

It Still Lives, Season 4, Episode 5: Tiny Worlds of the Appalachians

Interview with Rosalie Haizlett (RH)

RH: My name is Rosalie Haizlett and I'm a nature artist and illustrator and newly an author, and I'm from West Virginia. I've lived there pretty much my whole life. I'm obviously very inspired by my natural surroundings, so I like to do a lot of place-based art where I go and I spend a few weeks or a month in one location and just try to soak it all in and learn as much as I can about it and translate that into paintings. Mostly watercolor, some pen and ink, some gouache—which is like an opaque watercolor.

Kami Ahrens (KA): So tell me more about West Virginia and growing up there. Where did you grow up and did you guys live in town or did you live out in a rural space? How did that influence your art as a kid?

RH: Yeah, I grew up on a farm in West Virginia and it's in the northern part of the state where it's mostly farmland and pretty rural. There are some small towns. There are a lot of steel towns that were built up along the Ohio River that are now kind of scrambling because the steel mills are pulling out and there's not a lot of industry left to create jobs. So, it's a pretty kind of sleepy area, but I think that growing up in a place that I thought was super beautiful was definitely inspiring to me and I feel really lucky to have had the opportunity to just go out my back door and explore and play and feel really safe in the outdoors.

My sister Clara and I had a little club—I can't remember the exact name of the club—but we would go to this little meadow near our house and we would pretend that we were Olympic gymnasts and we would climb up on the trees and have this whole safe world where we could just make up names for ourselves and just be silly and do tricks—that's one of my like, it's a place that still there but I can't really, when I go back, I can get in the same mentality. It was definitely a special combination of being a little kid and that creativity and also the place that we're working together to make it really magical.

Clara and I are three years apart, but we're very much alike in a lot of ways and we also really like to collaborate on a lot of projects. So that's been really fun as we've grown into adulthood to continue to work together and use our different skills to do what we want to do.

KA: And you have other siblings right?

RH: I do, yep. I have six siblings and we're all doing different things, but we're a fun crew. My whole family is very creative. We're very resourceful. So we all kind of started our own businesses when we were really little. That was definitely encouraged. My dad is very entrepreneurial. My first business that I can remember—well, I had like lemonade stands and stuff—but I also started a little jewelry business. I think I sold like two bracelets and that was in middle school and then I moved on to greeting cards. And that was when I was like fourteen. Just kind of making stuff and trying to hustle my wares in different places.

KA: So when did you start painting? Was watercolors your first love or did you start drawing? Tell me about your creative process in terms of art.

RH: So I think my first medium with art was probably crayon. That's like everyone's start. Probably play-do and then just like slowly getting more and more extravagant with things. Like I wouldn't just stop at making a play-do snake like my friends would. I would like turn it into a whole family of play-do people, and then I would like, I definitely did some claymations where I like watched "Wallace & Grommet" or some sort of Claymation show, and I was like, "This is so cool that people get to play with play-do for a living." I think it was actually clay. So I've just always like to make things and it's funny, even when I am able to look at other people's art and really admire and be like, "That's so cool." But there's also part of me that's like, "I want to make that too." And I think what really stuck for me, the medium that really stuck for me, was mostly drawing and then adding in watercolor. And I love watercolor because it dries really quickly and it's very portable. It's not messy, it doesn't smell bad, it doesn't have any toxins that I know of. It's very versatile and can easily be added into something and totally change the way that a drawing looks. So that's kind of what I've stuck with throughout my life and just put a lot of hours into developing those skills and I also do branch out to other things here and there, but I kind of keep coming back to watercolor.

KA: Can you tell me about how you built up your business now? 'Cause I know that you sell your work, you've partnered with a lot of different organizations, and you've also started teaching classes, so when did all that start and just tell me how you started to grow that business?

RH: I think I actually started growing my business when I was fourteen when I came up with my very first greeting card line, which was actually 1920s flappers. They're totally different from my style now but that was the first time that I had that experience of packaging a product, coming up with a slogan and a brand name and came up with some sort of little logo. And watching somebody buy my work for the first time, I remember overhearing a couple of ladies at this little Christmas bazaar talking about one of the flapper cards that I'd made and they were just like, "Oh, this will be perfect for this person." And I was just like, just so shocked that this person that didn't know me was buying my art to give to a friend. And it wasn't because they felt bad for me because I was fourteen, they really liked it. and I think it made me realize that I could make things that I liked that other people would be excited about too. And so, since then, I've just little by little spread the word. Throughout high school I did home portrait commissions and caricatures of ladies in my church that they would pay me for—they were like \$10 a piece or something. And pet portraits and all sorts of stuff. And then throughout college, I took on a couple of freelance jobs. Most of them were logos and branding, but I'd always throw in like some sort of hand-drawn thing to make it feel like it was my style. And then about two years after I graduated from college is when I decided to try my darndest to be a full-time artist. And it worked out. So that was about four years ago, almost four years ago, that I started doing it full time. and I wasn't sure if it would last, I just decided that I'd give six months or so. I had a little tiny bit of savings, but enough to make it work. And it was very slow going in the beginning. It started with like an etsy shop that didn't get a lot of hits and commission work that was pretty regular, but it was like really low-paying jobs. And then just kind of saved every penny and stuck with it and things have slowly built up to feel like a really, a career that I don't have to worry about. I feel really confident that even as things change, marketing methods change and taste changes and style changes, that I'll be able to adapt and keep doing it, because I really love it.

My very first artist residency—and I've done a handful of them now—was with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. And that was in June of 2018. And that was a super pivotal time and it was actually really cool 'cause two days ago, I went back to the park. It was the first time since that residency that I'd been

there. And I was reflecting on how that experience was just so huge. 'Cause it was right before I decided to go full time. I quit my job as an AmeriCorps Vista graphic designer doing communications work and I did the residency and after that I went home and did it full time. So that residency gave me about five weeks in the park. I lived in ranger housing and I got to go exploring and do a lot of solo hikes and meet park rangers who taught me some things about local flora and fauna, and then I painted what I saw and I shared it with people and made a little series of fine art prints with the work while I was there. And that was the first time that like a large number of people saw my work and seemed to resonate with it because I had the opportunity to share what I was up to on the social media page for the park and that was just really validating to know that I love painting things in nature and I love going out and finding my own subjects to paint. And all these other people resonate with those same subjects as well, but maybe they don't have the painting skills to paint it themselves, but they also love that flower or whatever it is. So they were really excited to see my interpretation of it and yeah, it was just a hugely impactful time.

I also taught my first nature illustration workshop there to some park rangers and interns and when I came home, I started teaching more workshops like that because I felt like it was a skill that I could share with others that they could then go out and paint what they see too.

And then the Smithsonian internship, well it started out as an internship. And that was around the same time that I did that residency and actually I saw that it was this virtual internship that was listed and they wanted somebody—they wanted a group of students or recent graduates to collect stories of people that are involved in ginseng conservation in the Appalachian region specifically. And also like storytelling surrounding it and folklore and all of that. So I talked about it with my sister Clara and we were like maybe we could be the bridge between what, the stories that are collected and the public. We applied and we got it and that was really cool. We got to meet some different people in our own community in West Virginia and then beyond, who grew up harvesting ginseng and selling it or conserving it and educating about it. and it was just a really fun way to meet people that we wouldn't otherwise have gotten to know. A lot of them are older people that we don't really have too much in common with anymore, but it was this automatic sense of like camaraderie that we're all interested in this same plant. And so we were able to produce, I think over the past couple of years—because we continued to work with Smithsonian after that. After the internship ended, they asked us to come on as contractors to continue making a few more videos for the website and we worked with them for a couple more years. And we made maybe six or eight videos.

KA: How did those two experiences, since they're both kind of rooted in Appalachia, did they resonate with you in a special way or help you understand part of yourself better or your communities better?

RH: Yeah, I think so. I think that, especially, I think the most profound conversation with a guy who lived in my county, still lives in my county, in the northern panhandle of West Virginia who has made most of his living from trapping and foraging and hunting. He's just like a wild man. And he's still there, he's still alive. And I kind of thought that was a thing that had completely fallen by the wayside. I didn't know that people were actually still doing that and also in that part of the state, because it's close to Pittsburg—it's about an hour from Pittsburg—it's still rural, but it's not like the heart of the mountains. So it was still cool to know that even people in that area were living off the land.

KA: What are some things that you tell your students in terms of like, do you focusing on observing your environment differently or, you know, what's one thing you have found that's helped people significantly in terms of approaching nature from an artist's perspective?

RH: I think one of the lessons that I try to convey with my workshops is that you don't need to be going elsewhere to look for inspiration or to be always looking for super impressive aspects of nature in order to be inspired, and in order to create something really cool that's inspired by nature. So for a lot of my workshops, we focus on kind of the ordinary things and we look at them in different ways, so sometimes we'll start out with a circle and then we'll look really closely at a small object that we find on a nature walk and zoom in on that texture. And then just only paint or draw the texture. And it could be something really ordinary like a pinecone, but when you look at it at a really close up scale, it suddenly looks really interesting and unique. I think one of the most important messages that I try to communicate is that you can find beauty and you can find contentment wherever you are as long as you have your eyes open to it and you don't have a lot of preconceived expectations of the outdoors. You just go into it with an open mind and knowing that if you look closely enough at anything, you can find something interesting there.

KA: Have you gotten feedback from people? Have these classes or your way of inspiring people, is that enabling them to experience their landscapes in different ways?

RH: Yeah, I actually released a video, like pre-recorded class in March of 2020. I'd been working on it for a few months and just happened to have it finished right as the pandemic was getting started. And especially during the first six months after I started teaching on Skillshare, which is a video platform for sharing skills. And it was a nature painting class. And so many people said that it helped them to experience little moments of joy even when they were limited to their own tiny little neighborhood or their own yard. Like they couldn't go travel places or go on their big hikes that normally make them really happy. I think it was really just kind of serendipitous timing and it really seemed to impact a lot of people. That was also the class that reached the most people around the world. Tons of people were sending me their projects and it was just this whole painted catalog of things people saw in their immediate surroundings and liked. And that was so rewarding to me too and it helped me get through the pandemic too because I kept seeing just people kind of falling in love with their local surroundings.

I think that starting to teach the skills that I have been learning my whole life helped me to gain more appreciation for being a beginner, because I teach a lot of people who are middle aged or elderly and they don't feel comfortable or confident at all with their art skills. And so I think I've just liked gained empathy for that feeling and I've also tried to become a beginner again in other activities, like playing the fiddle and rock climbing have been two things that I've picked up in the past couple of years. And I feel like I got a late start with both of them because a lot of people that are really good at those things have started when they were really young. So I feel that like insecurity a lot. And sometimes I feel like why am I even trying because I'm never going to be like great. And I think it's sometimes nice to remember that you don't need to be great at everything. And sometimes there's a lot of joy in just like playing the same silly basic bluegrass song over and over again. And just knowing that it doesn't really matter that much.

So when I try to teach, I try to really—the people that want to get good at watercolor, I teach them a little bit differently from people that want to pursue nature journaling or something like that, because it's one thing, yeah, if you want to focus in on getting really good with painting, that's an awesome goal, but it's not like you need to to enjoy art. You can be a casual artist, you can get out a sketchbook every two months and sketch a moth that you saw. It can be just another activity that brings you joy.

KA: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's a lot to be said for just going through a creative process. There's a lot of reward for just taking yourself through the steps. Can we switch over to talking about your book project and what you're working on now?

RH: So the reason I'm in North Carolina right now is because I'm working on a new book which is focusing on the tiny plants, animals, and fungi that can be found throughout the Appalachian Mountain range. So the full range goes from—well, there are a few different definitions, but a lot of people agree that it goes from Northern Alabama to Newfoundland in Canada. So over the next six months—and we're about three and a half weeks in, my husband and I—we're traveling from south to north and spending a month in six different home bases along the Appalachian Mountain range and I'm doing a lot of day hikes to see what I can find. And I'm just trying to have that really open mindset. Like I try to teach, I'm trying to just go out and expose myself to new environments, see what I can find, see what piques my curiosity. I'm taking really good reference photos of those things and then I'm coming back and working from my photos and sketches to create really detailed watercolor illustrations that are zoomed-in versions of the tiny things that I saw in the woods. So the book is kind of—if you imagined what it would be like to be a snail and you're like exploring the woods as a snail and everything that we see as being really tiny is really big and amazing. It's kind of like trying to get you into that world of awe for the small things.

We've been here for about three and a half weeks and when we first got here, we wanted to kind of have the experience start in Northern Alabama where the mountains start. So we went to Talladega National Forest for a weekend and camped there and hiked through, I think it's called the Cheaha Wilderness. And then we have also gone to Great Smoky Mountains National Park and northern Georgia to Brasstown Wilderness and I've hiked several sections of the Bartram Trail, which is a really awesome local trail here that I didn't know about before coming here. And I popped on the Appalachian Trail and hiked up to Siler Bald. So many hikes. Yesterday, I don't even know where I went, but I went with a local botanist and I forget—I was just kind of following him, so I don't know where we were. I need to ask him where we actually went, but it was near Sylva. And he took me out and we looked for tiny worlds in a vertical bog, which is like a bog that's growing on the side of a waterfall or another seepy, rocky area. Been all over the place, I would say most days I've probably gone on a hike since I've been here, which is such a luxury.

I really enjoyed hiking in Talladega National Forest in Alabama and I think part of the reason I loved it so much is because I just hadn't really heard about Alabama as being a place that had a lot of natural beauty and the forest there is so big, I mean as far as you can see from some of those high points, it was all forest. And I just really like how, I think in Appalachia, part of the reason I'm doing this book, is that the word doesn't spread very far about these really awesome places and people kind of dismiss a lot of the states in the Appalachian region as, "Oh, they're behind the times." And West Virginia too. And so I feel that connection to places that, yeah, people don't really think of being beautiful and worth preserving and celebrating, so it's really cool to stumble upon them.

KA: Awesome, what kinds of things have you discovered in this part of Appalachia that maybe you weren't familiar with in terms of tiny worlds? Is there a particular species or plant that surprised you?

RH: I think the biggest surprise to me was the green anole, which is a little tiny lizard that apparently is in this whole southeastern area. They look like chameleons but they're not. But they do the same color changing show and I saw one in Alabama and I watched it go from brown to green because it ate a

beetle. And they change colors when their mood is affected or when they're trying to conserve heat because the temperature is too cold. so that was really cool because I was just taking videos and pictures of this little brown lizard and I thought to myself as I was taking the pictures, "Wow, this lizard is posing for me, this is super cool. I wish it was a different color because it would be more fun to paint." Literally as soon as I thought that, a beetle walked by. It pounced, it ate the beetle and immediately got super happy and turned green. And I was shocked and it was so cool. So that was I think the day after I came back from that hike, I started working on a painting of it with the before and the after, 'cause that was just a really cool surprise.

KA: Is there text in addition to the paintings? Are you talking about the species or are you focusing on the areas where you found them? Or are you talking about conservation messages? What's like the other theme of the book besides the tiny worlds?

RH: So the book is illustration focused, so every page has a huge, colorful, detailed painting, but then I also have text on every page that kind of talks about in first person what that encounter was like, 'cause I want to kind of bring people into my world of stumbling upon these things and feeling just the same enthusiasm that I felt when I saw them, so I kind of like set the scene with my words and talk about the weather that day or things that I was hearing or maybe what I was expecting to find, or what I was looking for that day. And then describing the encounter with the plant or the animal and talking a little bit about sounds that I heard they made or things I noticed about their behavior. And I'm also including bits and pieces of things that I've learned after I saw it and went back and researched it in my field guides or online or asked someone that's really knowledgeable about the subject.

KA: Where are your other, what, five stops?

RH: So on I believe Sunday, we will head to the Shenandoah area to Virginia, it's near George Washington National Forest. And also the southern entrance to Shenandoah National Park. It's a really cool location, there's a lot of jumping off points there too. After that we will head up to south Central Pennsylvania. It's a little Appalachian Trail town, the trail goes right through there. A lot of the towns that we chose are really close to the Appalachian Trail because the trail follows a lot of the high point ridge lines. So we wanted to be as close to the peaks as we could be to get that full experience. So it'll be south Central Pennsylvania—there's just a few state forests around there. It's a pretty developed area, but I am curious, I always like a good challenge, and it seems like that spot, there's not as much endless forest. It'll take some of me really going out and being intentional of finding things there. After that, we'll be in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. And then Maine, near Baxter State Park, and then Quebec in the Notre Dame Mountains and then there's Newfoundland is our last stop for the month of September. And we'll be on the west coast in Grossmorn area.

KA: Very exciting. It's going to be quite the changes too as the seasons go on.

RH: Definitely. Yeah, it's been cool starting out with really early spring here and just having—like, when we first got here, there were only just a few things popping up. and it was kind of nice for me to just focus on a few things and really see everything just come alive while I'm paying really close attention to everything.

KA: When do you plan to have the book project finished and submitted for publication?

RH: It has to be finished this winter, so I'll have a few months when I get back from the trip to do illustrations that I wasn't able to get done on the road and finish writing and do fact checking and all of that. It will come out in 2024. I would really like to have a traveling art show once the book is out. I think it would be cool to do like a book talk and book signing—also my sister is helping me make a short film about the project, so we could do a little screening and also have a pop-up art show in a few different places around the Appalachian Mountains.

KA: Do you think that you'll keep with nature illustrations in the near future? Do you have other things up your sleeves?

RH: I think so, I feel like because a big part of my job now is just going out and being in nature and it's so life-giving for me. It's like, I can't imagine anything better for myself, I really love it. I love the combination of getting to be creative and getting to be outside. I think I can foresee myself, maybe just an idea I've been thinking about, I think it would be fun in the next few years maybe create some sort of like small brand or something around helping people unplug. So even when they're not necessarily outdoors, they could do a puzzle that has my art on it. That's something that I love to do because I love puzzles. Or, yeah, just making other products that help people to be still and enjoy being with loved ones. Maybe illustrating a nature board game or something like that. I'm always seeing other projects that other people are doing and I just think it would be really fun to do them myself.

KA: Well and how awesome that you were able to find this at such a young age, for an artist.

RH: Yeah, it's funny because I feel like I've been working towards this since I was really little. So people are like, "Oh, you're so young." And I'm like this has been my career for 20 years, that's how it feels to me because I've been doing it so long.

KA: What does art give you as a person?

RH: I think that the creative process is just honestly just the perfect combination of challenging and fun. There's just something so rewarding about coming up with an idea and going through that hard, hard part. Like I'm enjoying this trip immensely but it's also really hard to be producing so many paintings. My goal is to have 100 different species represented in the book and each one takes a couple days at least. So it's like so many hours of painting and it's hard to stick with it, but I know I can do it. And the rewarding part that comes when you get to hold that physical thing that you made. And also just seeing other people enjoy it. And I really hope that, especially with this upcoming book, I'm trying to make it something that families will really enjoy together. So it's not a kids' book but it's something that anybody of any age could pick up and feel like it's made for them. That's one of my goals.

KA: And what's something that you would share with anyone who wants to pursue a creative craft or different type of art? What's something that you would share with them that's been helpful to you as you've grown through this process?

RH: I think that something that's been really meaningful for me, especially as someone living in a rural state, has been to put a lot of effort into connecting with other creative people in your area. Even if you live in the mountains and the closest other artist is a couple hours away, you can still email them and ask to talk to them on the phone. And that's something that I really did a lot. When I was just starting out, I would say between the ages of 22 and 24, I was always just like trying to find people that I really admired that were in a similar situation. They weren't living in a big city somewhere where there are a

ton of opportunities. They were living in West Virginia and I would just reach out to them and ask them if they had any advice or if they wanted to meet up and take a walk or get coffee or something. Just trying to create a community because it's not going to happen on its own. And people aren't just going to automatically know that you're trying to make it as an artist. You kind of have to put yourself out there and tell people this is what you want to do and they'll help you out. And they'll be so excited that you're pursuing what you want to do. And it's just really cool now to be able to give back a little bit with, like if I get projects that come my way that I can't take on. Like right now, I'm not taking on other projects because my book project is taking up so much time. So I'm able to pass along that work to younger artists. And especially West Virginia artists. I have like a whole network of West Virginia artists that I love like helping out because I was helped out so much.

KA: That's awesome. And I ask most people this, but do you consider yourself Appalachian and if so, what does that identity mean to you?

RH: I do consider myself Appalachian. I think that it's something that I didn't really care about until maybe college. And I think that's when I started to really appreciate the fact that I grew up on a farm. Because before that, I wasn't really, you know, I didn't really know anything else, so it was just like, oh this is fine. I live on a hill in the middle of nowhere. But then I realized, it's pretty special to have that access to nature and to have parents that chopped their own firewood and make their own food and grow their own stuff. And it's something that I definitely want to pass along. I love to do a lot of the things that my parents did and my grandparents did and I think it's really cool that there are other young people—I'm meeting more and more young people as I'm like traveling around Appalachia more. There are a lot of other people that want that too. So it's cool to see some of my friends getting their own little homesteads now and they're just like doing it. and yeah, it's pretty cool.

KA: Great. And most importantly, if people want to follow your adventure through Appalachia, how do they do that and where can they find your work?

RH: Well I would recommend going to my website, which is just my first and last name .com, so rosaliehaizlett.com and I have a very lovely newsletter. I've been putting a lot of work into it. I have been really enjoying being able to write a long-form letter to people who care about my work in the form of a newsletter, so I send out two of those a month with updates on the trip. And I also am making a monthly video that kind of recaps where I've been and what I've seen on the trip and what I'm painting and those are a lot of fun. So I just finished up my first one today and so definitely subscribe to my newsletter. And I'm also on social media too.