

By [Stevenson Swanson](#) | [Email the author](#) | May 6, 2011

Landscapes Of The Eye And Of The Imagination

A new exhibition at the Pelham Art Center features the work of a Chicago artist who is fascinated with how things look and how she'd like them to look.

Vivid landscapes, real and imaginary, are the focus of the [Pelham Art Center's](#) new exhibition, which begins Friday.

The show features 16 works by a single artist, Nina Rizzo, who is the 2011 winner of the [Alexander Rutsch Award](#).

[Rizzo](#), who teaches painting at Northern Illinois University and has a studio in nearby Chicago, will be on hand for the opening reception, starting at 7 p.m.

In a phone interview Thursday, Rizzo told me that she uses both actual places and imaginary landscapes as sources of her work. But she is drawn to subjects that share similarities to the medium in which she works—paint.

In *Thaw*, a 2009 canvas inspired by an artistic residency in Iceland, a jagged triangular iceberg of white, blue and green juts out of an almost purple sea, set against a blue-green sky. (*Thaw* and the other works by Rizzo that I mention are shown in the photo gallery that accompanies this column.)

She calls the iceberg “this frozen, liquidy thing that is like paint.”

But rather than making the paint look like an iceberg, she makes the iceberg look like paint. Instead of working the paint into a seamless depiction of an iceberg, Rizzo accentuates the brushwork. You could say *Thaw* is about brush strokes, not an iceberg.

That reflects her dedication to painting.

In studying art at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and at the University of Texas in Austin, she found herself becoming increasingly interested in painting and the materials of painting—the brushwork, the acrylic and oil paints—rather than some of the more currently fashionable artistic media, such as installations or video.

That fascination drew her to the Rutsch award, which is focused on painting. She heard about the prize from a fellow Northern Illinois professor, Frank Trankina, who won the first award in 2001.

[Alexander Rutsch](#), the artist for whom the award is named, was a Vienna native who moved first to Paris and later to the New York area, settling in Pelham in 1968. A painter and sculptor, Rutsch actively supported the art center for 25 years. After he died in 1997, his family and friends established the award in his honor.

This year's competition drew entries from nearly 400 applicants across the country. Rizzo is the sixth winner of the biannual prize, which began in 2001 and carries a \$5,000 award.

The exhibition of Rizzo's work, which will be on view until June 25th, follows a display of artwork by [Pelham high school students](#) and "[Curious Exploration](#)," a multi-artist show of fanciful mixed-media work.

Rizzo, 36, told me that she works on some of her paintings for up to a month, often setting aside a canvas and returning to it more than once. Others come together more quickly.

She divides her time between a studio in Chicago's Garfield Park neighborhood and the Northern Illinois campus in DeKalb, about an hour west of the city.

The idea for *Salt Mine Symmetry*, a strikingly pink 2008 acrylic painting, came from a 2007 visit to salt mines in Poland. In mining the salt, the workers created what looked like sculptures in the mines.

"I was fascinated with it," she said. "It was this pink color, this peachy orange color. And it was this material that you could manipulate. It was visual and functional."

Cactus Pile Goes on a Picnic, a 2009 oil painting, is an example of an imaginary landscape, showing a dark green cactus set against a bright yellow desert sky. The cactus is sitting on a white cloth.

In her five years in Texas, Rizzo saw a lot of cacti outside in their natural setting, but also inside as decorations. She wanted to create a hybrid work, blending landscape and still life.

It may be intended as a humorous piece, but the cactus is strikingly well painted.

"If something is poorly put together it can be a distraction," she said. "I feel like the crafting of it and making it well allows you to appreciate the humor, and not just that it's silly."

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