

# Lydia Johnston 'On the Outskirts' at Magpie

BY TAMRA TESTERMAN

**T**aos artist **Lydia Johnston's** work "intrigues the viewer, allowing a unique and profound connection with the images. Her play with color and composition is nothing short of magical." By creating "a powerful sense of place without divulging all the details. Pulling the viewer back to discover something new with a deep mystery, alluding to the familiar while remaining ambiguous.

Lydia Johnston: "On the Outskirts" opens Friday May 12 from 4-6 p.m. at Magpie, 218 Paseo del Pueblo Norte.

Tempo reached out to the artist and posed a few curiosities. Here are the details.

**Please tell us about your evolution as an artist, subject and medium, inspirations and experimentations.**

Color is the thread running through-out my art. I began working in fabrics in the 80s in Vermont, making art quilts; first with commercial fabrics, I soon turned to dying my own silks and cottons.

The designs were always my own, an exploration of color, pattern and texture. I am a self-taught artist which

gives me the freedom to follow my intuition. My work comes from deep within me, tapping into my experiences and the places I have lived.

I switched to oil painting in 2003 out of a desire to have more control over my colors. Loose landscapes emerged at first, giving the feeling of meadows, woods and skies. I never paint a specific place. I've always just wanted to hint at things, to trigger your imagination.

When I moved to Taos in 2015, my work became all about the big skies. I was captivated by the magical light. Multiple thin layers of oil paint allow me to use color to create light and depth.

My paintings are becoming more and more abstract. I just want to play with rich colors, to explore complex color combinations, to use color to create depth and the glow of light. I'm experimenting with lots of different mark-making materials to add line, graphite sticks, oil sticks, wax crayons and ink. All kinds of found objects, sticks, pine needles, feathers, become tools to lay down lines or to carve out lines in the wet paint. I've incorporated stencils and spray paints in under layers of some of my paintings before applying oil layers.

Most recently, I've been working with oil and cold wax medium. I love how I can use luscious oil colors, add lots of layers and create all kinds of fascinating marks, all without the long wait time for layers to dry. Marks are scratched onto the surface to reveal colors shimmering just below. I never quite know what will be revealed, and that's what I love. Patterns are rolled onto the surface to add another dimension. It's the unpredictability of the resulting pattern that grabs my attention. I can never repeat or copy a particular mark. This is magic.

**Who, where and what inspires you?**

My inspiration has always come from the natural world: skies, flowers, birds, rocks, ice. The more remote and wild a place, the better. It has always drawn me to bright jewel tones, using neutrals to set them off. I love the nuanced gradations of color found in nature; the yellows and oranges of lichens high in the mountains, the profusion of color and pattern found in flowers, the intense light displays at sunset and sunrise.

**What does your daily routine look like?**

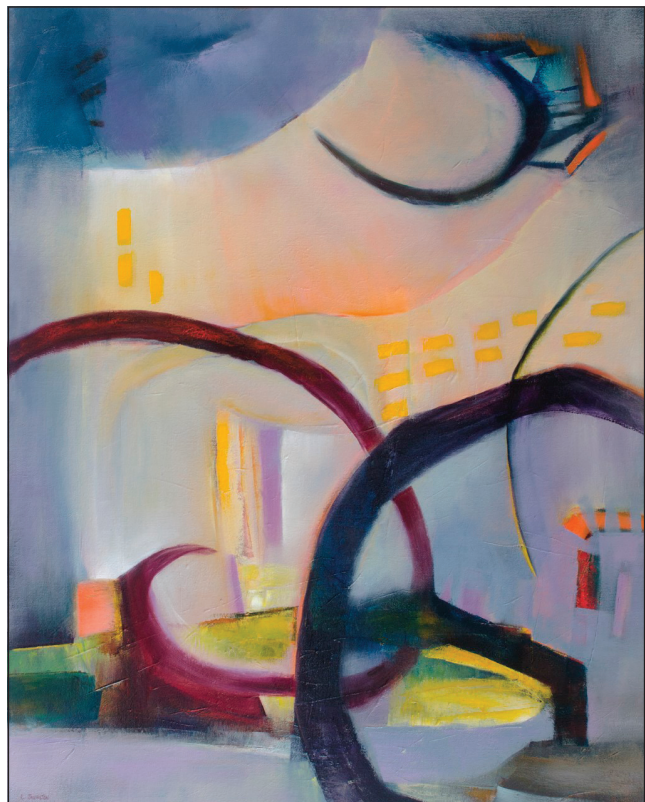
First thing in the morning, I take care of the business end of things; respond to emails, process photos, update my website. My studio is passive solar, so it's often chilly in the morning. I want the sun streaming in my east windows to heat, but I don't like that light to paint. I have large north windows to provide excellent natural lighting. Mid-morning, I get out my paints and start painting. I start without intention, just laying down colors until something emerges that intrigues me. Throughout the day, I paint, then set the piece on my viewing wall and sit back to assess, write color notes and thoughts to come back to, then it's back to painting.

I head outdoors to water plants, putter around and move my body. Then, back to my studio, paint, assess, it's a continual back and forth. So I have always wanted my studio at my house. Lunchtime is when I try to post through Instagram, something I dislike but promoting is vital. Then it's back to the studio. Paint, take photos, assess values in Photoshop, clean up. I'm a stickler for cleaning all my tools each day.

The end of the day is outdoor time, time to go for a walk on the mesa, work in my garden, feel the wind, listen to the birds.

**What books are on your nightstand?**

"Clear Seeing Place, Studio Notes," by Brian Rutenberg  
 "The Secret Knowledge of Water," by Craig Childs  
 "David Mankin, Remembering Paint," by Kate Reeve-Edwards  
 "Color, A Natural History of the Palette," by Victoria Finlay  
 "Under A White Sky, The Nature of the Future," by Elizabeth Kolbert  
 My Kindle for fiction:  
 "Beneath A Scarlet Sky," by Mark Sullivan



**LEFT: 'Point of Escape' by Lydia Johnston. RIGHT: 'Curiosity' by Lydia Johnston.**

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