

**ROCK SOLID**



ROCK SOLID

A Thesis

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of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

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Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

In the basin of a hidden valley, a skewed rock pile breaks the silhouette of distant blue mountains. The already-fallen sun leaves a green sky in its wake. Without the heat of day to hold it back, a brisk chill quickly rises from the sandy ground. This kind of moment is my artistic muse—the sublime beauty of Earth. This body of work follows my artistic journey of distilling these sublime experiences in landscape paintings. I focus on representing moments of transcendent awe specifically among the boulders in Joshua Tree National Park. Between the low-atmospheric light and the mazes of monolithic rocks, I have come to associate this landscape with a deep personal symbolism. My late father advised me to build my life on a rock-solid foundation. So, with this body of work, I have created a reliable foundation where my passion for painting meets my love for experiencing the sublime beauty of the Earth. The massive rocks in Joshua Tree physically represent this metaphorical foundation. I intend to create images that evoke the same powerful experience I felt out on location and to share a sense of stillness and peace that I found out in the desert.

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my late mother and father. Their love and advice are never ending.

**EPIGRAPH**

“Share the Love.”

– Jeff Williams

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## ROCK SOLID

### DESCRIPTION

An owl hoots and a heavy tranquility fills the air. Directly in front of me is my light travel easel, equipped with two side trays that support my brushes, palette knives, and a can of solvents. Under me is my backpack that holds all my supplies, as well as a water bottle, extra mineral spirits, and a small bag of almonds. I am standing under the ever-growing shadow of a monolith boulder at the bottom of an expansive rock pile. This boulder provides respite from the sun and a shaded view of my subject: an ascending cascade of rocks and patches of illuminated yucca brush, backlit from the setting sun. As I complete the color study for my painting *Boulders and Yucca* (Fig. 1), a low flying crow passes over my head, each flapping wing tearing the air with a gentle thud. Later, somewhere in a pile of boulders next to me, a bird calls out with a resounding chirp, echoing off the canyon walls. I try to

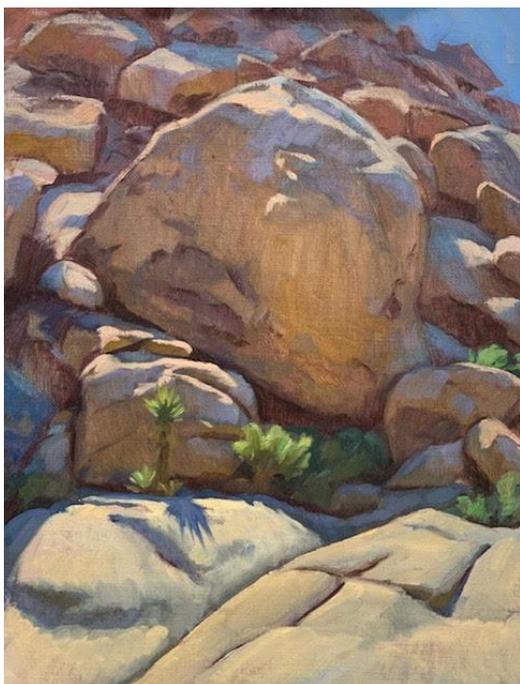


Figure 1 - *Boulders and Yucca*, 2021,  
Oil on canvas, 12" x 16"

mimic the bird's call. For at least a minute, this unseen animal and I are in a back-and-forth dialogue of birdsong. I am immersed in a communion with nature. In this moment I am experiencing the sublime of life on earth.

As the sun sets behind the horizon, cold shadows grow over me and my subject. It is time to pack up and head home. Driving back, I notice that the beauty of Joshua Tree left a feeling of profound wonder in me. It is a place of stillness and serenity.

A place where I can connect with the environment

free from the distractions of urban life and experience the sublime beauty of a natural environment.

The sublime is a central part of my current body of work. It is what drives me as a painter. I see it as my muse and my motivator. For me, the sublime is a feeling of transcendent awe. It's the moment when the beauty of a landscape takes your breath away, often sparking euphoria. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the sublime as something similar: "tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality or transcendent excellence." I see Joshua Tree as a place of elevated quality because its vast expanse of boulders and shrubs are unique and wonderful, especially during the sunset when dramatic light spills across the rocky forms. This body of work is about the different ways the sublime has presented itself to me in Joshua Tree.

I am focused specifically on Joshua Tree because it has become a unifying existential thread in my life. I believe it started when I was a young boy. My father told me a parable about building my house on stone rather than on sand. Every home needs a solid foundation. Since then, I have built my life on a foundation of gratitude, observation, and painting. This is my bedrock. As a landscape painter I observe the world and find gratitude constantly. Joshua Tree's stone is a nexus point where my father's advice, my love for painting, and an ever-inspiring landscape all converge.

This existential thread first braided into my life when I explored the boulders of Joshua Tree during a formative trip as a teenager. I went with a school group of about 20 other students and stayed in the national park for about six days. During one of the star-filled nights, our entire group circled up in an open patch of sand between the dried brush of an old riverbed. There we had a direct group conversation about our individual emotional states. When it was my turn, I spoke about my father who had passed away just four years prior. I brought up his story of building on a foundation of rock. It seemed fitting for our location. In hindsight, I believe this vulnerable state initiated my relationship with the Joshua Tree desert that has lasted to today. There among the boulders and brush, I found a sense of connection with my late father, and a decade after that high school trip, I return to the high desert with

nostalgia, revery, and appreciation for the life-long lessons my father left with me.

Now that I journey to the dry Joshua Tree desert with thoughts of painting, I have a clear idea of what to do with my time there. My work always begins by exploring and hiking among the rock piles and fields of stone. I can find inspiration at all times of the day. At high noon, the landscape is washed in pale light, casting chromatic shadows beneath boulders. During dusk, shapes of freestanding rocks silhouette against brightly lit mountains in the background as in my painting *Serenity* (Fig. 2). These beautiful moments always

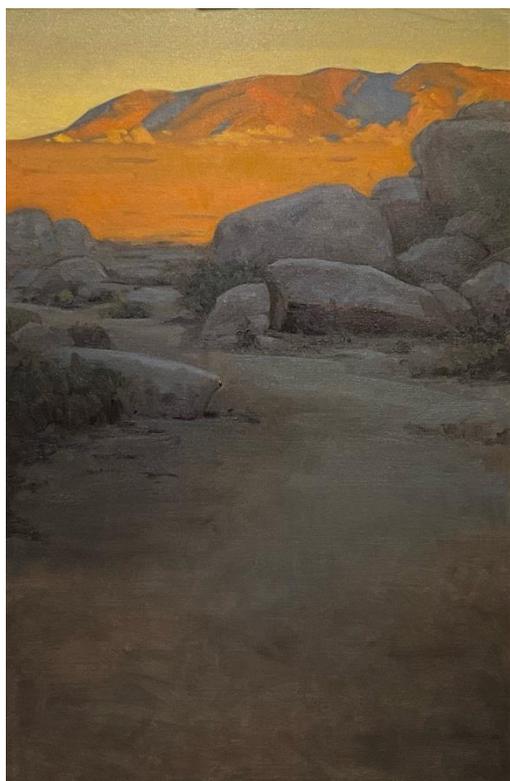


Figure 2 – *Serenity*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 24” x 36”

lead to a rush of excitement and energy. When I have that feeling, I know the landscape I see will become the next subject of a painting.

While I am exploring, I gather color notes and small studies of my subject through drawings and paintings. When I am painting on location, I feel most connected to the environment. There is not enough time to sit and overthink about the color I am mixing or the mark that I am making. I need to make quick decisions because the light is changing with each passing minute. As I paint, the mantra of my first painting mentor, John Burton, guides my brush, “I may not be right, but I am certain.” My intention is to capture not just my subject, but my experience of it as I see and feel it. I forgo the desire for perfect representation so that I can extract good color notes and a feeling of my subject. By painting the subject, I become a keen observer of the scene and develop a sensitivity to its specific shapes and colors. I may not finish the painting in the desert, but the process of painting on location allows me the opportunity to experience everything that my subject has to offer. The more time I spend in the setting, the more connected I feel to the subjects I paint there. Occasionally, if I do not have the time to paint, I try to capture glimpses of the sublime with my camera as I did for my painting *Serenity*.

It is not hard to find an exciting rock formation in Joshua Tree—they seem to be lying all over the place. However, it can be rare to find a truly sublime incident of light on these rocks. On a recent painting adventure, I was lucky enough to find one such moment. I walked among the weaving dry-riverbeds and dusty air, being careful not to step on a stray cholla spine. Just ahead I saw large rocks and boulders laying on top of one another: a crumbled castle of granite platforms. Their ovoid forms were just small enough for me to climb from one stone to the next. After scaling upwards for a while, I was confronted with a granite wall

too tall for me to continue. There, under the purple shadow of this gargantuan pillar of stone, I saw the most peculiar view: a stone the size of a small car perched on top of a tripod of three other large stones. Through the gaps in these rocks, I saw the amber light of the setting sun striking the distance hills. In that moment, it felt like the stillness of the desert air let my vision become the singularly activated sense in my body. I was confronted with a view of sublime beauty, which I have attempted to capture in the painting *Tripod Rock* (Fig. 3).

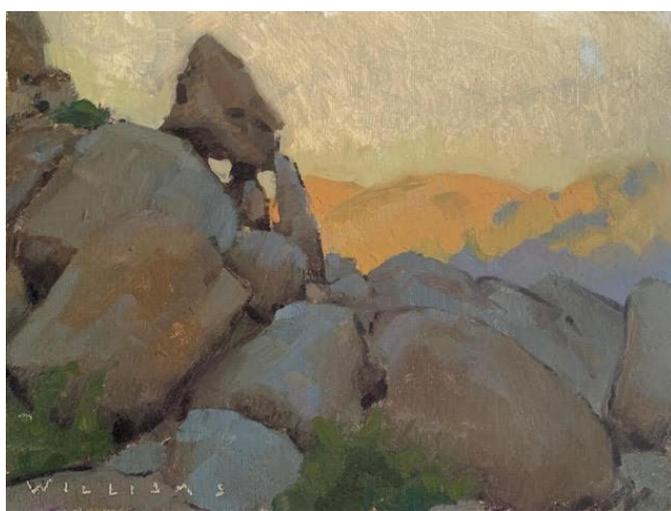


Figure 3- *Tripod Rock Study*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 6" x 8"

I found tripod rock especially worth painting because its precarious state seemed like a miracle. How could something so large and heavy be naturally placed and supported on top of other pole-like rocks? To communicate my observations of this scene in my painting, I arranged the composition so that the teetering rock

could have the most impact. By placing it at the top left of the painting, I added to the feeling that the rock is unstable and could come crashing down. I also altered the chroma and hue of the sky to highlight the coming dusk. Additionally, the staccato dark accents marks I placed around the boulders act as hints for the eye to move from one form to the next.

When I create larger works in the studio, my intention is to capture a similar feeling of the sublime that I experience on location. I cannot recreate exactly the same experience, but I can arrive at an approximation by highlighting the essential aspects of the scene and omitting the unnecessary ones. Experiencing the sublime in the real world will always be

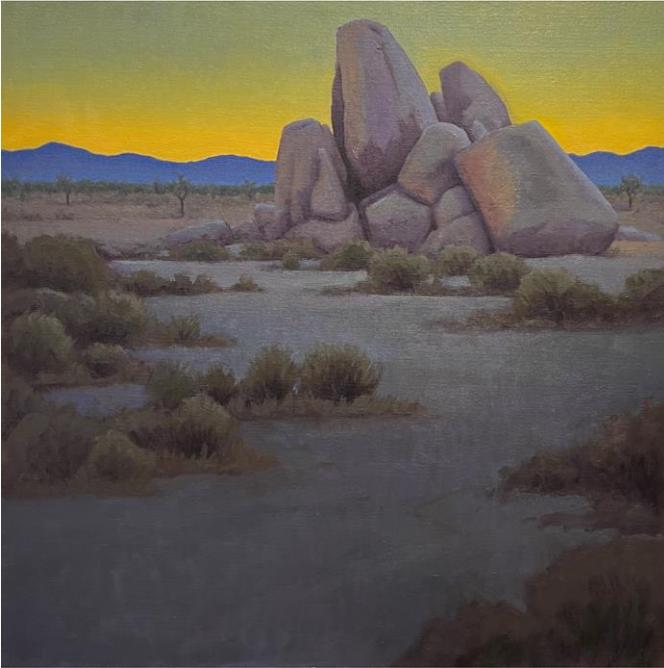


Figure 4 – *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight*, 2022,  
Oil on canvas, 12” x 12”

different than experiencing it in a painting. The real world is changing minute by minute. It is an experience that exists on a timeline. The benefit of capturing those moments in a painting is that the experience can remain in stasis, like lightning in a bottle. A painting of the sublime distills the best parts of a scene. It is like having a memory being concentrated into a singular moment.

I see my paintings as a reminder of the wonderful things that await us in the wild—a space unimpressed by the developments of society. My painting *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight* (Fig. 4) is about exactly that. When I planned the composition for this painting, I felt that the yellow-green sky against the boulders evoked the dignity and reverie of a national monument. So, I put the boulders in the top quadrant with a path leading up to them, just as a podium in a church is preceded by a runway of carpet and set against an altar piece.

The title of this painting is important as it projects the sacred quality of this landscape. This was one of the first times I tried to use a painting title to preface the work with an idea. The main subject is the pile of boulders in the top right. I have reinforced this idea by placing the darkest darks of the painting there. I believe that by using the word *sentinels* I have in a way anthropomorphized the boulders in the scene. Rocks do not

typically stand and watch guard, although gargoyles and statues can fulfill this role. The boulders in the painting are like the unsculpted gargoyles of the desert.

The Earth's beautiful landscapes have an incomparable effect on my senses. Whether it is a luminous sunset or the smell of wildflowers, the natural world holds my attention and offers a reprieve from the routine duties of everyday life. In my experience, landscape paintings offer something similar. My main goal with this series is to extend a moment of stillness and peace to my viewers. By channeling my sublime desert experiences through paint, I hope to spread the goodness and beauty I find in the natural world to the walls of a gallery or corridors of a home. My work can serve as a place to let go of worry and distraction. It can provide an opportunity for introspection and relaxation.

I hope my work will bring attention to environmental issues, especially climate change. As our global presence continues to grow, the Earth is warming up because of our unsustainable consumption and resulting emissions. Environments around the world are seeing a direct impact of our actions. By highlighting the wonderful qualities of color and light of a landscape that I know and love, I hope to inspire an appreciation for the Earth's unique qualities. In essence, I want to promote environmental awareness and the need to protect the Earth by highlighting its natural beauty through paint.

My dedication to painting the sublime in the Joshua Tree desert is the result of the many influences, mentors, and life experiences I have had. Some of these mentors have encouraged my technical growth, while others have fostered deepening my intentions behind what I make as a painter. Although I began my journey as a professional painter five years ago, I have only recently understood why I make the work that I do, and how it fits into the larger context of art history.

My work sits at the end of long lineage of paintings that deal with the dramatic sublime in a landscape. It is a heritage that stems from the Impressionists and the American Romantics. They studied the brilliant colors and movement in natural landscapes, but their combined fervor for painting the Earth eventually led to the legion of plein air painters living and working today. For example, I am a member of the California Art Club, a painting club that some early California Impressionists established nearly 100 years ago. I seek to be a part of the wonderful tradition of landscape painting by depicting my unique vision of what a landscape can be.

## RESEARCH

As a source of artistic inspiration, my family comes first. They have supported my creative endeavors since the beginning. These adventures of seeking out the sublime are, in



Figure 5 - Frederick Ballard Williams, 1871-1956

part, due to the environment in which I grew up. My grandmother was a high-school art teacher, my mother minored in art in college, my father was a shoe designer and my great-great grandfather, Frederick Ballard Williams, shown in Fig. 5, was a landscape painter. He was associated with the Hudson River School. Recently, after doing some digging, I found out that he went on a painting trip to the Grand Canyon with one of the

most notable painters of the beautiful sublime, Thomas Moran. He left for the trip in 1910 and came back two years later. It is written that my great-great grandfather “was best known for his decorative, romantic fantasies of women in landscapes” (nationalacademy.emuseum). However, a collection of his paintings hangs on the walls in my family’s homes, and many of them are landscapes of upstate New York.

My family raised me as a Christian Scientist. I am no longer a part of the religion, but its impact on me is lasting and clear. My mother and father passed away, at separate times in my life, but I am left with the lessons they taught me and the uplifting energy they expressed in life. They used the tenets of the religion to guide themselves as people and parents. They were both incredible people, who never stopped short of exuding unconditional love for their friends and family. I use my dad’s motto, *Share the Love*, as a life philosophy/mantra. I found to practice this philosophy, I need to collect experiences where I take love in.

As an avid landscape painter, I am often face to face with very lovely scenes of nature. One time this past summer, I was painting on location during the sunset in my hometown of Carmel. I stood on the sandy bank of the lagoon, just about a hundred feet from the ocean. There, a full moon rose over the hill that I saw every day on my rides to elementary school. The sky was a periwinkle blue, leftover pink from the sunset still visible on a few wispy clouds. Reflections of the yellow moon rippled in the lagoon as a mother duck and its ducklings paddled back and forth. As I was painting this scene, my late grandmother’s voice came to me. It sang the hymn that she used to sing when I was young. The first line kept repeating, “O’ gentle presence, peace and joy and power.” Chills shot down my spine. I was filled with a feeling of love. Love for my subject, and love from my family who have led me to where I am.

Apart from my relatives who were in the arts, being born and raised in Carmel may have had the most surprising impact on me. When my mom's family moved to Carmel, California in 1988, I'm sure she didn't expect the small coast town to have a major impact on my art as much as it has. When the town started just over 100 years ago, it was known as a hub for photographers and painters alike. Its roots are deeply in the arts, however the rugged coastline is a rude awakening for any tourist looking for a conventional warm and sunny beach town. The granite rocks are covered in chromatic lichen, and invasive ice plant covers the cliffs overlooking the ocean. Unlike the Southern California palm trees, twisted Monterey Cypress trees hang over the cold sandy beaches like a foreboding sign. Their gnarled bark and broken branches are a visual history of the harsh coastal weather. For me, this environment is my home, and a hundred years ago it served as the epicenter for the growing California Impressionist movement.

In between the boutiques and restaurants, there are more than 80 art galleries in the square mile of downtown Carmel. Most of these galleries sell generic artwork for high prices. However, a handful of painters living in Carmel today carry on the tradition of painting the Carmel coast, selling their work alongside the original California Impressionists in a few select galleries. These painters, old and new, have influenced my paintings. They have been ever present through my life, whether I knew it or not.

Thankfully, my family supported my choice to be an art major as an undergraduate. And when I got a day job at Apple after college, they seemed disappointed I wasn't painting. However, soon after, much to their delight, I quit that job to pursue painting full time. Almost immediately my grandfather commissioned me to do a landscape painting of his favorite vacation spot in Austria. At the time I didn't care for landscape painting much, but as a

nearly broke college graduate, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. In retrospect, I see this moment as a turning point in my artistic path, for it was when I developed a sincere interest in landscape painting.

As I developed as a painter, I also learned more about art history, and with that came a study of the Impressionists. The group is known for popularizing *plein air* painting, French for painting "in the open air." They broke away from the conservative aesthetic of the French Academy and opted for a more expressive and experimental approach to landscape painting. I was already familiar with the group, but as I read more about them, my fascination with landscape painting really took hold. I discovered that from the Impressionists came the California Impressionists, most notably Edgar Payne. In contrast, the earlier English Romantic artist John Martin and his contemporaries were focused on portraying the sublime as a powerful force of terror and beauty. I believe the Impressionists, most notably Payne and his ilk, were focused on the beautiful aspect of the sublime, rather than terror. I share their interest in the beautiful sublime.

Following my dive into the work of the California Impressionists, I met contemporary painters who carried on that tradition of design and technique. Under their guidance, I studied *plein air* painting more seriously and dedicated myself to learning as quickly as possible. It was during that time that my love for *plein air* painting became a hugely formative part of my life. I became determined to be a full-time artist, dedicating my career to fine art. During many of the paintings trips when I first started, I was overwhelmed with a sense of passion and joy, like the moving experience I had in Joshua Tree. It was that feeling of the sublime! To follow that feeling, I found myself trying to paint beautiful things that seemed impossible to capture. I studied gnarled cypress trees in freezing fog, blazing orange sunsets at the beach

in howling gales, and billowing clouds in between pockets of rain. I considered all these intense moments as nature's expression of the sublime. Even if none of the paintings from those sessions turned out well, that experience of the sublime taught me a lot about how to paint and what I actually wanted to paint.

Over two years, I painted full time in Carmel, and I met two professional painters, Jesse Powell and John Burton. Both took me on as their student. For an intense 9-week period, John had me paint outdoors constantly, sometimes having me make 30 small on-location paintings a week. This was helpful for getting past the initial hurdles of using formal tools like atmospheric perspective, value design, and color temperatures. Now, almost two years later, even though John and I have moved out of Carmel, I am still discovering lessons that he was trying to teach me.

*Point Lobos Rain* (Fig. 6) is an oil painting John did from Point Lobos, one of the hallmark locations of the California Impressionist movement. Many painters have made a pilgrimage to paint this location in the regional park there. This painting of Cypress Cove shows John's superb understanding of design. He arranged the value structure in this painting so that the point of highest value contrast is where he wants the viewer to look. The low



Figure 6 - John Burton, *Point Lobos Rain*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 12"x24", Private Collection

contrast areas support the focal point by not drawing as much attention, even if they are painted just as beautifully. Another thing John taught me is that in order to show detail in an area where he doesn't

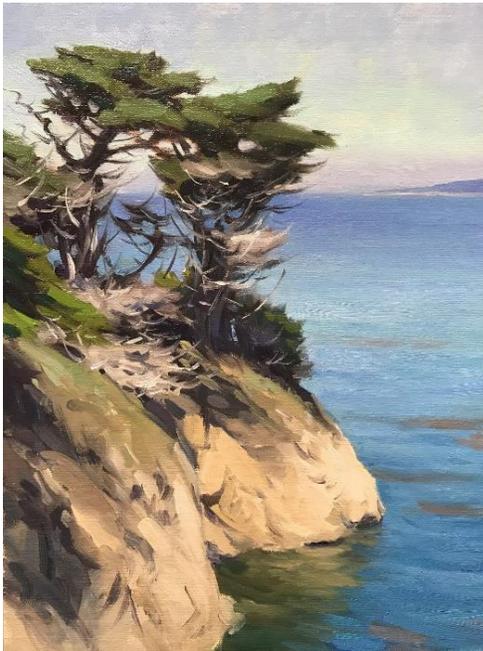


Figure 7 - Jesse Powell, *Point Lobos Cliffs*, 2019, Oil on linen, 9"x12", Private Collection

want the viewer to look for too long, he uses different color temperatures but the same color value.

Jesse Powell taught me many of the same things that John did, just with a different style. Jesse's paintings, like *Point Lobos Cliffs* (Fig. 7), always had a sense of stillness and serenity, which for me highlighted the nostalgia of the place he was painting. Since my studio was right next to his for a little while, we had plenty of opportunities to talk about my paintings. During those visits, he would share artists he thought I might like, and many of them were a part of

the original California Impressionist movement, with roots in Carmel. These artists included Payne, William Wendt, Hanson Puthoff, Armin Hansen, William Ritschel, and Guy Rose. I studied their paintings and even found the exact spot that some of them painted from a century ago. I had seen some of Payne's paintings prior to meeting Jesse, but I didn't realize how important he really was. Jesse encouraged a further study of Payne's work, and even shared a book that Payne wrote titled, *Composition of Outdoor Painting*.

This book became a big part of my growth as a painter. It was all about painting landscapes, and especially painting plein air. One of the main lessons that I learned from it was about types of compositions (fig. 8). When designing the composition of a painting in the rectangular dimensions of the picture plane, Payne thought it is useful to think of these basic shapes to arrange the subject. Just to name a few of these basic shapes, there is a circle, triangle, and a S curve. Using different compositional shapes can help with getting unique effects. The radiating line composition is useful in pulling the viewer's attention towards a focal point from any point on the canvas. The circle composition is helpful for getting a sense of constant movement in a painting to keep the eye moving in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction. Figure 9 shows one of my paintings that was designed using Payne's "S curve" composition. I inserted a red "S" to show how the compositional shape was used to guide the movement of the eye through the painting. An S-curve is especially helpful for moving the eye through a painting slowly.

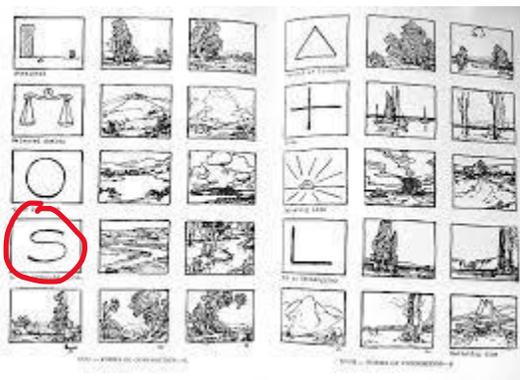


Figure 8 - Excerpt from *Composition of Outdoor Painting*



Figure 9 - *Shadow and Stone*, 2021, Oil on linen, 6''x8''

*Haze at Heisler* (Fig. 10) is a plein air painting I completed on location in Laguna Beach. In this painting, I tried using the techniques John taught me to regulate color temperature and improve my value design. I wanted the viewer to look at the white water moving onto the shore, so I left the highest value contrast for that moment. Then, not wanting to bring too much attention to the green foliage and trees, I bent the temperatures of the greens I used from warmer tones to cooler tones, so I could describe details without too much value contrast.

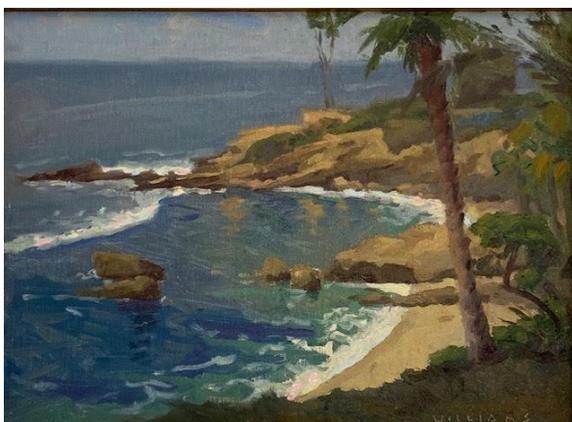


Figure 10 - Mason Williams, *Haze at Heisler*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 12”x16”, Private Collection

Now, I live in Laguna Beach, where the impacts of the California Impressionist movement can be felt just as heavily as in Carmel. Payne helped establish some of the painting clubs that I am a part of today, specifically the “California Art Club.” Both

John and Jesse have painted and competed in this group, and each earned a spot in their

highest and most skilled category of painters. Now that I have shared common living places and painting locations with these artists, the influence of the California Impressionist movement is visible in my work. I am a part of that legacy. Perhaps growing up in Carmel initiated the part of me that wanted to become a painter? Maybe it was my great-great grandfather yearning for one his descendants to follow in his footsteps? Whatever the reason I have elected to spend my time pushing paint. I feel fortunate to live in these two beach towns, as I can feel the artistic influence that has come from my family, my home, and my mentors.

I go plein air painting often, and although I can find interesting shapes and colors to paint almost everywhere, the deserts in the American Southwest have captured the interest of my soul the most. There specifically, among the rocks and sand, I feel at the most peace as a painter. Part of the reason, I believe, is because a desert landscape is frequently an area with a tremendous amount of open and quiet space. Therefore, it can offer an experience of the sublime.

Recently, I encountered a peaceful and unique variant of the sublime on a painting trip in the rocky deserts of Joshua Tree. Just as the sun was making its final descent beyond the horizon, I climbed up a small mountain of granite boulders. When I leaped from one large boulder to the next, my gummy shoes displaced loose rock. Each step sent a sound like sandpaper rubbing against itself echoing through the geologic chamber. Near the top, I squeezed through a narrow gap between two monolithic rocks and encountered a rocky amphitheater-like display of light and color. Vibrant hues of the nearly-complete sunset fell across massive bulbous rocks. Purple and blue shadows budded up against blazing orange and yellow light. There, in that remote conclave of stone, where my senses rode the high of adrenaline of child-like discovery, I found a subject for one of my latest paintings, *Throne* (Fig 11).



Figure 11 – Mason Williams, *Throne*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 6” x 8”

Naturally, I have looked to the past to see how others have approached such a large concept as the sublime. Moran, the painter who shared the Grand Canyon trip with my great-great grandfather, is well-known for making paintings of the American West. Many consider him to be one of the best painters of the sublime. A

collection of his work, alongside the work of many other influential painters like Fredrick Church and Thomas Cole, was in an exhibition titled *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880*. The show was on display at Tate Britain in 2002. In a press release on the Tate website, it mentions Moran’s dramatic and huge paintings of the far west. I imagine on their painting trip to the Grand Canyon in 1910, in between sketching scenes for larger paintings, Moran talking with my great-great grandfather about their shared sublime experiences, which might have been like mine among the boulders.



Figure 12 - Thomas Moran, *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River*, 1882 and 1908, Oil on Canvas, 53" x 7'10", Philadelphia Museum of Art

Lynne Moss wrote about the Tate exhibition in an article titled “The Sublime Landscape.” In the context of the show, Moss defines the sublime. She writes that the sublime is “a term used in Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe the emotionally overwhelming effects of nature’s

splendor” (1). She adds that the idea of the sublime was a primary focus for how American artists reacted to the landscapes they encountered, inspiring them to make paintings that evoked emotions ranging from terror to worship. Moss’s definition of the sublime includes the aspect of terror (1). Terror is a part of the critical dialogue surrounding the sublime; however, I am choosing to focus exclusively on the beautiful sublime because I find it to be a more uplifting and fulfilling endeavor. The American West, whether seen by our own unique experiences or in the eyes of these late-nineteenth century-American landscape painters, is undoubtedly a place where one can experience the sublime.

My first encounter with the sublime was not in nature but rather in the Saint Louis Art Museum. I was on a trip with my college art history class, and the professor had sent us out into the collection to find an artwork which would become the subject for our next written project. I remember walking aimlessly through the corridors, casually glancing from painting to painting. Nothing really captured my attention until I walked into the Romantic room. Hanging on the wall, like an irreverent powerful and magical force, was Martin’s painting *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* (Fig. 13).

I found his painting to be both gut wrenching and fantastically inspiring. A solitary man clings onto a rocky ledge, perched over a black abyss and under the stormy maw of jagged cliffs. It was the first artwork that showed me the expressive and emotional capability of a painting.

In that gallery, I put a visual notion of the “sublime” into my ideation toolbox. I want to highlight the “overwhelming effect of nature’s splendor” with every painting, as Moss noted. Not every scene will be obviously overwhelming or show one of nature’s most incredible happenings, but I will not paint the scene unless I find at least some beauty in it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The gentle sound of creaking floorboards accompanies neat leather furniture and stacks of painted canvases. The room smells of oil paint and linen. An easel stands in a corner, with a freshly cleaned palette and a big canvas of small studies. There are bookshelves full of art books and collectible tchotchkes. Every wall has at least one masterpiece painting, if not two or three. These are just some of the things in John Burton’s studio. I did not visit the studio often, but when I did, it felt like walking into a hallowed space like a library or a church.



Figure 12 - John Martin, *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*, 1812, Oil on Canvas, 72 x 51 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri.

Before my mentorship with him, John said something that has been true for me since then. He said, “One hundred starts are better than one finish.” For me, this came to mean that I can learn more by doing one hundred paintings than if I were to spend the same amount of time on one single painting. It is about the importance of repetition, like lifting weights in a gym. Now, nearly three years after meeting him for the first time, I have stacks of small paintings. They have become the cornerstone for how my new work develops.

Another goal with my current work is to make large landscape paintings that reflect my control of foundational skills I learned from making hundreds of small paintings. My large oil paintings are developed from a simple process that John taught me. To start, I go hiking in the landscape with a camera, a sketchbook, and occasionally a small backpack of painting gear. I prefer to go places that are remote, somewhere where human architecture does not impose itself onto the environment. Once I’m out in nature, I take pictures of every moment I see that either inspires me or intrigues me. Often, I come away with hundreds of



photos from a single day. For example, I took hundreds of photos during a recent hike in Joshua Tree. Fig. 14 is one of them. I captured it during the golden hour, only a few minutes before the sunset. A stockpile of photo references

Figure 14 - Photo Reference for *Tripod Rock*



Figure 15 - *Tripod Rock Study*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 6" x 8"

like this are helpful for when I'm back in the studio, and I want to make a painting about a particular moment during that adventure.

Once I'm in the studio with a photo reference I want to work from, I always begin with a small painting. This way, I can easily redesign the image to be

more in line with my memory of that moment without wasting too much paint. In the case of *Tripod Rock Study* (Fig. 15), I dramatically altered the sky color of my photo reference, to increase the sense of revery. I thought that more warmth and golden hues would add to my desired effect. The small size of the canvas allows me to make big changes to the composition with a single stroke of the brush. I can repaint sections in a matter of minutes, whereas on a larger scale it can take hours, if not days. At the end of a typical day of sketching, I can finish three or four little paintings. I painted *Tripod Rock Study* in an hour and a half with a single brush. I usually paint at least one of these small studies on a larger scale in the studio.



Figure 16 - First in Progress Shot of *Tripod Rock*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 24"x35"

When I decide to paint a larger painting from a study, I transfer the basic colors and shapes of the small study onto a larger canvas by eye. I want the large painting to feel fresh and just as relaxing and exciting as the small painting. Fig. 16 shows the initial layer of paint on the larger scale painting *Tripod Rock*.

Because my transfer process doesn't lead to an exact replica, there will often be new things I like about the large version and other things I like more about the small version. As I continue to paint on the large painting, I take breaks and put the small study right next to the larger painting to spark an internal dialogue to help me bring the painting to a resolve, as I did in Fig. 17.

As I worked on the larger painting, I felt the background mountains and sky color

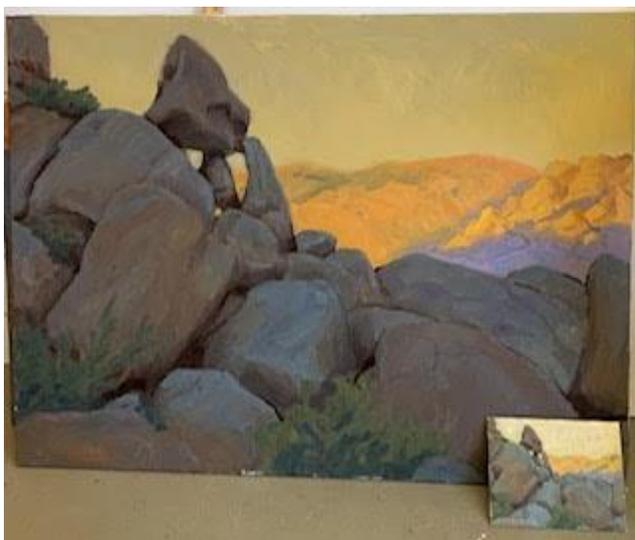


Figure 17 - In progress comparison between small and large version of *Tripod Rock*

were more effective in the small study, so I repainted passages of the larger painting to appear more like my initial impression (Fig. 18). It is still unresolved in many areas, but it is closer to the feeling I had experienced when I took the picture in the first place. My painting process is about discovery, design, and rediscovery.

Imbuing a painting with grand ideas like

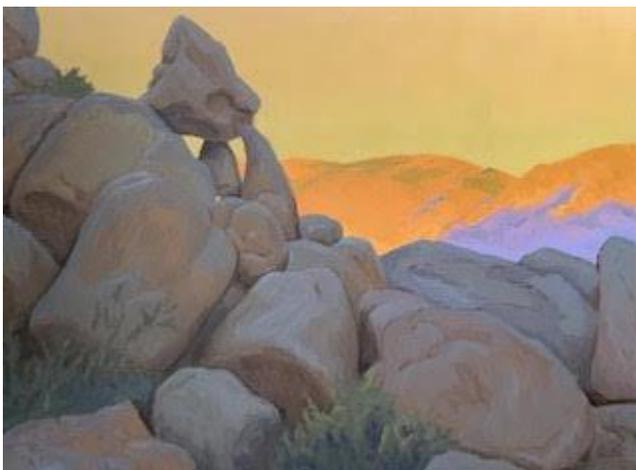


Figure 18 – Mason Williams, *Tripod Rock*, 2021,  
Oil on Canvas, 24"x35"

revery and self-expression is tough, however my process allows the work to remain flexible for the inevitable sparks of inspiration that can happen during my painting sessions.

I find that adjusting the composition and color of the photographic reference allows my

finished work to be more representative of how I see the world, rather than how my camera records the world. Fig. 19 is a picture that I took of a beautiful arrangement of rocks at the top of a boulder pile in Joshua Tree National Park. During this hike, I saw one gorgeous scene after another. With the light of the fading sun dimming rapidly, my excitement grew as quickly as the coming night. When I stumbled across this scene, I was moved by the stark orange and purple pattern of light and shadow that played on the bulbous rocky forms, as well as the intense red reflected light in the shadows. For me, this nondescript cluster of



Figure 19 - Photo reference for *Chroma Conclave*

stones held the power of the sublime. Unfortunately, I did not have my painting gear with me, so I could not do a quick sketch in oil paint.

When I begin painting from a photo reference, I first redesign the composition to better reflect how I remembered the scene in life. In the case

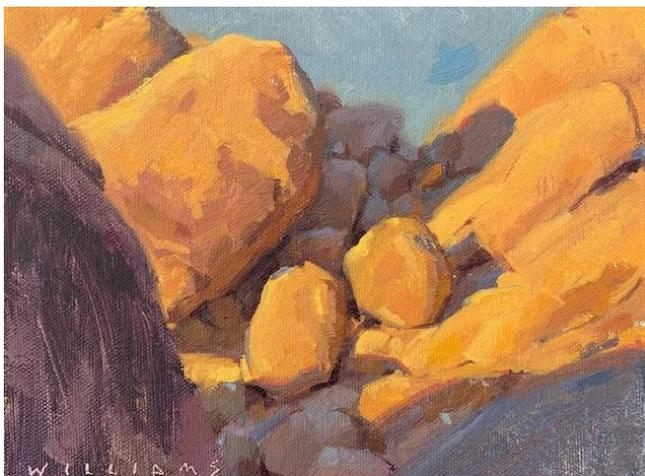


Figure 20 – *Chroma Conclave Study*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 6" x 8"

of my painting, *Chroma Conclave Study* (Fig. 20), I wanted the painting of colorful rocks to represent my memory of the landscape, filtered through my feelings of reverence. To do this, I decreased the overall value contrast in the image and pumped up the oranges in the lit rocks. I also tweaked the shapes of

the rocks so that viewers might feel nestled in a nook of stone as I was. After completing it, I felt that this tiny study was closer to my memory of the place than the photo, but it still did not get across the feeling of reverential awe I had on location. Painting it on a large scale, however, got me much closer to it.

Fig. 21 is the finished painting. After the first couple of days of working on it, I became bored with the painting, a feeling antithetical to reverence. I turned it against the wall, so I did not have to look at it every time I walked into my studio. After thinking about it

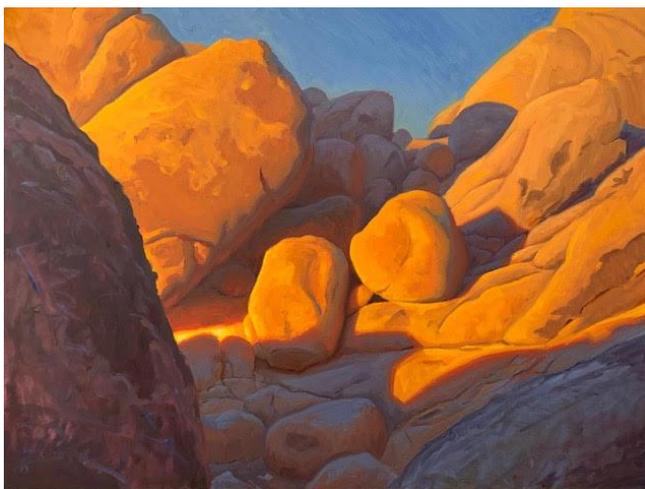


Figure 21- Mason Williams, *Chroma Conclave*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 30"x40"

for some time, I realized that my boredom was a result of not honoring my feelings of the place. So, I put the canvas back onto the easel and leaned into my memory of the initial experience.

I felt inspired to increase the color saturation on the rocks. I let my

intuition guide my problem-solving process. That immediately reignited my interest, and I began to see those initial feelings of reverence and sublime on the canvas itself. A red glow in the middle-left quadrant of the painting began to emerge, a byproduct of both the reflected light I remembered from the scene and leaning into my intuition. Through the process of making this painting, I learned that my intuition is the bridge between my emotive intent and my technical know-how. When I paint a feeling, it is helpful to paint *with* feeling.

Now, after much practice, I am able to do larger studies and turn them into even larger works at a much more efficient pace. By doing larger studies, I can pack more information into the study, so that the next larger version can evolve more quickly, because there is less to work out. In the case of my painting *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight*, I started with a picture I took at the end of a long day in Joshua Tree. The green sky against the sharp blue mountains behind the grouping of massive rocks was an absolutely moving sight. The scene displayed the beautiful sublime perfectly. I felt like the man in John Martin's painting,

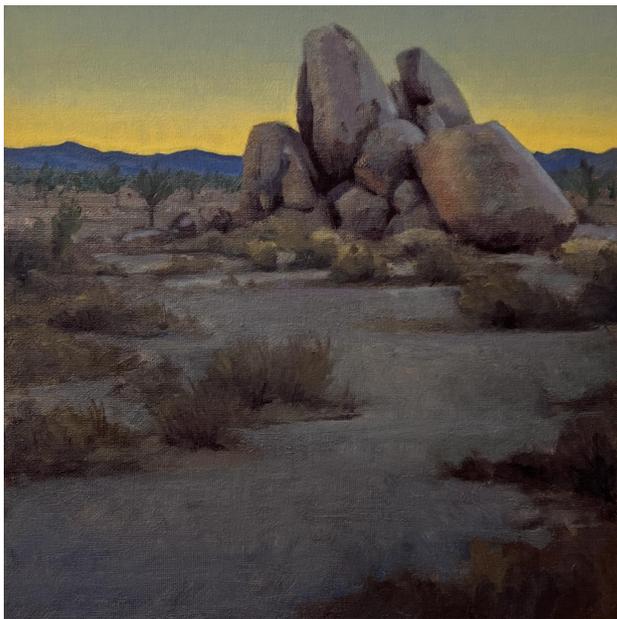


Figure 22 – *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight Study*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 12” x 12”

*Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*, gripping onto the last light of day. From the photograph, I made a 12”x12” canvas for the study (shown in Fig. 22). This study took me a bit longer than previous ones because it was larger. I also used a glazing technique that requires the underpainting to be dry, which can take up to a week. With this study, I used a variety of brushes and tried to

implement as much as I could from *Payne's Composition of Outdoor Painting*. I had never painted a scene without any direct lighting, so this scene was equally challenging as it was enjoyable.

After the study, I made a larger canvas panel for the final painting. With the study next to me as I worked on the larger canvas panel, I started with a big brush. I used a neutral gray mixture of paint to map out the big shapes. Once the composition was established, I began applying the colors I used in the study to the larger version. Sometimes I put a piece of plastic wrap over a study. This way I can match the colors I am mixing from the study more easily by painting on top of the plastic wrap without working over the study itself.

I like to leave the less important areas more expressive and the focal point of the image in higher resolution. Once the painting has arrived at this stage, I spend a lot of time applying less noticeable changes. This stage takes up almost as much as time as the previous part of the process. Often in this stage, I begin applying texture and glazes to make the painting more satisfying upon closer inspection. The final painting *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight*, (Fig. 23), combines all that I know about painting.

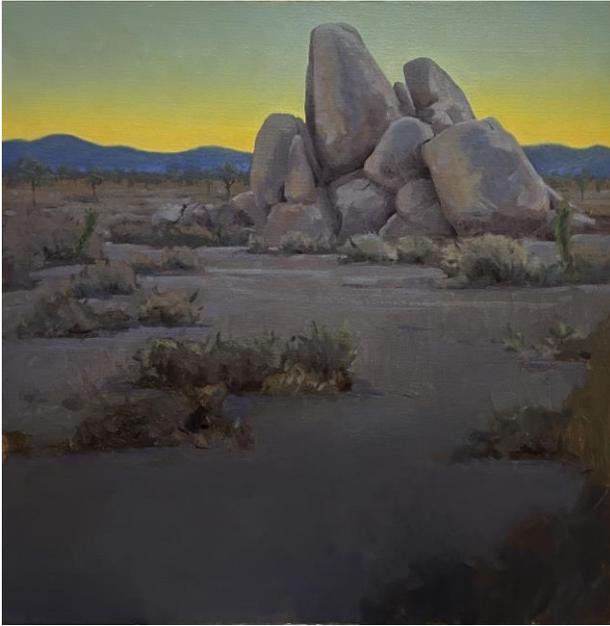


Figure 23 – *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 30” x 30”

## Conclusion

As I look back to the past two years of writing this thesis and developing the body of work associated with it, I see that I have developed a clear understanding of why I paint. Painting is not just my job, but also a way of living. Through observing my subjects, I find gratitude and fulfillment, and as a result of my efforts I get to experience the beautiful sublime of life on Earth. I have grown much faster

than I expected during this MFA program. Unexpectedly, the thesis writing fostered this growth. By thinking through my creative process and having to pin it down in writing, I have noticed two major outcomes. One, I embrace the things I want out of my work—I paint what I want to and how I want to. Two, I have let go of trying to make my work fit someone else’s expectations. The work I make reflects my creative self.

Through this two-year program, I have met amazing people, many of whom are well connected to the art world that inspires much of my work. They have encouraged me to apply to shows and competitions. I am hopeful that my post-graduate life will be full of successful paintings and sales. Before this program, I used to flounder with each painting. I now have developed a solid painting process that has led to some of my best work. As far as I am concerned, the journey is just getting started.

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## APPENDIX

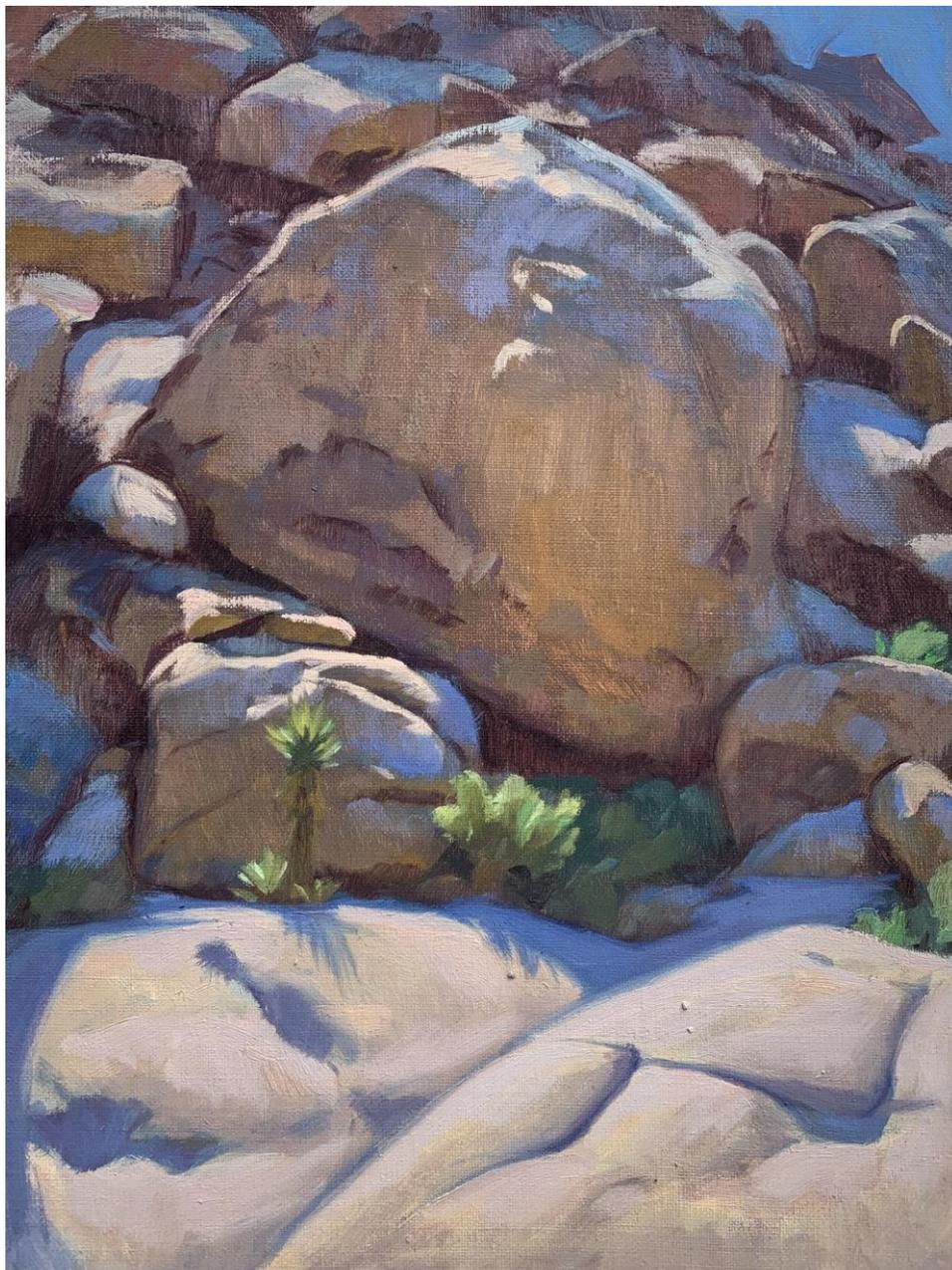


Plate 1. Mason Williams, *Boulders and Yucca*, 2021, Oil on Canvas,  
12" x 16"

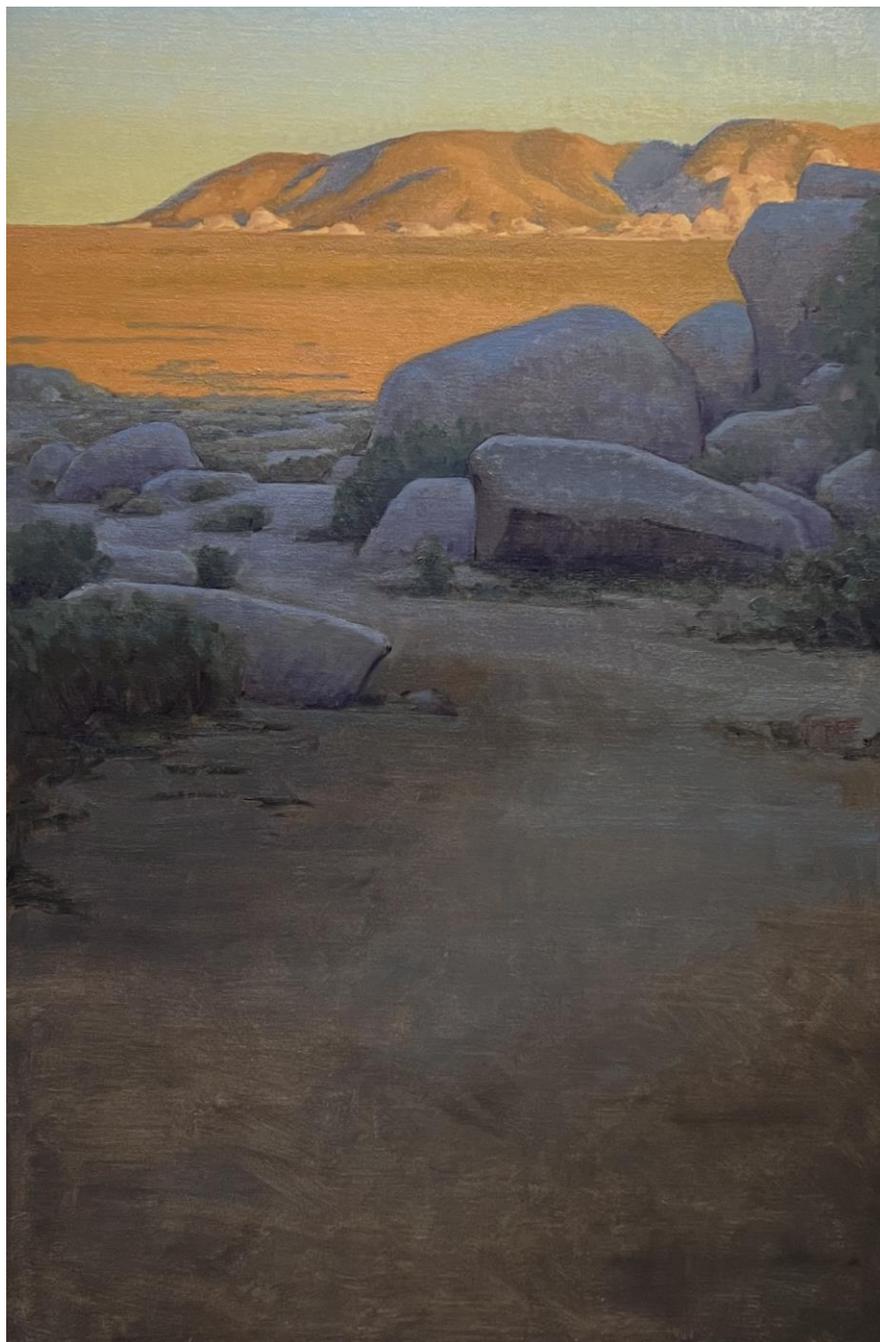


Plate 2. Mason Williams, *Dusk in the Hinterland*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 36" x 24"

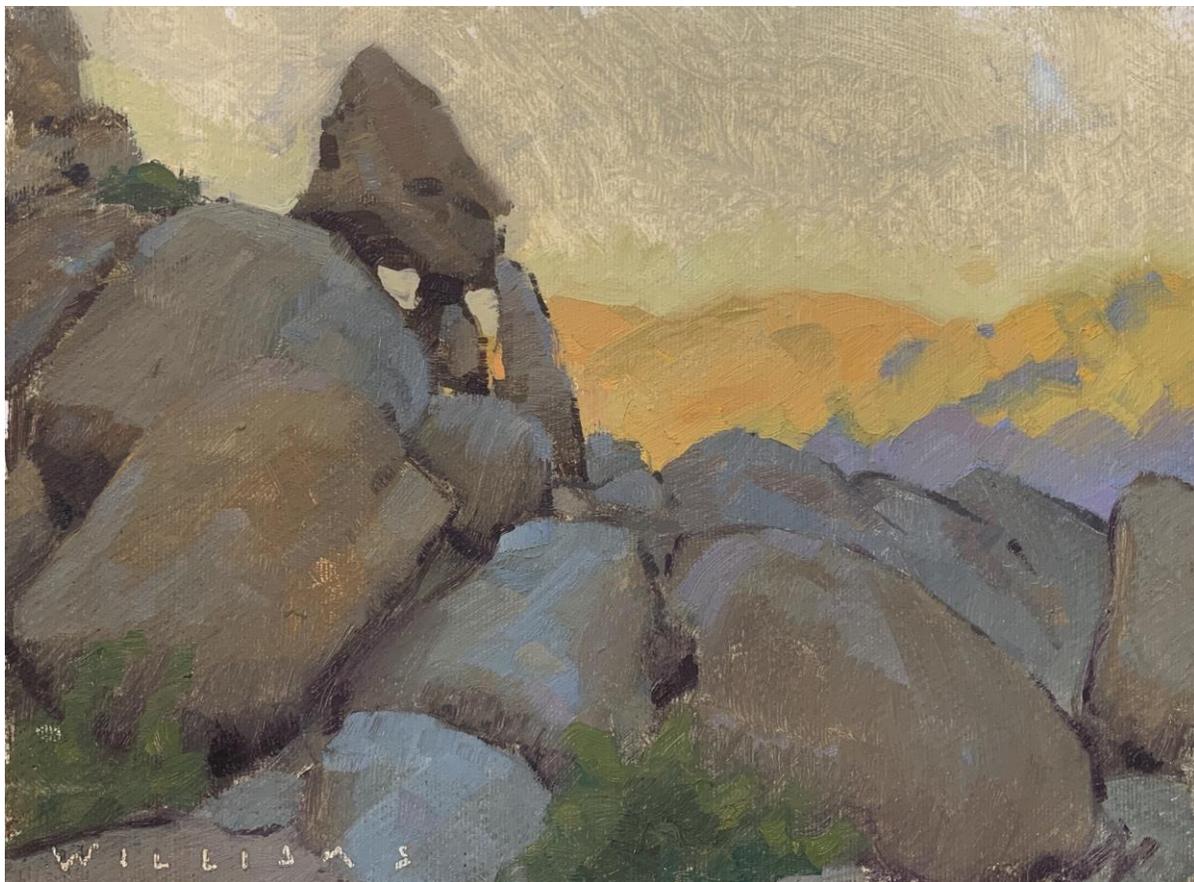


Plate 3. Mason Williams, *Tripod Rock Study*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 6" x 8"

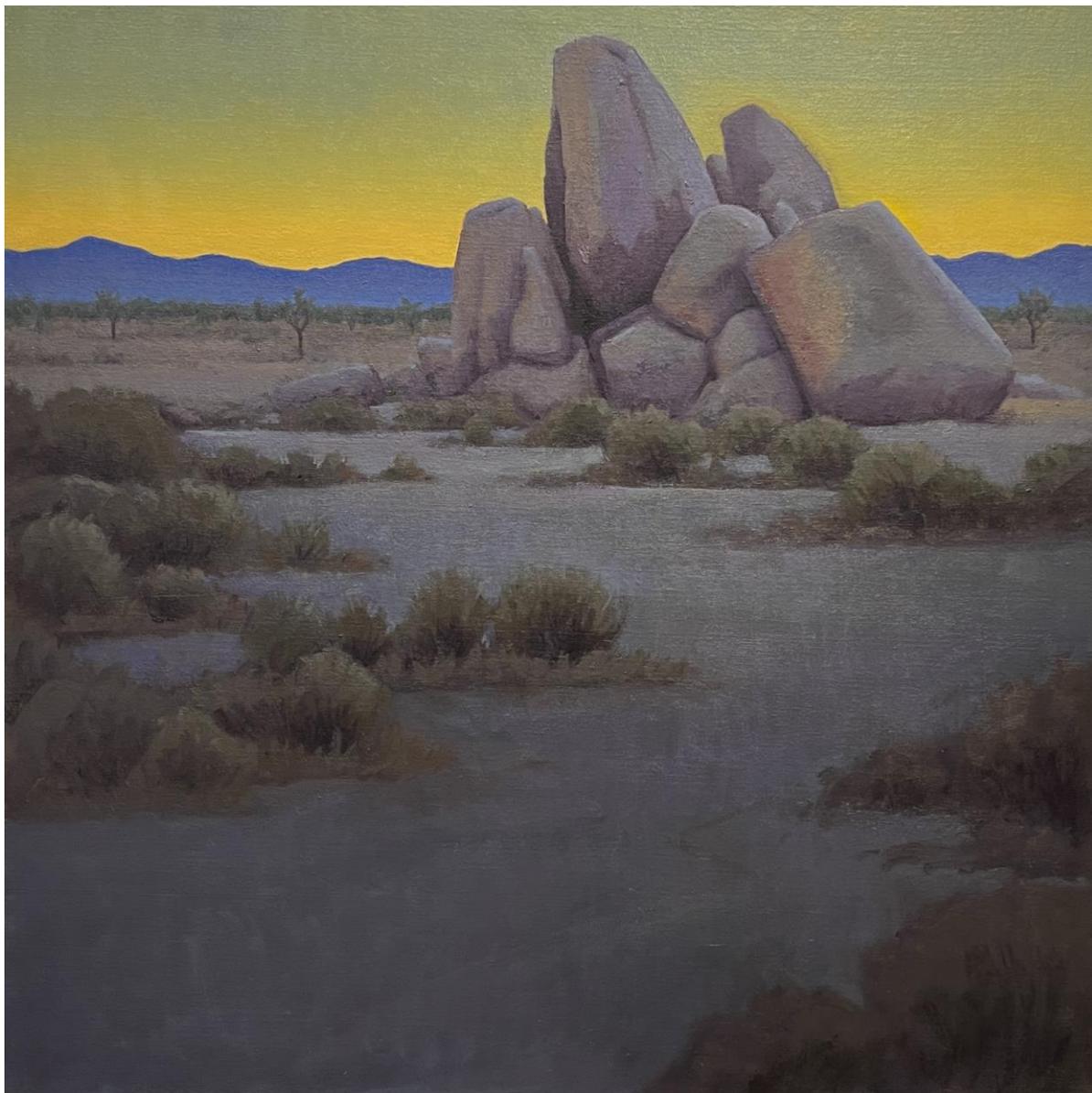


Plate 4. Mason Williams, *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 30"

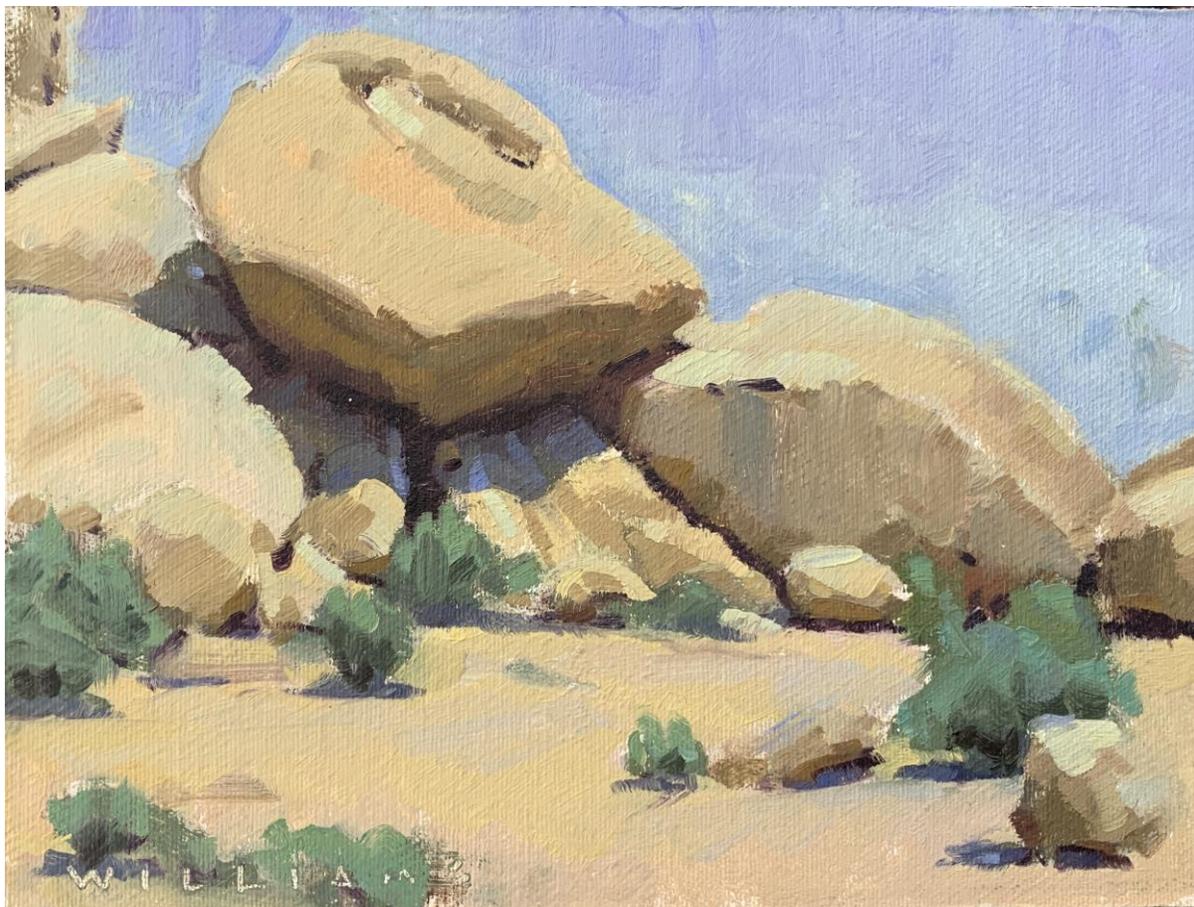


Plate 5. Mason Williams, *Shadow and Stone*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 6" x 8"

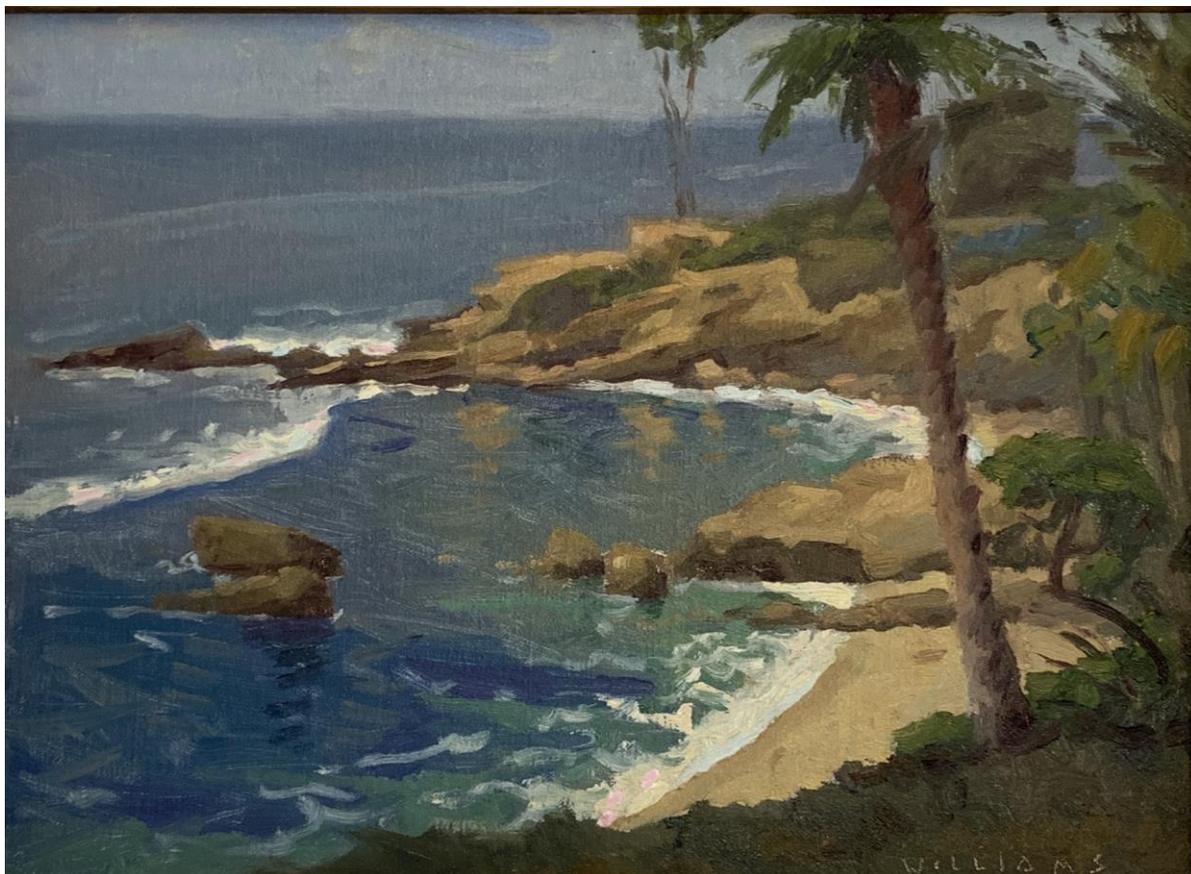


Plate 6. Mason Williams, *Haze at Heisler*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 9" x 12"

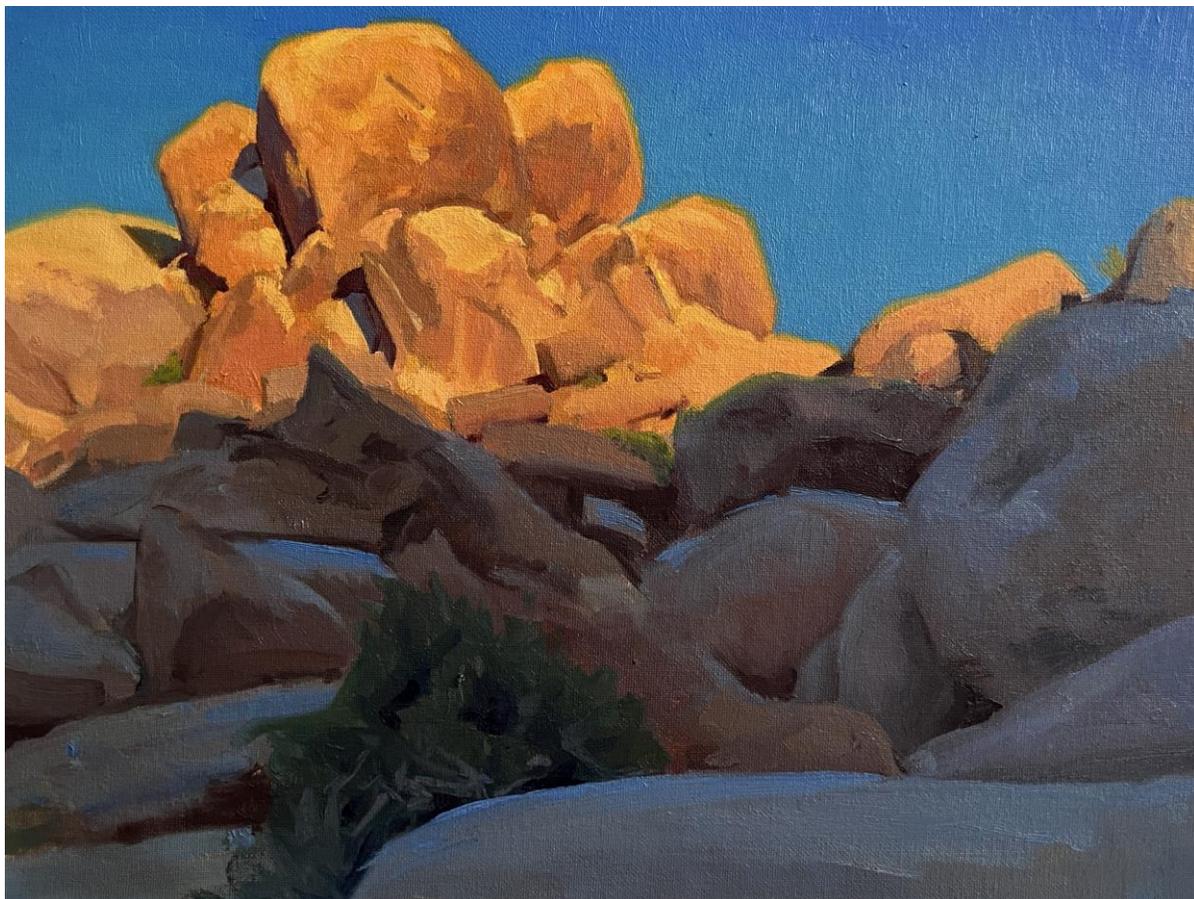


Plate 7. Mason Williams, *Throne*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16"



Plate 8. Mason Williams, *Tripod Rock*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 35"



Plate 9. Mason Williams, *Chroma Conclave*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 40"

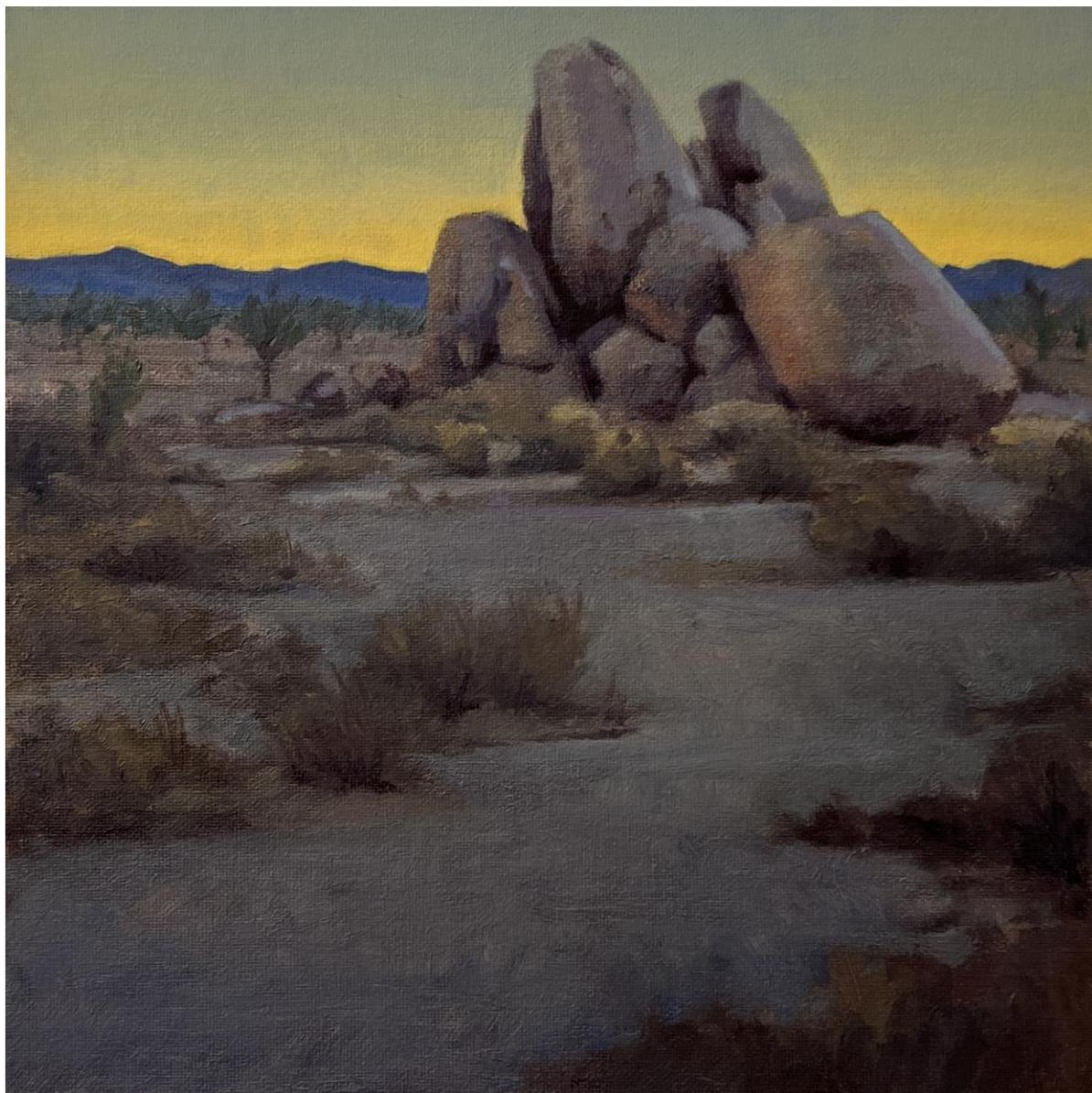


Plate 10. Mason Williams, *Sentinels of the Xeric Twilight Study*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 12”  
x 12”



Plate 11. Mason Williams, *Jötünheim*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 27"



Plate 12. Mason Williams, *The Shadow Fell*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24"



Plate 13. Mason Williams, *Desert Primaries*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16"

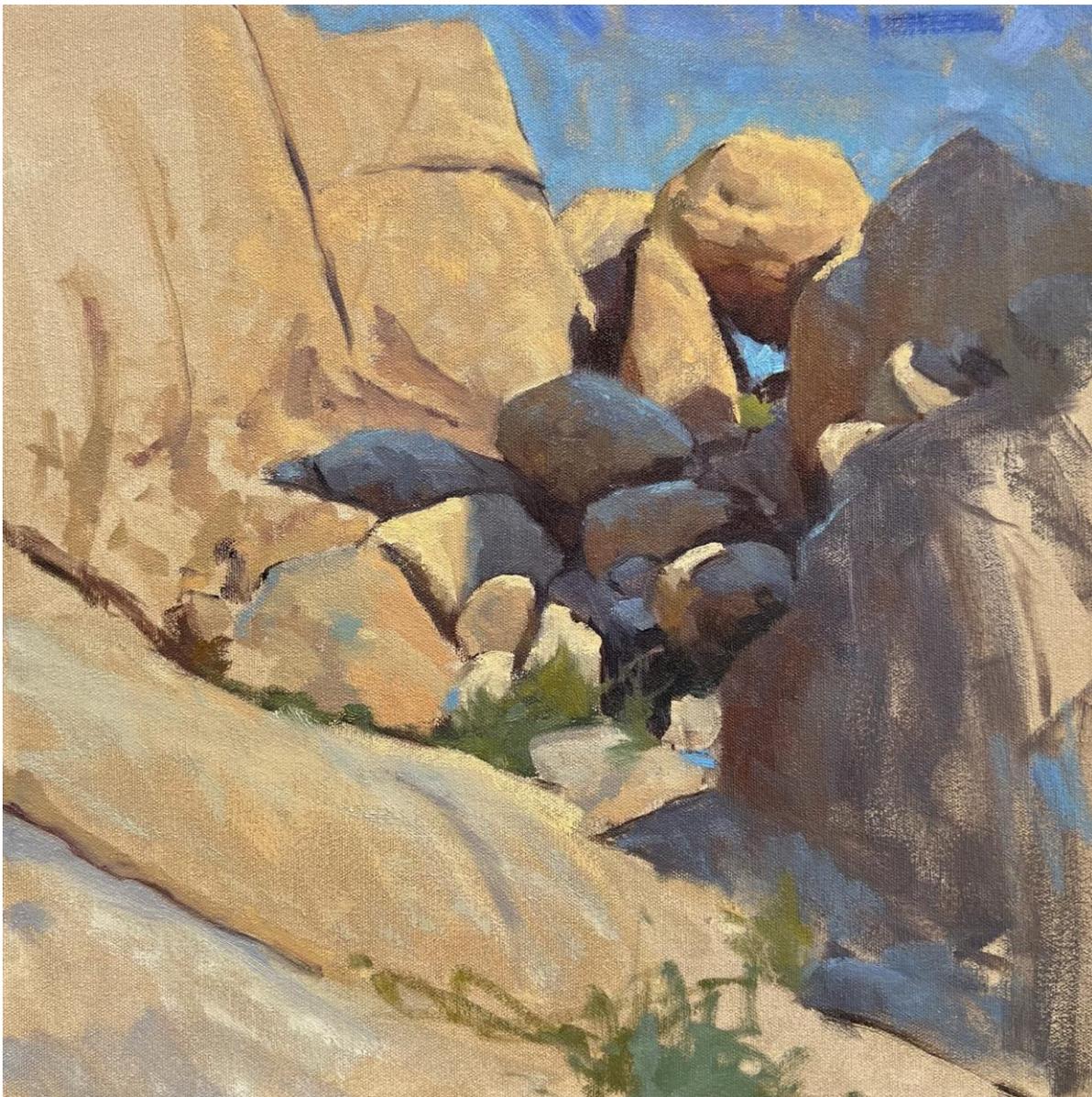


Plate 14. Mason Williams, *Stonefall*, 2022, Oil on Canvas, 16" x 16"

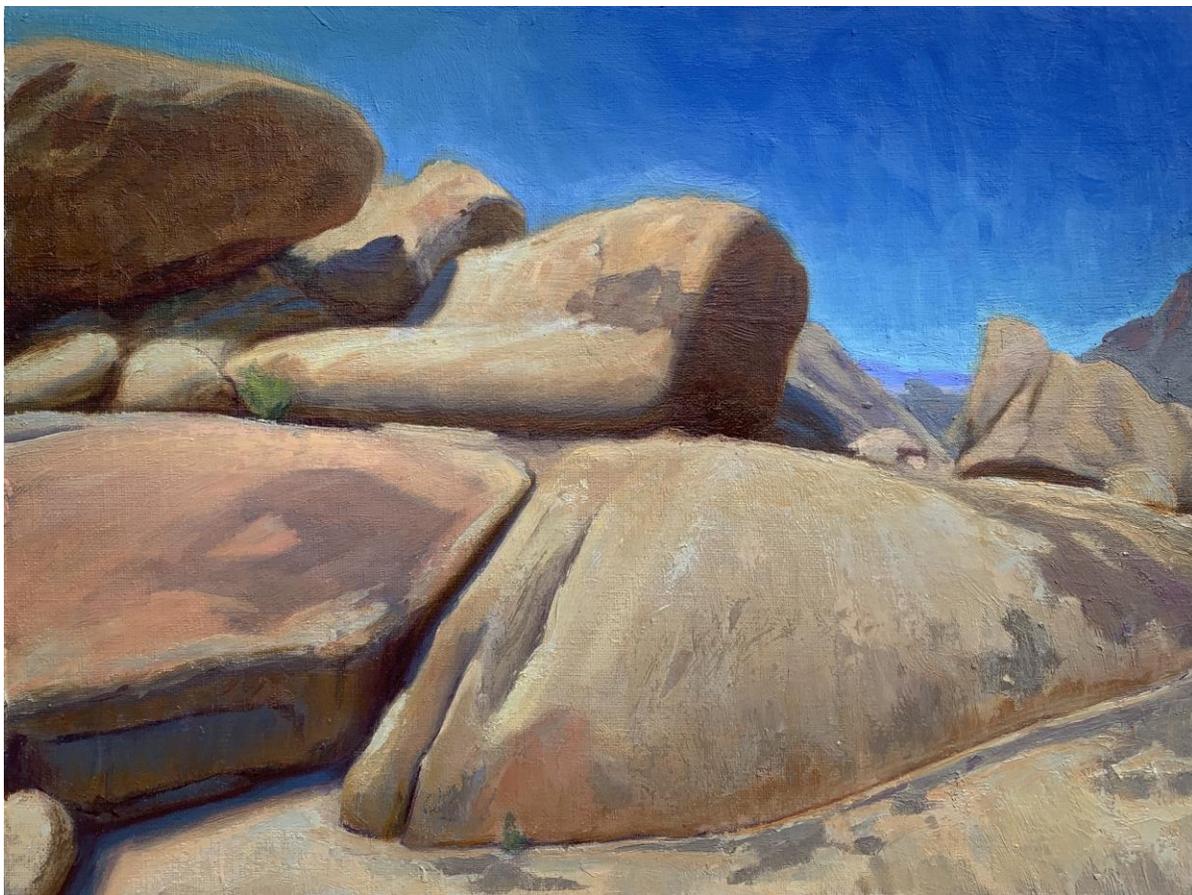


Plate 15. Mason Williams, *Rattlesnake Canyon*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16"

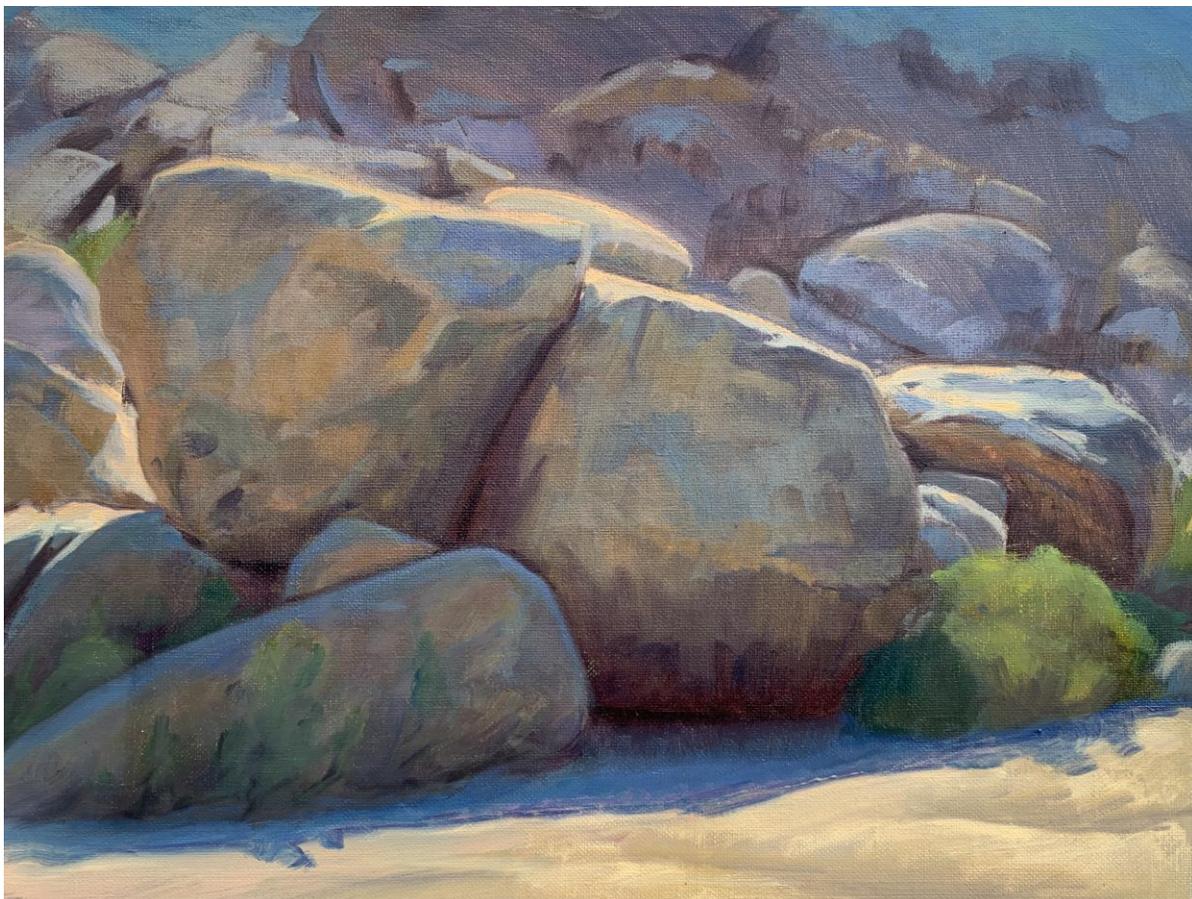


Plate 16. Mason Williams, *Settled Stones*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 12" x 16"

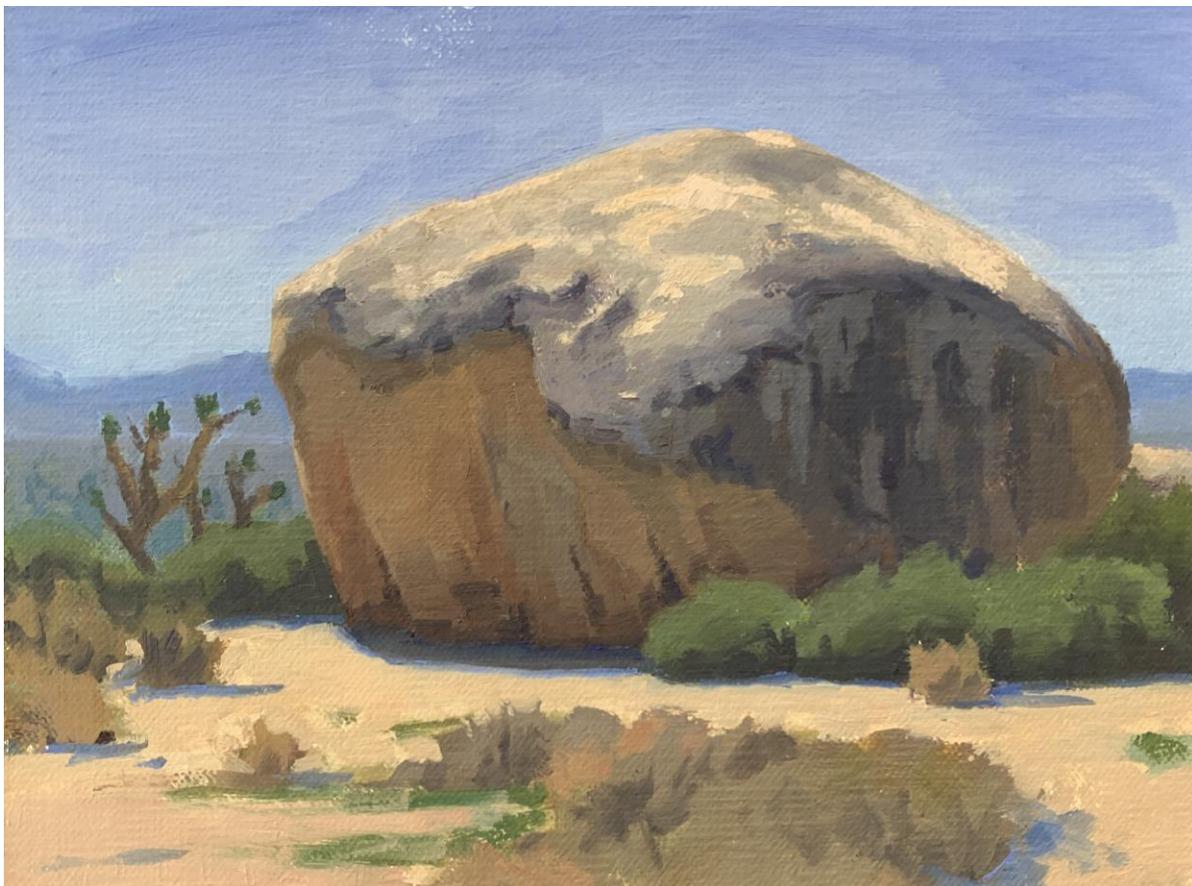


Plate 17. Mason Williams, *Monoliths of the Mojave*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 6" x 8"

## ARTIST'S NOTE

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California born artist, Mason Williams' paintings are rooted in the American landscape and reflect the beauty of the natural world and capture a moment of expressive stasis. He is motivated by his love of outdoor activities and memorable profound experiences in nature. Williams wants to stir a sense of wonder and appreciation with his well-crafted images, inviting the viewer to marvel at the sublime existence of such wonders. He comments on a world that struggles with facing the facts of a changing climate, and hopes to shift the attention away from indulgence and towards our responsibility regarding the environment.