

The Art of Logging

Kathleen Kolb captures a rugged trade in the Vermont woods

By TOM SLAYTON

ONE OF THE AIMS OF ANY SERIOUS ARTIST is to get the rest of us to open our eyes and see the world around us anew. Kathleen Kolb, in her paintings of forestry and logging in Vermont, is working on that.

For more than a decade, Kolb has been painting the rugged beauty she sees in the working forests of Vermont. One of her earliest paintings on the subject, a watercolor of the Lathrop lumber mill in Bristol, is an industrial landscape which, though rendered in Kolb's precise, luminous style, still feels both monumental and gritty.

More recently, she has been painting the men and machinery of the lumber-

ing trade: winches, chainsaws and big yellow skidders. Her paintings of the latter, "Loggers at Sunrise" and "Cutting," offer us a glimpse into the world of commercial forestry, presented in its working environment — the living forest. Though the beauty captured in these pieces is unconventional, it is nonetheless genuine, and a strong part of the Vermont landscape tradition.

Kolb had made maple syrup with her family in the 1980s and came to like working in the woods. At first, because of the attraction to the forest that sprang from that work, she painted more conventional woodland subjects such as sugaring and spring wildflowers.

When she later became fascinated by logging as a potential subject for her art, she had no idea that her interest would ultimately lead to several dozen paintings and drawings, a deepened understanding of what "working in the woods" really meant and close association with one logging family's personal tragedy.

Nor did she know that it would be so cold. "I really wanted snow in these paintings because it simplifies the woods visually, and because it's so beautiful," she said.

Loggers work year-round; winter is no holiday. And so Kolb met with a local forester to learn about the timber



Adam Frelm

To view other paintings visit www.kathleenkolb.com. To contact the artist, e-mail kathleenkolb@gmavt.net.



"Loggers at Sunrise"



"Talk at the End of the Day"



"Cutting"



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The Working Landscape

sales and logging activities going on in the hills around her Lincoln home. She began to look at them as an artist looks — carefully, analyzing their visual components in different lights, from different angles, “looking for the beauty I knew was there.”

And when winter came, she bundled up in layers — long johns, Johnson Woolen Mills pants, insulated Sorel boots, and various fleece and wool garments, topped off by a neck gaiter and a warm hat.

She did a lot of walking to logging job sites bundled up like that. The walking kept her warm. Yet, even so, with the temperature at or below zero, she found field sketching nearly impossible. “Moving your fingers, even to take pictures, is hard when it’s that cold,” she said.

But she persevered. There was something about work in the wintry forest that kept calling her back.

“It’s kind of an invisible industry,” Kolb said. She is perhaps best known for her paintings of rural architecture and landscapes, and still loves the pas-

toral landscapes of Vermont. But she felt that forest work was little known and underappreciated. “There was this whole other piece that wasn’t being represented,” she recalled.

Kolb is aware that timber cutting, though it is a traditional Vermont activity, often raises complex environmental issues. It can be done carefully, in ways that help the forest lands, or carelessly, in ways that harm them. Her aim, she said, has been “to pay attention, first, to its integrity” — the integrity of hard physical work and a working engagement with the natural world.

The men she observed were helpful, and the artist got to know some of them. One, Bruce Gilkerson, was deeply touched by a series of paintings she did of his truck. He came to a show at Clarke Galleries in Stowe and gazed at the paintings with tears in his eyes. Later, because of a failing knee, Gilkerson left logging and took another job. But after knee surgery, he returned to work in the woods.

Logging is dangerous work. And one day when Gilkerson’s knee unex-



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pectedly buckled, he fell beneath the wheels of a skidder and was killed. His death was testimony both to the danger of forest work and the dedication with which it is pursued.

“There is a kind of devotion to that work,” Kolb said. “It’s a quality of devotion I would hope to bring to my work.”

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