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Flower Market, oil, 20" by 24"

"I consider myself a lover of color, and I am greatly interested in painting shapes. What could be better than still life painting?"

'I'M ADDICTED TO PAINTING'

By Barbara Coyner

Stirring up colorful images of life, Ramon Kelley resembles a human artesian well, infusing unlimited freshness in his art, day after day, year after year. The Denver painter approaches a blank canvas as a story waiting to be told with abundant color, vitality and excitement. Ironically, it was a lack of abundance in material things and educational opportunities during his youth that has contributed to Kelley's amazing career.

"I never went to school for fine art,

so I never got the basics," says the 62-year-old artist. "What keeps me fresh is coming across new things in painting. These things are brand new to me, and every day is a constant challenge. Every day there's a new discovery I wasn't exposed to early on. While I certainly don't recommend not going to school, some things become redundant to those who went to school in fine art. But these things are always new and exciting to me."

Kelley, who grew up in a family of

10 children in Cheyenne, Wyoming, worked his way up the art ladder the long, hard way. As a child, he excelled at drawing, and later, after a stint with the U.S. Navy, he rounded up a scholarship to the Colorado Institute of Art. After completing his studies there in the early '60s, Kelley moved to Denver, where he earned his daily bread producing ads and layouts. That work taught him discipline, but Kelley dreamed of a career in fine art.

"My wife, Mona, and I got into this



Golden Pond, oil, 12" by 12"

"The composition of this piece is very interesting in that there are many ducks. I believe the white ducks are the point of interest and carry the painting very well."

together, and day after day, we had to sacrifice to get where we are now," Kelley says. "While our friends were going out and having fun, we were staying home and painting." (Although Mona isn't a painter, Kelley often refers to "we" when talking about his career, because he considers Mona a vital source of both inspiration and support.)

Kelley concedes that he is a people watcher, which contributes to his exceptional ability to instill life in a painting. "It's something I was born with, something you can't learn in school," he says. "I have a gift. Technically, you can have a good painting, but there's not always life in it."

In his quest to give life to his paintings, Kelley is not unlike a mad scientist roaming about a laboratory. Holed up in a renovated storefront that serves as a studio he shares with his 34-year-old son, Ben, who also paints full-time, Kelley plays with oils, pastels, watercolors, various surfaces and colors, palette knives, brushes—anything to get the effect he is after. "I'm not painting to be different, I'm painting to do a great painting and to do that, I have to experiment," he says. "Some people are afraid to experiment, because they have a lot of fear, but I say to people, 'Enjoy the journey. Don't ever look back and see that you did the same thing for 50 years

and didn't have any fun at it. Have some fun.'"

That isn't to say that Kelley approaches the easel as an artistic anarchist. He's as firmly grounded in life, as he is in art. "The biggest fear for an artist is to burn out, and I don't want to burn out at my age," he says. "I want to paint beautiful paintings until I die. I'm addicted to painting, and I'll do anything to keep painting. But to do that, you have to prepare yourself for the journey and not only enjoy good art, but also your marriage and your children.

"People ask me all the time how it is to be famous or successful and go into my studio and paint every day, and I have to tell them that I approach





Swan Dance, pastel, 9" by 12"

"I have always been interested in the figure in motion, most especially dancers. In this piece, we know that the dancer has just finished dancing. What a beautiful pose or finish to the dance."

"To sharpen my sense, I challenge myself to create a work that looks as if it were just breathed onto the canvas."

Little Molly, oil, 14" by 10"

"For me, it has always been a challenge to paint children. The anatomy of the skull is not very apparent under all those little balloon-like features. Little Molly was at the stage where she had lost most of her baby look."

my painting always with a cold sweat. Doing this humbles me, and I can't get complacent. I go back to my easel and that beautiful mistress grabs me by the ear. That's the way it should be, but a lot of artists abuse their mistresses. I don't want to do that."

So Kelley connects with his "beautiful mistress" and, though each painting exhibits a freshness and unpredictability, he pays strict attention to the essential elements of composition, value, color, texture, and focal point. He knows composition is where a great painting begins—and where it can abruptly end—so he diligently arranges and rearranges, whether working with a live model or a still life setting.

Though Kelley generally aligns himself with the impressionist camp, he also considers himself a realist, who wants his subjects to be recognizable. Yet the artist's freedom lends itself to mystery and

interest, experiment and intrigue. Kelley's goal is to entice viewers to return to his paintings again and again, each time with a fresh appreciation for the work. Values allow him to give his paintings a three-dimensional look and to direct the viewer's eye. "To sharpen my sense, I challenge myself to create a work that looks as if it were just breathed onto the canvas," he says.

Kelley uses a technique called *chiaroscuro* to bring a lighter object out of a darker background. "Chiaroscuro is hard to do, because I must create a gradual transition from light to dark," he says. "Otherwise the values will have too much contrast, which will shock the viewer."

Admitting that he studied other artists' use of color for 10 years, Kelley says he then spent another 10 years unlearning it. He likes to play neutrals against pure, intense colors, or warms against cools, which



Crow Agency Montana, pastel, 14" by 18"

"With this piece, I was more concerned with the design, so I handled it more like a still life in pastel. The tipis and Indians were composed so that this made an interesting composition."



enable him to be mellow or wild without being dull or gaudy. As for texture, he again dons the mad scientist lab coat, splashing oils or pastels over a watercolor background, or mixing it all up with varied brushes and brushstrokes, a knife, or even his fingers. As he points out, texture cannot be added at the end of a painting; it must be built up from the very beginning.

"I want my paintings to stand out as paintings, not just as pretty pictures, but as handmade works of art with tactile surfaces that viewers can feel with their eyes," Kelley says. "For me, the best way to achieve this effect is through texture."

Through composition, value, color and texture, the fifth element—the focal point—moves into Kelley's painting as everything comes together. Here the story finally gets told, the artist directs the movement of the eye, and the viewer becomes the ultimate audience for the creative process.

Ever the student, Kelley also has become a well-respected teacher and has written three books and several magazine articles on painting. His resume of awards, commissions, and membership reads like a *Who's Who in American Art* with memberships in Allied Artists of America, the Pastel Society of America, the National Academy of Western Art, Knickerbocker Artists, Oil Painters of America, and the American Watercolor Society.

Although he is gearing down the number of workshops and classes he teaches, Kelley is grateful for the



“I want my paintings to stand out as paintings, not just as pretty pictures, but as handmade works of art with tactile surfaces that viewers can feel with their eyes.”

Washer Women, pastel, 19" by 25"

“This pastel was more of a challenge than some. I was concerned not only with the placement of the figures, but for good design I needed to place the landscape work with the total composition. Note how the large figures on the left draw the viewer into the painting.”

contact he has with his students who, he says, have taught him much and have added considerably to his enjoyment of life as well as art. “I tell my students that they shouldn’t come into my classes and try to impress me, because they can’t,” he says. “And they shouldn’t expect to do a masterpiece in five days, because you can’t do it.”

Kelley should know. Although his paintings have earned him much acclaim, he remains a student himself in his quest to combine technical skill and life to create works that wrap their artistic arms around viewers and draw them in again and again. □



Autumn Colors, oil, 12" by 16"

“The composition in this painting is interesting in that it is very simple in design. The warm color of the trees and foliage accents the cool temperature of the lake.”

Barbara Coyner is a writer living in Potlatch, Idaho.