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[In This State: Artist Kathleen Kolb finds “moments of sublime contact”](#)

by [VTD Editor](#) | December 2, 2012

This piece is by freelance writer, editor and photographer [Mark Bushnell](#) of Middlesex. In This State is a syndicated weekly column about Vermont’s innovators, people, ideas and places. Details are at <http://www.maplecornermedia.com/inthisstate/>.

The light on this cloudy November day is silver and stark, giving the world a washed-out look. Just the sort of day Andrew Wyeth would have loved to paint. But then, as I drive south on a dirt road in Lincoln, the light shifts. Sunlight spills through a gap in the clouds and the world transforms from bleak black-and-white to rich color.

Where before I’d been looking at frost-killed fields and the stubs of dead corn stalks, I’m now noticing the orangey light that illuminates the trees lining the road and brings out the greens still in the grass.

I’ve driven from a Wyethesque landscape into one that could have been painted by Kathleen Kolb, which is perhaps not surprising. She has been painting Vermont’s hills, fields and forests for nearly four decades. I’ve come to her part of the state to see how she does it.



Kathleen Kolb, an artist from Lincoln, with one of her paintings. Photo by Mark Bushnell

Kolb greets me, a cider jug and two glasses in hand, and leads me to her studio, which sits above the detached garage. Kolb, in her late 50s, wears a black sweater over black jeans. A band holds back her beyond-shoulder-length brown hair. Small, rectangular glasses frame her keen eyes.

She began her art education early, at age 6, when her parents enrolled her in a class that met Saturdays at

the Cleveland Museum of Art. School teachers had told her parents, neither of whom were artists, that Kathleen showed a special affinity for art. It’s not like

she was studying fine art at that age, Kolb says, smiling: “They gave me a bucket of crayons and a stool.”

But she eventually progressed to more formal classes at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and then on to the Rhode Island School of Design, where she focused on illustration, which emphasized figurative work.

“I came to Vermont as a figure painter, and there weren’t any people,” says Kolb. She was living an isolated life in Greensboro, only getting into nearby Hardwick maybe once a week. So the land and Vermont’s built environment became her subjects.

Kolb began exhibiting paintings in Vermont galleries and found freelance illustration work for magazines, including Vermont Life, which has profiled her three times over the years.

“I’ve never tried that (regular paycheck) route, which is kind of crazy,” she says, especially when she was later raising two children as a single mom in Cornwall. During the early 1990s, she looked for a

dependable income in a non-art-related job, but friends and prospective employers who knew her artwork encouraged her to continue painting.



Artist Kathleen Kolb fills in detail on a painting. Photo by Mark Bushnell

With the years came recognition. She began exhibiting in a small local gallery, then moved on to larger galleries in Vermont, New York and beyond.

She also benefits from the attention of art lovers who arrange to visit her studio. They buy her work when they can afford it — Kolb's paintings now run in the four- and sometimes low five-digit range.

Her environment is integral to her work. She will explore anything from community life to climate change but not in a pedantic way. She just paints things as she sees them and lets the viewer respond.

"I believe in the power of art to make the world a better place, to encourage conversations (and) to soothe and comfort people," Kolb says. "Being that I'm a landscape painter, I want my art to contribute to their sense of place, their sense of home, their joys and responsibilities and the sheer beauty of the world we live in — these moments of sublime contact."

Kolb can find those moments even in workaday settings. For years, she has painted images of the logging industry. It was her way of highlighting what she considers an overlooked aspect of Vermont's working landscape. Her paintings — whether depicting a logging truck being loaded in dawn's purple shadows or the white snowy mist thrown up by a tree felled in winter — show the harsh realities and raw beauty of the lumber industry.



"Talk at the End of the Day," oil on linen, by Kathleen Kolb. Photo by Mark Bushnell

A meticulous style

To reach Kolb's studio, visitors walk down a narrow hallway lined with her art, ranging from a meditative still life to a deep blue shadowed snowscape. The studio is comfortably appointed and neat. White walls, hardwood floors, an oriental rug, a wooden desk, and cabinets that Kolb built herself grace the room. Large windows offer views from Mount Abraham down to Breadloaf Mountain and beyond.

The studio's orderliness reflects Kolb's meticulous style. "If you are enjoying something, why would you rush it?" she asks. Her paintings are sometimes

described as photorealistic, and, indeed, she often works from reference photos. Yet she manages somehow to avoid the deadness that can result when painters slavishly copy a photo.

When she takes a break, words are often what she craves. "I'll stop and have a poem," she says, as others might have a smoke.

By regularly sketching and painting on site in oils and watercolors, Kolb knows what light hitting an object really looks like and manages to get that light, and life, into her works.

For subject matter, Kolb says she is looking for an “emotional gut reaction.” That’s how people first encounter a painting, with emotions, she says, “so I try to start a work from the same place.”

Kolb sometimes listens to music while painting, but nothing with lyrics. She has always been very verbal — which many artists aren’t — so words can be distracting. But when she takes a break, words are often what she craves. “I’ll stop and have a poem,” she says, as others might have a smoke, reading favorites like Mary Oliver or Jane Kenyon. Then it’s back to work.

After sketching the outline of her subject on canvas, she generally works from the top of the piece to the bottom. Her half-finished works are a strange amalgam of tightly rendered sections, as detailed as a photograph, and parts that are just dark outlines of the scene to come.

Kolb works on a classic oval wooden palette, mixing a pool of paint until it is just the color she wants.



“Two Grounded Icebergs,” oil on linen, by Kathleen Kolb. Photo by mark Bushnell

Some painters mix heaps of paint that are, say, the size of a fried egg. She prefers to blend colors in small flat puddles the size of a half dollar. Working with small bits of paint, she will remix her colors often. The small variations in hue that result will give “dimension, subtlety, and vibration” to the color, she explains.

“I want the color to have a richness you can’t get with sameness.”

Kolb’s work relies on her understanding of nuances. Up close, you can see slight variations in colors in areas like the sky. Step back, and those distinct brush strokes weave together into a seamless whole

and give the painting its vitality.

Similarly, Kolb hopes her work connects people with the deeper realities of their daily lives.

“My gift is to do this visually,” she says, “but there are so many other ways to do it. This is what I can bring to the world.”