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Morning Sun Far Shore,
oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

Nature Study

Pennsylvania-based artist **KIRBY FREDENDALL** paints modernist landscapes that seek to engender the feelings of introspection and calm she experiences in the outdoors.

BY JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN





Kirby Fredendall enjoyed painting as a child but never imagined a career as an artist. Even still, the writing was on the wall. She grew up on the western bank of the Delaware River, in a rural region known as Bucks County, Pennsylvania. It was here, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that the Pennsylvania impressionists took up residence in inexpensive farmhouses and disused industrial properties. They set about painting sylvan fields and rustic scenes along the river and the once-bustling Delaware Canal. The whole region remains a nexus of artists and craftspeople.

Fredendall, born in 1966, was raised in the county, originally in Carversville, and now lives in the village of New Hope, a former mill town 40 miles from Philadelphia. She and her husband, Alex Damevski, share an 18th-century house on a sparsely populated two-lane road that cuts through the fields. Her studio is in an adjacent white-clapboard structure that once housed a general store.

She paints in the second floor of the building and uses the ground floor as a showcase for her works, mainly oil paintings of lakeside scenes.

Fredendall earned a B.A. in art history from Duke University in 1988, and after a course at Le Cordon Bleu in London, returned home to work as a pastry chef. Then she befriended a group of art students from the University of Pennsylvania and began making abstract paintings, some of which were exhibited and sold locally. Because she needed a day job, she completed an M.Ed. in 1992 in art education at Arcadia University and became the visual art instructor at the Solebury School, a private college-preparatory academy.

It was around five years ago that Fredendall's abstraction gave way to loosely rendered landscape paintings that feature trees and an expanse of water leading to a distant wooded shore beneath a luminous sky. She began repeating the subject matter, but varying the palette. Her soft-focus blend

of abstraction and impressionism conveys fleeting effects of light, seasons, and weather in a way that really lets you feel the scene. Her recording of these peaceful moments of reverie and delight in a solitary encounter with nature has struck a chord with her audience.

Fredendall's artworks have been presented in numerous group and solo shows, mainly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and she has had a one-artist exhibition at the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Modestly priced, her works are now represented by Bluestone Fine Art Gallery (*bluestone-gallery.com*) in Philadelphia, Box Heart Gallery (*boxheartgallery.com*) in Pittsburgh, and Candita Clayton Gallery (*canditaclaytongallery.com*) in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

In her New Hope studio, she discussed growing up in Bucks County, the evolution of her style and process, and how a savvy business coach helped jump-start the career she never dreamed of. →



Finding a Path 5, oil on acid-etched tin, 14 x 12 inches



Glimpse of Spring, oil on panel, 12 x 48 inches

FOUNDATION WORK

What was Carversville like growing up?
Everybody knew everybody, and everybody still knows everybody. My father grew up nearby and had a career building homes in historic styles. He and my mother, who is from Indiana, moved to Carversville because the older homes were affordable for young people and artists. They had a beautiful 18th-century stone house that cost them \$8,000 in 1964.
Many of their friends and neighbors were artists. The painter Charles Ward was across the street and I took piano lessons from his wife. Their house was a trip—old, dark, lots of velvet drapery, two grand pianos, and piles of Ward’s work. The sculptor Raymond Barger had a studio in a former grist mill downtown with sculpture grounds for his abstract metal pieces. Our whole family sat for portraits and had

weekend meals with Jan Cullen, another artist who lived in the other converted mill.
One of my best friends was the grand-daughter of the celebrated woodworker George Nakashima. We would swim in his pool, sit in his teahouse, and wander around his wood-storage house—places that people now visit on tours. The children’s book authors Stan and Jan Berenstain lived over in Solebury near James Michener, right up the road from the school where I teach. All of that is to say that I grew up in a very art-rich environment.
Were your parents interested in the arts?
My parents were collectors of prints and antiques. My mom was an amateur painter and her work was all over the house, and her oil paints were never off-limits to me. Local visiting artists would conduct workshops in

my school and I was the art-nerd kid, always in the art room making stuff instead of going outside to play at recess.
Did you consider going to school to become an artist?
I got straight As and liked math, so it was assumed I would be premed. Starting at Duke University, I was convinced that I would be a doctor and make art on the side. After a particularly bad chemistry test, I took the advice of a friend and tried an art history class, and I loved the professor. It was like he tapped into something in me that was already there, so I dropped everything science-related and majored in art history.
Going to Europe was hugely important. I studied for two months in Florence and spent a semester studying British art and architecture in London. After I graduated,

I didn’t know what I was going to do. I loved London and didn’t want to come home. That’s when I decided to take a course at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school.
How did you start painting?
Shortly after I came home from London, I befriended a landscape painter who was working for my dad building houses. He and his friends were making art and hanging out in each other’s studios discussing their work, and that blew me away. I would go with him on painting trips, and I started painting and even selling some work. I quit my job as a pastry chef and went to graduate school to get certified to teach painting and art history K–12. I also started helping my mom in her metal shop, where she was making lighting fixtures out of tin that she sold in wholesale trade shows.

Describe your early work.
When I used to paint landscapes, I was less drawn to the vista than to the close-up—the turning shape of a branch, the textures and colors on the wood, the reflections on the water. It wasn’t so much about describing a scene as pulling out elements—the color, the light, the texture. During my teaching degree, my painting teacher, Betsey Batchelor, encouraged me to explore abstracting the landscape. The color started to get more expressive than representational. A tree would become teal and the water would become orange. I was new at painting so I started to play with it because it was fun.
What were you trying to capture?
I wasn’t trying to capture anything specific. Things that were visually interesting to me got internalized, and I would go into the

studio and make images that were just intuitive. Some were based on petroglyphs that I saw on a trip to New Mexico, and others were drawn from the garden. Then I completely pulled away from landscape and started painting abstractions with lots of turns and twists.
All of the elements came from nature, but there was an aspect that had to do with trying to get across a sense of time and memory. We carry within us our ancestors, and every experience that we have had is still within us. In the paintings, I was trying to create layers that allow you to look in and imagine that kind of experience. I titled some of these paintings *Ancestors* or *Memory Strands* for that reason. If you sit with them for a long time, then you start to see people, and I honestly did not put them in there intentionally. →



Blue Twilight, oil on panel, 20 x 60 inches

SETTING THE SCENE

How did you make the transition to painting landscapes?

My family has a house on a small lake in the Adirondacks not far from Lake George, and I started painting small landscape sketches while sitting on the porch. I was still painting abstractions at home, but one afternoon I had a large canvas stretched and no great idea, so I decided to enlarge one of the small landscape sketches and I haven't looked back since. That first landscape is now hanging in a corporate collection in Philadelphia curated by Bridgette Mayer. My work still retains the mark and color of the abstractions, but there is recognizable

imagery drawn from the landscape, mainly the lake—although I sometimes base my paintings on places I have traveled to, such as the Dominican Republic, Culebra Island, and Iceland.

Were you influenced by the landscape painting tradition of Bucks County?

I may get labeled a "Bucks County landscape painter," but I don't want to make the same landscapes that someone's already painted. I'm more interested in artists in terms of their use of color and mark. I like to look at less representational work, like the pictures of Anselm Kiefer, or

the amazing water and trees of Mondrian. I love how Joan Mitchell manages to put every color into a painting.

Do you paint outdoors?

I like to be in my studio with my coffee and my music and my light and my materials. I create pencil, oil, and pastel studies on the porch overlooking the lake, and then use them for reference in the studio. But I tend to alter the landscape to my vision, and I don't need to be outside to do that.

Are you painting a particular place?

The scenes have a feeling of Adirondack

lakes, but it's important that my landscape is not about a specific place. I appreciate beautiful landscapes where people can recognize their cottage or the inn down the road, but I don't want to be that specific. I'm painting the idea of a place to remind someone of whatever landscape is important to them.

Describe your process.

First, I draw with a big stick of graphite, then I mostly cover up the drawing with a lot of washes. Recently I've been drawing, painting, drawing, painting, and leaving lines visible in the finished composition. I

either work out of my imagination or I'll use smaller pastel drawings or little paintings as a jumping-off point. I love that calming, flat horizon where the sky, land, and water meet. I'm often trying to knit the three together.

The color on the lake is never the same. Sunsets, sunrises, the afternoon sun, being on the lake being in a kayak—a pink may not look like local color, but it absolutely has existed in my life on that lake. The light and the color are soaked into me. There's a lot of movement and texture in the water and the clouds. Water is the element that's most important to me. I try to get across the kind of vibration that happens in the light. That's

where the gesture comes in, getting the texture of the water and the feeling of the water being different than the sky.

Why do you use only oil paint and not acrylic?

Acrylic dries really quickly and has a surface I don't really like, nor do I like the feeling of its texture on the brush or how it feels when I put it on the canvas. With the abstract paintings I would put paint on the canvas, pour turpentine on it, and layer paper over it and pull it off. In the landscapes, there's more actual brushwork, although I've started to do a little pouring and pressing →

paper onto it and pulling it off to get different surfaces.

When I paint on tin, I start out with sheets of silvery metal and brush on nitric acid. The sheets are vertical so it creates drips and patterns. And then I rinse it all off and spray it with clear coat and then paint on top of it. You can see the drips through the paint. I love the wet, streaky shadows underneath the painting and the layers that happen. And I love the connection between my mom and the tin.

How do you play with scale?

The biggest paintings I do at the moment are 4 by 6 feet because that’s the biggest piece that fits up the stairwell. And that’s the biggest piece that I could fit into my Honda Pilot. But, I love the idea of making a really big painting. I have three new canvases that are 6 by 7 feet. I have found someone who can fabricate really large tin sheets because the biggest my mom and I can make with her shearing equipment is maybe 3 by 2 feet. With a really big metal support I can emphasize the geometry of the landscape with lines and have color as the backdrop to the drawing.

FORGING AHEAD

How have you evolved professionally as a painter?

A pivotal moment came when I turned 50. I was making good work and showing it, but I didn’t have a gallery or consistent sales. I decided that it was time to stop coasting so I attended a business coaching event hosted by Bridgette Mayer, one of the top gallerists in Philadelphia. I paid my \$200 and sat in the front row, and when she said that she was going to take on five students as a business coach I decided to sign up. It was expensive, but I was going to either stay in one place professionally or try to make something of my career.



Sunset Meditation, oil on panel, 24 x 48 inches

Bridgette came for a studio visit while I was in transition from abstraction to landscape. She wasn’t finding a cohesive idea in the abstractions; then she saw the new landscapes and said, “This is amazing! This is what you need to do.” Her encouragement put me in that direction.

What did you do next?

I had been in group shows, but in the past three years I have signed with three galleries. I put myself out there in a much

more proactive way. Bridgette helped me redefine how I see myself as a successful artist, which gave me the tools to take my art career to the next level.

What is the price range for your work?

I appreciate that art is expensive for many and love the idea of appealing to all levels of collectors. My smallest paintings start at \$185 for just that reason. I recently created a commission that is much larger for \$4,800.

Who has collected your work?

My open studios have created a great network of friends, and friends of friends, who collect my work. My galleries have worked to place pieces in private homes. And local art advisors and designers have been great resources for corporate collectors.

Do you still teach?

I am the only painting and drawing teacher in the Solebury School. I teach beginning,

intermediate, advanced, and AP painting and drawing. We’re the only high school that I know of that offers a nude figure drawing class. I only let kids take it who are super mature and advanced. Some of my kids are applying this year to RISD, Pratt, SVA, Parsons, and Tyler, and it helps that their portfolios include figure drawing, which is unusual. I have a real opportunity to work with my students on their art and to help shape their aspirations, which is a big part of my life. kirbyfredendall.com ♦

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