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CITIZEN TIMES

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PEAKS TO THE CANVAS



Oil painter Olena Babak contemplates the scene before her along Little River in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS AND SMOKIES LIFE

With each brushstroke, plein air painters capture the mountains' magic

Holly Kays

Guest Column

On a piece of rocky ground at the base of a steep bank along the mist-shrouded Little River, oil painter Olena Babak sets up her easel. It's late in the day to be starting a new piece—less than three hours of sunlight remain—and Babak is fresh from an hours-long painting session in the Elkmont area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But something about the scene compels

her.

"Sometimes it's like an impulse," she said. "Sometimes it's contemplated. Sometimes, a scene sort of drags you in, and you need to figure out why."

The Great Smokies offer a markedly different landscape than her home state of Maine. But Babak, like the 18 other artists participating in the fourth annual Plein Air Smokies event—this year hosted by the Great Smoky Mountains

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Featured artist Charles Newman works to translate the scene before him onto canvas. PROVIDED BY ERIN ROSOLINA AND THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT



Aerial scenes of downtown Asheville on Nov. 18, 2024. MICHAEL CLEVENGER AND MAX GERSH/USA TODAY NETWORK

Asheville population nears 100K since COVID

Ryley Ober Asheville Citizen Time

Asheville Citizen Times USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - The mountain city has grown ever-closer to a population of 100,000 since 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an October report from the Office of State Budget and Management shows.

Asheville's population grew by over 3,500 between April 1, 2020, and July 1, 2024, reaching over 98,000 people by 2024, according to population estimates from the state demographer. With the nearly 4% population increase, the city held tight as the state's 11th largest municipality.

Michael Cline, a state demographer, told the Citizen Times that Western North Carolina benefits from the area's natural resources, national parks and forests, which attract people to the area. Many of those are retirees or folks nearing retirement, he said via email Oct. 16. As more of the baby boom generation entered these ages, more people migrated to WNC.

"The area — particularly Asheville — also benefited from post-pandemic migration with people moving to areas where they want to live while working remotely," Cline wrote.

Nearby cities and towns in Western North Carolina also saw growth

See POPULATION, Page 5A

Trump seeking charges for more political foes

3 already indicted but others on president's list

Josh Meyer

USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton on Oct. 16 became the third high-profile Trump critic to be criminally charged after the president repeatedly attacked him publicly. All three maintain their innocence and plan to contest the charges.

The day before, Trump rattled off other names of people to be "looked into" as Attorney General Pam Bondi, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche and FBI Director Kash Patel stood beside him at a news conference, smiling.

"I hope they're looking at all of these people," Trump said of former Justice Department Special Counsel Jack Smith, former Justice Department senior prosecutor Andrew Weissmann and Sen. Adam Schiff, D-California. "And I'm allowed to find out. I'm allowed, you know, I'm in theory chief law enforcement officer."

This presidential interference represents a major breach in the once-firm firewall between the White House and the Justice Department.

Former President Bill Clinton created a scandal merely by having a mundane conversation with former Attorney General Loretta Lynch at an airport in 2016, when DOJ was investigating Clinton's wife, Hillary, for her use of a private email server while secretary of state.

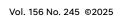
That recent history seems quaint today. Trump's appointees have indicated that more indictments against Trump's personal and political adversaries will be forthcoming.

Trump told reporters Sept. 26 he expects more charges against people who

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President Donald Trump has publicly listed a number of his political opponents he thinks should be "looked into." KEVIN DIETSCH/GETTY IMAGES





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Painting

Continued from Page 1A

Institute at Tremont—found ample inspiration while painting there September 21-27.

"You always want to paint everything," she said, "and there's just not enough time."

Great Smoky Mountains National Park covers 816 square miles, stretching from rugged mountaintops to valley rivers, so for artists like Babak finding scenes to paint was easy. The challenge was deciding which ones to depict.

"For me, the goal is always to help people find a personal connection to the outdoors," said Erin Rosolina, Tremont's marketing director. "We know that moments of wonder and awe in nature benefit both mental and physical health, and plein air painting provides another pathway to those experiences."

"Plein air" painting, French for "open air," describes the practice of painting while outdoors, experiencing the scene in person. Plein Air Smokies was created by Friends of the Smokies in 2022, and the park partner hosted it for three years before passing the torch to Tremont for 2025. The event brings nationally recognized artists from across the country to spend a week experiencing the beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains, painting the scenes that inspire them, and participating in a variety of public events designed to get people excited about art and the national park.

"Our programs encourage people to slow down, notice patterns, and experience wonder in nature," Rosolina said. "Plein air painting does exactly the same. Since Tremont already offers photography workshops and a writers' conference that use nature as inspiration, this event felt like a natural fit."

This year, the artists spent five days painting at locations scattered throughout the park, including several painting demonstrations at specific locations like the Tremont campus and the Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center in Townsend, Tennessee. On the morning of Friday, September 26, artists worked one-on-one with art students from three regional high schools-Gatlinburg-Pittman, Fulton, and William Blount—walking through the entire painting process together on Tremont's campus. Later that evening, the artists displayed their work from the past week for sale during the Collectors Celebration event at the District Gallery and Framery in Knoxville. Though a portion of the sales went to the gallery and to Tremont, most went back to the artists.

The 19 oil, acrylic, and watercolor artists who participated this year traveled from 13 different US states, stretching from Texas to Wisconsin and Maine to Florida. Some, like Babak, were experiencing the Smokies for the first time. Other had been coming to Plein Air Smokies for years. This was Kansas City, Missouri, resident Richard Sneary's third year participating in the event.

"It's hard to beat national parks, no matter which one it is," Sneary said. "This one is particularly special."

A native of Maryland, Sneary loves the Smokies' rivers and mountains. They connect him with his roots on the East Coast, where the trees are bigger and the mountains greener than in the Western states. Of course, the greenery is only possible due to the significant rainfall the region receives, something that was acutely evident to this year's painters. According to the National Weather Service, Townsend received rain during five of the seven days of Plein Air Smokies.

B SHOES

GREENVILLE'S LARGEST



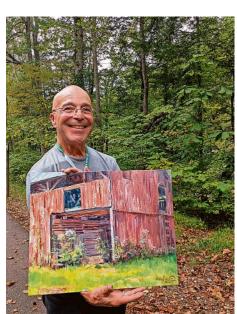
An artist creates a scene during the Plein Air Smokies Quick Draw Competition held in Knoxville on Sept. 27. The contest challenged artists of all levels to create paintings on the spot, with cash prizes available for the winners. PROVIDED BY ERIN ROSOLINA AND THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT

"When you start seeing those spots show up, it's time to turn your painting over and get it out of the way," said Sneary, who paints in watercolor.

For plein air painters, meeting such challenges is part of the game; the outdoors provide inspiration, but also throw plenty of curveballs. Over time, artists develop the skills they need to hit a home run even when conditions aren't perfect.

"The painting I finished today, I started when it was sunlight," said Massachusetts-based oil painter John Caggiano, also a third-time participant. Then the rain came. "Some got on the canvas, and thank God I had the skill to carry through the intent of the painting. Although it would have been nice to have the sunlight, I didn't need it."

By definition, plein air work requires travel. For many of the artists who flocked to the Smokies last month, Tremont was one of many stops on their painting calendar. Caggiano traveled directly from Townsend to another event in Lichfield, Connecticut, while Sneary left for Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and from there traveled to Sedona, Arizona.



Old barns, such as this one in the Walland area, are a favorite subject for oil painter John Caggiano. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS AND SMOKIES LIFE

The schedule can be exhausting, but also incredibly fulfilling.

"It's a solitary profession, so plein air events give one an opportunity to meet lots of nice people, and 99 percent of the people who participate in these plein air events are really nice," Caggiano said. "We look forward to it because that's our chance to socialize and be with our plein air family."

Painters forge connections over a shared love of both the discipline and of the landscapes they paint. For Rosolina, a favorite memory of the week was formed when watercolor artist Richie Vios showed her the piece he'd completed an hour before the deadline for the artists to turn in their submissions for the gallery. The painting showed Tremont's Council House, the open-air gathering space where many of the institute's programs begin and end.

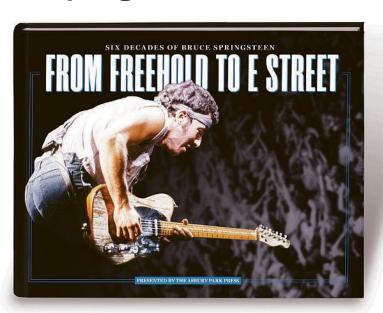
"He depicted it with people gathered around a fire, capturing its essence as a place of connection," she said. "From his short week at Tremont, he understood how much we value these connections to nature and to each other, how beloved this space is, and how many lives have been impacted by their time at Tremont. It was perfect."

For more information about events at the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, including the 2026 Plein Air Smokies event, visit gsmit.org.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.



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