Ron Kingswood | Taking Chances

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By Todd Wilkinson

In a new painting called Anticipation of Spring, which portrays a pair of Canada geese standing on a shelf of dissolving river ice, Ron Kingswood reminds the viewer of his three great pleasures as an artist: his love of nature, his will to paint big (the canvas measures almost 7 feet high and 6 1/2 feet wide), and his fearless passion for challenging convention. But the monumental work—one of 32 new paintings on view this summer at Martin-Harris Gallery in Jackson, WY—also speaks to something else: Kingswood's emergence as a visionary after 15 years of experimentation with abstraction, using wildlife as his inspiration.

"Ron paints in a distinctly impressionistic style that is radically different from that of any other wildlife artist working today," says Martin Kruzich, founding partner of Martin-Harris Gallery. "His mastery of color, his unusual composition, and his highly original approach to his subjects are influencing the evolution of animal art. Ron's work is an intimate response to nature, based upon his command of anatomy and his passion for the natural world."

Whether Kingswood's work should be called pure impressionism or a variation of the kind of abstract expressionism pioneered by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning is open for debate. What's certain is that Kingswood [b1959], though still a relative youngster, is going his own way and turning heads.

"Ron's paintings are exciting because he takes chances with negative space," says Susan Simpson-Gallagher, whose gal-lery in Cody, WY, represents Kingswood. "He does a lot of things that casual viewers think are wrong, but he makes them work." Although Kingswood is not the first wildlife painter to chart new territory in his genre—Swedish painter Bruno Liljefors explored the terrain of expressionism, too—he is among only a handful to succeed, critics say, with such accomplished execution.

"Liljefors had a brilliant approach, and he is revered for not giving everything away to the viewer. Ron doesn't either," Simpson-Gallagher says. "His compositions aren't intended to provide a tidy, self-contained narrative. That's the joy of being an artist—demanding that viewers use their own imaginations on the most basic level. The irony is that Ron is one of the most sophisticated painters I've ever come across. There is a level of intelligence in his work that is mind-boggling."

Simpson-Gallagher is particularly impressed by Kingswood's portrayal of a tundra swan in winter—a work that, by its description, implies a muted palette of white on white. "But there is blue and green and gray and black and yellow and pink—although it reads as

white on white, it's compelling because it is anything but white," Simpson-Gallagher says.

The beginning of Kingswood's promising career now seems like ancient history, given the profundity of his transformation. During his teenage years, the southern Ontario native was enamored with the realistic paintings of Don Eckelberry, which frequently illustrated the pages of Audubon magazine. Kingswood, a birder since boyhood, obtained Eckelberry's address and began corresponding with the late avian master, who critiqued the young
artist's work.

It was on Eckelberry's recommendation that Kingswood sought formal art training at the H.B. Beal Secondary School in London, Ontario. There he learned color theory and composition; in his second year he fell under the tutelage of Bert Kloezeman, who convinced Kingswood that natural history and fine art could be merged.

In 1978, while attending an exhibition at Beckett Gallery in Ontario, he discovered the works of fellow Canadian Robert Bateman. The acknowledged dean of modern wildlife painters, Bateman has inspired numerous protégés—including the impres-sionable Kingswood, who readily admits to emulating the master early in his career. But Bateman also encouraged Kingswood to pursue a fresh vision he could call his own and not to feel limited by "the rules" as others defined them. Today Kingswood remains an admirer of Bateman's realistic representations of wildlife, which have established the standard that many artists use for communicating the language of nature to the masses.

Kingswood achieved enormous commercial success with photorealistic works. Still, he could feel that spiritually something was missing. Eckelberry, his early mentor, advised him to resist the tightly rendered, highly illustrative approach that has trapped more than a few gifted nature painters and instead to always be attentive to draftsmanship and anatomy, which give the eye a foundation for comprehending the outside world. Eckelberry also pointed to the liberating example of Liljefors.

By the mid-1980s, the 20-something Kingswood was ready for a change. Rather than gradually shifting his style and medium, Kingswood turned to radical reduction, embracing the Chinese philosophy of stripping down a painting to its barest essentials. He identified, too, with the struggle of Henri Matisse, who abandoned Impressionism for abstraction in an effort to resolve the conflict between two and three dimensions.

Kingswood remembers a conversation he had with Bob Kuhn at King Gallery in New York City during the late 1980s. Kuhn told him—only half in jest—that he was throwing away a million-dollar career by creating paintings that were more highly evolved and required a sophisticated viewer to appreciate. Kingswood's reply, which earned Kuhn's respect, was that he wasn't pursuing art to make a lot of money. Ironically, how-ever,

Kingswood's almost Taoist approach to painting—that less can be more, that power often lies in understatement, and that filling the individual well of personal satisfaction is more important than bulking up his checking account—has yielded financial dividends.

It has also garnered praise from his peers. Simpson-Gallagher says Kingswood is "a painter's painter and a sculptor's painter, too." Indeed, sculptor Kent Ullberg, who is renowned for his wildlife monuments in public spaces around the world, admires Kingswood's bold paintings. "I find his work remarkable," says Ullberg. "At one point he painted 'Bateman-esque,' and he was successful! The first time I saw his realistic work years ago, Bob Kuhn and I were on a judging panel, and we gave him an award. The assumption was that he had fallen into a style he was comfortable with. But then he comes back years later with these broad, gutsy creations. It takes a lot of courage to leave the safety net where you had great success. He is pushing the envelope of fine art, and I find his work incredibly exciting."

Collectors apparently agree. Maria Hajic, curator of the department of naturalism at Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe, says his paintings resonate with established collectors. "Clients were immediately drawn to Ron's work because his style is so different from anyone working today," Hajic says. "There are two things about his work that I always think of—his vibrant, bold colors and his imaginative design."

Although Kingswood, who spends weeks each year in the field as a naturalist, pays homage to animals in his works, he considers his subject matter secondary to the flood of color flowing off his palette in abstract streaks, rivulets, and muted mosaics. "Ron has given a whole new meaning to large paintings," Hajic says. "With most artists, large is 30 by 40 inches. But with him, 60-by-70- and 70-by-80-inch canvases are routine."

Kingswood says that ideas will percolate in his head for months or years at a time and then undergo three or four phases of development in his sketchbook before he staples a canvas to a wall. "Sometimes I'll run from the studio and just stay away, and then later there's this calling, this absolute desire to paint something that is welling up inside of me," he says.

When his emotions erupt the outpouring is swift, with big brushfulls of paint blossoming from very simple charcoal lines laid down on the surface beneath. A catharsis? Perhaps. "It's a spontaneous creation," he says. "I apply the paint very aggressively, and usually I've thought about the painting for so long that it is hard to hold myself back. Rarely do I ever finish the charcoal drawing on the canvas before I reach for the paint."

Kingswood is not alone in his urgency to create. "Cezanne once said that he felt like the Hebrew who could see the Promised Land, but he knew he might not reach it in his lifetime," Kingswood says. "I feel good about what's happening because meaning in life, for me, comes from the journey. All I'm trying to do is be true to myself."

Photos courtesy the artist and Martin-Harris Gallery, Jackson, WY; Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; Simpson Gallagher Gallery, Cody, WY; Spanierman Gallery, New York, NY; and Soma Gallery, La Jolla, CA.

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