



No downtime, just work for Kingston artist Kevin Paulsen

by [Lynn Woods](#) / March 31, 2016 / 2 comments



Artist Kevin M. Paulsen with Surrender (The last viewing platform) (photos by Robert Storm Photography)

For the past 17 years, Kevin Paulsen has been living and painting in two sprawling lofts on the second and third floors of a former department store on Kingston's Wall Street. He is that rare creator who is equally devoted to his art and his business: producing murals and decorative interior design work. Before moving to Kingston, Paulsen spent 20 years in Nantucket, where he established a relationship with several galleries and prestigious venues such as David Findlay and Bergdorf Goodman.

By mysterious osmosis, Paulsen absorbed the primitive folk art of New England, which was contemporaneous with Nantucket's early-19th-century whaling culture. His spare, muted paintings of willowy, frondlike trees, humpbacked hills and simply drawn ships floating on peaceful harbors and seas, his distant towers and rhythmic rows of military tents, his cavorting birds and silhouetted, archetypal folk figures, with their top hats and frock coats, channel not just the vocabulary of America's early-19th-century itinerant painters, but also, more importantly, their inventiveness.

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Much of the appeal of Paulsen’s work lies in the play of his pale, delicate tones. The subtlety of his compositions, his use of geometry and the pure invention of his figures and structures – which, in their translucency and odd juxtaposition, verge on the surreal – also echo the art of Giotto, Claude Lorrain, Klee, Picasso, Miró and late Kandinsky. A selection of Paulsen’s murals and other works is currently on display at Exit Nineteen, located at 309 Wall Street in Uptown Kingston.

When *Almanac Weekly*’s Lynn Woods recently visited Paulsen in his studio, three commissioned mural paintings were draped along one wall of his studio, an unheated expanse with a view of the Catskill Mountains. Arranged on the floor were dozens of small collages consisting of arrangements of pairs of black cutout figures – fanciful, playful silhouettes recalling the shadow plays of *fin-de-siècle* Paris – spray painted in red and blue-green.

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Farther down the wall hung a strip of handpainted wallpaper that his assistant, Amelia Leon, was working on. Other samples, part of a new line of wallpapers that he’s developing for Nantucket House Interior Design, were rolled up on tables amid stacks of drawings. A large painting of strange-looking, aerodynamic fruit, created entirely with a roller, was visible from the mass of paintings leaning against the wall, as was a primitive-looking mural of trees, which appeared to have been ripped from a plaster wall; on closer inspection, it turned out to be a painted image on plaster mounted on a piece of foam.

The second-floor living loft, which contains a kitchen space, a round table and chairs, a bed, several couches and a curtained shower stall, retains the sense of a live/work space, with drawings piled up on tables; studio assistant Kaitlyn Doris was cataloguing them for Paulsen's current show at the Rockland Center for the Arts. On one long wall hung his art collection (Paulsen briefly ran a gallery across the street and helped found the O+ Festival), including the large *Stack of Cakes*, a painting by neighbor and friend Joe Concra; three fluorescent-hued abstract word paintings by John Philip Abbot; a flea-market find of a moonlit landscape; framed doodles from a schoolboy dating from the 1860s; a black painting portraying a deer with a sagging body; and a collage by Paulsen, titled *Never Poke a Microbe*, in which a top-hatted gent gingerly extends his cane to a giant amoeba form floating within a curtained stage: an image that conflates high school science, vaudeville and science fiction.

Lynn Woods: Where did you grow up, and how did you launch your career?

Kevin Paulsen: I grew up in a suburb of Kansas City, where my Dad had his own company buying and selling metal from the mills. I went to the Kansas City Art Institute and at age 18 went to Chicago, where I got married. I worked in showrooms in Chicago and built thematic stage sets for upscale retail spaces, learning how to use materials in unorthodox ways. Through the connections of my then-wife, in 1983 we moved to Nantucket for a summer and ended up staying. [Paulsen has two grown sons, one of whom is the artist Geddes Jones-Paulsen, who helped create the red goat glyph that has come to symbolize the spirit of Uptown Kingston.]

Nantucket is now a place for the very rich. What was it like back then?



There were still fishing boats. It was more oriented toward summer people and old money. Starting in the early 1980s, it became more like the Hamptons. I was there when the first million-dollar house sold.



Paulsen's *The Re-Seeding*

How did you make a living?

I started out as a housepainter, then had a restoration business, which I combined with decorative painting. From about 1995, I started doing murals and paintings. I had a business relationship with a good friend named David Wiggins who had been a second-generation antique dealer in New Hampshire. We bought and sold old wood and did collaborative paintings. We learned as we went: We had carpenters and other artisan painters, and we'd buy old lumber for the restorations. We'd dismantle an old floor, have people fit it to the new space and wax it. That would lead to a mural or painted landscape overmantle or fireboard.

I bought a house, subdivided it and built a studio. As my career changed, I thought, "This is crazy; I could rent them and take the money and have much a bigger space." I put my money down for a space in Hudson, but then – that same day in 1998 – I got off Exit 19 to get gas, discovered the building on Wall Street and called a realtor to rent it. I moved up here in 1998, full-time in 2000, and got rid of my property in Nantucket in 2006.

How did you develop the distinctive folk style of your murals and paintings?



I was always fascinated by European murals, especially the frescos of Giotto. While in Nantucket I was exposed to vernacular New England work. Before the advent of the Internet and eBay, you could still go around and find beautiful examples of folk murals in Maine and New Hampshire. Many were in private homes, and though a lot of them were never documented, David knew where they were. They were painted on the walls with sand-mixed paints and also had stenciling.

Your work doesn't copy the vernacular language of primitive folk art so much as inhabit that style.

The reason I'm successful is that I'm using those ideas and philosophies. With a lot of contemporary folk art paintings, the artist is copying without understanding the vernacular itself. That philosophy has a lot to do with the outcome. Rufus Porter, for example, took a conceptual approach to decorating. It was very abstract. He was talking like an Abstract Expressionist.

Who was Rufus Porter?

He was an inventor and itinerant painter from Maine, active from 1820 to 1845, who'd paint for room and board. His nephew worked for him. He also taught a class in sandpaper drawings for schoolgirls in small towns. They'd all work from the same etching of a landscape and copy it the best they could. Those drawings were made with marble dust and chalk on paper painted black, which was then scratched through.

As merchants in the big cities became more prosperous and decorated their houses with flocked paper and imported wallpapers, the rural artists would try to imitate this with stencils in a crude manner. Porter was self-taught. Another New England itinerant artist was John Avery, who worked only in black and green, for a most bizarre effect.

How did painting in this style relate to what you had learned in art school?

I had to unlearn a lot of stuff. The earliest mural I painted was a combination of Thomas Hart Benton and Walt Disney; it was in a hyper-real style that was very surreal. In decorating a wall, you're creating an atmosphere. It's not as literal as it might seem at face value.

How do you paint the murals?

I start them with no idea of what I'm going to paint. I dump paint on the surface and roll it around and scratch into it. I see how it's balancing, then I scrub them down. Some fail. I try to paint like I don't know what the hell I'm doing, so I don't get hung up. To find my own voice, I had to unlearn what I thought art was about. I had to make art for real, just not be an artist. Dave Hickey, a scholar and art critic who is very cynical and dark, said you have to uneducate yourself: have no downtime; just work.

I work in series: seven, eight or ten paintings at a time. I work very rapidly and look at them a lot. I don't get too bogged down with the end result while working.

What are your materials?

I work in powered pigments and acrylic on dry plaster surface. I tint the plaster, then work the wet paint in to dry. I apply glue adhesive onto velvet, cotton or linen, then I plaster on top, then paint on that.

I had just been to New Hampshire when one day I saw a big chunk of plaster lying by the side of the road. It turned out it was a piece of foam, and that's where I got the idea to apply glue onto foam and then break the foam randomly, to get what looked like pieces of wall. That's how I started.

Figuring out these materials seems integral to your artmaking process.

[When I was doing showrooms and restoration work,] we'd be asked by designers to build something impossible, which forced us to find ways to use unorthodox materials in a new way. How you solve visual and craft problems: That's what I didn't abandon from art school. I think about ideas more than the academic side. Painting is an ongoing problem-solving project.

The paint-and-paper collages with the partially spray-painted cutout figures are a real departure from your earlier work.

Some are drawn rather quickly; then I repeat the figures and play with compositions in varying combinations. Seven years ago I was in a group show in California with young artists, which was fun and introduced me to graffiti: another American vernacular artform. It's self-taught and democratic. I related to these other artists, and that's how the spray-paint element grew in my own work.

Words sometimes dictate the grouping of things, more than the images – such as *The Cuckold and the Arsonist*, which inspired the series of drawings, paintings and paper collages of the same title. They also came out of the silhouettes in my vernacular narrative paintings. Silhouettes are born out of decorative art; stenciling is a universal way to represent a figure without slaving over it. They are symbolic of all humanity, archetypes representing the human condition: lovers, or people walking through a village. These are more mythological, including minotaurs and satyrs.

That classical mythological element reminds me of Picasso's drawings of the minotaur and the model.

I really liked the drawings in the second room at the recent exhibition of Picasso's sculpture at MoMA. Picasso's Vollard suite of prints was also incredible. He was a sculptor who painted with the most economical means.

Picasso and Matisse are like folk artists in that they found their own thing. They learned how to draw like themselves. There's a line running through any incredible art that has nothing to do with training. I'm aware of art history, but anyone worth shit as an artist is ultimately a self-taught artist. And to be good, you have to be making lots of art, working all of the time – allowing the brush to do its work.

Much of your work looks naïve, but the compositions are masterful.

It's about juxtaposing things, such as light and dark, detailed and vast. I got that from Synthetic Cubism. Juxtaposing was another thing I learned in school that I never gave up; it makes the piece easier to read.

You have to let things happen: Set up the parameters so that things can work and you don't have to worry about an array of possibilities. By limiting my means, say, to cutouts and spray paint, I'm free to do with that anything I like. It's simplifying. It's getting as much content and detail in the work by doing as little as possible.

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Uptown now has a lot of activity thanks to all the newcomers from New York City. What are your thoughts about the gentrification?

I have mixed feelings about it. It's great for the community at large, and there are many interesting people, some with whom I have a business interest; some are good friends. But I preferred the threadbare and tragic Kingston of a few years ago. The parking meters are a nightmare. Kingston should follow the example of Cambridge, Massachusetts, which gives out a pass if you can prove you live here. Very few buildings have parking.

Can you tell us more about your new business venture?

I'm in partnership with the people from Nantucket House Interior Design doing a line of digital and screenprinted fabrics and wallpapers. Nantucket House has been representing my paintings and mural work for about 30 years. A year ago they approached me to become the art director and develop my own line, with them assisting in production. We're hoping to launch this spring and work with a couple of small boutique stores.

The first job I've had in Kingston was the Elmendorf Tavern 1723, at Fair and Maiden Lane. I painted a mural, decorated the floors, grained the trim and put up digital wallpapers, which are done by hand, scanned and digitally formatted, then printed on large sheets. I've got a couple of assistants. We're outsourcing to Detroit to print the digital work, but we are considering bringing people in-house, which means I'll need a lot more space.

Where would you relocate?

I went to Detroit and looked at spaces, but I love it here. In the past, if I needed a bigger space, there were always empty buildings I could use. The Shirt Factory downstairs was just a wreck, and I'd give the owner \$50 so that I could frame paintings for a month. I have found a building I'd like to get, possibly with some venture partners. As I get older I'd rather be on the ground floor than walk up to the third floor.

Your paintings and decorative designs have resulted in some beautiful interiors, but you seem to eschew that aesthetic in your own space.

I'd rather have a giant studio and live in a hut.

Do you have any extravagances, outside of making art?

I like to eat out way too much.

Paintings by Joe Condra and Kevin Paulsen are currently on view at Exit Nineteen, 309 Wall Street, Kingston.

"Kevin Paulsen: Winter Theorems", through April 3, Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday, 1-4 p.m., Rockland Center for the Arts, 27 South Greenbush Road, West Nyack; (845) 358-0877, www.kevinmpaulsen.com.

Check it out



TEN DOLLARS REWARD.

RUN AWAY on Friday the 26th of August 1774, from the subscriber, living in Middle-paten, North-Castle, Westchester county, and province of New-York,

A NEGRO MAN,

Named W I L L I, about 27 years of age, about five feet six inches high, somewhat of a yellow complexion, a gay lively fellow, very talkative; had on when he went away, a butter-nut coloured coat, felt hat, tow cloth trousers; he has part of his right ear cut off, and a mark on the backside of his right hand.

Whoever takes up said Negro and brings him to his master, or secures him in goal, so that his master may have him again, shall have the above reward and all reasonable charges, paid by JAMES BANKS.

N. B. Masters of vessels are hereby warned not to carry off the above Negro.

New book by local historians tracks slavery in the Hudson Valley



Letter: Now is the time to improve bicycle safety in New Paltz



Moving to the Hudson Valley from Brooklyn? Here’s what you must know

There are 2 comments

Janey
March 31, 2016 at 9:40 pm



I might have to disagree about the city people being good for Kingston in general, especially as far as housing costs go. Also speeding through city streets, I don't love that about them. They frequently do not hold a door, and don't let you in front of them at the supermarket when you only have one item and they have half a cartful. They complain about the cost of local labor, and occasionally rob laborers absolutely blind, and in our desperation to simply make rent, some locals allow it. They DO frequent restaurants and buy gas, I suppose. There are two blocks in Kingston doing pretty well. No, they aren't really great for the area in general, no matter how much local administrators want to think otherwise.

Canvas aims to cultivate, expose local artists in a bar setting

April 11, 2016 at 1:03 pm

[...] No downtime, just work for Kingston artist Kevin Paulsen Other samples, part of a new line of wallpapers that he's developing for Nantucket House Interior Design, were rolled up on tables amid stacks of drawings. ... including the large Stack of Cakes, a painting by neighbor and friend Joe Concra; three ... Read more on Almanac Weekly [...]

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Senior Writing with Lew Gardner

Writers at all levels of experience, beginner to expert, whether interested in non-fiction, short stories, plays, memoir, or poetry, writers age 55 are invited to join the group. The workshop stresses trying out new forms and content in a supportive atmosphere. No fee is required. The workshop is led by experienced writer, editor, and instructor [...]

Artful Hike: Poet's Walk

Drop-in anytime and stay as long as you wish. Olana had great success with new programs for our littlest visitors last year and so have decided to add new programs for pre-school children and their caregivers. Come anytime within the two-hour block, and add a hike and a picnic lunch.

Talcott/Swierzowski Art Exhibit at Cunneen-Hackett Arts Center

Featuring works of Richard Talcott and wife, Carol Swierzowski. Gallery hours: Monday-Friday, 9am to 5pm and by appointment now until 10/14.

Life Drawing at Unison

Offering professional artists and students an opportunity to work with experienced models under controlled lighting. On-going.

Open Mic

On-going. Free admission.

Open Eye Theater's Audition Notice: Sandy and the Weird Sisters

Eight actors are needed! A stage manager and assistant stage manager are also needed. There is modest pay. The world premiere production will be directed by the author. Rehearsals will be late afternoons or early evenings, and some weekends. Public performances 10/7, 10/22,10/29, 10/23, 10/30 & 10/28. Info: phone or e-mail Amie Brockway at 845-586-1689, [...]

Pilgrim Pipelines

Local officials, and Riverkeeper attorney, Kate Hudson, are speaking at 6:30pm. The hall opens at 6pm for networking and refreshments. Sponsored by Interfaith Earth Action, Climate Action Coalitiion, RUPCO, and the Repair Cafe. Info on Facebook.

Arts & Entertainment events

Rosendale Theatre's Artist's New Work Forum presents Like You (original screenplay)

A new screenplay from Hudson Valley writer/director, Nicole Quinn, will be read by Actors and Writers company members.

Evergreen Chorus Open House

Tuesdays in September. This award-winning women's aCapella Chorus is holding an Open house for prospective members. Experience the excitement and joy of singing with women who have a passion for performance, and strive for musical excellence in a supportive, educational environment. There is no charge.

Open Mic

On-going. Free admission.

Talk & Film Presentation

Guest speaker, Joseph Levy, born in Cairo, Egypt. Followed by the film: The Silent Exodus- The Expulsion of Jews from Arab Countries, the "Naqba" that befell over 800,000 of these Jews.

Jazz Jam

Every Tuesday, 7-10pm.

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Esopus Artist Group

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