

ARTFUL ADVENTURES:

Connecting People to National Conservation Lands through the BLM Artist-in-Residence Program

Gregory P. Shine

On a sunny June evening in 2022, a crowd gathered in the amphitheater outside the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument visitor center for a performance by D'DAT, a four-piece jazz ensemble led by Diné trumpeter Delbert Anderson. Describing D'DAT's music, Anderson explained that they had “taken traditional Navajo spinning songs; stories and chants about life in the Navajo Nation; and combined them with jazz, funk, and hip hop to create an entirely new sound.” At that night's performance—part of their Painted Mountains Tour of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) National Conservation Lands—they also announced a new composition, inspired by their experiences on-site.

The Painted Mountains Tour was more than a traditional concert tour; it was a BLM Artist-in-Residence (AiR) Program woven from three elements over multi-day experiences at five sites within the National Landscape Conservation System, also known as National Conservation Lands. First, local BLM leaders organized private

meetings at each site for Anderson and D'DAT to connect with local Tribal leaders about the land and its resources. Second, BLM staff provided the ensemble on-site walks and tours with subject-matter experts, such as archaeologists at significant cultural sites and curators in museum collection facilities, to further inform D'DAT's new musical creations

D'DAT performs at Canyons of the Ancients National Monument as part of the 2022 BLM Artist-in-Residence Painted Mountains Tour. GREG SHINE, BLM





D'DAT members visit a cultural resource site at Canyons of the Ancients National Monument as part of the 2022 BLM Artist-in-Residence Painted Mountains Tour. GREG SHINE, BLM



Artist-in-Residence Delbert Anderson visits the curation facility at Canyons of the Ancients with museum staff. GREG SHINE, BLM

and interpretations. The ensemble also scheduled time and space for personal connection and reflection. Third, the ensemble led audience-centered public workshops on-site, including bring-your-own-instrument play-alongs, followed by an evening musical performance inspired by their experiences. Combined, this program helped forge new connections to public lands through music.

As ancient petroglyphs and pictographs of animals, plants, and objects demonstrate, art has long connected people to nature. The BLM's AiR Program continues in this tradition by connecting people to the resources of public lands administered by BLM through the power of artistic expression. Whether a musical tour of several locations, like D'DAT's, or a painter's individual work at one site, the program "offers opportunities for painters, photographers, potters, sculptors and other artists to promote deeper understanding of, and dialogue about, the significance of natural, cultural, and historic resources on public lands managed by the BLM—including the National Landscape Conservation System."² All the artists are volunteers, receiving no financial compensation from BLM for their time and creations.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

D'DAT's Painted Mountains Tour was one manifestation of BLM's national AiR program, which is scalable in size from multi-site tours to individual artist experiences. The program consists of an unlimited number of individual programs that can be held any time of the year. These are decentralized and administered locally by a BLM host site—usually a field office and frequently a National Conservation Lands unit. Each office has the autonomy to design its AiR program in a way that best aligns with its needs and capabilities, all while guided by five program essentials: (1) an artist committed to a

public lands connection; (2) a local BLM office's capacity for support; (3) an artist's direct, in-person connection to public lands; (4) an artist's public presentation and digital copies of their art for BLM use; and (5) formal agreements, including a volunteer service agreement.³

It is the direct, in-person connection between the artist and the land that provides the BLM program with its most flexibility, because it does not require sites to provide a typical overnight or multiple-day residency. Few BLM sites have cabins, bunkhouses, trailers, or other accommodations available to program use—especially when staff housing is so scarce. As long as the artist is able to have a hands-on experience on public lands that is "significant and meaningful enough to inspire their art,"⁴ a residency can be crafted creatively to meet the needs of the BLM site and a wider group of artists, including those unable to dedicate days or weeks to being on-site.

The AiR Program itself represents inherent qualities of art. While a single strand of colored fiber is strong, when that strand is interwoven with others, the combined strength, color, texture, and complexity creates an intricate braid. The image of braiding, inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, is a powerful metaphor for understanding how the AiR Program connects visitors to National Conservation Lands sites and the resources they protect, while also supporting management goals and objectives. The program does this by weaving together three different but interconnected elements: artistic expression, conservation and stewardship, and community engagement.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION—NEW WAYS OF SEEING

With keen senses honed by study and observation, artists

often recognize details, patterns, and connections that others might miss. Their unique perspectives can offer the public—and BLM staff—fresh insights into the world and inspire new ways of viewing and experiencing public lands. Pastel painter Lonny Granston, an artist-in-residence for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 2024, remembered a person’s comment on his art: “You help us see colors that are there, but we can’t see.”⁵

Serena Richelle, an artist-in-residence at Oregon’s Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in 2024, applied her talents as a hyper-realistic scientific illustrator to observe details in nature that go beyond the limitations of photography to enhance accurate species

► Scientific Illustrator Serena Richelle, the 2024 artist-in-residence at Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, sketches flowers in the field. MATTHEW HESTER, BLM
▼ Artwork by Lonny Granston, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Artist-in-Residence, 2024.



identification. “So, there’s a lot of times where I’ll take an image of something, and once I’m home, I’ll realize that it’s not the best representation of its species,” she explained. “And so, with science illustration, being able to illustrate something, you’re able to make sure that all of the identifiable characteristics that mark that specific species can be represented in the final piece.”⁶

As we have seen with D’DAT, artistic expression also goes beyond visual representations, providing additional ways of connecting to public lands and their resources. In 2018, Frank Soos floated 100 miles of Alaska’s Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River as part of his artist-in-residency. The experience inspired several poems, including “Color of the Day.” His poetry’s rhythm and imagery provoke a unique connection to the river through disparate elements like rain, wind, instant oatmeal, a Coleman stove, and aspirational rainbows.⁷

Matthew Conrardy, an artist-in-residence at California’s King Range National Conservation Area, crafted a video inspired by his experience hiking and painting along the Lost Coast Trail. He made the video available on YouTube and also ran it as a loop during his gallery showing.⁸

As artists-in-residence at Nevada’s Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA), Elizabeth Cadigan developed an album of

► “Color of the Day,” poem by Frank Soos.
 ▼ Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River 2018 Artists-in-Residence Margo Klass and Frank Soos floated over 100 miles during the week on the river with Outdoor Recreation Planner Collin Cogley. CRAIG MCCA, BLM



“The Ecology of Hyatt Lake,” Serena Richelle, Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Artist-in-Residence, 2024.

Color of the Day

Wet gloves, chilled to the
 Point that my cocoa jostles in
 My hand.

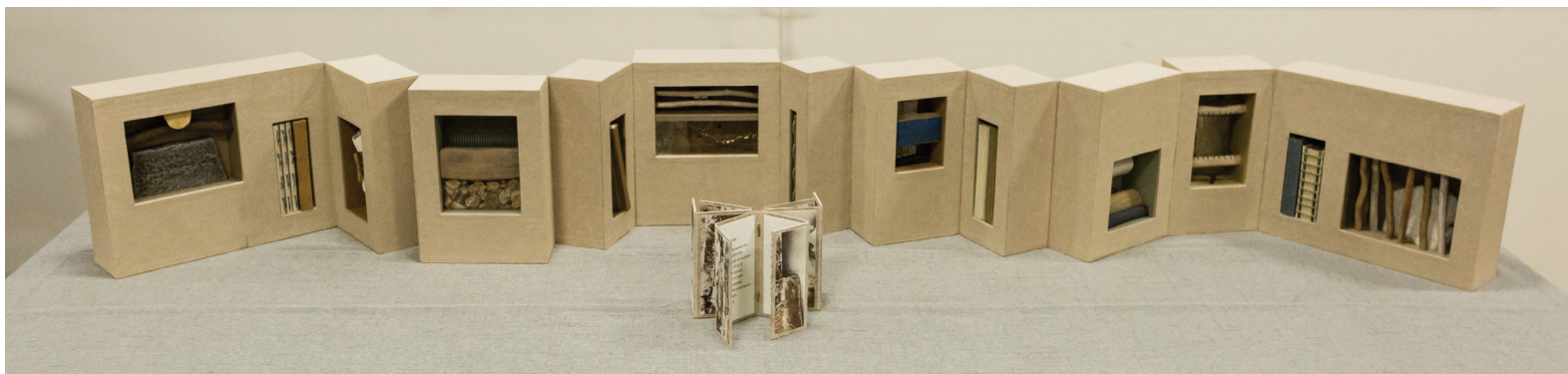
The cold has pushed
 All the color from the day,
 The sky, heavy as lead, hangs
 Just above my head and
 Spits rain on me.

I might conclude the world
 Is not such as welcoming place.

Except—there across the river
 On the low hills draped
 Over them like a scarf,
 A bent and misaligned spectrum:

I wouldn’t call it a rainbow,
 Though that is its aspiration.
 And just now
 That is enough.





▲ Art book created by 2018 Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River Artist-in-Residence Margo Klass, inspired during a week on the river. CRAIG MCCA, BLM
 ► “*Aquilegiaformosa*,” by Matthew Conrardy, King Range National Conservation Area artist-in-residence, 2023.
 ►► “*Ceanothus Over Fog*,” by Matthew Conrardy, 2023.

children’s music about things relevant to the NCA, and Virginia Catherall knitted 15 wool pieces inspired by the landscapes she visited, including a neck muffler that interprets the mud cracks of the desert’s playa.⁹ “What I try to do is capture the essence of the landscape. It’s not every aspect of the landscape, it’s just a portion. Sometimes it’s the color, sometimes it’s the shape and sometimes it’s the texture,” Catherall said.¹⁰

CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP—INSPIRED ACTION

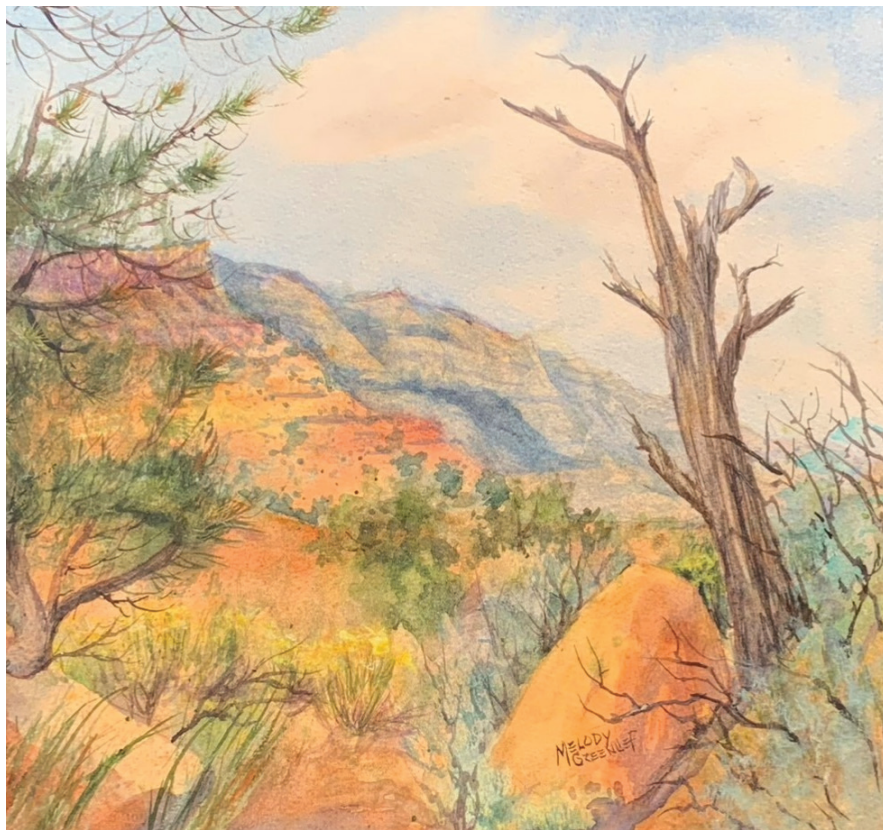
The requirement for a participating artist to have a direct, hands-on connection to public lands is an essential program component. Places, like National Conservation Lands sites, provide access to meanings. A central tenet of interpretation is that the physical experience of being in a place—and experiencing its sights, sounds, smells, and textures—enhances meaning and forges a stronger connection between person and place.¹¹ Artists gain a deeper understanding of a place and its meanings when they visit it, and this is shared with the public through their resulting artwork. John Duwe, a BLM park ranger, helped coordinate Richelle’s residency in 2024. “I was surprised by how much Serena’s use of a kayak [on Hyatt Lake] opened up not only where she could explore, but how she viewed the landscape,” he said. “As well as its scenic beauty, her final work depicts the unseen of Hyatt Lake, the depths that only the artist’s eye can capture. Exposing these hard to see places is the essence of scientific illustration and the power of interpretation.”¹²

An artist’s direct, in-person experience on public lands, like Richelle’s at Hyatt Lake, can cultivate a deeper, personal appreciation that inspires and acts as a catalyst for promoting National Conservation Lands across a wider audience. The program’s requirement for artists to participate in a public presentation associated with their residency amplifies this, expanding the audience reached by the art. The design of these presentations is left to



the creativity and capacity of the staff and artists. For example, bring-your-own instrument music workshops, formal concert performances, demonstrations, talks tied to special exhibits or displays, and readings have been used to expand audiences in new and different ways. At Grand Staircase Escalante, artist-in-residence Melody Greenlief led art programs for local students, arts festival attendees, and participants at a painting-on-the-rim event, while Lonny Granston conducted three community art programs and a dinosaur sidewalk chalk painting class for kindergarteners.¹³ As an artist in residence at California’s Alabama Hills National Scenic Area, artist Daniel Walter composed music and a video inspired by the movement of water through the Owens Valley. His work culminated in a public performance, video, and soundwalk installation that visitors will soon be able to enjoy along the Mobius Arch Trail.¹⁴

By virtue of the artists’ agreeing to share with BLM some of their art created on-site, or digital images of it, the bureau further amplifies the art and its connecting powers. At Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument—the site of one of BLM’s first AiR programs—the Escalante Visitor Center hosts a special exhibit of plein air paintings by past participating artists that is continually added to.¹⁵ An artist-in-residence community art project is displayed from



▲ Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument landscape painting by Artist-in-Residence Melody Greenleaf, 2023.
 ◀ Melody Greenleaf paints on location in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, 2023. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

the ceiling of the A.B. Cox Visitor Center at New Mexico’s Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, accompanied by a description of the project and the Artist-in-Residence Program.¹⁶ Alaska’s Central Yukon Field Office also showcases program art in its public room lobby.¹⁷

The use of visual art is not limited to physical displays at visitor centers. Staff at Arizona’s Las Cienegas National Conservation Area have used images of artist-in-residence art in social media posts for the site and also in annual reports for the NCA.¹⁸ Alaska’s Central Yukon Field Office staff have used the work of program artists in collectable posters that they distribute to the public in the lobby and at community events.¹⁹ Staff at Grand Staircase Escalante have used artist-in-residence photographs to enhance revised interpretive signs and the cover of the unit’s visitor information brochure.²⁰ The use of visual art even reaches curriculum-based education programming. Amber Giove, a park ranger at Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, uses art from artist-in-residence Jane Caldwell-Peacock for a fourth-grade postcard pictograph activity. “After learning about pictographs vs. petroglyphs, their meanings, natural pigments, and Leave No Trace, the littles [children] are given these postcards to create their own pictograph on

one side and write a message to other fourth-graders on the other side. In effect, mimicking the act of creating images and symbols to pass on information to people you may or may not encounter. I then mail these between participating fourth-grade classes in the Las Cruces area as part of a follow-up post-field trip,” Giove said.²¹

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT—SHARED STEWARDSHIP

The program structure empowers collaboration between artists, local BLM offices, and communities in support of a shared responsibility for the stewardship of public lands. As reflected in a widely used bureau training document, *BLM Spectrum of Community Engagement for Public Land Management*, sharing leadership is the highest level of community engagement, and the program presents opportunities to “unlock collective power and capacity for transformative solutions.” The program’s flexibility allows local offices to tailor it to best meet their needs and resources, and partner with community organizations and friends groups to support it. At California’s King Range National Conservation Area, BLM partners with the Shelter Cove Arts and Recreation Foundation to “provide an opportunity for artists to experience the Lost Coast while educating the community and showcasing their interpretations of the surrounding public lands.”²² Staff at Oregon’s Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area

▼ “The Fortymile,” Christine Nguyen, Fortymile Wild and Scenic River artist-in-residence, 2015.
▼▼ “The Fortymile” displayed in the Public Room at the BLM Fairbanks/Arctic District Office Building. [COLLIN COGLEY, BLM](#)



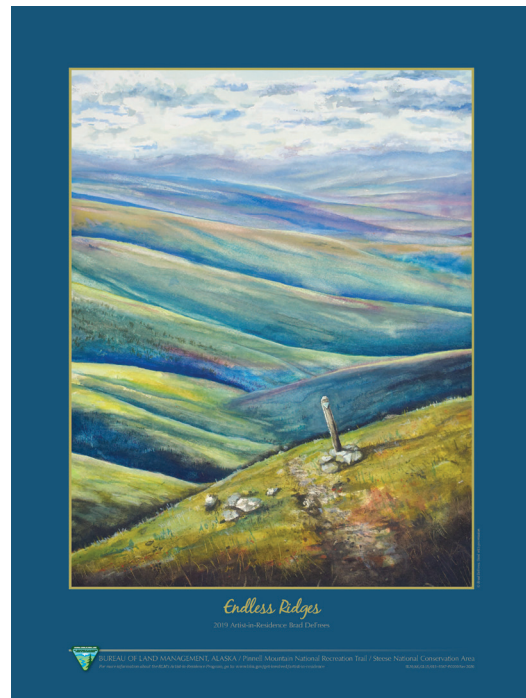
operate their popular AiR program in partnership with the Oregon Coast Council for the Arts and Friends of Yaquina Lighthouses.²³

The public presentation and engagement component of the AiR program also provides opportunities to connect with new audiences who might not typically visit public lands. This can help broaden the understanding of the value of areas, including National Conservation Lands units. As an artist in residence at Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, Crystal Evans engaged 29 community members in a collective art project that created the cover image for her own project: a zine (a small-circulation, magazine-like publication). Each person decorated a common outline, contributing their unique perspective to Crystal's project. "Together, we created a patchwork mosaic of our view of the Organ Mountains," Crystal explains in the zine. Importantly, she also actively engages reader thought with the following call to action: "How do *you* see the Organ Mountains? Share your perspective by decorating the next page."²⁴ Importantly, it is not BLM asking the question. Through the AiR, BLM has shared leadership, empowering artists to forge connections with public lands that it would be hard pressed to do alone.

BRAIDING TOGETHER: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR CONNECTION

The program's braiding of artistic expression, conservation and stewardship, and community engagement creates a powerful tool for connecting visitors to National Conservation Lands and their resources and stories. In the process, BLM and its partners gain valuable insight into their on-going work. In 2024, Andrea Stolarczyk, an artist in residence at Gunnison Gorge National Conservation

Area, capped her residency with a public presentation and showing that drew over 150 people. "After seeing the impact from her events, we have integrated [an] art curriculum into many of our educational programs," a representative from the partner group Colorado Canyons Association said. "It shows that public lands can be used for more than just hiking, biking, or hunting—they're the perfect outlet for creativity as well! Working with Andrea on her year-long art residency in the NCAs was an incredible experience."²⁵ The artists may also find personal benefit through the program. "I started looking for artist residencies because I felt stagnant in my art making practice, and so I found the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument was the next one coming up, so I applied to that one." Richelle said.²⁶



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER RIGHT BLM artist-in-residence posters: "Endless Ridges," Brad DeFrees, 2019; "Yukon Traffic Jam—Eagle, AK Circa 1900," Jamie Smith, 2016; "Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River," Becca Rorabough, 2017.





Brad DeFrees, artist-in-residence at Steese National Conservation Area and Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail, painting at the North Fork Trail Shelter. [TERI-BALSER, BLM](#)



Rebecca Rorabaugh, 2018 artist-in-residence at Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River, painting on a hillside overlooking the river. [BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT](#)

Additionally, as word of BLM’s program grows, the bureau has become a resource to share program strengths, successes, and challenges externally. For example, staff from the US Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Water and US Department of Energy’s Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education have reached out to BLM’s Artist-in-Residence Program for information and advice to support their development of new programs.²⁷ Noting that the BLM program was “one of our major inspirations,” the Department of Energy’s Benjamin Burch corresponded with BLM staff about the program’s design, function, successes, and challenges.²⁸ In 2024, staff conducting a research study to inform the development of the San Francisco, California-based Metropolitan Transportation Commission’s Bay Trail Program also contacted the BLM program. They were “examining models for artist and agency collaborations to enhance equity and a sense of belonging in public space,” and had selected the BLM program as one of 12 public agencies nationwide—and one of just two federal agencies—to identify replicable best practices for collaborations between artists and government agencies.²⁹

A LEGACY OF ART AND CONSERVATION

Like the braids of a rope, the BLM Artist-in-Residence Program embodies an integrated, interconnected approach to understanding and engaging with public lands. It weaves together strands of artistic expression, conservation, and community engagement to create a powerful tool for connecting visitors to public lands, including National Conservation Lands. It also inspires

a legacy of art and helps BLM move beyond traditional approaches to conservation, stewardship, and land management, embracing the interconnectedness of art, science, and community engagement. “I think the point of having programs like this, and having artists come out into nature, is a great way to reconnect these spaces to the public,” said Richelle. “We have artists that get to come out, and through their lens of observing the world, really just capture the beauty or the ambiance of a space, and reshare that with the public in a different way that hopefully inspires other people to go experience that place.”³⁰

Looking to the future, the program has the potential to facilitate even greater change. Writing in *The New York Times*, Michael Powell noted how D’DAT’s Painted Mountains Tour “began to heal centuries-old wounds between that federal agency [BLM] and Native tribes.”³¹ Thus, not only does the Artist-in-Residence Program inspire a legacy of art, stewardship, and engagement, one of its greatest strengths is its ability to inform larger, institutional change.

Want to be inspired by public lands? Learn more about the Artist-in-Residence Program at [Get Involved: Artist in Residence | Bureau of Land Management \(https://www.blm.gov/get-involved/artist-in-residence\)](https://www.blm.gov/get-involved/artist-in-residence).

The findings, conclusions, and opinions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Bureau of Land Management.

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