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CREATIVE LIVING IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

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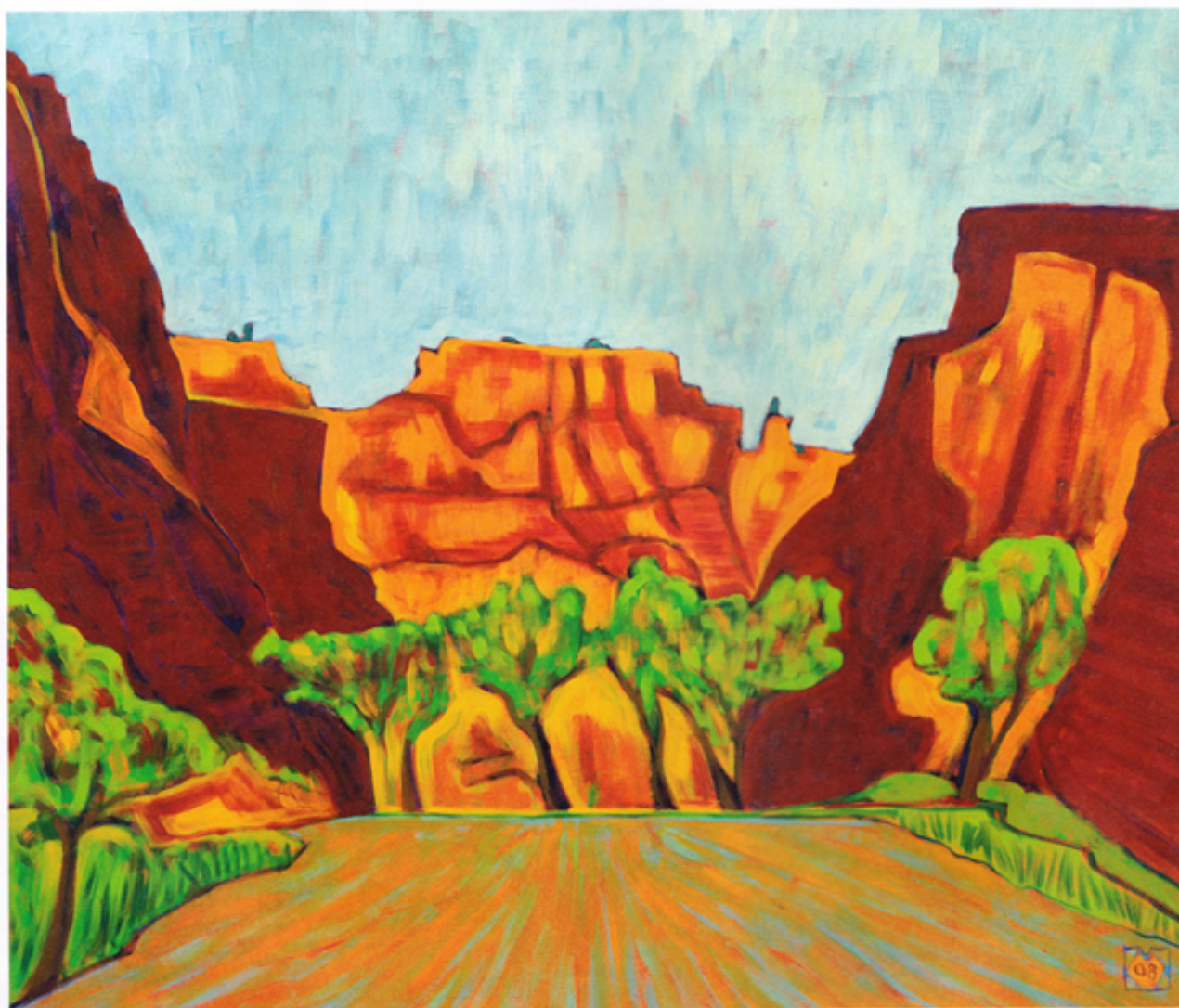
bringing a little west back east:

artist KATHARINE MCKENNA

by Ross Rice



FLATHEAD PASS AND FARNLAND, MT OIL/BOARD



Any Easterner (United States, that is) who takes their first trip out West could easily be forgiven if they thought they were on a different planet altogether; they just don't have those shapes, those colors...those SIZES of things back home. Many never return East, except to pack up and say goodbye.

Though born in California, Katharine McKenna grew up in New Jersey from the age of four, and spent most of her successful professional life working in the heart of New York City. Childhood summers were spent travelling out West with her paleontologist father, and color-filled visions of mesas, buttes, and mountain passes took hold from an early age. Those memories became a recurring theme, a returning place for

the artist. now, instead of staying out there for good, she's bringing visions of the West back East. A little piece at a time.

It took awhile to figure it out though. First it was anthropology at Skidmore and Wellesley Colleges bracketing trips out to Flagstaff Arizona, where she worked at the Museum of Northern Arizona. She found herself studying industrial design at Pratt Institute, a subject she admits she had never heard of until just before starting her Masters. (In case you're wondering, industrial designers are the art architects of products: everything from automobiles to appliances to Coke bottles.) She graduated from Pratt in 1984—having written her thesis on non-verbal thought—and set out looking for work.

A reference from a professor put her in touch with a client that needed somebody with exhibition design experience plus computer skills.

Fortunately Katharine was an avid "computer geek," having attended several of the annual Siggraph Conferences and Exhibitions on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques, and she landed a job working for designer Albert Woods, who specialized in large-scale environment-style exhibitions. Katharine's job was to devise an easy-to-use interface to access computers in exhibition kiosks, using buttons and shapes—"the Graphical User Interface"—instead of the qwerty keyboard. The installations were hugely successful. That led to a job with CitiBank's Development division, designing interfaces for customer service reps to use.

Katharine settled into being more of a consultant—with the nickname of "Screen Goddess"—and started feeling like she "was going down the wrong path. I'm not a business person. I didn't really know that much about the stocks, the trades. That was actually an asset: I could ask dumb questions, and they would scratch their heads and go 'well, why ARE we doing it that way?'" Arranging numbers on a screen was becoming unfulfilling, despite the nice salary, Manhattan digs, great food and fashion, and single life.

She went to a career counselor, who one day asked her "'if you get to be 95 years old, what are you going to regret that you didn't do?'" I looked at

her and said 'I'd really regret not doing a painting.' It just kind of came out of me." The small bit of painting she had done back in her first years at Pratt had stuck with her somehow. For Katharine, this was the pivotal moment she decided to become a painter.

But she didn't want to go back to college for it, didn't want to have somebody grading her progress. Multiple inquiries led her to Nicolas Buhalis at the Woodstock School of Art, and she began taking weekend classes with him in 1990, while working weekdays in Manhattan for IBM. And like so many from the City who buy homes upstate, Katharine made the shift to full time in Ulster County, part time in NYC.

After a few years of instruction, Katharine returned to the Southwest and reconnected with her visual and spiritual muse, and over the course of frequent trips there and back built up a body of work over the next several years. So how did she manage to get them shown?

"If you're someone like me, that is, someone without an arts degree, you start off showing in restaurants. From there you join the local artist center and start showing in group shows. Then you might have a four-person show there, get something in a gallery. Build up the resume, where you can list where you've shown. Then, you try to hit something bigger. But





well-known galleries aren't interested in somebody just starting out. You use every connection you can think of."

"I ended up showing at a museum auction show, a fundraiser for the museum. The Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody Wyoming. Being on that put me on askart.com. After that the Booth Museum in Atlanta; I sent a portfolio down before (the building was even completed). Because I had a connection there. That resulted in a solo show, and one of my paintings becoming part of their permanent collection. The curator at the Booth knew the guy...at the Museum of Northern Arizona." Where she used to work back when she was 19.

Locally, Katharine has been very active, opening the Coffey Gallery in Kingston with two fellow artists in 1994, and then co-founding the Art Society of Kingston (ASK) the following year, where she occasionally still serves as president. Recently, her industrial design experience came in handy when she helped co-ordinate the Tanks Project in the Rondout section of Kingston, with large-scale images projected onto industrial tanks.

Ensnconced in an industrial space adjacent to Markertek—the Saugerties-based professional broadcast studio equipment supplier whose founder and CEO Mark Braunstein is Katharine's husband—the spacious studio/office is a perfect getaway. Meticulously organized, tastefully furnished, it's a place she can camp out in and get work done. The upstairs lounge, complete with kitchen and couches, seems decorated by someone with a fond memory of the 60s, a retro-modern feel.

Natural light fills the two-story studio space where multiple canvasses and finished works fill wooden racks, a series of fifteen or so paintings in various stages of completion line a corner, and two easels stand in the middle, with charcoal sketched canvasses imbued with a orangey-reddish undertone that reminds one of the actual color of the Golden Gate Bridge—"Pompeii Red," Katharine tells me. It's immediately recognizable as the fundamental hue of her Western sandstone formations and cliffs.

It's a straightforward process. Katharine books time out West, generally in the warmer months, and does charcoal sketches en plein air, some

painting as well. Upon return to her Saugerties studio she works on several paintings simultaneously, layering in color using a combination of memory and whim, never referring to any photography. Paints are Williamsburg oils, from R & F Homemade Paints in Kingston.

It's not meant to be perfectly representational, "it's definitely an interpretation of what I am looking at. So I'm putting a lot of myself into the painting, and also hopefully capturing the essence of what I'm seeing as well." She laughs and readily admits "it doesn't look like this out West. I use the structure of what I'm looking at...to play with color."

The results have an interesting combination of boldness and serenity. The open largeness of the Western vistas gives Katharine plenty of room to touch golden and crimson off with vibrant greens and blues. The effect can seem like an idealized hyper-reality: "New West Expressionism," Katharine likes to call it. The effect is similar to wearing tinted glasses, the way certain colors pop out at you.

With several charcoal-sketched canvasses still from her last trip West, and the corner of unfinished paintings, Katharine has plenty of material to work with over the Winter until Spring, when she goes back out. She puts in time on the board at Pratt, and plans to be part of a large ASK group show in mid-2010. With nearly 400 paintings—some in permanent collections—she has created a body of work that combines a vision of the Western US with a New York vibrancy and energy. All thanks to some timely career counseling.

