



DYANA HESSON

For her modern West botanical paintings, artist Dyana Hesson seeks out all the wild plants she can find in Arizona's backcountry then commits their beauty, strength, and fragility to canvas. The quest takes her far and wide and is as serious as the research that goes into it. "If you really want to understand the wild West, study the wildflowers," she advises. "Before the cowboys and early settlers, there was land and plants. They offer subsistence and shade, medicine and beauty."

Among Arizona's hiking set, Hesson is well-known both for her outdoor prowess and the resulting artworks. Her blue Jeep Wrangler with the license plate "TRBLUE" has become fa-

mous in its own right. "When I pull up to a trailhead, folks will say, 'Hey, there's Blue!'" she says. She searches out plants—the rarer, the better—on mountains and in washes throughout the state for her botanical paintings.

"I'm striving to bring attention to the plants and blooms in the Southwest landscape that people maybe don't recognize," she explains. "It would be easy to stick to the mainstays, but my work is storytelling, history, and beauty. I'm finding a freedom in the way I see and depict the landscape in my work. You have to drown out the noise to do that."

Returning to the studio with photos and field notes, Hesson streamlines the images, painting modernist close-ups of flowers

by applying thin layers of oil paint, sometimes on huge canvases. They show off Arizona's flora: glossy, strong, perfected. The beauty is somehow magnified by the minimalist presentation. "I feel like my style is probably on the contemporary side," she says. "It's not realism exactly. It's not painterly. It's probably a little more colorful than it actually is, sometimes a little more abstracted."

Born in 1966 in Auburn, California, Hesson grew up happiest in the outdoors. Her dad gave her a camera at 12, and she began photographing flowers. She earned a bachelor's degree at Arizona State University and stayed. She's been painting the plants of her desert home for 30 years now.

Venturing from her home studio in suburban Phoenix, Hesson has recently been trekking in the Arizona wilderness with a museum botanist as they seek out ancient agave cultivars. The odd rattlesnake sighting doesn't faze her one bit. "They don't scare me anymore. I think bees are the biggest thing I'm afraid of out in the wild because you have to outrun them."

Climbing the steep Spanish Ruins near Payson with her husband, she once got so overheated that she submerged her entire body—clad in hiking clothes and boots—in a river to cool down. "I tend to wear some companions out," she says. "My husband, for example, who brought me to Arizona in the first place. I fell in love with it so much. On the weekends, he's like, 'Can we just rest?' And I'm like, 'No, there's more to see.'"

Hesson has painted 50 different Arizona wild plants so far and is on a quest to paint every wild plant she can find in the state. With thousands of species of native plants, Arizona boasts more diverse plant life than most states. Even if it's

daunting, the prospect of capturing them all inspires her: "I will die before I paint everything I want to paint," she says. "It's a good problem for a creative person."

Hikes she'd recommend for wildflower sightings? "I like to head toward Superior, which is an old mining town. You'll go by the Superstition Mountains. You can pull in there and see cactus blooms in the springtime," she says. Her paintings *Stay Golden* and *Superstition Color* depict spiny cholla cacti in this area.

She's painted white desert rosemallow and purple engelmannii cactus in the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson, white lilies growing near the Colorado River, and scarlet monkeyflower she spotted on a rafting trip. A wiz at combining shades of blue to meditative effect, she just finished a canvas of a red firecracker penstemon she spied atop Bill Williams Mountain west of Flagstaff. "I found great satisfaction in mixing reds, from orange to pink and deep shadows of purple."

Her work sells quickly. "My ultimate desire—aside from putting beauty in the world, which is No. 1—is to compel people to care about the natural world and what you're treading on," Hesson says. "I do modern West botanicals. In the Western art world, you think of cowboys and landscapes and horses, and all of that is Western for sure. Flowers in landscapes are usually in the background. I'm trying to bring them to the forefront." ★
—Wolf Schneider

Hesson will mount the one-woman show *Wild Arizona* at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona, October 4, 2025–December 7, 2025, with an opening reception on Saturday, October 4, 2025. For more, visit dyanahesson.com and desertmuseum.org.



OPPOSITE: *Field Trip*. Owl clover, lupine, and blue dick wildflowers, Salt River, Arizona. Bloomed 3.30.23, 7:15 p.m. 40 x 40 inches, oil on canvas. **THIS PAGE:** (left) *Awash With Color*. Chuparosa blooms at sunset, near Red Mountain, Arizona. Bloomed 3.28.23, 7:23 p.m. 28 x 22 inches, oil on canvas; (middle) *Gratitude*. Sego lilies, false garlic, and Lemmon's Butterweed, Mazatzal Mountains, Arizona. Bloomed 4.14.23, 4:30 p.m. 40 x 30 inches, oil on canvas; (right) *A Thousand Words*. Antelope horns milkweed and juniper hairstreak butterfly, near the East Verde River, Arizona. Bloomed 5.15.24, sunset. 50 x 40 inches, oil on canvas.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST