Finding Cool in Death Valley

How Eva Slater, one of Orange County's most promising and mysterious painters, traced the abstract art movement to an unlikely source.

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By Ann Japenga

WHY IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO APPRECIATE ABSTRACTION, I don't know. A fan of early California landscapes, I just didn't see how a few blocks of color could compare to the Laguna bluffs of Edgar Payne or the desert dunes of fellow Impressionist Sam Hyde Harris.

Abstract paintings always looked to me as if they originated in the minds of art students, not in the landscapes themselves. Then I chanced upon "Desert Rain" by the late Orange County artist Eva Slater, for sale on eBay. A curtain of rain, made up of blue and orange triangles, pushed hard against a geometric mesa. The force of the rain, the intimidating scope of the land—both were authentic. I could see for the first time how an abstract painting came directly from the desert, and this got my attention.

Since I moved to the California desert 15 years ago, the peaks and *bajadas* have been my life's coordinates—the source of the stories I write, the place names and symbols that sustain me. How could a modern artist—someone I thought of as an urban breed removed from the dirt—have captured the desert in a few triangles and planes? I wanted to find out more about this nearly-forgotten painter.

I bought the black-and-white sketch of "Desert Rain"—more budget friendly than the painting—and used the purchase as an entrée to contact the seller, Eva Slater's daughter Miriam, also an artist. When I first talked to Miriam on the phone, she told me Eva was living with her in Santa Barbara. At 88, Eva had memory problems, was in declining health, and couldn't talk to me. I might have stopped there, but a mystery drew me on: Why did Slater leave the red-hot O.C. art scene in the 1960s to wander Death Valley, looking for rushes and tules?

I have a special interest in people who voluntarily exit the L.A.-O.C. gravitational field. I'd also left a shiny scene hoping to find a place that better suited me. I was a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in the '80s, a golden era in newspapers when the job title conferred access and status. I, too, walked away, ending up—like Eva—in a faded work shirt in the desert.

Miriam filled me in on Eva's early days. She was born Eva Zeits in Berlin, in 1922. She moved to New York after World War II and worked as a fashion illustrator. That's where she met John Slater, whom she married. Eventually they had three children and settled in Fullerton. John was an aerospace scientist for what was, at the time, Anaheim's largest employer, Autonetics. Along the way Eva studied painting at the Art Center College of Design in L.A., where she fell in with Frederick Hammersley, Lorser Feitelson, and his wife, Helen Lundeberg. In the 1950s and '60s, while living as a wife and mother, Eva and her circle of friends were key members of a small, chic movement called Hard Edge. The art form emphasized

contrasting edges and a cool precision that set it apart from the more emotional Abstract Expressionism popular at the time.

As Miriam says: “Rhythm, counterpoint, playing off opposites … that’s how you generate excitement.” Critics were impressed. “Southern California produced little noteworthy modern art before the austere, crisply defined Hard Edge geometric paintings,” wrote Benjamin Schwarz in the March 2008 issue of *The Atlantic*.

Hard Edge became one of California’s most important exports to the world of international art, and Orange County was a key incubator, says Frances Colpitt, a professor of art history at Texas Christian University and author of a forthcoming book on Hard Edge in Southern California. She points out that

John McLaughlin, the best-known and most influential Hard Edge painter, lived in Dana Point, and a pivotal Hard Edge exhibition was held at the Pavilion Gallery, now the Newport Pavilion, in 1964. The Slater household—an epicenter within an epicenter—was an oasis of Midcentury Modern style. Miriam remembers hip artists drifting in and out of the custom-built house designed by an industrial architect, its roof beam aligned with the North Star. But then, in the late ’60s, Eva stopped painting. “Everyone knows Helen Lundeberg. No one knows my mom,” says Miriam. “She just walked away.” Hammersley, Feitelson, and Lundeberg became increasingly well known. Their fame continues even after their deaths, and Hard Edge is enjoying a revival along with all things midcentury. The rock band Sonic Youth wrote a song devoted to Lundeberg, and the Orange County Museum of Art held a show on Hard Edge art, “Birth of the Cool,” in 2007.

Miriam couldn’t tell me exactly why her mother turned her back on the glamour. It had something to do with the war, maybe. Her childhood home had been bombed and burned, and as an adult Eva sometimes had a hard time coping with competition in the art world, and with life in general. Miriam was unsure, as we often are when it comes to the motives of our mothers. If answers could be found, I decided, they likely were in Death Valley.

The old mining town of Darwin, population 54, looks like a place Burning Man alumni go to retire. On the day I drove through the dirt streets, nothing—humans nor cars—was stirring. Lumps of sculpture and found objects were piled in front of scruffy miners’ shacks. I had a feeling artists were hiding in the little houses, watching this stranger drive by. Some critics say Hard Edge style was influenced by the clean lines of the desert; Lundeberg also painted these landscapes. Even when her kids were young, Eva loved taking family trips to the desert. “She really liked the space,” Miriam says.

In the ’80s, Eva began making frequent trips from Fullerton to Darwin and nearby Darwin Wash. The town is surrounded by desert. Still, I drove with the windows down, sniffing hopefully for water, rushes, a stream, a wash. Places Eva would have gone.

She had become fascinated with California Indian basket designs—the Hard Edge artists all liked primitive art—and had plunged into the backcountry to find the last basket makers of the Panamint Shoshone, a native tribe now known as Timbisha Shoshone. Along with interviewing the artists themselves, she searched for the springs where they gathered raw materials—willow, bulrush root, yucca root, devil's claw, porcupine quill, woodpecker feathers. Miriam says her mother would go to great lengths to find a specific stand of juncus that turned golden at a certain time of year and lent a distinctive thread to the baskets. After she quit painting, Eva opened a small gallery and crafts store in Fullerton in the late '60s called the Village Bazaar. Miriam says her mother would exhibit top-notch artists' paintings such as those by Josef Albers and Sam Francis. She also showed quality ethnic items such as old Indian baskets that caught her eye. She knew so much about them that she started writing about them for magazines and Sotheby's catalogues. "The interesting thing about basket makers of the West Coast is that they are the only ones in the world who took basket making to a really high art form," Miriam says. "My mother saw this—and of course loved all those geometric designs—and wanted others to see the art in them, too."

Eventually she wrote a book, "Panamint Shoshone Basketry:

An American Art Form." In it, Eva makes it a point to identify the artists from that native tribe who made the baskets, to finally give those girls and women overdue recognition. After Eva closed her store, she continued to curate exhibitions at museums and colleges in Orange County through the 1980s and '90s, including the Bowers Museum and Cal State Fullerton. "I think my mother related to the Indian basket makers, who, like herself, never really got the recognition they deserved," Miriam says. "Basket making was a precise art involving geometry, and so she shared with them a similar mind-set." Writing the book absorbed her for 10 years. Driving and walking into increasingly remote areas, she scouted abandoned wickiups, Indian camps and mining camps above Keeler, the canyons of Lone Pine, and all over Death Valley. At some point, her crisp city attire yielded to the desert-rat look: a faded buttoned-up denim shirt, graying hair blown loose in the wind.

Some people who met her in Death Valley didn't know she'd ever been an artist. When basket collector Jane Wehrey asked about her Hard Edge days, Slater told her: "That was another time. I'm done with that."

At last I find a grumpy man wandering down the middle of Darwin's main street. He tells me to look for the house with Buddhas in front. Ask for Monty. I find Monty Brannigan inside his dark cave, sucking on a cigar in a corner seat. I show him a photo of Eva Slater. Does he know this woman? He does not. He had known some of the basket makers in her book, he says, but the Indians are all gone now. The willow groves I'm sniffing out? Off-limits on the China Lake bombing range. Down the road in Lone Pine, I look up Maggie Wittenburg, who lives in the house Eva built. In 1998, Wittenburg, a freelance, L.A.-based producer of network news segments, drove up the Owens Valley, not intending to stay. But she stumbled upon a house for sale and pulled over to look. From the street it resembled a garage, unpromising. But when

she peeked inside, she found a massive open loft facing Mount Whitney and the wall of the Eastern Sierra: a jaw-dropping jumble of turrets and triangles. The room she'd always wanted.

Wittenburg bought Eva's house, designed by Orange County architect Lee Stearns and—like Eva, like me—quit the city. I walked into the big space, now packed with Maggie's books and Western artifacts. It was clearly more museum than house. The only object breaking up the space was a 15-foot room divider designed by Stearns at Eva's request to hold baskets—one great hall of light meant to shine on her extensive collection. Eva oversaw the construction of the house in the mid '90s, but before she and her husband could move in, he died. Then she was stricken with heart troubles, and had to abandon the plan. The house sat empty for six years before Wittenburg peeked in.

Stopping by the Eastern California Museum in nearby Independence, I found two display cases of baskets donated by Eva. Each had a label with the maker's name and a cryptic title, including one labeled: "Hot Springs Charlie's Woman's Mother, circa 1890." I could see—as I had in her painting "Desert Rain"—that Eva was pointing me at something: See these baskets? See how a few contrasting lines, with touches of porcupine quill, can create a butte? A snake? A man? A woman?

Artists, like journalists, wait for a fox to cross their path, then follow it—as outdoors writer Craig Childs once said. When I landed in the California desert, I found my fox in stories that tied together landscape, history, and art. Eva and I had been following the same fox. I still don't know exactly why she stopped painting, but I now know she never gave up on art. Before I left the Sierras, I asked someone to show me the basket makers' favorite plant, a willow. A museum consultant named Richard Stewart led me to a stream out back. I could smell the willow and the water, at last. A basket maker himself, Stewart sliced a switch and peeled back the bark, then handed the branch to me as a souvenir. Eva died soon after I returned to my Palm Springs home from Death Valley. Her book "Panamint Shoshone Basketry" is one of the first to celebrate basketry as art, not just anthropology, and it remains a classic. Her paintings are difficult to find. Her daughter sells her early sketches now and then on eBay. Since discovering Eva Slater, I'm more and more attracted to abstraction in desert landscape—the orbs and rays of Agnes Pelton, or the undulating hills of Cady Wells. And I appreciate more than ever what Eva did.

By taking abstract art all the way back to the willow branch, she showed me that humans always have seen lines and shapes on the land. It's not an art school invention after all. In turning her back on cool, Eva had found cool's very source: the canyons, willows, and bulrushes.