist Residency at Great Smoky Mountains National Park

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The United States has a visually stunning history of documenting our natural lands. In the late 1800s, Hudson River School painters captured national parks in the west (National Park Service, 2017). Ansel Adams is famously known for his rich black-and-white photographs of Yosemite and other national parks from the 1920s. In the 1930s, the Works Projects Administration (WPA) hired unemployed artists to create illustrated posters of the national parks (Bennett, 2016), and the illustrative style using bright colors and simplified shapes still remains emblazoned on much of the merchandise available in park gift shops. The value of art in our national parks is made evident today by the availability of over 50 artist residencies where artists stay on-site, create site-specific artwork, and conduct public programs.¹



Figure 1. *Elkmont Open Doors*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.



Figure 2. *Elkmont Light Beam*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.



Figure 3. *Elkmont Bathtub*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.



Figure 4. *Elkmont Double Doors*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.

Each park has its unique application process, but most ask for a résumé, statement of intent, and a sample portfolio. A team of park rangers, partner organizations, and volunteers review the applications. Once accepted, on-site housing is provided, and a park ranger works with the artist to interact with visitors and create public programming during the residency. After the residency, most parks require the artist to donate a piece of artwork. During the past 6 years, I have had the honor of being part of this tradition by being awarded over a dozen residencies. Luckily, this opportunity was still possible during the pandemic, in the form of an abbreviated visiting artist residency at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. However, the social aspect of participating as an artist-in-residence was greatly reduced during the pandemic.

Socially distancing during my truncated stay in the Great Smokies deepened my understanding of my artistic process and influenced how I share what I know. The pandemic demanded problem solving. *How do I make this artist residency happen?* Drive from New York to Tennessee, stay in a hotel, then finish the

artwork at home. *How do I draw and paint what I see?* Take a photo for reference. *How do I conduct public presentations and create lessons for my students back home?* Record videos and explore online resources. This time of isolation also infused my thoughts with themes of the pandemic itself.

My first night in Great Smoky Mountains National Park involved walking through the alien landscape created by synchronous fireflies (*Photinus carolinus*). Their awe-inspiring show reminded me of the fragility of life and the constant transition of the present time, shifting into the past. However, despite their distance, the fireflies create light to find one another because each one is alone, together. The beauty was in the show they made by communicating with one another. Similarly, we are all transmitting our digital signals across this mandated isolation, and maybe there is beauty in that.

I spent the rest of the week on an adventure collecting reference photos. My visit included hiking steep elevations, rock scrambling, biking through a valley, and tubing down a river in a torrential



Figure 5. *Elkmont Fireplace*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.



Figure 6. *Elkmont Green*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.

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downpour. To collect reference photos, I explored a historic artist's cabin that was only accessible by narrow strips of wood stretching across a creek, investigated a ghost town of cabins, located the mysterious antique train engine lying upside down in a creek, observed a working farm, and toured a gristmill that has been in continuous operation since the 1800s. I witnessed endless flora and fauna, including nightly fireflies, hemlock trees, mushrooms galore, mighty oaks, snails, rhododendrons, elk, butterflies, fire azaleas, deer, barn swallows, mountain laurel, spiders, enormous snakes, and frolicking bear families.

This residency illustrated what is essential about site-specific artmaking. Although I would prefer to have the residency encompass both process and product, I have learned that it is not necessary to finish the artwork on-site to complete a residency. The experience is what matters, and this is ultimately the subject of the



Figure 9. *Elkmont Pink*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.



Figure 7. *Elkmont Hallway*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.



Figure 8. *Elkmont Kitchen*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.



Figure 10. *Elkmont Open Window*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 x 8 in.

artwork, not necessarily the place where the physical transcription took place. However, working exclusively from reference photos was a change in my process. The drawing and painting experience was delayed, meaning I was working from the memory of a time and place. Because the process was not immediate, the theme of isolation bled more into my depictions. Photo references provided technical accuracy, but the emotional content encompassed a more prolonged time frame that included the pandemic.



Figure 11. *Elkmont Yellow Wall*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.



Figure 12. *Elkmont Wood Paneling*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.

My chosen subjects shared the common thread of being temporarily alone. The 14 oil paintings are of the abandoned Elkmont cottages slated for renovation. I gravitated to these cottages because they were abandoned, and the isolation of the pandemic echoed their interiors frozen in time. I used Blick oil paints, which are affordable yet high quality, and bought the 8-by-8-inch wood-cradled canvas bundled on sale to help offset the cost of traveling and lodging. I painted each image in one sitting, *alla prima*, which translates to wet on wet. I prefer this method because I can blend; layer thicker, lighter paint on top of the thinner, darker underpainting; and render before the paint dries.

The four colored pencil drawings depict an animal, an insect, a human-made object, and a plant or fungus surrounded by fireflies. These drawings use abstract shapes to represent the interactions between these various entities and how each impacts the others. I overlapped the reference photos in Adobe Photoshop and studied the overlapping areas to understand better what the abstract shapes looked like when I drew them on Bristol paper using colored pencils. I prefer Prismacolor colored pencils because they blend well when using a burnishing technique. The flat shapes echo the two-dimensionality of the screens through which we now interact.



Figure 13. *Elkmont Sink With Window*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.



Figure 14. *Elkmont Sink*, 2020. Oil on board, 8 × 8 in.

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Figure 15. *Deer Cottage*, 2020. Colored pencil on paper, 9 × 9 in.



Figure 17. *Snail Engine*, 2020. Colored pencil on paper, 9 × 9 in.



Figure 16. *Elk Cabin*, 2020. Colored pencil on paper, 9 × 9 in.

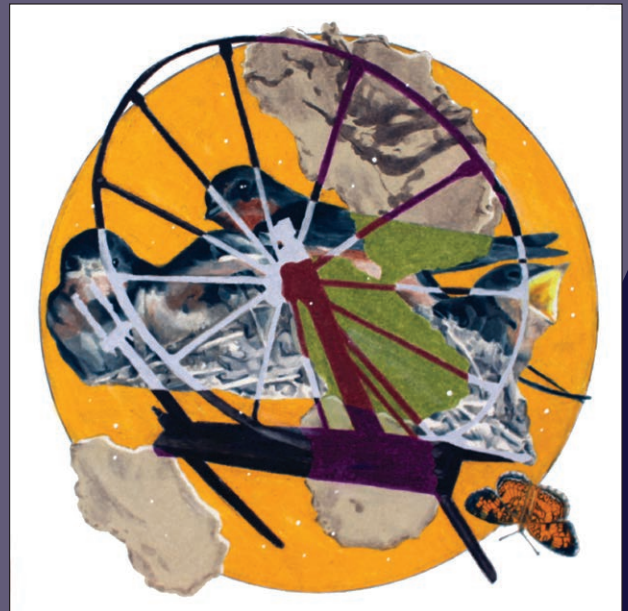


Figure 18. *Bird Wheel*, 2020. Colored pencil on paper, 9 × 9 in.

I now understand what it feels like to create artwork at home in isolation, like many of my students do while they are learning remotely.

The public programs I usually conduct during my residencies are hands-on activities where visitors make artwork inspired by the parks; however, this time, I had to record demonstration videos. I put a stool on my kitchen counter and perched my iPhone on the edge so I could record the video from above. I used the program iMovie to crop and edit the content, add a title, and export it as a file that I then uploaded to YouTube and shared with the park. Instructing through posted videos is limiting because of the one-way nature of communication, and I cannot provide art supplies or see the artwork that viewers are creating. On the other hand, there is no limit to the number of people these videos reach because anyone can watch them asynchronously. Similarly, my recorded artist talk after the residency is now available in perpetuity. Filming these videos in isolation reduced the feeling of loneliness by making site-specific connections through creative activities. These artistic experiences provide a methodology for teaching by inviting participants to connect and explore by combining art and technology.

My work during residencies mirrors what I teach in my middle school classroom. After each residency, I share with my students the importance of environmental and cultural preservation provided by our national parks. I identify as an artist, which demonstrates my passion, as my students are figuring out who they are through experimentation and expression. My artistic process includes research, considering multiple compositions, and making connections between history and my life. Similarly, my students begin art projects by researching the topic we are referencing; the hook is finding ways to provide choice and personal connections. When they are ready to plan their compositions, I have them practice critical thinking by creating several different options and ultimately picking the best one. I then teach my students technical skills when they are working on the final versions of their projects.

The Great Smoky Mountains residency relates to art education during the pandemic through learning and teaching. Trying new things and problem solving are part of the creative process in which I engaged during the residency and brought back to my students. Google Arts & Culture provides interactive resources to deepen understanding through engagement. I was inspired to have my students travel virtually through the national parks highlighted on Google Arts & Culture by exploring audio and visual information. Students clicked and dragged through 360-degree

imagery while listening to cultural stories and reading about the flora, fauna, and unique landscapes found in the national parks. Then they created postcard designs inspired by the WPA posters; their finished postcards demonstrated their understanding of the content, despite the distance.

I now understand what it feels like to create artwork at home in isolation, like many of my students do while they are learning remotely. Ultimately, the isolation of the pandemic has created a need for frequent contact and being able to see and hear each other in real time, even if it is over a computer screen. I am especially aware of the importance of ensuring students can be creative and express themselves during this stressful time.

Carrying out a residency and teaching while social distancing caused me to reflect on the comfort and unifying power of artmaking. My artwork buoyed me because being creative gives me a sense of purpose. My craft is a familiar constant, and my mind can rest when I am in the flow of creating. Isolation from others did not isolate me from my artwork; it encouraged a renewed connection. I now realize how strongly I identify as an artist and teacher and how identity is our core, despite the chaos around us. For all the havoc this virus has wreaked, there is also innovation, community support, and a challenging universal experience that demands resilience and growth. Despite existing in the isolation of a pandemic, the power to connect with ourselves and others through art is stronger than ever. ■

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References

- Bennett, J. (2016, August 25). The forgotten history of those iconic national parks posters. *Popular Mechanics*. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/adventure/outdoors/a22536/national-parks-posters>
- National Park Service. (2017). *Be an artist-in-residence*. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm>

Endnote

- ¹ National parks participating in the artist residency program are on the website <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm>.