



KENNY MCKENNA

Disco Drove Him to Art

By Clover Neiberg



Nymph Lake, oil, 18" by 26"

"On a return trip from Jackson, Wyoming, a visit to Rocky Mountain National Park was a must. Nymph Lake is one of a chain of mountain lakes on Flat-top Mountain Trail. Under weather perfect conditions, the colors of early morning paired with glassy smooth water, were the inspiration for the painting."

Ask Oklahoma City-based oil painter Kenny McKenna what kick-started his career, and he will tell you, in all seriousness, that it was disco. "This is a true story," he says with a laugh. "It sounds ridiculous, but it's true. As much as I

dislike disco, I can thank it for what I'm doing today for a living."

It *does* sound ridiculous, and it is a true story. McKenna, an accomplished musician who has been playing in various bands since he was in junior high school, was living in Phoenix, Arizona, and playing six nights a week with a successful local band back in the 1970s when the disco era arrived. Disco was what the audience wanted; disco was what McKenna's band played. And he hated it.

"I thought, 'I just can't take this; I cannot take this,'" he says. "I needed a creative outlet so I took a couple art lessons from a lady who painted, and I just got addicted to it. I started doing the festivals and mall shows

and stuff like that. I thought, 'If I could just make a living doing this, I would be happy.' And then one thing led to another, and I landed my first gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico."

Although that period in time represented McKenna's transition to a full-time, professional artist, it was by no means his first foray into art. He had been steeped in music and art all his life, encouraged to develop his talent by family members and by an outstanding high school art teacher.

"I wasn't born with a paintbrush in my hand, but almost," he says of his childhood in Kansas. "My favorite day of the week was art day; I remember that back as far as second grade. And before grade school, I

(Left) Canyon Life Past and Present, oil, 48" by 36"

"While traveling through both Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto, I came across this scene that was remindful of life from a previous century. The varnished towering cliffs, mature cottonwood with signs of early autumn, and the still intact hogan were the ideal elements for the painting."



Autumn Day on Canyon Road, oil, 28" by 24"

"With the ancient cottonwood in full autumn colors, teamed with adobes and the winding road, how could I resist?"

was always coloring—usually outside the lines."

McKenna's affinity for music

developed in tandem with his interest in art. "My mom informed me when I was in third grade that I was

going to be taking piano lessons," he says. "I thought it would be the worst thing in my life, but I'm still

doing it. Thanks, Mom.

"I think it was just timing. The Beatles had just come out. I was in seventh or eighth grade when they appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, and I had just started playing guitar. I thought, 'That's the life for me!' And that's how that goes. You start playing in garage bands, the bands get better, the bad so-called musicians quit, the good ones get better, and it just kind of evolves."

Meanwhile, under the guidance of his high school art teacher, McKenna was also emerging as a gifted artist. "I talk to people and they ask, 'What art institute did you go to?' and I tell them, 'high school,'" McKenna says with a laugh. "He [my art teacher] was really good. We had to come up with 10 sketches a week suitable for re-drawing and painting at some point—that was our homework. He taught us how to draw perspective—linear perspective, aerial perspective, all that stuff. We did figure drawing, we did faces, we would go outside and sketch in the spring and fall for an hour during class. By the time I hit my junior year, he just let me do what I wanted to do.

"He introduced us to so many different mediums and styles—through process of elimination, you know what you don't want to do! There's some value in that. Because it was the Sixties, I thought abstract would be a good deal, but I got bored with abstracts and came back to landscapes. I experimented with still life and things like that. I kept coming back to landscape, and I eventually decided it was what I was meant to be doing. It just feels right."

Although his teacher encouraged him to explore acrylics and watercolors, McKenna immediately recognized oils as his go-to medium, and he hasn't wavered from that stance since. "I just like oil so much better," he says. "It's more controllable to me; it just feels right. Once I started oil painting, I liked everything about it—liked the smell of it; just liked it."

Despite his promise as an artist, McKenna's post-high school years were dominated by music and by marriage to his high-school sweet-



Sun and Rain, oil, 28" by 28"

"Since my first Monument Valley trip in 1987, it continues to inspire. The landscape's abundance of interesting shapes provides endless design opportunities. Using my artist license, I painted an ominous gray sky in straight on early morning light to showcase the formation known as Three Sisters."



Emerald Lake, oil, 40" by 44"

"The subalpine water of Emerald Lake is the jewel of Flattop Mountain Trail in Rocky Mountain National Park. The uphill hike was well worth the effort."



The Blue Umbrella, oil, 32" by 30"

"I usually don't portray scenes exactly as they exist, but this was an exception. The man reading while in a reclining position, oblivious to all activity, under a blue umbrella spotlighted by late afternoon light proved irresistible. The backdrop of Saint Francis Cathedral provides the unmistakable location."

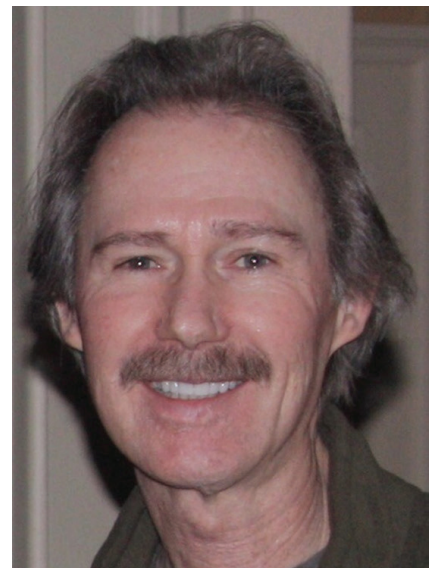
heart, Janet, and the births of their two now-grown children. He played in local bands, earning a decent living at it and having a lot of fun, until the fateful arrival of the disco era and his transition to full-time artist.

Once McKenna decided to shift his focus to art, he worked hard, painted constantly, showed his work in just about any venue available, and sold a lot of paintings. "In a perfect world, I don't think I would've tried to start selling my work until a few years later," he says. "Something I've found out that never even occurred to me back in the early days was that, if you paint long enough, you're going to get to see what you

did 40 years ago, and it's not too pleasant! Back then it was just, 'Oh, boy, another one sold!' Now? Now, some of that stuff comes up in auctions."

McKenna sighs, saying, "If I had to do it over again, I would ... well, I don't know. Maybe I would do it all over again. It's just one of those things, a catch-22. You've just about got to paint every day to get good at it, and that involves selling it at festivals and mall shows and things like that when you probably shouldn't be selling anything."

McKenna credits a handful of key influences with his progression as an artist. "I met Dalhart Wind-



berg, and he was nice enough to let me come down to his studio and bring a lot of bad paintings," he says. "He would critique them—he gave a great critique—and then I would hang around and watch him paint. I did that for three years. He was so generous with his time, really sat down and gave me a lesson, taught me what not to do. He would paint, and then he would turn around and tell me what he was doing. I just pretty much kept my mouth shut and my eyes and ears open. That worked out really well."

Another major influence was Richard Schmid's book, "Alla Prima." "It's just a different way of painting altogether, a fantastic book as far as the how-to," McKenna says. "It's the best one I've ever come across. I've probably sold so many books for him! Want to be a great artist? Go buy Richard Schmid's book. Read it, and re-read it, and then reference it."

"It was extremely helpful. The real kicker is, if I would have just listened to my art teacher in high school a little closer, he laid it out for me way back in the Sixties, [wanting me to paint looser]. I was painting shingles on a barn, and I was painting every single shingle, and he came and stood over my shoulder and said, 'Kenny, Kenny, Kenny...'"

After some years of moving around—Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona—McKenna and his family found themselves back in Oklaho-



Midday Performance, oil, 30" by 40"

"With more than 50 visits to the Grand Canyon, its drama continues to impress. With early morning and evening being the favored show times, a passing storm at high noon is equally as stunning."


ma, first in Guthrie and then in Oklahoma City, where they've lived since the early 2000s. "We've lived some fun places," he says. "I have a lot of friends here, and a lot of friends are still here from when we lived here in the Seventies and Eighties."

McKenna and Janet have now been married 53 years and have three granddaughters. He still stays in touch with his music buddies and looks forward to some future post-pandemic time when his band can resume playing a few gigs a month. "We're all the same age, and every-

one's kept their chops up musically through the years," he says. "And they've all got good ears, and no one gets in the way. It just works."

As a painter, McKenna is busier than ever, prepping for a number of spring and summer shows, including a solo show in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's still having a good time and still evolving and growing as an artist.

"Of course my paintings have changed through the years," McKenna says. "My heroes have shifted from Bierstadt to Monet. When I

first started getting into oil painting, I liked tight details and all that; now I paint much looser. These days it's more about coming up with a better painting and a better way to do it. But I'm as passionate about painting as the day I was when I first got serious about it." 

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