

A painting by Kathi Peters depicting a dark horse and a blue horse in a snowy landscape. The dark horse is on the right, facing a haystack. The blue horse is on the left, facing the dark horse. The background is a textured, light blue and white wash representing snow. Two haystacks are visible, one in the upper left and one in the lower right.

SANCTUARY

the paintings
of Kathi Peters

Kathi Peters is one of those artists that other artists feel drawn to.

—interview by L. Raff

Educated in Italy, she is a traveler of countries, of careers, of media, and of styles. She is also a traveler through the path that is life, and in overcoming its unexpected moments she never lost the sense of herself as an artist; that which may be different now is only part of a new journey. Like Monet, she draws inspiration for her paintings from her garden and from her farm. Her work is a metaphor for expressionism—color singing softly in its purest form.

In its quietest voice, it says 'Sanctuary'.

"Since I was young, I have felt this need to be creating something," Kathi Peters says. "My parents were always supportive of that need, whether it was in school or with private lessons. I was painting, drawing, designing houses, designing clothes or writing poetry or stories."

A New England native, Kathi's family owned a farm in picturesque Hebron, New Hampshire, and her childhood was defined by animals and activity. "I grew up riding horses all over the woods, jumping and driving, enjoying a life surrounded by dogs, cats, and farm animals. I attended school in a one-room schoolhouse in the quiet country village," Kathi remembers.

When she was 9 years old, Kathi's family moved to Italy. Kathi went from an idyllic small-town life to the vibrant city of Milan; her one-room schoolhouse was traded for private tutors. "We lived in an apartment, and my amusement was going to art museums and the opera," Kathi recalls. "The only time I was around horses was when I took jumping lessons at San Siro Riding School. But both parts of my childhood created who I am today and I draw on past experiences in all my artwork," she adds.

Kathi says that her first years in Italy made a profound effect on her as an artist. "In Italy I was surrounded by wonderful classical sculpture and architecture on a daily basis," she says. "There is no way that hasn't affected my creative idea bank and my appreciation of design and/or fueled my imagination."

Kathi returned to the US as a teenager when she enrolled in prep school, where several of her teachers there prompted her to continue her art studies. At the age of seventeen Kathi

applied for and was accepted into the prestigious La Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome, Italy.

"After my second year there my father convinced me to also enter a commercial art school, ENLAC, so that I would be able to support myself. I attended both ENLAC and the Accademia for a while. I also worked as a stringer for an American newspaper that was published in Rome," she says. Kathi wrote about the 'teen scene', including the rock bands that came through Rome to play. She met her husband, Les, at a popular club called the Piper Club, when he was a musician with a

in Massachusetts. Later when Les and I had moved to Maine I worked as an Advertising Manager for an equine newspaper published in New England, and also did story illustrations."

Kathi says that despite her varied and exciting art career, she didn't really get back into fine arts until after her two sons were grown and out of the house. By then, she and Les had finally settled on a farm in Pownal, Maine. "We became farmers - a far cry from our exciting past in Europe - but we loved it," Kathi remembers. "We got horses, cows, chickens, and sheep and immersed ourselves

in the whole Mother Earth concept.

"It was a very natural progression for me to start painting animals," she continues. "No more fashion illustrator. And the Horse became my main subject. Les loves driving horses and the discipline of carriage driving so it was a natural that the driven horse became my favorite subject. My life came full circle back to my childhood heart song - the Horse."

Today, Kathi and her husband and live on a small farm in the woods of Downeast Maine, in the lovely village of Morrill. "Now the horses we have fire my muse," Kathi says happily, "as do the trees and flower gardens that surround our cottage. I think I could

paint forever and never leave the farm for inspiration. But on the same token, my work done today is really a product of everything that came before in my life," she says.

"While in Rome studying at ENLAC, the commercial art college, one teacher, Manfredo Acerbo, took me aside after one irate model stormed out of our live figure study class, when she saw my studies of her. He told me, 'Kathi, this woman was upset because you captured her real soul and she didn't like seeing that. Never lose that ability you have to portray the real subject. You have your own style and don't let it be influenced by other artists, teachers, or critics. Stay always true to yourself.' For me that was the 'a-ha' moment that has affected my entire life as an artist. His words made me stop and think about what I paint, who I paint and what I am saying in my work. I am confident in my own work."

Kathi says that when she is not drawing or



Left: 'From the Left: Winter', Casein, 16x20. Above: 'Little One', Casein, 12x12".

rock band. As a sideline, she also designed clothes for some of the bands, and did album cover designs.

At the same time, her fine arts career was blossoming. Kathi had her first one-woman show in Israel at age eighteen, a collection of her pen and ink drawings of Rome's architectural highlights. The show was a benefit to help Jewish immigrants from Russia and Hungary return to Israel.

Soon after, Kathi and Les married. "I traveled with Les' band a lot all over Europe," she says. She continued her work as a journalist, writing a fashion column for a newspaper in the USA; she also did fashion illustration and kept abreast of the fashion industry in Italy. "This gave me a great background in fast sketching of the human anatomy and in design," Kathi says. "Before the birth of our first son, I came back to the US, where my parents were living by that time, and I worked for an advertising agency



Above: 'Shades of Black #8', Casein, 12x12". Opposite: 'Shades of Black #9', Casein, 12x12".

painting from life, she makes use of photo references. "I get a lot of commission work from around the world, but I am also lucky to have live models to use, when I am stuck as far as capturing the equine anatomy and the dynamics of interplay between horses. I have a pretty good foundation of drawing from my studies at the Rome Accademia," she notes. "I feel any painting needs to start with a good correct drawing and a good composition. So my paintings start with a drawing in graphite or charcoal where I work out the composition and values."

Kathi works mainly in water media like Watercolor or Casein. But though the two are water-based, Kathi likes that they are very different in their application and approach. "In watercolor, I seem to stay classic in approach, but my casein work is taking on a more abstract expressionism bent," she says; "although I have been told by critics that even my watercolors have a strong abstract quality to them as well."

She begins her watercolors on 140-300lb hot press watercolor papers, or on archival watercolor board, which Kathi likes for its

time-tested reputation. Her Casein works are done on gessoed board or Colorfix paper, though it was actually designed for pastel work. Kathi paints in layers of glazes, and says she does not mix colors on her palette. "In essence, I mix colors on the painting itself instead, using transparent glazes of pure pigment.

"I am limited to fairly small-sized works, due to the size of my tiny studio loft. But I feel a need now to get into doing some bigger work. I don't know if this will mean I will start working in another medium. We will see."



"You might say I have a split personality as far as my approach with the two water media I use. My watercolors are approached with a more realistic and traditional style. Then I use a more abstract and liberated style with my caseins. I know some critics feel that having two separate styles confuses people, but I feed on this 'bi-polar' artistic expression. It keeps my work spontaneous and engaged, more infused with my emotional feelings at that moment in my life."

Kathi says that her work is now very influenced by a life-altering event that

happened about two years ago. "I suffered an ischemic stroke that left me with aphasia [loss of language skills] and some right side weakness," says Kathi. "I never lost my ability to draw or paint, but my language skills are still affected. And my productive workday has been shortened immensely, as I still tire quickly; but I can handle a brush, pencil and pen in my right hand. I can even do my paper cutting. But I can't feel hot or cold in my right hand and my feeling on my fingertips is impaired. My brain is giving me false information concerning my sided nerve

ending messages.

"Since the stroke I have cloistered myself on our farm, and caring for our four horses and my huge perennial garden have been my therapy. It has been a hard two years of healing and rethinking my life's directions - and there were some hard obstacles to get over. But through it all my artwork has continued and has given me a purpose," she says.

"When I got back into painting after my sons were grown, my work was very realistic, but I see a leaning to more abstract imagery in my



Honal Study/Accidia

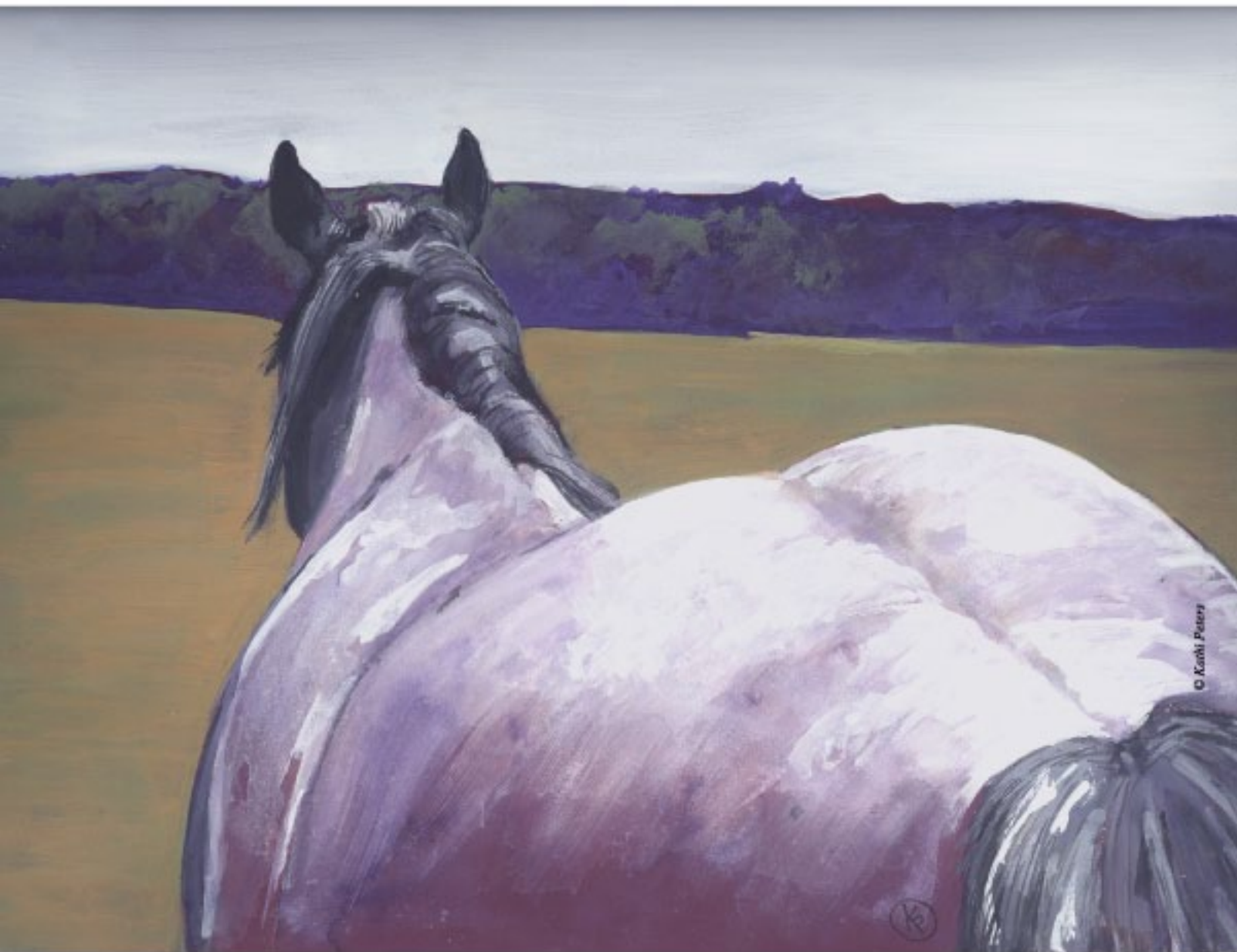
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Above: Unlimited Horizons Casein, 9x12". Below: Taking It Laying Down, Casein, 9x12". Opposite, top: 'From the Loft: Summer', Casein, 16x20. Opposite, bottom: 'Bend to the Left', Casein, 12x12". Previous pages: 'Head Study/Acadia', Watercolor, 10.5x7"; 'Lady in Waiting', Watercolor, 10.5x7".

I think I could paint forever

painting today," she says. "It sort of started with the *Shades of Black* series, where I am exploring the myriad of colors that are in the black coats and the ground shadows of black horses." Using their two black Tennessee Walking Horses as her models, Kathi was inspired to create the series while watching them around the pasture at different times or the day and year. "I watched how the sun hit their black bodies during different seasons," Kathi continues. The *Shades of Black* series continues to be ongoing, and has developed into another series of horses from above entitled *From the Loft*. "I am branching from just portraying our horses from our own loft, to portraying other horses depicted from the lofty view from other barns. As humans we always view the horses from the ground, usually looking up at the horse from eye level or below. In the *Loft* series I examine the birds



© Kathi Petery



and never leave the farm for inspiration





© Kathi Peters



Top: 'Pinned In', Casein, 4x6". Above: 'The Black Pair', Casein, 16x20". Opposite: 'Fenced In', Casein, 10x10".

eye view of the horse; maybe because I feel a need now to see everything from a different perspective," she says. "My work, and even my feeling about life, might make it important to me now to really use my own voice."

Each morning I awaken with new ideas. New paintings in my head that need to be created. There aren't enough hours in the day for me to get all the ideas done and there is always more tomorrow. There are so many mediums I want to learn more about, to expand my repertoire as an artist. I don't have very many days where things get stale in the

studio.

"I feel a need now to somehow give back to other stroke victims and their caregivers. I am working on a body of work now that metaphorically deals with stroke, healing and dealing with the hardballs that life hits us with.

And yes, the Horse is the subject matter, metaphorically depicting struggles that I conquered," says Kathi.

"I know I have healed."



~interview by L. Raff

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