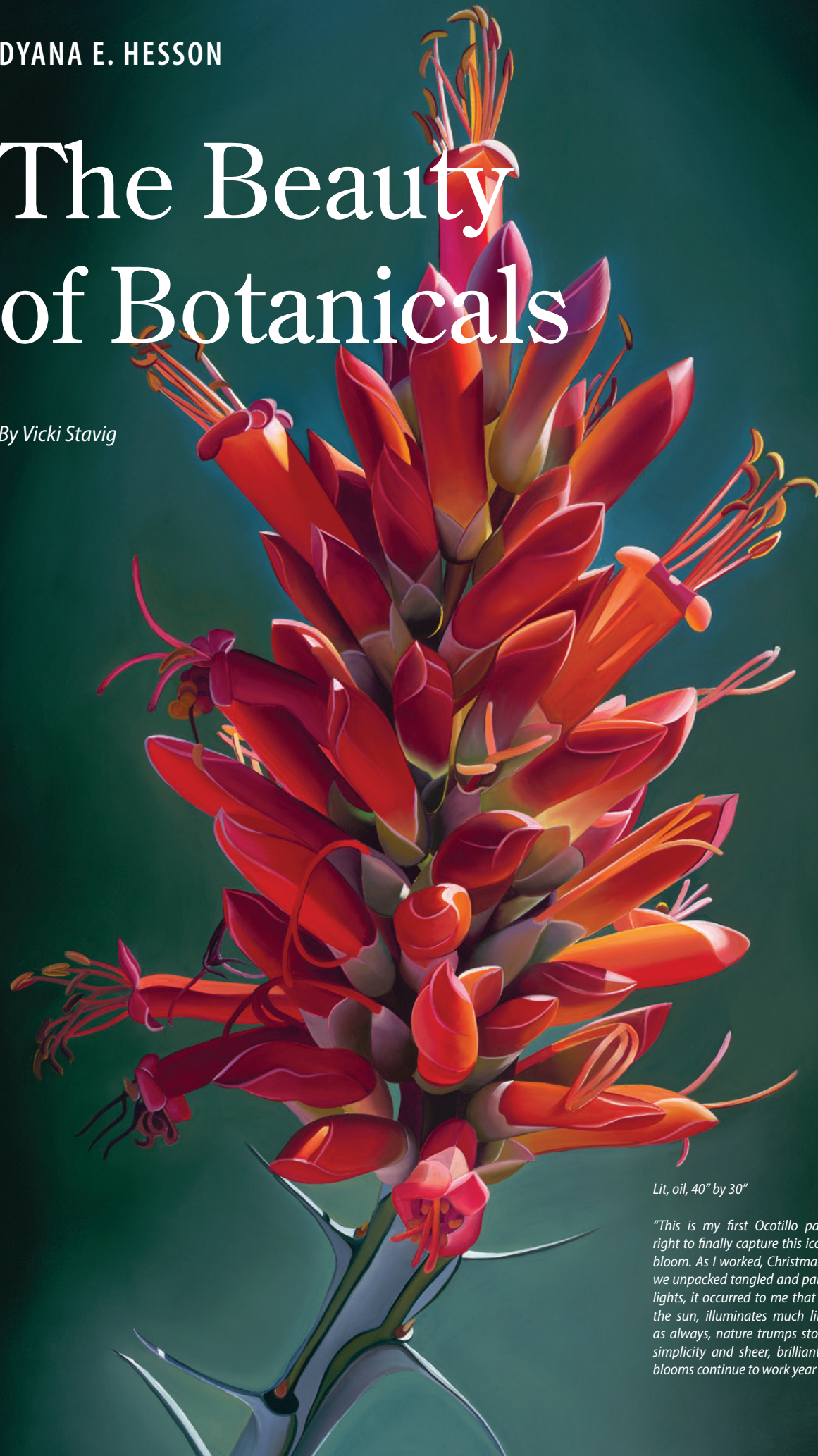


DYANA E. HESSON

# The Beauty of Botanicals

By Vicki Stavig



Lit, oil, 40" by 30"

*"This is my first Ocotillo painting. The time was right to finally capture this iconic and loved Arizona bloom. As I worked, Christmas was approaching. As we unpacked tangled and partly working Christmas lights, it occurred to me that the Ocotillo Bloom, in the sun, illuminates much like holiday lights. But, as always, nature trumps store-bought for me. The simplicity and sheer, brilliant design of Southwest blooms continue to work year after year."*

The first word that comes to mind when you see a painting by Dyana E. Hesson is "stunning." Her botanical paintings with their vibrant colors and masterful use of light and shadow simply cannot be ignored.

While other artists might paint similar subjects, few—if any—do so on the scale and with the talent of Hesson. Her largest painting to date is a whopping 61"-by-100" commission for one of her many collectors. "I had to build a special easel for it," she says, "I built one I could ratchet up and down. Large canvases grab people's attention. I love to paint big but I do small paintings, too."

Hesson's largest project to date was an exhibition of 47 paintings at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, which closed the first week of December and drew record crowds. Titled *Wild Arizona*, it was a celebration of her 35-year career as an artist and featured paintings from her lived experience, which includes hikes, ecological fieldwork, and restoration efforts.

"The audience was art lovers and plant nerds," she says. "I cried when I saw the paintings. Things sell off my easel, so I never get to have even five paintings on display at a time. We had to borrow some of them from collectors."

Hesson's love of—and fascination with—plants took hold as she was growing up in Northern California, where her mother tended to several gardens. Her interest in art also took root as her parents took her and her brothers to art shows. "It was magical," she says.

Describing her younger self as hyperactive and creative, Hesson says, "I gave my parents a run for their money. I was a challenging child, and I wasn't a great student. I had a rope swing in the yard and spent hours on it and listening to music. I was also an avid roller skater and put out a neighborhood newsletter."

When she was 19, Hesson married Randy, a young man from Arizona who was working in the mortgage business in California. "We hated it there," she says. "It was congested, I



Shimmering Light, oil, 48" by 36"

*"One afternoon in April, while observing these marvelous blooms and the shimmering light on the water, I spotted several teenage boys considering a jump off the lake bank into the water. They were egging each other on, chattering. The mom in me wanted to warn them of the danger of the jump. But really it didn't look too bad and, if I were their age, I would have joined them in an instant. The best part of the scene was that there was not a cell phone in sight—just boys being boys on a warm Arizona day. The whole scene made me smile, and I knew I would paint it."*

couldn't get into the wilderness, and we couldn't afford to buy a house."

The newlyweds packed up and moved to Arizona, where they bought a house and restarted their lives. Hesson enrolled at Arizona State University in Tempe, where she started learning about art. But, before she committed to it, she had several majors, including communi-

cation and liberal studies. One day, Randy suggested that she major in art.

"I never thought of art as a career trajectory," she says. "I had always been interested in art, but our schools at home didn't have art education. In college, I started learning about art and loved it. Once I changed my major to art, I thrived



(Top left) *A Thousand Words*, oil, 50" by 40"

"These plants are Airbnbs for pollinators, but it's not a simple check-in. The unusual structure of the flower regulates pollination. Insects snag sacs of pollen on their legs, but then they must be perfectly inserted in the slits behind the crown. If the pollen is inserted backwards, the grains germinate in the wrong direction and are wasted. This is why there are so few pods produced per plant. For butterflies, it's a survival game too; their species only lays eggs in milkweed, thus their declining numbers. On this day, the juniper hairstreak butterfly was diligently pollinating. As I watched him work, it felt like I was witnessing a miracle. It's moments like these that fuel the work of my hands."

(Bottom left) *Only On Sunny Days*, oil, 40" by 40"

"I stalked this plant in the White Mountains of Arizona for many summers. I rarely saw it and, when I did, the plentiful clusters of bright blue buds would be tightly closed. Next year, same thing. And the next, and the next. This plant's flowers only open fully when there is plenty of sun, and I was only seeing these beauties under cloudy conditions."

"Then, in the summer of 2024, after a long day of hiking various trails in and out of pouring rain, the sun finally came out just before sunset. My friend and I pulled over to walk the West Baldy trail for a bit, and the beautifully saturated and sun-soaked forest yielded several gentian plants—all of them fully open. What a delight to finally see what had been concealed from me for so long. It felt like a friend finally telling me her deepest secret."



and was getting A's, not C's. I really grew as a person and an artist; I blossomed in Arizona."

Hesson did run into one problem, however. In order to earn her degree, she had to pass algebra. She knew she couldn't do that, and set up a meeting with the dean. "I told him that I was on an academic scholarship but that I just couldn't pass algebra; my brain doesn't operate that way, so he let me take debate instead," she says. "I earned my BFA in 1991."

Before Hesson earned her diploma, she visited a gallery in Scottsdale. After viewing her work, the owner hosted a show for her. "I hit the ground running," she says. "I'm a very determined person. If you find what you're good at, it might make the journey longer, but you can thrive. If you wait to be ready, you'll never be ready. You have to keep learning and growing."



While in college, Hesson had to decide what she wanted to paint. That decision came rather easily, since her mother always had gardens, and her father had given her a camera that she eagerly used to capture images of what her mother planted. "It was a natural progression to paint those things," she says. "Now I focus on native plants of the Southwest, going out and finding what God has planted."

Several years ago, Hesson was fortunate to connect with artist Billy Schenck, who gave her some great advice. "He's an iconic figure in Western art," she says. "He had a show at a Scottsdale museum, and I went to it. I introduced myself to him after his talk and sent him an email a couple days later, asking if he would have time to chat with me. He called me five minutes later. He told me, 'Your work should always be recognizably yours, but always evolving.'"

Hesson loved living in Arizona, but had to switch gears when Randy accepted a position in the legal publishing business in Michigan. It was quite an adjustment, but she continued to paint what she saw growing there. "It wasn't my soul scape, but I painted what was in front of me," she says. "Then we moved back to Arizona, and I got into galleries there."

Hesson was back in the light and the diverse landscapes and plants she loved—and she thrived. Armed with a camera, she heads out in her Jeep to explore the countryside. "I'm always looking for the next painting and discovering what feeds my creativity," she says. "I ac-



*Shelter*, oil, 40" by 60"

"In the wild, shelter is important. For the hiker, it's the first thing to consider when stranded in the open—before water, before food. Protection from the elements is vital. Plants benefit from shelter, too. Often, in the Southwest, certain plants thrive only in the sheltered cover of another plant or in the shade of a rock. In terrain with diverse geologic formations, life thrives."

tually know the moment I'm looking through the camera lens if that will be my painting for the day. I do about 25 paintings a year; they're very involved."

She also tracks her outings on a large map in her studio on which she places pins to mark the places she has painted. "I immerse myself

in exploring," she says. "Some artists grab things off the Internet and paint them; my paintings are not AI generated. They're compositions that have stories behind them with adventure and exploring." Recently, Hesson has been adding landscapes to her work and occasionally includes small buildings and hides her



*I Love Flowers. Don't You?, oil, 48" by 36"*

*"Even if monsoon season was a bust, you can count on barrel cactuses to bloom in sheer reds and pale yellows (and, in this case, golds) at the end of an Arizona summer. Barrel cactuses sit like little Buddhas in the Southwest landscape, often overlooked and overshadowed by the larger, more prestigious, columnar saguaro, unless they are in bloom. On this day, I was in the right place at the right time. I saw the gold glow in the distance and spun the Jeep around, because that's what you do when you love wild plants and places."*



*Royal Flush, oil, 40" by 60"*

*"Can a cactus be famous? This one is, so much so that her common name is Queen of the Night. This cactus can be hard to find and is often overlooked because it resembles a pile of dead sticks hiding under another shrub. Supporting an underground bulb weighing between five and 15 pounds, this plant flushes (blooms en masse) only once between May and August on a good year. Its beautiful fragrance attracts a special pollinator: the hawk moth. When the sun rises, the grand nocturnal event, like a royal ball, is over—just a memory."*

Jeep on a hill.

Hesson doesn't just paint plants, she helps to restore them by volunteering with Natural Restorations, an Arizona-based organization that replaces acres of plants that have been destroyed by wildfires in wilderness areas throughout the state and removes trash from those areas. "It's a huge success," she says.

Asked about her style, Hesson says she can't describe it. "I just paint what I see," she says. "I don't need a label. And I don't like the world floral; I prefer botanicals.

Floral sounds like a housedress or a tablecloth."

Hesson says she wants to convey beauty and appreciation through her paintings. "There is a lot of ugly in the world; my goal is to give your eyes a place to rest," she says. "I don't exaggerate the colors; they exist in nature. I love light and the contrast of light and shadows."

A master signature member of American Women Artists, Hesson has received the Master of the Southwest Award from *Phoenix Home & Garden* magazine. She's proud to have her paintings included

in collections at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona and at Scottsdale's Museum of the West. She's also published two books and will soon publish a third. And in May she'll be exhibiting her paintings in a show titled *From the Hilltop: Recent Works by Dyana Hesson* at Altamira Galleries in Scottsdale.

"I love being busy," Hesson says. "Keep your head down and keep working—that's my mantra. To have work I love to do and that keeps my hands busy is a blessing."



*Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.*