

Ulster Publishing *Almanac*, May 2007

## Painter's Passage: Kingston artist Kevin Paulsen opens New York City show by Ann Hutton

In a cavernous third-floor loft on Wall Street in uptown Kingston, Kevin Paulsen paints still-lifes and landscapes evoking a concept of nature of a different era. Rendered in a somewhat primitive vernacular, his dancing trees, birds and rivers are reminiscent of an idealistic, sometimes primordial environment - one in which perspective is playful and content is valued by its level of beauty and abundance. If one red bird is good, then many-red-birds-splotched-randomly-around-the-scene is better. The familiar elements - plants, animals, a few individuals engaged in simple work - are comforting to behold, and the decorative repetition seems to reassure the viewer that she doesn't have to "read a manual to know what she's looking at."

"This is not cutting-edge," Paulsen maintains. "I have no interest in that. Bore me." He considers that art should be about expanding our mythologies and our psychic and spiritual sensibilities, rather than about pounding a political statement into our brains. "I think that's why people like this," he says. "They see something they recognize." And from that recognition comes the desire to recreate what's familiar, and indeed protect what could soon be lost: an environment lush with life and beauty.

His paintings even look comfortably old: fissured and veined throughout, and irregular around the edges. Influenced by early wall paintings done on lath and plaster, he describes how he stumbled on sheets of polystyrene foam board and experimented with binding glue and plaster to create a lighter-weight surface. "Plaster is one of the oldest surfaces to paint on; it's very stable," Paulsen explains. Its pliable rigidity allows for alteration that produces an antiqued texture. "I'm not trying to fake you out that it's actually old," he says, then flips a painting front-side-down onto the floor and proceeds to walk on it. The foam board pops and crackles in a basically uncontrolled manner, just as aging (and evolution itself) is often unpredictable.

While his product is representative, Paulsen's process is very abstract. He may get an idea from a passage in a book, then approach his prepared surface with only a vague notion of what the painting might contain. Working from a deliberately simplified color palette and set of visual themes, he is able to uncover an expression of energy and an endless variation - much as nature itself is restricted by genetic coding, yet renewed continuously, effortlessly, exuberantly. Simple shapes of color - a leaf, an antler rack - become symbols of aliveness and possibility, a veritable record of life on the planet, like primitive paintings on a cave wall.

"These are very abstract to me...I don't think about it, I don't know where things are going." He might start rolling paint (pigments in a soybean resin base) onto the surface and allow empty spaces to fill themselves in with figures and objects. A line from Shakespeare is ribboned across one scene: "But screw your courage to the sticking place and it will not fail." In the context of the painting, its meaning is not obvious. It doesn't tell a viewer how to think about something; rather, it provokes him to pay attention - to whatever is in front of him.

Paulsen reads a lot of history and allows impressions from other traditions - Hindu texts, Roman frescoes and ancient religious prints - to inspire his work. There is a decorative, almost naive sense to it that might subtly suggest a more serious theme, such as the long-term effects of commerce on the region, depicted in a scene of boats docked around a small town. "These are not politically charged...I like beauty regardless of the trend in art. Yet I'm commenting on some of the things that are going on today, like how industry was once touted as a great thing, and now it's taken over not only through greed, but also it's ruining our environment. I don't get specific...but I'm trying to bring a little bit of awareness back into it."

Born in Missouri, Paulsen has lived and worked in Chicago ("on Halsted in the '80s, when it was still dicey") and on Nantucket Island, where he began to paint wall murals. His move to the Hudson Valley was based on both aesthetics and practicalities. The local mountains and rivers inform his themes, and maintaining a studio in uptown Kingston is affordable. "I get this huge space - still close to Nantucket, where I

continue to go, and only a couple hours from Manhattan."

Paulsen's work has been represented at Velsani Arts & Antiques in Kingston, at L & E Reid Art & Antiques in New Preston, Connecticut, and at Nantucket House Antiques & Interior Design in Nantucket, Massachusetts. A recent successful stint at Bergdorf Goodman in Manhattan put his paintings in sidewalk show windows, which prompted many commissions for murals and further exhibits. The David Findlay Galleries are currently hosting the first solo exhibition of 20 of Paulsen's pieces through June 9. From New York, Paulsen will take his artwork back to Nantucket and New Preston, to South Carolina and perhaps to Aspen, Colorado.

It's been said that Paulsen's work succeeds on many levels at once: as civilized vision, as decorative splendor, as narrative in which the individual viewer provides the storyline, as a kind of nourishment and powerful cues for the imagination, as revelation of a world rich in hope and possibility. Meanwhile, he's inventing a new Hudson Valley idiom - perhaps just in time.