

Early Memories & New Perceptions

Author - Kim Keever

I look back at those glorious days of childhood when it was easy to quickly drop into a brand-new world and imagine everything to be possible. My father owned a house in Virginia that looked out on a small beach surrounded by seagrasses on either side. Beyond the beach was a wide expanse of estuary called the Machipongo which led to the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. At low tide thousands of little fiddler crabs would move up and down the beach in great waves looking for bits of food that the ebbing tide had left behind. Walking up to them they would scatter in a mass stampede and quickly drop back into holes in the mud they would constantly dig out after each high tide. Sometimes this all came about with stunning sunsets that were so beautiful I could not stop looking until the mosquitoes drove me back into the house. The fiddler crabs were my first strong memory of what a miniature world could be like. I was peering into a world you know you can't physically fit into but can't help being mesmerized by the change in scale.

At that time I never thought I would become an artist. My father told me I would starve if I tried. Even then I knew what hunger was and endless hunger didn't seem like a good choice for the future. I always made art growing up but I didn't have the nerve to jump in and just go for it. It wasn't until I had almost completed my Masters degree in Engineering that I realized, at least in my own world view, that you only have one life to live that you know of and you might as well live it the way you want to. I dropped out of my engineering graduate school program, became an artist, and never looked back.

Had I known that fiddler crabs and sunsets would forever influence the greater part of my life, I would have skipped everything in between but life is never a straight line. There are so many forks in the road and so many trails that lead back around to the same place. And so many mistakes I have made over and over again.

I was mainly a painter but I created endless drawings and occasional etchings and monotype prints along with various kinds of sculpture. I wanted to bring something new into the art world, but it wasn't until I started building and photographing landscapes in a water filled aquarium that I knew I was on the right track. I felt like my figure in the landscape paintings were not saying anything to me that felt inventive enough. I had become bored with the paintings I was making. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy making them, it was just that I didn't feel I could say anything more with paint. Working with a large format camera and poured paint into the water I was able to bring my landscapes alive. This would be my signature work.

I stopped painting in 1991. I admired Cindy Sherman's very personal photographic work and I wanted to bring certain restrictions into my photographs as she did. I decided to work with a large format camera so that I could make prints larger than 30 x 40 inches and still have good resolution. They would be landscapes verging on reality and everything would be in focus. My first attempts did not feel all that successful because they had no atmosphere. they were "tabletop setup models." *Eight Months* was one of the most outstanding but it still didn't read as real space on this planet. I worked out an intermediate solution involving surrounding the models with clear plastic, lighting smoke bombs inside the model, and shooting through a hole in the plastic. This worked for a while but I longed for those dramatic clouds passing by right outside my studio window.



***Eight Months* 1997**

The house by the beach brought about the solution in a roundabout way. We lived an almost 19th century existence since the house was far removed from the power and telephone lines. There were kerosene lamps everywhere, a wood fireplace, and water was pumped from an outdoor hand pump that rested on a pipe jutting out of the ground. Even though we had a milk cow, it was more of a pet since there was something wrong with its udders and it couldn't give milk. In place of regular milk my father would fill half a glass of water to the top with canned milk. Though it was always a rather bland taste experience, he would insist that I watch as he poured the milk into the water. Watching the milk mix with the water was always a fascinating visual experience and made it go down a little easier. A friend of mine was throwing out a 100 gallon aquarium and at about the same time it dawned on me I could mix paint into water and get cloudlike effects.

The combination of the free water tank and the liquid paint mixed in for atmosphere was a big breakthrough in my photography. *Girl on a Road* is one of the best examples from the late 90s. It turned out that with enough experimentation I was able to get interesting cloud formations and various effects by moving the lighting around and using colored gels over the lights. Since *Girl on a Road* and earlier prints were made directly from 4 x 5 inch transparencies, the image had to be basically just right because I did not yet have the luxury of Photoshop.



***Girl on a Road* 1998**

Though I came to use Photoshop with my scanned transparencies after *Girl on a Road*, I have always used it sparingly. What I mean is that I make such changes as lightening or darkening some areas, intensifying color or de-intensifying color and other darkroom type adjustments. Though I have had several black and white darkrooms in the past, I cannot imagine going back to those working conditions and the general slowness when using those processes.

Everything I photograph is of a composite of movable "sculptures" however ephemeral they may be as the paint dissipates in the water and the plaster mountains disintegrate over time. I have continued along this path with new enhancements to the landscapes over the years but have remained true to my original ideas. Newer works have come to include model railroad greenery, colored plaster mountains, pillow stuffing clouds in back of the tank and extended scenery on tables in back of the tank and sometimes in front. I have included examples along with studio shots to give you an idea of the process.



***West 104k* 2009**



Studio view for *West 104k*

I realize what I am talking about is more or less about process and how I got there. I rarely think of what I am doing on an intellectual basis mainly because I believe that if I tried to explain everything in this way, I would get bogged down in a whirlwind of restrictive and confusing verbal ideas. For myself I like to think that art is something that flows from the artist, a talent one is generally born with and relates to visual cues and sensibilities picked up throughout one's life. I sometimes say that an artist should be seen and not heard. Besides, I'd rather not spend the time competing with the writers that continue to write about my work. I am often amazed at their insights and often learn more from them about what I'm doing than I knew previously. Perhaps my favorite quote is from the artist/critic Kit White, "there were sunsets, mountains, and ocean shores before there were eyes to see

them."

On the other hand, living in New York City for many years I am well aware of the art and artists in the contemporary art world and I have always been interested in the history of art. Though some of my work is reminiscent of the Hudson River School of painting, I have never tried to imitate their work or to purposely go in that direction. Whatever the quality, if I tried to emulate the paintings as such, I would immediately be labeled an academic. I have always hoped that my work would be viewed having some connection with Conceptual Art, this being one of the driving forces in the art world since the 1960's. I make artworks that are generally appealing landscapes, something everyone can identify with on some level. On closer inspection the landscape breaks down into simple materials such as plaster, paint, water, and multicolored lights suggesting a circuitous connection with Postmodern art via a more conceptual approach to historical quotation, the fabrication of artificial realities and a simulacra of worlds.



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About the author:



Kim Keever

***is represented by Kinz + Tillou Fine Art, New York, NY.
He lives and works in New York City.***