

# The Accidental Artist

Molly O'Mara unites plaster with canvases to create fine art

Written by Heidi Pesterfield

**IT'S EASY TO** imagine Incline Village's Molly O'Mara equally comfortable elbow-deep in lime plasters used for creating faux-finish designs or at the helm of a large river raft, small hands at her chest gripping the oars, head pivoting left and right as she prepares to drop into a series of Grand Canyon rapids. While both scenarios capture important snippets of O'Mara's life, her focus today is creating outdoor-inspired fine art pieces on canvas with the very materials she used to forge a successful 12-year career as a faux-finish artist.



## From Faux-Finish to Fine Art

O'Mara's journey into fine art is unique—and unexpected. In 2011, while taking a course on faux-finish techniques for applying imported lime plasters, she created several three-foot-by-three-foot samples of her work.

"It's one of the benefits of these courses—you get to take home sample boards you've created in the class to show

**LEFT:** Molly O'Mara, photo by Heidi Pesterfield



**Tahoe Impression**  
36 x 48 inches



***Horizons #1***  
26 x 30 inches

to your clients,” O’Mara says. In sharing a few of these boards with Incline interior designer Lindsay Bourgeois, her colleague was astonished at one sample’s beauty.

“Lindsay said to me, ‘Molly, this is just beautiful by itself.’ Then she gave me a piece of fabric to take home, which I used to inspire an abstract piece for her to hang on her wall,” O’Mara says. “I made two more, and she immediately sold them to clients.”

Word spread about her fine art pieces and potential buyers lined up. Within

several months, Truckee’s Bolam Gallery invited her to show her work, propelling the Tahoe artist into almost instant fine-art notoriety.

Bolam Gallery owner and artist Andrew Bolam began showing O’Mara’s work last year and it sold quickly.

Bolam describes selling O’Mara’s art one morning while hanging some pieces she brought in to replenish his consistently shrinking inventory of her work. “I knew upfront we were going to do well with

Molly’s work, but I’m constantly surprised by how well we’re doing and how every single piece she brings us sells,” he says.

Bolam points to one of O’Mara’s latest efforts, titled *Horizons 1*. “That piece is going to sell in a heartbeat because it elicits such emotion and feeling,” he says. And sell it did—later that day—to collectors Mark and Young Armenante.

When asked about O’Mara’s art, Mark Armenante describes their attraction to her work. “Molly [O’Mara] breathes new life



# What's Happening at

NEVADA | MUSEUM | OF ART

Explore this featured exhibit:

## **TAHOE:** *A Visual History* Through January 10

Works from artists of acclaim past and present throughout the region and world have been curated in this one-of-a-kind collection of artwork celebrating Lake Tahoe. Photographers, sculptors, painters, mixed-media artists, basket-weavers and more are showcased in the museum-wide exhibit that presents art from early Washoe works to modern-day interpretations of The Lake and its beauty. This historic show will feature more than 400 pieces of art, including entries from Ansel Adams, Maya Lin, Phyllis Shafer and Julia Morgan, among others. The exhibit was featured in *Tahoe Quarterly's* Summer 2015 issue.

## For more information

call (775) 329-3333 or visit [www.nevadaart.org](http://www.nevadaart.org)



Michael Light | *Highway 89, Cascade and Emerald Lakes and Mount Tallac Beyond, Looking Southwest*, 2014 | Pigment print on Hahnemuhle | 40 x 50 inches | Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, *The Altered Landscape*, Carol Franc Buck Collection, © Michael Light

into Western Art. She has rejected the clichés that populate so many resort galleries. Her new perspective brings saturated colors and a subtlety of subject to the wonder of nature that surrounds us.”

Bolam agrees. “One of the things that people always respond to in Molly’s work is that it bridges the gap between pure abstraction and representational art,” he says. “The people who are buying her work really appreciate the elements of landscape in them—elements inspired by her love of the outdoors. But they also appreciate that she’s taken it to a

very personal level that is closer to pure abstraction. They love the fact that when you look at her work, there’s a lot left for the viewer to do—there’s a lot of interpretation to be done, so it makes it more interesting.”

## An Artistic Upbringing

O’Mara’s earth-tone color palette clearly reflects her love of the outdoors. The reserved Utah native’s path as an artist began with a childhood filled with continuous opportunities for artistic expression, including several early years enrolled in the Virginia Tanner

activity through exposure to multiple forms of artistic expression and stimulus.

“We’d arrive and she’d turn on music and she’d say ‘Dance!’ and we would dance around for a while in whatever way we chose,” O’Mara says. “Then we’d spend an hour melting crayons and smearing them

around and then move on to painting—it was amazing.”

Her mother, Pam, worked as a graphic design artist and interior designer, and currently resides in Salt Lake City, where she runs and owns the art gallery Utah Artists Hands.

“My life was in a constant state of remodel,” O’Mara says. “I’d come home and [my mom] would have a sledgehammer in the bathroom and a toilet sitting in the front yard. She definitely fed that whole artistic side of me.”

Molly breathes new life into Western Art. She has rejected the clichés that populate so many resort galleries. Her new perspective brings saturated colors and a subtlety of subject to the wonder of nature that surrounds us. —Mark Armenante

Creative Dance Program for Children at the University of Utah, where she was hand-picked from hundreds of children to study directly with the school’s founder. Tanner’s renowned methods were rooted in her belief that children could better access their cre-

O'Mara also credits her mother for encouraging her to explore the outdoors.

It was during her early adult years that O'Mara fell under the spell of the Grand Canyon, where she worked as a river guide, forging the gauntlet of the Colorado River's roiling milk-chocolate rapids while adopting the free-spirited river guide lifestyle. The experience, combined with winter explorations of Utah's Wasatch Range, imprinted O'Mara with a deep love of the natural world and its elements.

## Transition to Tahoe

In 2003, she packed up her life and relocated to Truckee, stepping into the variegated greens and blues of the Tahoe Basin and launched a fledgling faux-finishing business that paid off after a few years.

O'Mara recently traveled to Utah to create a large-as-life aspen forest mural in the dining room of a high-end luxury home at the bench of the Wasatch Range. The homeowners had purchased two of O'Mara's canvases from her mother's gallery and asked her if she'd create the mural for them during a remodel. The results delighted the owners and exposed yet another of O'Mara's untapped talents. Upon returning to Tahoe, O'Mara could barely contain her excitement. She admits the temptation to phase out her faux-finishing work so she can focus primarily on fine art, but she is unsure of the time frame for such a transition.

"I'm living a dream of mine that I honestly never thought I'd fulfill," O'Mara says. "I feel a great sense of accomplishment at getting to tap into my full creative expression. It's a gift to be able to go outside and enjoy the natural world—to see the beauty of a mountain ridge, the light on the edge of a hillside, the bark on a tree—and then translate the feelings of these experiences onto canvas for someone else who values my work."

As O'Mara eases into this new







**Winter Aspen**  
36 x 48 inches

chapter of her life, she continues to maintain a fairly significant footprint in outdoor circles. She tries to guide the Grand Canyon at least once a summer, and spends time in the winter on backcountry skis in Tahoe with a posse of friends who love to do the same. One might be hard-pressed to spot her on the slopes, however; she's the one in understated colors and the gray hand-knit beanie, quietly and contemplatively ascending and descending the mountain, soaking in the inspiration and blending in naturally.

*Molly O'Mara's fine art pieces can be viewed in downtown Truckee at the Bolam Gallery, 10396 Donner Pass Road. **10***

*Heidi Pesterfield* is a Tahoe Vista-based writer.



**Gabriel & Co.**  
NEW YORK

*Certified diamonds,  
great wedding set selection  
and jewelry for the whole family!*



Repair while you wait. Call Mo for an appointment.



WE HAVE MOVED! 4145 S VIRGINIA ST RENO

775.829.8282 • PRECISIONDIAMONDS.NET

Tuesday-Friday 10 AM - 7 PM  
Saturday 10 AM - 6 PM  
Closed Monday & Sunday

