

Zolita Sverdlove (1936-2009), South Pasadena Artist
(with special thanks to her husband, Donald Rapp)

Zolita Sverdlove was dedicated to her art for more than 60 years. She lived in California for forty years including 30 years in South Pasadena (1979-2009). She regularly roamed the hills of South Pasadena, finding places looking northward toward the San Gabriel Mountains, Mount Baldy, and the Verdugos, and southward toward the buildings of Los Angeles in the distance framed by the hills of South Pasadena in the foreground. Her style was impressionist and she was a great colorist, using bold colors to accentuate her depictions of local landscapes.

As her husband Donald has noted, "Zolita was one of those rare people who knew what she wanted to do with her life when she was 8 years old, and proceeded in a straight line to carry out her mission. Her dream was to develop into a great artist. She exhibited her talent from an early age."

Quotes from her diaries:

- "I studied art since I was 12 years old. Unusual for a teenager, I spent every Saturday at the Art Students League drawing the figure."
- "I had the good fortune to study landscape painting in Provincetown for two summers. It was a seminal time with people like Hans Hoffman, Wolf Kahn, Helen Frankenthaler, Arnold Newman, Chaim Gross, Sam Kootz and others on the scene."
- "I graduated from the Cooper Union Art School, which is a full scholarship school, and then moved to California. Then I decided it was time to find out who I was as an artist."

Don knew her since she was 18 years old and was married to her for 53 years. During that time, she was continually devoted to her art. She not only pursued her own art but vigorously studied the work and lives of other artists.

From the time Don and Zolita first moved to California in 1956 she was fascinated by the California landscape.

More quotes from her diaries:

- "The landscape of California is both breathtaking and ominous. Freaky things happen in Nature here."
- "What should not be happens in reality: postcard sunsets, crescent moons that hang at the wrong angle, harvest moons, clusters of jeweled lights, glittering palms under black skies, and red sunsets with purple black water glittering under the clouds."
- "I am fascinated with the ever-changing, dramatic expanses of color and light."
- "My work is involved with both the gorgeous and creepy, the awesome and the frightening."
- "I like to deal with the real that appears unreal. This is the essence of my work. The reality of Southern California is that it is a little unreal. The place almost seems like a set location. I find myself caught between the bucolic beauty of an impressionist landscape and the surreal phenomena that happen here."

- “I use Landscape as a metaphor to express a mood. I always travel with a sketch pad or camera. I take numerous notes of the phenomena that interest me. Out of these, I build a painting.”

When Don took a position as a professor at the University of Texas in Dallas in the 1970s, he took Zolita away from the California landscape that she loved. Frustrated by the boring landscape of Texas, she went abstract for several years.

In 1979, Don accepted a position at JPL and they moved to South Pasadena. He remembers that Zolita was like a cat let out of a cage and that she immediately returned to vibrant, passionate landscapes. Don further recalls that Zolita roamed the hills in South Pasadena, spending time perched under the now forbidden water tower, drawing and painting the City of South Pasadena below with the San Gabriel Mountains in the background and the baroque sky above.”

“Recurrent themes in her work were the scenes from Hanscomb and Illinois Avenues of the rolling hills of South Pasadena in the foreground with the buildings of Los Angeles in the background; and as always the skies played an important role in her landscapes.”

The Farmers Market in South Pasadena was also a favorite subject for Zolita. She created at least 40 artworks (paintings, drawings, and graphics) of the people and the vendors buying fruit and vegetables.

And, like all artists in the area, she did an occasional artwork based on the Colorado St Bridge. She also became fascinated with the city of Los Angeles.

More quotes from her diaries:

- “Many of the geographic and architectural settings in Los Angeles are just as compelling and attractive as medieval cities that are visited by the public for their beauty and history. I have executed paintings that are parallels of many famous cities. The towers of San Gimignano are very similar to the buildings of downtown Los Angeles silhouetted against the sky and hills. Many times I have felt that Pasadena in a storm reminds me of El Greco’s View of Toledo. The snow-capped mountains around Los Angeles have similarities to the scenes painted by Swiss and German romanticists.”
- “Coming into modern times, the freeways and bridges express a unique modern beauty of urban life. The array of night lights has been called a queen’s necklace. These modern urban developments are just as visually compelling to me as the cities and monuments of the past.”

Zolita was a prolific artist, leaving behind about a thousand oil paintings, a thousand watercolors, hundreds of pastels, and thousands of drawings, etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, and much more.