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## THE MURALIST'S MUSES

Influenced by the simple, imaginative scenes painted on to New England walls by 19th-century itinerant artists, Kevin Paulsen transports interior spaces to other realms with landscapes of graceful fountain elms, naive villas and shimmering stretches of water. Carol Newman is inspired by the view. Photography: Miguel Flores Vianna >



Clockwise from top: one of Paulsen's versions of a formulaic 'theorem' painting; a panel in the style of Rufus Porter hangs over the stairs to the combined studio and living space; the front end of Paulsen's studio shows some of his work in progress

**PAINTER KEVIN PAULSEN** isn't afraid of the label 'decorative'. Or 'derivative'. He certainly doesn't need to prove himself in Kingston, a sleepy town 160km upriver from Manhattan and too far across the Hudson from the commuter train ever to become really smart, despite its remarkable, picturesque old buildings. Paulsen's art is all about gentle decay – distressed, faded, soft: another America where dramatic natural landscapes are juxtaposed with industrial architecture, glorified first in the 1800s and again now.

'Decorative' Paulsen paints murals, mostly in elegant dining rooms, commercial or domestic. 'Derivative', yes: they borrow from the style of Rufus Porter and John Avery, early 19th-century Yankees, itinerant artists who travelled widely in New England offering cheaper décor than the popular imported wallpapers. Paulsen views the limitations of that time's mediums – the palettes of few colours, the specific instructions of the 'how to' books (written by Rufus Porter himself) – as a good place for him to start.

Rufus Porter lived 92 years, and left a huge volume of work. It was an era of do-it-yourself, a high in American folk art all too soon terminated by the cheap mass productions of the industrial revolution. Porter, dubbed 'the Michelangelo of America', was scientifically minded, an inventor looking for better, easier ways

of doing things. As a result, his art was simplified as well as imaginative. The scenes he painted are full of tall graceful trees, the legendary fountain elms, waving locusts and huge weeping willows, languid bodies of Reptonian water and childlike simple houses. Oversized bright birds sit in the trees (you can almost hear them sing), new steamboats paddle by, and windmills or lighthouses add what was then a modern touch.

Building restorers pulling off old wallpaper in the 1960s came across hundreds of these murals, and art historian Jean Lipman found enough to write two books (in 1968 and 1980) on Porter's remarkable legacy. Paulsen, from the Kansas City Art Institute, was himself doing antique restorations in Nantucket when he fell in love with the simple direct work of both Porter and John Avery (who was less prolific) and the way their paintings on plaster had weathered nearly two centuries.

What is it about distressed surfaces and faded paint? Is it evidence of having survived life's battering? Paulsen deliberately paints on such surfaces, with similar colours, styles and subjects – but then goes further. His latest works are spiced with tiny silhouettes dancing in the foreground of exaggerated land- and seascapes. The water roils in wavelets, the wind snaps, the ships are tossed about; trees fill the skies and birds gather in wheeling >





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Clockwise from top: a mural panel entitled 'Ursus Icarus Esopus' combines mythical connotations with the Hudson river (Esopus being a creek that feeds into the latter); a Paulsen mural adorns a client's dining room; several birds perch atop the artist's typically featherlike trees

locks. Or else the whole shoreside scene is reflected in a calm surface, not a ripple in sight.

Paulsen also does 'theorems', a formulaic mode of painting dating from the first half of the 19th century. Then, education for all was sweeping America and young ladies were taught to draw, paint and embroider within strict guidelines, and with specific techniques and standard subjects, mostly copied from popular engravings. What those girls did within those parameters was fantastically imaginative (and nowadays very collectable). On Paulsen's reckoning, three quarters of his work is handed down to him, after which he goes wild with his own inspiration.

Paulsen will tell you that although he uses the American traditions in decorative painting as a starting place for inspiration, imitation is not the aim. Due largely to their timeless appeal and continuing demand, his landscape murals remain true to the spirit of the American itinerants. Many of his paintings, however, diverge more and more into an experimental, personal and modern sensibility. 'Mythic and archetypal ideas inspire my content, and the possibilities of the materials themselves often give rise to new directions,' he says. 'Painting on plaster in a simple and offhand way, I allow the natural quality of the materials themselves to be a large part of the aesthetic.'

Paulsen loves one particular 18th-century technique, that of sandpaper drawings: marble dust on shellacked paper or board, worked with charcoal or pastels, allowing dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Romantic moonlit landscapes, Gothic ruins, weeping willows over inscribed tombs: scenes that still resonate with us. He has figured out how to replicate the look of frescoes with a layer of plaster over polystyrene – a lucky, convenient discovery – but the exact sandpaper recipe has so far eluded him. Another craft practised by Porter and his like was stencilling. Paulsen's adaptations of the 19th-century patterned wall treatments are gutsy and bold, nothing like the polite imitations done by others today.

Paulsen lives his art. There is no physical divide between his studio and his living spaces; sketches, canvases, books, peeling walls and flaking paint fill one big loft space above the old galleried shopping street. There's a big bed, an up-to-date kitchen with the requisite espresso machine, a generous central round table with comfortable armchairs, a Mac and lots and lots of books. It's charming and unpretentious. Rufus Porter would approve ■ The exhibition 'Migration', featuring the work of Kevin Paulsen, runs at Kelley Roy Gallery, 50 Northeast 29th St, Wynwood Art District, Miami, FL 33137 (001 305 447 3888; [kelleyroygallery.com](http://kelleyroygallery.com)), until 31 Jan. To contact the artist, ring 001 845 338 8046, or visit [kevinpaulsen.com](http://kevinpaulsen.com)

Text:

Painter Kevin Paulsen isn't afraid of the label "decorative". Or "derivative"! He doesn't need to prove himself in Kingston New York, a hundred miles up river from Manhattan, a sleepy town too far across the Hudson from the commuter train to ever become really smart despite it's truly remarkable picturesque old buildings. Kevin's art is about gentle decay, distressed, faded, soft. Another America where dramatic natural landscapes are juxtaposed with industrial architecture, glorified in the 1800's, as they are beginning to be now.

"Decorative", Kevin paints murals, mostly in elegant dining rooms, commercial or domestic. "Derivative", yes, they are take - offs on the style of Rufus Porter and John Avery, early 19th Century Yankees, itinerant artists who traveled widely thru out New England offering room decor cheaper than the popular imported wallpapers. Paulsen views the limitations of that times' mediums, the palettes of limited color, the specific instructions of the "how to" style books (indeed written by Rufus Porter himself) as a good place to start himself.

Rufus Porter, 1792-1884, lived 92 years, and left a huge volume of work. It was an era of do-it-yourself, a high in American folk art all too soon terminated by the cheap mass productions of the industrial revolution. Porter, actually called "the Michelangelo of America", was scientifically minded as well, an inventor, looking for better, easier ways of doing things so his art was simplified as well as imaginative. The scenes he painted all have tall graceful trees, the legendary fountain elms, waving locusts and huge weeping willows, languid bodies of Reptonian water and childlike simple houses. Oversized bright birds sit in the trees (you can almost hear them sing!), new steamboats paddle by, windmills or light houses add what was then, a modern touch.

Building restorers pulling off old wallpaper in the 1960'ies came across hundreds of these murals and art historian Jean Lipman found enough to write two books (1968 and 1980) on Porter's remarkable legacy. Paulsen, from the Kansas City Art Institute, was himself doing antique restorations in Nantucket when he fell in love with the simple direct work of Porter and particularly that of John Avery (who was less prolific) and the way their paintings on plaster had weathered the near two centuries.

What is it about distressed surfaces and faded paint? Is it evidence of having come thru life's battering? Paulsen deliberately paints on such surfaces, with such colors, in such styles of such subjects but then goes on

further, off on his own. His latest works have a spicing of Kara Walker's tiny silhouettes dancing in the foreground of exaggerated land and seascapes. The water roils in wavelets, the wind is snapping, the ships are tossing. The trees fill the skies, the birds are in wheeling flocks, or the whole shore side scene is reflected in a heavy perfect calm, not a ripple. These paintings are shown by the David Findlay Galleries in New York City and this coming January '09 during Art Basel Miami at the Kelley Roy Gallery, where Kevin will exhibit with fellow Kingston artist, Joe Concra.

Paulsen also does "theorems". Again in the early 1800's, education for all was sweeping America and young ladies were taught to draw, paint and embroider, within strict guidelines, set rules, specific techniques, and usual subjects, mostly copied from popular engravings. It was a decorative age. And what those girls did within those strict limits was fantastically imaginative (and very collectable today). Paulsen figures 3/4's of the work is given to you but then you go wild with your own inspiration. Abstract, therefore theorem.

Kevin will tell you that although he uses the American traditions in decorative painting as a starting place of inspiration, imitation is not the aim. Due largely to their timeless appeal, and continuing demand, Paulsen's landscape murals remain quite true to the spirit of the American itinerants. Paulsen's paintings however, diverge more and more into an experimental, personal, and modern sensibility. "Mythic and archetypal ideas inspire my content, and the possibilities of the materials themselves often give rise to new directions," Paulsen says. " Painting on plaster in a simple and offhanded way, I allow the natural quality of the materials themselves to be a large part of the aesthetic."

Paulsen loves one particular 18th C technique, that of sandpaper drawings, marble dust on shellacked paper or board, worked with charcoal or pastels, allowing dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Romantic moonlit landscapes, Gothic ruins, weeping willows over inscribed tombs, dramas still dear to today's' teenagers. Kevin has figured out how to replicate the look of frescos with a layer of plaster over polystyrene, a lucky convenient discovery, but the exact sandpaper recipe has eluded him so far.

Another craft practiced by Porter and his like was stenciling. Kevin's adaptations of the patterned wall treatments are gutsy and bold, nothing timid like the pale polite patterns now used a century later.

And yet another of Kevin's enthusiasms, again like the fiddler Rufus Porter, is music. Kingston is near fabled Woodstock, a natural place for musicians

to settle and hang out. An album entitled Bathos in Aqua by a young singer Kat Larios, produced by Paulsen and partner Ed Butler for Safety Clyde records, will be released soon.

Paulsen lives his art, there are no walls between his studio and his living spaces ; sketches, canvases, books and peeling walls, flaking paint fill one big loft space above the old galleried shopping street. Of course there's a big bed, an up-to-date kitchen, the requisite espresso machine, generous central round table with comfortable armchairs, a big Mac and lots and lots of books. It may be unpretentious but it's very comfortable. At the back windowed wall are the work spaces of his partner Bonnie Marie Smith, a sculptor of small lyrical clay animals and figures. Bonnie also works in collage and drawing and has shown in various galleries in NY and at Badcock's gallery in Penzance, England. They're cool.

Rufus Porter would approve.