

'Strong art involves struggle'

Lockdown for artist Lydia Johnston prods her to take risks

LYDIA JOHNSTON is always exploring more – and deeper.

Getting a new lease on life is the effect Lydia Johnston's art process has on me. After a visit to her Hondo Mesa studio last June, I walked away excited by the prospect of looking at my day-

GALLERY GLIDER

By Virginia Clark

to-day life as a canvas – a specific, creative expression of whatever is flowing within me in

any given moment.

Johnston is a self-taught artist who moved to Taos in 2015 from a 30-year hiatus in Vermont. Taos light and wide-open skies hooked her immediately, she says, and she is still as jazzed by it now as when she first arrived.

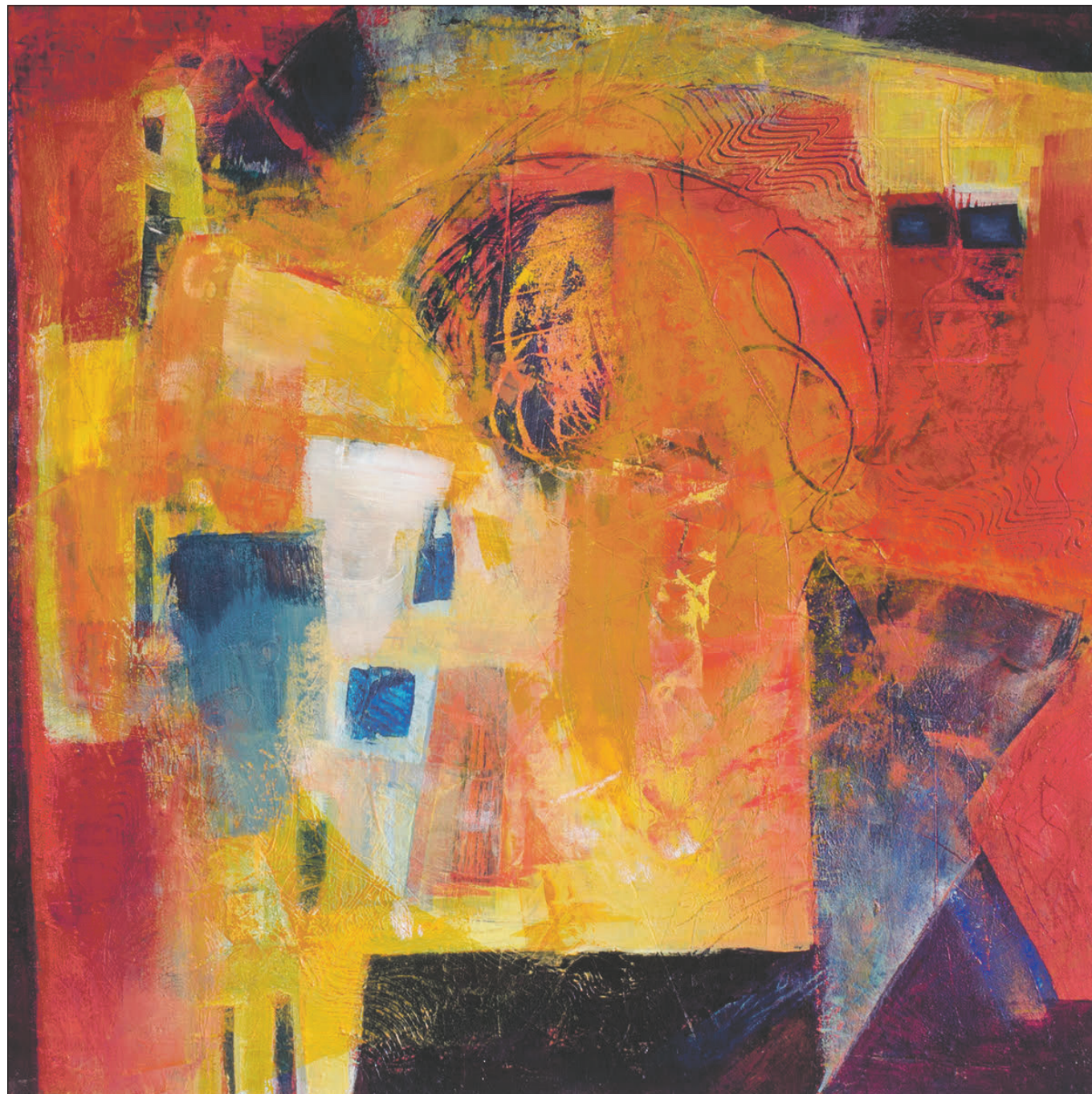
She is represented in Taos by Paseo Norte Gallery, a virtual gallery since the pandemic forced closure of the physical location, and can be seen at paseonortegallery.com and Facebook.

In the '90s Johnston did collaged textiles and art quilts – she hand-dyed all her fabrics, noting she always wants visual texture, mostly looking for “control over color,” finally moving into oils in 2006. She works in “groupings” these days, five to six or more differently sized canvases, all depending where she's at artistically at any given moment, which she expands upon in our interview here.

How did the lockdown affect you – depression or the opposite, more jazzed by the extra time?

Honestly, not having to go into town and deal with external things was great. I'm much more jazzed up and excited by what I'm working on now. It's created the perfect opportunity for me to experiment and explore new ideas.

My studio is at my house, so I had more time to focus on my art. Of course, I'm very concerned about this pandemic and very saddened to not be able to travel to see my family, but it has created a perfect opportunity for



'Infinity', 12-by-12-inch mixed-media on board

me to spend more time painting.

How did you hear about the Art2Life Creative Visionary Program and how has it helped you during this part of life in the pandemic?

I heard about the Creative Visionary Program from various artists I admire and follow on Instagram. I'm a self-taught artist and have always felt this

gives me the freedom to follow my intuition – my art comes from deep within me without being influenced by teachers. But CVP seemed different.

In early February I was recovering from some minor surgery and so I decided to check out the free workshop to introduce CVP. The timing was perfect. This program sounded like just the

thing to help me develop my art further and strengthen my voice. It was online so could be done from my home and includes a community of artists from all over the world. So I took the plunge and enrolled – this was right before the pandemic began.

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It was an incredible journey to be part of during this pandemic and lockdown. There were live sessions three times a week, lots of video material, as well as exercises to do each week. One of the main things they teach is how to analyze your own work and strengthen it, to take it from good to great.

There were days I would wake up with dread about COVID-19, but then CVP would give me direction for the day and I would get lost in my artwork. There were highs and lows, struggle and frustration, but then, all strong art involves struggle.

Specifically, what has changed in your life and art during lockdown?

During the lockdown I've been able to really focus on my art. It's been like an intensive artist retreat. It has allowed me to spend the time to dig deep and discover what my intent is with my art, where my inspiration comes from, where I want to go with it.

The lockdown has given me the time to explore new ideas, experiment and take risks, to let me figure out what really makes me feel alive, what excites me most. A few years ago I was doing quite a bit of mark-making and printing on my oil paintings and then I let that go. I realized that's something I really want to bring back into my paintings – it adds a dimension that I'm really finding exciting.

CVP taught me that one of the most important things is to pay attention to how you are feeling when you are painting, when something excites you and makes you feel alive, follow that. Follow the “yeses,” and if you don't like something, stay away from it. This has brought me so much more joy in my painting.

On the flip side, it has been hard to not visit with friends and really sad to not be able to go meet my first grandchild, born in Boston in mid-April. But I fully understand the need for the lockdown to slow the spread of the virus and keep us all safer.

Can you explain further how reading and riding the bike-trainer for 30 minutes or so leaves you “fresher”?

I'm not sure exactly how it works, but I can tell you what I've found. At the end of the day after painting, I get on my bicycle trainer to exercise, while reading for 30 minutes. After 15 minutes I glance up at the paintings I've been working on and can instantly assess if I'm pleased with what I've been doing, or if something needs changing.



'The light from within,' 12-by-12-inch oil on canvas

After about another 15 minutes, I can often figure out what I need to do to make any needed changes. Somehow the physical activity (cycling) and mental activity (reading) disengages my mind from what I was so focused on while painting and lets me assess it with fresh eyes.

I find this invaluable because with an oil painting, if I can adjust something while it's still wet – I won't have to wait a few days for it to dry enough to start working on it again. I love many layers in an oil painting, but I some-

times hate waiting for each layer to dry! I used to feel that some pieces needed to be left for a week or two, and then assessed. I find with the bicycle trainer, that I can achieve that sense of a fresh look in 30 minutes.

I find a similar thing by putting a painting into my bedroom and then looking at it first thing in the morning before I'm fully awake. For one, the low light at dawn strips most of the color away and lets me see the values clearly. I crack my eyes open, look at the painting, shut my eyes, snooze and then

crack them open to look again.

I find this incredibly powerful for assessing my work; this has become a regular part of my art practice. If I love what I see, then the painting is done, if I don't, then it goes back into my studio for more refinements.

For more on the artist, got to lydiajohnston.com; [lydiajohnstonartwork](#) on Instagram; and [Lydia Johnston's Fine Art](#) on Facebook.