



Insider's Look at Grand Canyon

Webisode #31 – Interview with Artist in Residence Erica Stankwyth Bailey Transcript

Ranger Patrick: This is Ranger Patrick and today I have another guest who's an Artist in Residence. It's Erica Stankwyth Bailey. Erica, welcome to the show.

Erica: Thank you.

Ranger Patrick: Erica, I heard on your way here you got stuck in snowstorms. You're the Artist in Residence for Feb. 2010, and now you're staying at Verkamp's. What I understand is that your art is metalsmithing. Could you share with our audience what that means to you?

Erica: Sure. So, I'm a metal smith. I work mostly in the jewelry scale. I work with non-ferrous metals—so metals like silver, copper, brass and bronze. You know, I just thought it would be really interesting to come here to the Grand Canyon, making such small work in such a vast place.

Ranger Patrick: To get to be an Artist in Residence at Grand Canyon here, it's extremely competitive. Artists who do things from painting, to the singing poet-cowboy who was here earlier, we've had a screenwriter here, so many different types of arts. And it is very competitive, and there's this whole application process, there's a panel of judges. I got to see some of the stuff you actually submitted. Would you mind reading for our audience part of your submission?

Erica: Absolutely. I have never traveled to the Grand Canyon, nor anywhere else that parallels its magnificence, and I intend to be awe-inspired. It is without a doubt that experiencing the Grand Canyon will change my ways of viewing. I inspect the world in great detail and have always collected shells, seed pods, stones and interesting organic elements. My studio often resembles a laboratory, with trays of collected specimens lined in rows. My work has always been inspired by the textures of the earth. Pages of my sketchbook are full of drawings, photographs and renderings of organic and natural elements, which I then translate into metal objects. I have always been intrigued by the miniscule within the larger body: a beautiful shell in the sea, a cell within the stem of a plant, jewelry on the wearer, a rock or leaf in the vast wilderness. The relationship of small within large, or species within habitat, must be truly dynamic in the vastness of the Grand Canyon. The amazing, beautiful, and wonderful thing about the environment is that this enormous depends on the small. Sketchbook, camera, and field guide in hand, I want to experience the Canyon and its amazing biodiversity, myself representing the small being within the larger environment.

Ranger Patrick: That's excellent. I love how it's the small within the big. Having got to see some of your art, I think it really shows through in what you make. But here at Grand Canyon, when people first come to the rim, they see the Canyon, and sometimes it's hard to understand how big it is and how small you are. When you first got here, what was your impression?

Erica: Well, when I first walked onto the rim, I cried. I was so overwhelmed by how amazing it was. But, in that same moment, it almost seemed like I was looking at a photograph. I mean, it was hard for my mind to believe that the place was as big as it is. And so as an artist, I started trying to figure out how to digest the Grand Canyon. And so what I started to look for were lines. That was the first thing that I saw, were the lines of the Canyon. The pancaking of the rocks, the lines of snow resting on the different layers, because there was four feet of snow when I got here. So it's just really amazing to start to see the Canyon in a more simple way.

Patrick: As I said before, when folks get here, they're trying to put this into their brain—how big this place is. And I always say to folks when you come to Grand Canyon, being on the rim is awesome, but if you go down one of our trails, even if you only go down 15 minutes, that will change your whole world,

your perspective. But even though it's the dead of winter now and we got this huge snowstorm when you got here, you still hiked to the bottom of the Canyon, which completely changes your perspective, and you went on some adventures. Would you share with our audience what those adventures were like and what your impressions through your art and the big and the small- how did you see that?

Erica: Sure. So I hiked down on a Monday morning, down the Bright Angel Trail, geared up more than I've ever been in my life, with gaiters and Yak-Trax and all of these things. And like you said, I mean, just a couple of moments down the trail and the world begins to change. What looks like simple texture on rock faces becomes these enormous outcroppings of rock. And it's just absolutely amazing, and as I journeyed down that trail, I just felt like I was entering new worlds, as the elevation went down. You know, from snow-covered rock to almost everything being white and red, to the oasis that is Indian Garden: the trees and plants and rumbling creeks that you step over. You know, absolutely an amazing place. So that whole journey down... journey in a lot of ways. Journey visually, journey for me because I'm not a hiker. So kind of interesting going downhill for 9 ½ miles. And then I arrived to the Colorado River, this big rushing, massive, you know, brown beast. And it's truly amazing. It's amazing to see it because it's cut a canyon as large as Grand Canyon. It's amazing, too, because it means that you're really close to Phantom Ranch, which at that point, was my final destination for the day. So I got to Phantom Ranch and I was going to be there for about three nights and I decided that if I'm going to hike my way all the way down to the bottom of Grand Canyon, I'm going to do everything that I can do from this place. So all the day hikes that they had available, I decided to do. That first morning that I woke up- beautiful. So different from being on the rim. Suddenly, you have a true sense of the scale of Grand Canyon. Because what from the rim looks like a little black line is actually a huge canyon full of trees and buildings in the case of Phantom Ranch. So, anyway, I decided to take a hike to a place called Ribbon Falls. Ribbon Falls is about a 12 mile roundtrip hike from Phantom Ranch, down the Bright Angel Canyon, and I'd just been told by rangers that it was an amazing and fun hike. And not too terribly hard because my calves were still kind of on fire from the hike down. I set out alone. I didn't take my walking sticks because they said it was an easy walk. So I'm walking along and you start through a place called "The Box." And it's an area in the Canyon where, in canyon terms, the walls are really close together. So here you are in Grand Canyon, on the ground, and you're really in this intimate space. You know this intimate space, and Bright Angel Creek is running down beside you and I was really able to start to see the texture of the rocks and the texture of the environment. I really just started to touch things. I didn't have those walking sticks in hand, so I was touching the rock, feeling how cold it was and as I left "The Box", you sort of enter into Bright Angel Canyon. And it's amazing to see all of the plant life and the trees in that desert environment. And I was shocked to find that at points on that trail I was surrounded on both sides in certain cases by plant life that was taller than me. So, as I'm walking along I start to run my hands along all the plants and the things. Beautiful green plants and golds. And I'm immediately shocked at how hard they are. I'm from North Carolina, so if something's green and soft-looking, it usually feels green and soft. And here in the floor of the Grand Canyon everything was hard and rough. And, you know, I've since learned that's because these things have to be that way to survive in that desert environment. So, I mean it was really interesting for me. And my hands were kind of swollen from the hike and not having my walking sticks, so it was just this really interesting sensory experience to run my hands along that plant life. And, I mean, I didn't touch the cactus, so I imagine they were *really* intense. But even the stuff that didn't look terribly intense was. And then, you know, as I started to get closer to Ribbon Falls, I came to a point that I could see the falls. Beautiful! It's this thin cascade of water over the rocks, and I was just absolutely amazed and I was still kind of far. So I continued to hike and suddenly I just lost the trail. I couldn't really find it anymore. And I looked around and I thought I know I've got to be able to get closer to this place, and so I just sat down. Well, actually I climbed up a rock where I had a good view of the falls and I laid my stuff out. I had my lunch. I got out my topographic map, which I'd never looked at before in my life, and tried to see if I could figure out how to get the rest of the way to these falls, which I could not. But I got my little surge of energy from my powerbar, climbed down the rock, and found my way. It was really interesting because I had been walking through this desert canyon, which at points was closed and narrow like I said, with plant life but often it was really open and you could really see the rocks on either side and see the geology of Grand Canyon. And then suddenly it was this wonderful creek and all of this growth, so I just sort of navigated my way through growth, even did a little bit of rock climbing, which is not something I'd ever done before. And finally I found it- Ribbon Falls. It was amazing! In the middle of this red and brown and gray place was this enormous green mound, with water just cascading over it. It

was by far the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. And- serendipity, maybe- there was a rainbow in front of the falls, so it made whatever moment of not knowing where I was or the traverse of the rocks all really worth it, to see this place. And what's amazing about Ribbon Falls is you're able to walk up very close to the falls, but you're also able to go behind them. And it's a whole different experience because suddenly you climb this little slope into this rock overhang, and the colors and the textures in the rock created by the water falling. And then the view through the waterfall to Bright Angel Canyon was absolutely amazing. And the interesting part to me was that the water falls so straight down, kind of in mid-air, that you can stand incredibly close and not get wet. You know, so I was able to stand there and take photographs of the moss that was growing on the travertine mount, to take photographs of the pools of water at the base of this waterfall- and I wasn't wet. And even at the base of the waterfall when I climbed back down from behind, there was this lovely little pool of water, maybe just a couple of inches thick, and there was all these rocks and pebbles and this amazing texture and, in that, lay this skeleton of a leaf perfectly still. Not even a foot from the base of a waterfall. And I thought, you know, how interesting this place is, in terms of this small in relationship to the large. That all of the small things do truly matter here. And they do survive. And they do decay and are reborn to create the Grand Canyon. So, anyway, an absolutely amazing hike.

Patrick: Well, we like to have our Artists in Residence come here to Grand Canyon to share their perspectives of the world. You know, the big and small. Big and small. That is *really* important here, so I'm so glad that you were willing to share your perspective with us and we really appreciate you coming out, being an Artist in Residence. Erica, thank you for being on the show, and thanks for doing what you do.

Erica: Thank you so much, Pat.

Patrick: We'll catch you folks next time on Insider's Look at Grand Canyon.