

Artist Portrait: Peter Kephart

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These are the landscapes of our dreams. They come to us as visual ideas that both sooth and alarm as they float with the elements of fire and water from the primeval imaginings of our ancient ancestors.

It's through the process of fire and water that Peter Kephart allows the images to take form – using starch, liquid pigments and gunpowder on the paper before it is exposed to the flames. He completes each picture with artist materials that are almost as ancient: pastels, inks and charcoal.

He discovered the effects of fire on rag cotton watercolor paper by accident when he threw scrap pieces into a bonfire. The combination of fibers and gelatin sizing made the paper heat resistant. The fire singed the paper to a golden glow, and if he sprinkled water on the surface, those spots and patterns would remain white.

The visual movement he achieves in each composition comes from the process itself and his experience in controlling the elements during the burn. Some results are unexpected and open up new ideas and concepts.

Peter was born in New Jersey and developed his process there. He lived and worked in the DC area for years and now continues his painting in West Virginia. He is a new member of Zenith Gallery and his works are on display this month in Chevy Chase Pavilion. (See, At the Galleries).

The paintings of Peter Kephart go beyond decorative. Inherent in his work is a warning of loss that becomes a post-idyllic story of change and a declaration that the natural beauty we treasure is fragile and transitory. Our inherited idealized views may survive only as remnants as they are replaced by the new realities of expedient social and technological change. www.zenithgallery.com.

Jim Magner's Thoughts on Art

Alexis Rockman (see, At the Museums) has full control of the language of painting. He has mastered all of the structural principles of composition and



the techniques of paint application. He has achieved a mastery of appearances – all the fool-the-eye tricks of optical illusion that fashion our common notions of realism. His pictures often appear almost as photographs, seamless and without a hint of painterlyness. At the same time, in some monumental panels, what may look like random strokes up close, meld into great flows of ice, oceans or cities.

But Rockman is not demonstrating technique for its own sake, that tempting sanctuary of admiration where many accomplished painters arrive and decide to roost...including some of the best known surrealists. He uses the language of painting to say something of consequence. Like Dickens, Orwell, Twain, Steinbeck and other literary masters, he uses subtle expressions of common experiences to reach deep into the soul of human morality, and then goes beyond, to the pure serendipity of existence.

Questions are asked and answers are offered. Not just in the realm of the big doubts, but itty bitty questions about the itty bitty things that ultimately add up to the profound. His questions about the past are as teasing as those of the future.

This is not decoration or entertainment. Rockman is not afraid of the ugly...not shy about graphically splaying the freckled notions of natural existence. He dares to include beauty, but not a romantic idealism.

It's the deep-seated beauty of the violence inherent in nature.

That includes us and the ultimate consequence of human ingenuity and intervention. We are the target. We are the answer.



At the Museums
Alexis Rockman
Smithsonian Museum of
American Art
8th and F Streets NW
- May 11

The stunning work of Alexis Rockman seems to be the least heralded of the current shows at

Out on the Fringe. Bonfire, Water (Color), Mixed Media on Cotton Rag Paper. 38" x 38".

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Unexplained Daylight where Evening Mist is Made. Bonfire, Water, Mixed Media on Cotton Rag Paper. 38" x 29".

the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, but this is a not-to-be-missed experience. Both his large and small paintings are monumental in technique and impact.

He can paint wall-covering canvases that overpower an imposing space with a cast of a thousand creatures that flow as one – or intense, compact expressions of raw nature that jolt your imagination and make you cringe...or smile.

You can stand inches from the surface and revel in the surprising detail. Yet, each composition is so strong that the farther you go back, the more it works as a complete painting.

The real impact, beyond the mastery of technique, comes from the realization of what you see: the truths and fantasies of a universe evolving at warp speed. These are major and often scary statements that go beyond science to the emotional ties that leap

from primordial forces and ooze from the pores and orifices of every living thing. Alexis Rockman is the complete package.

Peter Kephart
Zenith Gallery
Chevy Chase Pavilion
5335 Wisconsin Ave. NW
- Feb. 8

Peter Kephart (see, Artist Profile) uses “firepainting” to create landscapes, still lifes and abstract works. He prepares heavy cotton rag watercolor paper by applying materials such as starch, liquid pigments and gunpowder, preserving white areas with water droplets. He exposes the surface directly to open flames, which creates the primary shapes and forms. He then completes the picture with pastels, inks, charcoal and other materials.

The result is a sense of flowing move-

ment on the surface, which comes from the material used, experience with the process and unexpected effects. There is more color than you might expect – the applied pigments are clear, and often intense, but still complex. www.zenithgallery.com.

Photography
Capitol Hill Art Workshop
545 7th St. SE
Jan. 8 – 30

CHAW presents its fifth annual photography exhibit, juried by Bruce McKaig. The show always includes a great range of images and technologies from black & white to digital. Opening reception is Sat. Jan. 8, 5-7. www.chaw.com.

“Leaves, Words & Screens”
City Gallery
804 H St. NE #1
Jan. 2 – 29

Ronnie Spiewak uses her mastery of collage to create her “paintings.” Scissors and Xacto blades are her paint-

brushes. Foreign language publications and papers with rich glossy finishes provide some of the exotic touches, but don’t distract from the overall composition. The opening reception is Jan. 8, 6-9. www.citygallerydc.com.

“Off Kilter”
Touchstone Gallery
406 7th St. NW
Jan. 5 – 30

With “Off Kilter,” Leslie Nolan brings forth the emotional intensity and colors with muscle in her big paintings. Artist reception: Jan. 14, 6-8:30. www.touchstonegallery.com.

“Celebrate Gay Marriage”
Foundry Gallery
1314 18th St. NW
Jan. 5 – 30

“Celebrate Gay Marriage” is indeed a celebration with art and other exhibitions. The opening reception is Jan. 7, 6-8. www.foundrygallery.org. ★



Alexis Rockman. Bromeliad: Kaieteur Falls, 1994. Oil and lacquer on wood. Nestlé USA. Photo courtesy of the artist