



Arturo Chavez at work in Canyon de Chelly

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Tucson Desert Art Museum presents works by Arturo Chavez

Like the landscape it depicts, the massive oil painting — “Rock of Ages” — is stunning in size and scope. It captures the moment that morning light spills into the Grand Canyon at the Temple of Isis formation, trickling over the brilliant strata of rocks.

The formation of the canyon may have been inevitable, but the painting itself almost didn’t happen.

Artist Arturo Chavez reflects that his immersion in the life of the Grand Canyon dates back more than 30 years. “The early 1980s was the first time that I came up there to paint. I got my easel together, set up on the rim, looked around and thought, ‘Where am I going to start?’ I packed up and headed back down the hill. It took me 10 full years of thinking about how it could be done.”

But even after he was sure of his technique, approach and point of focus, he still had doubts. For starters, the size of the frame and canvas on which he was working was daunting — nearly 7 by 14 feet. “I put it up on the easel and thought, ‘What did I get myself into?’ That’s a pretty big piece of canvas.”

So big, in fact, that the bolts of the easel originally broke under the weight.

Easel reconstructed and reinforced, Chavez went to work, taking about two weeks to do a pencil drawing of the painting on the canvas. It took another six months to complete the oil painting itself. Though he had visited the site many times,

and had photos to work from, some artistic and scientific speculation was called for. “I had to put the atmosphere in the sky. None of the photographs contained that, so it was all made up.

Chavez is nothing if not disciplined, however. By training he also is a classical guitarist, and he finds that there is no difference between the passion and the study that goes into making music, or into creating a piece of visual art. He usually blends the two in his studio, having Bach, Handel, and other baroque masters on the stereo while he paints. He notes that “Rock of Ages” is very much like a concerto from 300 years ago. “I have so many themes that are weaving in and out of each other, supporting each other, some are subordinate and some dominant, and I liken it to polyphonic music.”

And just as musical themes come around again to be reinterpreted, Chavez has returned to painting the canyon. At press time he was working on a piece based on the view from Moran Point, a very popular spot for photographers and painters alike.

The New Mexico native has exhibited his work all over, but he’s especially gratified to have “Rock of Ages” at the Tucson Desert Art Museum. “I had sent that painting to a show in Grand Rapids, Michigan, put it in storage for a while, reframed it and sent it to the Tucson Museum of Art for a show. I had it in a gallery in New Mexico for a while, but I kept thinking, ‘That piece belongs in Arizona. That’s the Grand Canyon State.’”

Summer hours: Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun 10 am-4 pm; Thurs: noon-8 pm. 7000 E. Tanque Verde Road. 520-202-3888 or www.tucsonart.com.