

Lisa Grossman

Endicott Arm - Four Progressions,

was created while Grossman was a **Voices of the Wilderness Artist-in-Resident** in Tracy Arm/Fords Terror Wilderness, Tongass National Forest, Alaska, in the summer of 2017.



Endicott Arm - Four Progressions, oil on panel, 19 x 31 in. © 2018

What a singular experience—to accompany U.S. Forest Service TAFT Wilderness Rangers in Endicott Arm Fjord for six-day excursion! I’m an avid kayaker—in Kansas—and had never been to Alaska or kayaked in tidewaters, so I especially appreciated the expertise of Ranger Chrissy Post, who taught me so much about this unspeakably beautiful wilderness and kayak-camping in it. I felt honored to glimpse what is required to manage such a vast, wild land of many uses for its “wilderness character” and the many collaborative partnerships it takes to accomplish their stewardship goals, including artists-in-residence!

I pared down my oil painting gear to fit into two dry bags small enough for the kayak hatches and created a dozen sketches from eight locations plus a few watercolors. I proposed a series of small paintings that would illustrate several narratives, depending on what inspired me, and also had the potential to extend the mission of the rangers’ work. I settled on four themes, each represented by a horizontal series of paintings.

Top row: Encountering Ice

The first panel is the first painting of the trip. This incredible blue iceberg happened to be resting near our first camp at Wood Spit, and I had one delightful hour before dinner to

paint it. The next panels represent kayaking up foggy Endicott Arm, so quiet and mysterious, but with occasional eruptions of flocks of waterfowl. Harbor seals and porpoises popped up near us several times and humpback whales could often be heard spouting in the distance.

Kayaking amongst icebergs was thrilling and their color, beyond belief. They were works of art themselves, changing with the light, and I could have painted them endlessly. I was surprised by the sounds they made, squeaking, popping, and crackling, especially freshly calved pieces. We had to avoid them in our fiberglass boats and also keep a safe distance as the big icebergs can roll at any time, which I did witness once.

Second row: In Fords Terror

Fords Terror Fjord branches off of Endicott Arm to the north and is a narrower, deep canyon of dark purple walls, deep green water, and dozens of crashing white waterfalls. We camped at the Narrows and farther back at the “T” in a meadow, where I did the first painting in this row. The intermittent sun pushing through low-hanging clouds was my kind of painting—I love the challenge of painting changing atmospheric conditions on location. The following day I had the opportunity to continue this series (panels 2 & 3) from the deck of the Wilderness Explorer, anchored at the Narrows. The rangers board tour boats regularly to give talks to guests about the wilderness and their work to protect it.

One of the tasks the wilderness rangers engage in is monitoring visual and noise intrusions. I painted the last two panels from the Narrows beach, and, as we watched a boat exiting the fjord, I handed over one panel to Chrissy to make marks indicating how the sound of it “felt” to her, visually. We’d also heard two gunshots earlier, and I asked her make those sounds in the paint as well. The last image is how the boat noise “felt” to me, symbolically, in paint. It’s not scientific, but more of a visceral expression of what it feels like to have interruptions to one’s sense of solitude and silence in the wilderness.

Third row: Dawes Glacier

There was no way for me to predict how it would feel to approach a glacier by kayak. There really aren’t words to describe how moving it was. That’s why I paint! I’d hoped to witness calving, but I never thought I’d actually see it happen half a dozen times in the day I was near Dawes Glacier, there at the end of Endicott Fjord.

The first painting is how it looked from the Wilderness Explorer, and the others are painted from our last camp about a mile and a half from the glacier. Panels 2-5 show the imposing glacier at sunset, with the earth-shattering crash of a calving represented by the inserts. It was thrilling to witness glaciers calving in person, but also unsettling, especially upon learning that 95% of Alaska’s glaciers are rapidly receding. The effects of a warming planet finally felt real to me. The glacier “miniatures” show the pink glow of sunset and showers I watched from camp, in awe. While painting tiny glaciers, I couldn’t help but feel I was painting them shrinking. I know that if I were ever to see it again it would be reduced or maybe not visible at all. The last panel shows a massive cruise ship turning around near the glacier, its smoke emissions, and how seeing and hearing it felt to me.

Fourth Row: Sumdum Glacier

It was astounding to experience another glacier from many angles and at different times of those long summer days. The first panel shows the view from Wood Spit, painted immediately after the Blue Iceberg, panel 1, with clouds obscuring upper elevations around 4,500 ft. The second view is from the Liseron, a tour boat that motored us back to Harbor Island, and it illustrates how cold air from the ice often clears a hole in the clouds above, revealing a brilliant blue sky. Stunning. I painted the third image on Harbor Island before sundown, and the next panel is a studio piece of that same night an hour later or so when shadows crept across the glacier. The water was so alive with tides and marine life but quiet as well. Humpback whales were spouting every 15 minutes or so, and the final piece includes two vaporous spouts in the early morning when Sumdum was purple in shadow. It was all truly awesome to behold.

My time in the TAFT wilderness was short, but I tried to always be in the moment, to honor the place and its protectors by interpreting impressions of it in paint, and to not take any of it for granted.

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