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Women in Art

Special Focus:
Figurative Painting

Painting the
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Serenity IN THE STORM

Kevin Beilfuss uses deft painting skills to reveal tranquility in a chaotic world

AS A LITTLE TYKE, Kevin Beilfuss proudly told his parents he wanted to be a coloring-book artist, making a living with bright-colored crayons, when he grew up. He was pleased with the fact that, unlike some of his cousins, he was very good at keeping all the colors inside the lines. Today, the 51-year-old artist jokes, he spends his time trying to break out of the lines—but not completely. In most of Beilfuss' figurative paintings, the clothing, fabrics, landscape, and other background elements are suggested through loose, bold, often textural applications of paint. Yet faces and skin are kept "within the lines," rendered in soft, delicate detail.

It's the juxtaposition of these two approaches that especially interests Beilfuss (pronounced *Bile-fuss*) and adds to the appeal of his widely collected work. In another way as well, the painter has grown directly from his early roots: Rich, sumptuous color continues to be an integral part of his creative expression. In fact, color was a major consideration in his decision to enter the world of illustration as a young man. And, 13 years later, it was among the essential elements that remained with him when he transitioned into fine art.

RAISED JUST west of Chicago in the suburb of Downers Grove, where he still lives today, Beilfuss spent time in the

◀ **Magdalena**, oil, 24 x 18.

city's art museums as a boy, drawn in particular to imagery of people. He loved to contemplate paintings in books as well. Much of what he saw in both contexts, while beautiful, seemed to be painted in dark, muted hues. And like other children who initially experience art primarily through museums and art history books, he was left with the impression that all great artists were long deceased. Years later, when his own son was in elementary school, Beilfuss wanted to help other children avoid the same misperception, so he became what he good-naturedly calls an "art mom" for his son's class. He brought in original artworks, including his own. He talked about art and let the kids touch the paintings to feel the texture of the paint. He hoped the experience would inspire them to believe that if they wanted to, they could someday become artists themselves.

As a teenager, Beilfuss discovered and fell in love with the work of artists from the late 1800s to the 1940s, a period known as the American golden age of illustration. Illustrators, it seemed, had no fear of bright color. Beilfuss dreamed of joining their ranks, creating paintings that would become movie posters or album covers. A resurgence in illustration's popularity beginning in the 1970s added fuel to his dream, and after graduating from Illinois State University, he entered the American Academy of Art in Chicago. There, strong

foundational training in the classical tradition honed the skills he would use in illustration and, later, in his fine-art career.

With intense hours every day spent drawing and painting models alongside such fellow students and future masters as Scott Burdick, Sue Lyon, and Nancy Guzik, the seeds of Beilfuss' passion for the figure were inextricably sown. "It was really inspiring to have all those great artists in the same class, and now to see how wonderfully they've developed," he relates. During his time at the academy, renowned *alla prima* painter Richard Schmid was also living in Chicago. Encountering Schmid's art for the



representation

Gallery Russia, Scottsdale, AZ; **Paul Scott Gallery**, Bend, OR; **RS Hanna Gallery**, Fredericksburg, TX; **Sage Creek Gallery**, Santa Fe, NM; **Total Arts Gallery**, Taos, NM; **Waterhouse Gallery**, Santa Barbara, CA; **Walls Fine Art Gallery**, White Sulphur Springs, WV; **Palm Avenue Fine Art**, Sarasota, FL.



Lily of the Field, oil, 36 x 30.

first time was a revelation for Beilfuss, as it has been for countless representational painters before and since. “When I saw his work and the color he used—holy cow! It opened a new vision for me,” Beilfuss says.

Following graduation from the academy in 1989, Beilfuss entered the illustration field. He produced dozens of paintings for book covers and national magazines, working with such publishers as Viking Press, Penguin, and Houghton Mifflin and magazines including *Reader’s Digest*, *Guideposts*, and *Golf Digest*. “My agents used to chide me sometimes when I sent them samples,” he remembers, smiling. “They’d say, ‘I think you want to be a fine artist.’ I think they were probably right. I don’t think I did as good a job

painting other people’s ideas. There was no room for self-expression.”

The niggling thought that maybe he was approaching art from the wrong angle became stronger over the years. It rose to the surface with powerful poignancy one day in the late 1990s as he was admiring the art of Daniel Gerhartz and others in a magazine—“probably *Southwest Art*,” he says. “I was almost in tears at the beauty of what they were doing, and I think I longed for the ability to do that, to paint what was in my heart instead of what other people wanted.” The insight coincided with a time of change in the illustration world, with computer-generated imagery and digital technology rapidly replacing hand-painted art. Beilfuss and his wife agreed

it was time for him to take the leap, and in 2003 he completed his last illustration job and made the transition into fine art.

Yet his years in illustration were not without lasting gifts. Among other invaluable skills, the artist gained a highly developed sense of composition and design. It’s an awareness that continues to guide his hand and eye in every piece he paints. “For me, right now, the subject is kind of secondary, even though the figure is the focal point,” he explains. “What I’m really looking for is an abstract shape or flow in the way the body is posed. I’m not really satisfied unless the painting has a sense of movement to help the viewer’s eye move around the piece and then come back to the focal point.”

This lively visual experience is reinforced by what Beilfuss refers to as “fireflies”—artistic elements that stand out in a painting, grabbing the viewer’s attention and directing the flow. Among the most important of these is the use of contrasts: dark and light; heavy, textural brush strokes next to smooth, thin washes of paint; areas of seeming chaos juxtaposed with more precise detail; bold colors that accent or complement each other or jolt the senses awake. The painter often begins with an idea involving light, color, feeling, or a potential pose. But as he and the model work together, Beilfuss’ easy manner and subtle guidance frequently results in the model moving comfortably around and finding the perfect, most natural pose.

AT TWELVE, for example, features a 12-year-old family friend as the model, reclining sleepily in a red-and-white kimono and long white gown. “She has a great look on her face—she’s staring at the viewer, but she seems peaceful,” Beilfuss observes. “She’s comfortable in her own skin, even though she’s aware she’s being watched.” Another recent painting entitled SUMMER’S LIGHT represents the artist’s widening interests as he expands into depicting the subject within the landscape. “I’m drawn to the human figure, but it’s nice to take that into other places and find beautiful shapes and the play of light anywhere,” he says. “I like having parts of the painting where details are less spelled out. In the landscape, there’s so much information, but when we look at it, everything on the periphery is out of focus. That’s how the eye sees.”

In this case, a young woman is absorbed in the quiet sanctuary and carefree feeling of time alone beside a forest stream. The finely rendered realism of the figure is balanced by the visual rhythm and abstract patterns of water, trees, leaves, and dappled light.

Back in his studio after sketching and photographing a scene, Beilfuss sometimes turns a painting-in-process upside down. He steps away to discern whether its nonobjective composition works equally well that way. What he discovers is that from the seemingly erratic movement of brush strokes and apparently chaotic color emerges a sense of order and compositional balance. And in the midst of this, the figure appears as a soothing vision of calm. “I want the two-dimensional surface to be interesting, even when you’re not looking at the face,” he says. “You explore other areas, but it always leads back to the beauty that can be found amongst chaos.”

Clearly, this perception is shared by many viewers and collectors, as reflected in the artist’s receipt of top national and regional Oil Painters of America awards, including a Gold Medal, an Award for Excellence in Figurative Painting, and a People’s Choice Award. On another level, as well, the strong elements of contrast in his work are symbolic of the incongruousness of life in general and the world around us, Beilfuss points out. Even within darkness, confusion, and discord, there are moments of sparkling beauty and quiet rest. “If we look around, we can find the beauty in all this mess,” he muses. “God has already created all this beauty. I’m trying to capture part of that and give it back to people. I’m interested in joy, peace, and happiness, rather than setting a dark mood. There’s enough of that in this world. If I present a little bit of sanctuary, then I’ve done my job well.” ✦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy also writes for *Native Peoples*, *Western Art & Architecture*, *American Craft Magazine*, and other magazines and is the author of three books on visual artists.

See more of Beilfuss’ paintings at www.southwestart.com/featured/beilfuss-k-nov2014.



Summer’s Light, oil, 33 x 30.



At Twelve, oil, 16 x 24.