



The Unreal Art of Photorealism

Bloodless wolves and coiffed bison versus the elegant pastels of Kim Donaldson.

by Brooke Chilvers

Given how many of Gray's readers collect original sporting art, many wonder why we don't run a regular column on sporting artists and the sporting-art world. And the answer has always been, we've never found a writer with the knowledge and the eloquence to do the job the way it ought to be done. Until now. So please join us in welcoming Brooke Chilvers, who navigates her way with equal aplomb around the easel and the salon and the keyboard and the back-of-beyond safari. —JRB

I WANDERED UP the Safari Trail, turned right on Javelina Highway and right again down Bear Tracks, then east on Whitetail Way until I finally arrived, exhausted, in Grizzly Gulch. More than a thousand exhibitors lined the aisles of the Safari Club International annual hunters' convention in Reno—including more than 75 outdoor artists who ranged from still striving to ridiculously successful.

In-your-face elephants charged passersby from at least a dozen

booths. Countless every-hair-in-place leopards draped over backlit horizontal branches. Even the naturally disheveled bison had been to the *coiffure*. At SCI, photorealism stalked the aisles.

And now, half a year later, I can't recall a single work I'd sell my step-mother's diamond watch to buy.

"Season of Fire," an original pastel, 30 x 57 inches, by Kim Donaldson. Courtesy of Call of Africa Gallery, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

Why did all that photorealism leave me feeling cheated? Vassili Kandinsky wrote that a good painting conveys more than the objects it represents. Okay, Kandinsky was a Pan-European Expressionist who figured out he didn't need *any* identifiable objects in his paintings, only color. But his point is clear. American Realist John Sloan wrote, "Nature is what you see, plus what you think about it." A perfectly real 17th century Flemish still life of a dead hare, string of partridges and a bowl of apples immediately communicates thoughtfulness, contemplation. Why does photorealism so often fail to communicate anything at all?

Rumors abound that much of photorealism is photo-generated, perhaps even traced from projected images. That probably explains the lack of blood pulsing through the pack of wolves on Grizzly Gulch. Why did those meticulously rendered wolves seem not to occupy their own bones, when French Romantic Theodore Géricault's loosely painted charging steeds do? My guess is, there is little Leonardo-style mastering of anatomy going on in the *atelier*. "I remember a certain painting of an elk or a moose that had the foreshortening you can only get with a photo, and never if you have a real understanding of the animal's skeleton," criticizes Fred King of Fred King Galleries, who instantly catches such *faux pas*.

In fact, even the messiest modern Impressionist should be as sure as Renoir was about the bones under the bodice or Degas about the overworked feet in the ballet slipper. And double that dose for photo-realists.

Perhaps when the animal subject is the only subject—which is overwhelmingly the case with photorealism—the artist is simply more concerned with composition, how the differently sized squares of an elephant's body, head and even

ears fit together on the canvas, than with spiritual implications or visual statements about landscape. For example, the sheep-covered hills of Devon indicate man as a good caretaker of Eden, while wasted bison skeletons with cowboys and Indians in the background imply something altogether different.

Riding the photorealism bandwagon basically absolves the artist of two things: the constraints imposed by a real knowledge of anatomy, and the need for an artistic vision that goes beyond the external forms to capture the more important essence of, say, a herd of tenacious buffalo trudging slowly down a dried riverbed.

In addition, the standard flat, polished surfaces of most photorealism give the impression that the artist is not present in the act of creation, thus compounding the feeling that this is anonymous commercial art rather than a statement by an individual artist. It's the photo's realism, not the artist's. As a result, outdoors art appears to trend further away than ever from the masterpieces of museum-quality fine art.

That's why coming across Zimbabwe-born Kim Donaldson's work (see page 90) again at the SCI convention was so refreshing—despite his having subjected it to the powerful influences of the American market during his dozen years of "exile" in the U.S.

In his pastels and paintings, his lioness's bones carry flesh lean with hunger; he mindfully works her flattened and tense torso to betray her deadly intention to feed, making the connection between anatomy and nature.

I still prefer his earlier work, where the landscapes themselves told at least half the story: the wind coming in spurts, lifting sun-baked dust into the air, bending parched clusters of grass that catch the

iridescent light bouncing off cottonpuff clouds. Will rain finally quench this thirsty land? Will the crouching lioness feed her off-canvas cubs? The viewer gets to decide.

In those works the composition had an almost zen-like simplicity with lots of clean space on the canvas, a vertical line of gemsbok or wildebeest "lost" in dust-hazy flat vistas or under endless stormy skies, leading to a single focal area.

Donaldson also uses landscape, or skylines, as a vehicle to push the animal forward toward the viewer. His lions capture the luminous golden light that bathes the forefront of one painting, while the blackening rain-streaked sky fills the background. These dramatic skies are compositional tools that provide the contrast against which the subject pops out, creating an inherent excitement. Overlooking the animal's landscape—especially for African species—would mean missing the very sense and significance of the vastness, the distance, the sheer immensity of the continent.

Ross Parker of Call of Africa Gallery in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, says that if wildlife and sporting artists find their work isn't accepted as fine art, the causes are at least partly self-inflicted: "If they deserve their reputation, it's because they have abused the market with blatant imitation, copyright violation and the orientation to the Almighty Buck." The fast-talking South African explains that Americans buy landscape paintings separately from outdoor art, and when they buy wildlife art they definitely want the animal subject to dominate the painting. They prefer work where they can see the leopard from the other side of the street rather than having to pick it out from its setting. Sounds crazy, but Parker knows his market and commands terrific prices

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for his artists' works.

"You'd better be pretty darn sure you've identified today's market trends before you commit yourself to invest in shows like Art Expo," says Parker; the booth alone costs \$12,000, each light costs \$350, not to mention framing, airfare, hotels, meals and catalogs.

The print-oriented art market also seems to be fueling the ever-expanding penchant for photo- and ultra-realism. "The buying population today seems very impressed by realism," Donaldson told me the last time we met. "This trend means that labor has been accepted as making a better painting than vision."

Still, the commercially successful print market has probably succeeded in educating the public to skip originals and purchase prints, which range from regular offset lithography that can reproduce some 5,000 colors to a technique that combines a form of silk-screening, called serigraphy, with Advanced Continuous Tone lithography that allows up to 25,000.

This explains why even dedicated pastel artists like Donaldson are dancing to the tune of the print market, joining the vast majority of outdoor artists who use acrylic or oil-based pigments almost exclusively. This adds another repetitive clone-quality to this generation of work: It's like writing the novel *after* signing the contract for the movie script.

Donaldson is at his best with pastels, which come across as more personal and spontaneous than oil or acrylic. "Pastels sparkle. They're instant. If the idea to highlight with yellow and orange is fresh in your mind, you just go straight to them," versus the time-consuming process of mixing oils. Donaldson keeps a huge palette of virtually thousands of colors on hand. Even then, he has to mix his own because, he says, pastels tend to be very primary and ignore the middle hues of Africa's grey and brown earthtones.

Rather than start with a photo, he originates a piece by studying the over-

all tonal values he is visualizing in his mind. For his distinctive monochromatic dust-shimmering Namibian scenes, he'd lean towards a gray surface; for his sunlit fawn and tawny felines, an orangey one. Because the entire surface isn't covered in a pastel painting but rather shows through, the selection of background color is absolutely essential. Donaldson, for one, doesn't restrict himself to manufactured background colors but tints his own or underpaints them in acrylic, building up tonal values that help increase the depth of field.

Unfortunately, buyers, even galleries, are afraid of pastels, despite efforts to educate them that a pastel work has an archival life as long as an oil painting, as long as the work was created using art-quality (not student-quality) pigments, is framed in an acid-free mount on museum-quality matt boards and is behind glass. *All* artwork should be kept away from direct moisture and direct sunlight, and yes, certain colors are fugitive when exposed to ultraviolet rays—"not because they're pastels but because they are paintings!" says Donaldson.

Buyers don't seem to know that pastels aren't chalk but raw pigments that are already dry. In fact, the identical pigment is used in every painting process, whether for oils, watercolors, acrylic, pastels or washes. Moving that pigment onto the canvas with oil gives you an oil painting; adding gum then diluting it gives you watercolors.

Would I try to convince the curator at the Metropolitan Museum to wander down the aisles of next year's SCI convention with me? No. Why not? Because a shameful ignorance of anatomy, a lack of authenticity and an absence of vision dominate the floor.

It could not be simpler: The artist's job is to create, not just imitate. ■

Brooke Chilvers has spent 20 years migrating between her office in the States, her home in France and her professional-hunter-husband's straw hut in the Central African Republic—a country she, too, had never heard of before landing in Bangui.



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