



PASSION PROJECT

*Dyana Hesson continues her mission to
preserve Arizona's native blooms in paint.*

BY SARAH GIANELLI

I'll Be Back,
brittlebush over
Camelback Mountain,
AZ, oil on canvas,
30 x 60". Private
Collection.



Arizona, with its extreme variations in elevation and climate, is home to almost 4,000 species of native plants, making it one of the most floristically rich regions in the United States. This abundance also makes it a perfect home for artist Dyana Hesson, whose focus is painting the state's vast botanical biodiversity ahead of a sweeping showcase of her progress at Tucson's Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in the fall of 2025.

Florals have been the subject of Hesson's larger-than-life paintings for more than 30 years, but it was after her work was the subject of a large spread in *Arizona Highways* magazine in 2021 that she made a conscious decision to narrow her

scope to the state's wild botanicals, specifically.

"It gave me a hyper-focus to really seek out and find more," says Hesson, who has completed roughly 50 paintings in the series thus far. "I love being in the wild. I have an insatiable curiosity for what's around the next corner. I love our state and love to research it. I love the history of the West. I get to explore and learn so much within this theme."

One particularly memorable discovery occurred in the southern part of the state near Patagonia, Arizona, while adventuring with her husband in April 2023. "We had just finished some tricky driving (at one point we had to drive backwards down a steep, narrow grade because there was



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Artist Dyana Hesson in the wild in March 2023.

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Shimmering Light, Sierra Madre yucca, Patagonia Lake, AZ, oil on canvas, 48 x 36". Courtesy Bonner David Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ.

3
Higher Calling, saguaro blooms and buds near Aravaipa, AZ, oil on canvas, 40 x 50". Courtesy Bonner David Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ.

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A Good Landing, butterfly weed and Acmon blue butterfly, Sierra Ancha Wilderness, AZ, oil on canvas, 22 x 28". Courtesy Bonner David Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ.

no place to turn around) and had stopped to rest in the sandy wash," recounts Hesson. "My eyes were darting around the landscape looking for color when I noticed them—tall, star-shaped, white and lilac flowers swaying in the breeze. In all my exploring, I had never seen such bloom."

When she got home, she researched the plant and found out how rare Arizona blue star (*Amsonia grandiflora*) is. It has only been found in one other canyon, in Sonora, Mexico. The plant became the central subject of the 40-by-30-inch painting *Colleen's Home*, in which the purple flowers are suspended like a bridal bouquet in the sky. Hesson's clean compositions are imaginative but to her "they are completely accurate. That's the beauty of art," she says. "It's like standing in a still life class where everyone is painting the same thing, but every [piece]

is completely different. In my mind's eye, I am painting what I see. If you stood there, you might see something else, but hopefully it will inspire you to go stand in that place yourself."

Shimmering Light depicts a yucca variety unique to the same area, where sky islands—dramatic rises in elevation—create alpine environments in close proximity to the desert. "They ring like bells in the breeze and glow in the afternoon light," says Hesson. "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 was 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.”

Another example is *I'll Be Back, Brittlebush over Camelback Mountain, AZ*, a 5-foot-wide panorama of the defining Phoenix landmark as seen from the top of Mummy Mountain across Paradise Valley. “The brittlebush were growing right at my feet,” Hesson recalls. “All the smells and sights of that area, at that moment, are in that painting.” Her choice to provide an up-close view of the plant is meant to enhance the sense of being there.

Hesson was born in Northern California Gold Rush country at the foothills of the High Sierra, to green-thumb parents who kept a large greenhouse and garden. A natural adventurer from the get-go, and surrounded by the natural beauty and history that continue to inspire her today, she was more inclined to explore than sit still at a desk. “I’m fortunate to have had parents who always said, ‘do whatever you want.’ And if I had some sort of interest in something they would help me figure out how to explore that,” she says. “When I mentor young artists now, I tell them that everyone needs that encouragement, that cheerleader, and anything is attainable if you put in the hard work.”

Hesson met her husband, an Arizona



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native, while in college in Southern California. Although she despised SoCal, she says she still came to Arizona “kicking and screaming. I was like ‘yuck. It’s dry, parched, and full of old people.’ I didn’t want any part of it. But we went to the Grand Canyon, Payson, Tonto Bridge...got sprayed by skunks at our campsite. We had this amazing Arizona

adventure—I had no idea how diverse the state was.

“That did it for me,” Hesson continues. “When we moved to Mesa [part of the Phoenix area] in 1989, I just fell in love.”

Then in her 20s, Hesson enrolled at Arizona State University and started taking art classes, at her husband’s suggestion. Upon graduating in 1991, she hit the ground running and has been painting professionally ever since. “I figured I should paint something from Arizona and that’s when I got interested in the plants and places, and it’s been a journey ever since.”

Weekend jaunts in the jeep and nature excursions continue to define their family culture. “Being outdoors is the place where I truly am the most joyful,” says Hesson. “It’s a deep soulful feeling that’s hard to describe, but you know it when you feel it. Everything makes sense. It’s not political; there’s no drama. It’s just clean air and blue skies, and the smell of things that grow at your feet...it just makes my heart and soul sing.

“I’m so grateful for this state. It’s provided so many moments like that. And that’s what I hope to show people in my paintings.”

These days, Hesson is especially intrigued by an elusive bright blue wildflower she’s only seen in the White Mountains, in the easternmost part of the



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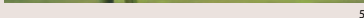
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Lucky Strike, fringed
 redmaids, Silver King
 Mine and Apache Leap,
 Superior, AZ, oil on
 canvas, 28 x 22". Private
 Collection.



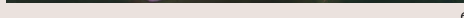
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Superstition Color,
 buckhorn cholla blooms,
 Superstition Wilderness,
 AZ, oil on canvas,
 48 x 48". Courtesy
 Bonner David Galleries,
 Scottsdale, AZ.



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Gratitude, sego lilies,
 false garlic and
 Lemmon's butterweed,
 Mazatzal Mountains, AZ,
 oil on canvas, 40 x 30".
 Private Collection.



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state where the highest peak is over 11,000 feet.

"It's very temperamental about opening and most often when you see them they'll be closed," she says. "This summer, all day long they'd be closed, closed, closed. At the end of the day, the sun was coming out and I asked my friend if we could stop along the corridor one more time to take a look, and a whole bunch of them were open! Open for business! That's what a flower is doing—inviting pollinators in so the species can continue." Hesson hasn't brought this varietal to life on canvas yet, but it is on her short list.

One of her favorite plants blooms on the slopes of one of her favorite places in the spring—the buckhorn cholla in the Superstition Mountains, a jagged, volcanic range just east of her Mesa home. "They can bloom in shades of yellow, gold, orange, pink, deep brick red and everything in between. How would you describe the color of these blooms?" she asks about those pictured in *Superstition Color*. "Fuchsia? Orchid? Purple? I see all three, swirled together, bouncing off each other, glowing in the late day's light. They are poetry, a western ballad, a remembrance, a spark. Legendary colors of the Southwest, rippling in the wind."

Although Hesson did not start painting florals with conservation in mind, she found that the more she learned, the more she cared. Upon embarking on this project, she asked herself, "What if I really focused on the wild plants and places of the Southwest, some of which are vanishing? Maybe the more I can capture these wild



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places, the more people will be inclined to take care of them. You really can't effect change unless you are educated and you have a personal experience to share. And that's what I'm doing—sharing my personal experience in the wild with my collectors.”

The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, which has a gallery in addition to a zoo, botanical garden, natural history museum and aquarium, recognizes art's capacity to be a powerful tool to advance conservation efforts. Jennifer Lindquist, curator of the museum's

Art Institute, says, “Dyana Hesson exemplifies the important role artists play in conservation by creating emotional and visual connections to the natural world that inspire a desire to protect it. Her vivid, detailed botanical paintings highlight Arizona's native plants and landscapes, allowing viewers to experience the beauty of these often-overlooked characters of the desert ecosystem. Her paintings inspire a deep appreciation for the resilience and uniqueness of Arizona's flora, sparking curiosity and instilling a sense of responsibility for its preservation.”

Featuring roughly 40 works, *Wild Arizona: Native Arizona Plants and Places* will be on view in Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum's Ironwood Gallery from October 4 through December 7, 2025. “It's kind of like I've been releasing singles,” says Hesson. “Now, at this show, we're going to show the album.” ●

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Blue as the Skies Above, wild irises, Mormon Lake and San Francisco Peaks, AZ, oil on canvas, 30 x 60". Courtesy Bonner David Galleries, Scottsdale, AZ.

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Colleen's Home, Arizona blue Star, *Amsonia grandiflora*, Flux Canyon, AZ, oil on canvas, 40 x 30". Private Collection.