

Artist Katherine Kean *Captures* Nature's Soul

By Nicole Borgenicht



Having a deep connection with Nature, Katherine Kean chooses compelling scenes to develop with layers of pigment and specific textures, in expression of the feeling she receives and gives back. These images are transformed from Nature and Kean's imagination into a semblance of an innately comprehensible story. Her expression of universally recognizable imagery with weather patterns invites similar responses uniting viewers and Nature in spirit. An artist from childhood and winner of multiple art contests, Kean chose fine art painting only after experimenting with multifarious visual arts. She sculpted, created etchings, and had a career in special visual effects, yet painting stood out as the "most fulfilling," she says.

HISTORY

"I was very fortunate in high school to have an art teacher who was supportive and encouraging. The art room was a bit of a refuge, and she pointed me in the direction of Rhode Island School of Design where I intended to study painting. Reminded that it was difficult to make a living as a painter, I started studying film making and animation," says Kean. While she "loved" designing and animating visual effects, Kean continued to paint in her free time. The catalyst for a change of career came when she had a poignant dream. "A salesman-like man in a loud plaid jacket took me to an art gallery in the sky and showed me wall after wall filled with beautiful paintings. He

told me that all of the paintings were mine. They were paintings I could and should have made," she shares. The emotional impact of the dream sequence influenced Katherine Kean to follow her dream and make it reality.

LANDSCAPE SUBJECTS, IN NATURE, THE MIND AND HEART

Expansive scenes have always driven Kean from Nature, compiled with her imaginative journeys to single out perspicacity within that imagery. "My subject matter is the landscape - not necessarily the landscape I see with my eye, but the landscape I feel," Kean explains. She has painted en plein air (outside), hiking to locations at all hours of the night and day in a search for a landscape she had visualized in her mind. In time, she developed a more practical working method that she utilizes today. "I draw and paint in Nature and then working from that, and my reference photos, create a landscape that evokes the mood I'm after," Kean says.

"EVERYTHING IS SPIRITUAL"

A painter who seems to have a deep connection with Nature, Kean describes her experience in relation to the dynamic elements of Nature. She interprets her sensory response tactically, personally, and technically in each piece. Kean says,

"I think everything is spiritual. I do experience Nature - especially wilderness, as a place where our essential selves are

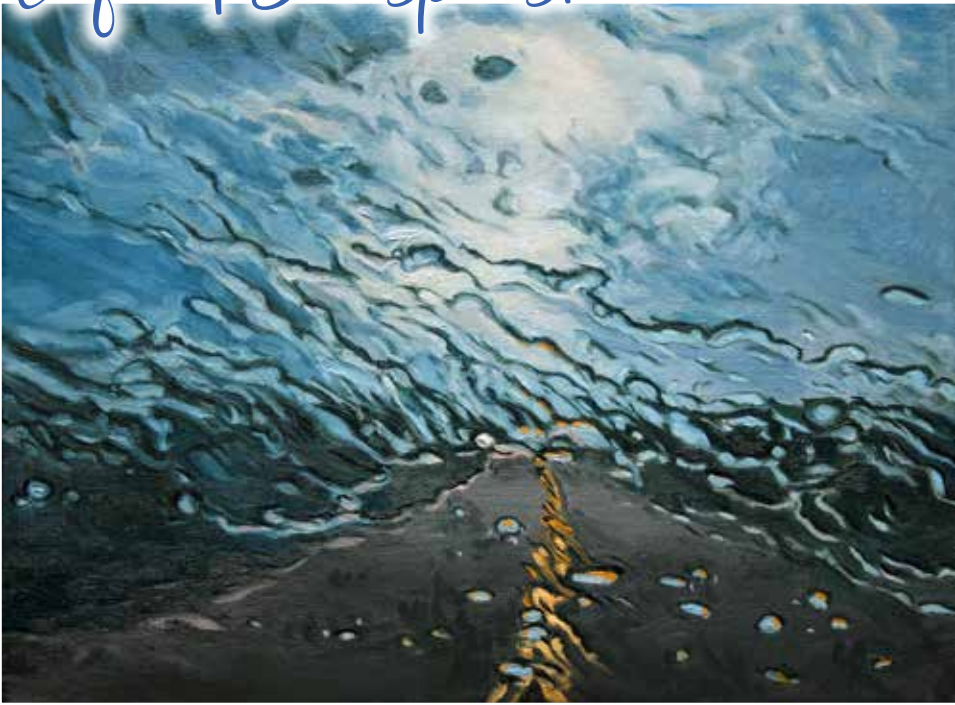
easier to connect to, where any sense of separation from spirit is less likely to hide in the hypnotic fog of civilization. I look to Nature as a reminder of that essential part of ourselves and I see paintings as a way to deepen the connection and to be reminded that we are not separate from - whatever it is - that can be felt and experienced by the sheer magnitude of a mountain or the force of a storm. I try to capture the essence of awe I feel in Nature by showing the scale of it, the mood of it."

EARLY PROCESS

Early studies allow Kean to explore different aspects of a painting. A painter who primarily works on linen, Kean shares the many reasons she prefers the fabric. She describes her process: "I like linen because it is a very strong and long lasting fiber and has the benefit of requiring less water and fewer pesticides to grow. I work in oils on an oil-primed surface sized with synthetic glue because it makes a beautiful, soft, responsive surface to paint on. I make a lot of sketches and I also take photos, especially if I'm painting something elusive like clouds or raindrops and I see a particular formation that I like. Drawing and small painting studies help me figure out what I think I'm seeing."

PAINTINGS AND TECHNIQUE

Liquid Sunsplash



STEP ONE:

I like to use Aquabee sketchpads. It is a wonderful paper that takes a variety of media. I have a very light touch, so I appreciate very soft pencils for sketching. I use soft, black pencils like Palomino or Blackwings. I make the sketch to get an idea of how value would work along with the pattern of rain water and to use as a "map" to refer to when I start painting and inevitably get lost in all the drops.

STEP TWO:

As an artist, I get to play in two areas at once; the water creates an abstraction and I get to work with an image that way. And then, as I refine it to look like rain, the subject is revealed, but not entirely. It's fun to engage with that line between realism and abstraction.

STEP THREE:

The depth is suggested by the softening of the distance, along with allowing the road and the ground to get warmer in hue as they move closer. The closest objects are more in focus and the drops and squiggles of water are sharper edged.

FINAL:

I know the painting is finished when it can hold its own in a conversation and I feel I don't have to defend it with additional brush strokes.

In Liquid Sunsplash, the technique works so well in the wet upper atmosphere imagery that it almost looks like one could dive into the painted sky for a swim. In addition, the water imagery presents a tromp l'oeil effect of actually warping the picture plane in step two. In step three, the artist achieves a depth of field driving in rain with resilient acuity. Her final painting is rich with dimension from each step. Kean shares the story behind this piece: "I love watching rain fall on a window or windshield and I'll often take a few photos before I wipe them away. While driving in Hawaii on a beautiful sunny day, an unexpected quick downpour drenched my windshield, my car, and the road. I don't often get to experience a blue sky along with a splashy windshield. I was driving a rental car, so the patterns were quite different from what I was familiar with. As with most of my raindrop paintings, I painted the background first - with all of its watery distortion, and then added the individual drops last."



Scattered Glow

STEP ONE:

In the study, I wanted to quickly capture the colors and general shapes of the clouds. I find studies very helpful as a relatively quick way to try out composition and color before spending a lot of time and energy on a larger surface.

STEP TWO:

The beauty of oil painting is that you can paint over what you have already painted, and yes, of course, that “destroys” what was painted before. I’ve been known to completely muddle up a painting trying things out, then take what I’ve learned and start over on a fresh canvas – and the second one usually goes very quickly. However, no danger of that in this case, because this particular study is two paintings merged together in a photo editor. I wanted to suggest the link between the atmospheric river in the sky and the natural watershed and very important ground water. The history of water is very interesting in this location. Without going into it too much, as recently as 200 years ago, much of the Los Angeles Basin was saturated with ponds and marshes and had a natural river.

STEP THREE:

At this stage of the painting I was working very quickly to lay in large bodies of color over the vivid underpainting without much detail. I think the simplicity along with the contrast of underpainting and main color adds to the modern effect. I love the work of modern colorists such as Milton Avery and the boldness and simplicity of Georgia O’Keeffe.

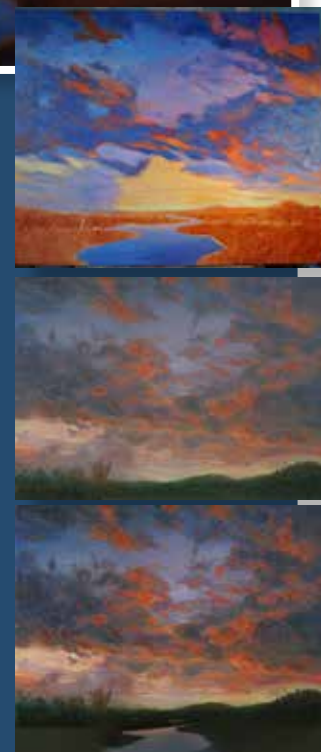
FINAL:

I usually put a painting aside near the end. The colors change as it dries, so sometimes I go back in and make adjustments, or add glazes. I crawl visually all over a painting looking for any areas where I feel the paint is not well articulated, and if found, I’ll go over that area again.



Scattered Glow has luminous imagery revealing Nature stirring beneath and shining upon all. Where it came from is quite unexpected. We can clearly see in step two below, how Kean added unique warmth with water, altering the original composition without fear of destruction. In the third phase, the artist transforms the painting to encompass a glowing contemporary aspect and then brings it all together in her finale. Katherine Kean describes her original source and added inventive imagery:

“We were having a series of wildfires, and as devastating as they are, the smoke in the atmosphere made amazing sunsets. I took photos of the sky and clouds and sketched the simplified shapes. I then made a small painting study to get a sense of the color I wanted. I realized I wanted to have water in the foreground and made a little water study. Then, in a photo editor, I merged the two studies to get the final composition, which I then transferred to a large linen panel.”



Storm Shimmer: Angeles Forest



LET'S DISCUSS STORM SHIMMER: ANGELES FOREST.

In the colorful underpainting, Kean's painting style is different from her other works. And in the final piece, the painting is very dark, but the depth-zones are conceivable, by our having seen an under painting. In using a lot of color beneath dark paintings, it has a great effect translating as dimension, reminiscent of former art periods as far back as the Renaissance. Kean shares how the effect works along with her technique inspiration. "For the underpainting, I just imagined what color the light might be if it were shining through the clouds, and I exaggerated that. Atmospheric turbulence can

be full of spectacle, and I wanted to express that feeling. The underpainting color always influences what goes on top and some of the underpainting color shows through. It is the contrasts and progression of color, the steps from warm to cool, and dark to light, that give it depth, as well as the final color glazes that make the darks deep and rich."

In terms of art period influence, Kean says, "I often feel aligned with the Romantic artists and the Tonalists, and their emphasis on a connection to Nature, both in their artwork and their philosophy. In the wish to

uphold Nature in the face of urbanization, I also like the way Caravaggio used light and dark, and punctuated with bold reds. His compositions are forceful and direct. And, as I mentioned, I feel aligned with the Romantic painters, like Caspar David Friedrich, and the Tonalists, such as Whistler and Innes."

I Stop for Drops

Notice how in the painting, *I Stop for Drops*, step one (below right) is a combination of representational and Photo Realism in flavor. Yet in the final work, the drops become a more painterly version of rain. Kean shares more of her favorite artists and technique she uses to manifest the separation between and feeling of: raindrops. "I love Realism and the work of artists Vija Celmins, Janet Fish, Gerhard Richter (1960s oceans and clouds), and Don Eddy - there are so many amazing Realist painters. The red drops are caused by red light reflected from the brake lights of the car in the image. When it rains very hard one can barely see the cars until their lights come on. As the raindrops were painted, the contrast between the misty background and sharper foreground really came into play as very distinct areas, but they are connected by color - such as the red brake lights reflecting on the drops. At the same time, paint is liquid, and it was fun to let the paint's own liquid aspect become part of the rainy, drippy image."



ARTIST TIP:

To paint convincing raindrops remember that they reflect the background upside down and that gravity will pull on them, making them tend to be bottom heavy, although once they've splashed down, they appear in a variety of shapes, depending on what they land on. The prismatic effect of water also causes them to be a little bit brighter than the rest of the environment.

Exciting Exhibits

Many of Katherine Kean's paintings have been exhibited and sold in various galleries, art fairs, museums, government and corporate buildings and events. Described next are a few shows of significance to the artist: "I find it rewarding when work is included in museums and venues with long duration exhibitions that provide an opportunity for the work to be seen by people who may not necessarily visit galleries. Two of my paintings were included in Paint America's Paint the Parks, which was on display at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial aka Gateway Arch Museum, Gateway Arch National Park in St. Louis, Missouri for several months. Other special museum exhibitions include Grants Pass Museum of Art in Grants Pass, Oregon and Red River Valley Museum in Vernon, Texas."

Kean highlights other venues, "Bloomingdales purchased one of my paintings for their collection when they opened the Santa Monica store and displayed it in an ongoing exhibition. I have really enjoyed exhibiting with Deanna Izen Miller, both at her Palm Desert Gallery and the Palm Springs Fine Art Fair. Through her expertise and networks, my work has been shown to new audiences, with resulting sales and collectors of my work. My experience has been that the proximity of the artwork in the spectrum of styles she assembles for an exhibition, seems to add energy to all the work, and I feel energized in turn - then all that creative energy seems to go back into new work."

In tandem with Kean's focus on Nature, her work was in The National Weather Center Biennial 2015. "I am such a big fan of weather to begin with and it was wonderful to get a tour of the Center, learn some of the science, and meet many artists doing weather and climate themed work." Encompassing true science and the imagination of science fiction, Kean's artistic journey continues to play out.



Visions For The Future

"I'm just starting to use my dreams as content, and I am enjoying the challenge. In one sense, it opens the door to paint in new ways. At the same time, I want to stay true to the feeling of each dream. I hope to expand on what I have done so far in that vein while continuing to explore atmospheric paintings," Kean says.

Once again, Katherine Kean is accepting her dreams as guidance. Gifted with great imagination mixed with analysis and experimentation in technique, Kean unites the unconscious with the conscious. Thereby, in her all-is-Nature-themed paintings, she brings elegance to our senses.

More of Katherine Kean's art can be seen at www.katherinekeanfineart.com