

Face to Face

A spell of abundance

"Whether I'm painting a piece on my own or a commissioned work, I'm always trying to cast a spell of goodness and plenty around my subjects," says Kathleen Jardine. "I go to my clients' houses and find things that resonate with them or with me. As I paint, the process becomes more associative: One thing calls to another, as it did in *The Barber Sisters* (oil, 50x40).

Photo by Jerry Markatos. Painting collection of Blake and Marina Barber.



Kathleen Jardine reveals secrets of craft and a truth of the heart: There's nothing more enthralling than painting from life.

INTERVIEW WITH
MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD

A signature member of the Watercolor USA Honor Society, Kathleen Jardine was born in Torrance, California, grew up in Oklahoma, and received an MFA from the University of North Carolina. At home in the woods of North Carolina, where she gets from place to place by riding a horse, Jardine took time from her painting and gardening to talk with me.

MB: Let's start by talking about how you became an artist.

KJ: By the time I was 3 or so I was interested in the figure, in drawing a likeness. The first drawing I remember doing was of my mother nude, walking a poodle. I think a lot of our talents and drives are embedded in us in a way that we don't fully understand.

MB: When you went to art school, were you primarily doing representational work?

KJ: Yes. I got an MFA when I was about 40—after I'd already taught myself. I learned to paint by going to museums and looking carefully to try to understand what I was looking at, the magic of it, and I did a lot of reading. Watercolor was my first medium: I had a baby loose in my studio, and watercolor was the least dangerous paint I could expose him to. My son's birth was the real making of me as an artist—the reverse of what most women consider the effect children have. My son has been my main subject. Painting him was a way to know him, to understand what he was, and my compulsion to paint him made me grope my way along technically. During that time, I rarely employed a professional model. I knew and loved all my models [see the portraits of the artist's son, Will (above, right), and of her goddaughter, Lily (on page 38)].

MB: Your recent work is in oil, yet it's luminous. The transparency is still there.

KJ: It must be a work habit taken from watercolor. When my son grew older, I tried to convert to oils and found it very difficult. But between searching through books and museums, I figured out a fairly standard, durable



The artist's son as muse

"I brought Will home from the hospital and went to work—and I've never stopped. I just couldn't take my eyes off him. He was the most astonishing thing I'd ever seen," says Jardine, who worked in watercolor when her son was young and then switched back to oils. "I started using a throw-away paper palette, because cleaning a wooden palette requires using a lot of turpentine, and when you work indoors as I do, the smell can be overwhelming to the other inhabitants." Here is *Be Saved by Free Love* (oil, 40x40).

approach to using oils and canvas. I use a limited palette of Utrecht oils: titanium or zinc white; cadmium yellow light; alizarin crimson; quinacridone violet; French ultramarine and phthalo blues; phthalo green; yellow ochre; and raw and burnt siennas. Beginning painters especially benefit from using a limited palette. There's a big enough mess going on with just 11 pigments! I use a conventional medium of four parts turpentine to one part stand oil. I got to work once with Janet Fish, who told me to avoid damar in the medium because it's the source of surface failure. I use damar for the final varnish, though: It smells so delicious.

MB: How do you achieve that luminous surface?

KJ: Glazing! I admire *alla prima* painting, but I can't do it. Vincent van Gogh is a good example of an *alla prima* painter; he appears to have gotten what he wanted in one pass. I'm a glazer—an endless reworker. I love a complex,

An interior filled with light



1 Sketching the elements. I first drew all the furniture and architectural elements in a little 5x4 sketch using graphite. Then I placed my models. Sketching the scene before the models arrive saves time. I drew a box above the cat that I'd fill in later. I knew I wanted to copy an etching that shows Hannibal crossing the Rhone on his way to the Alps.



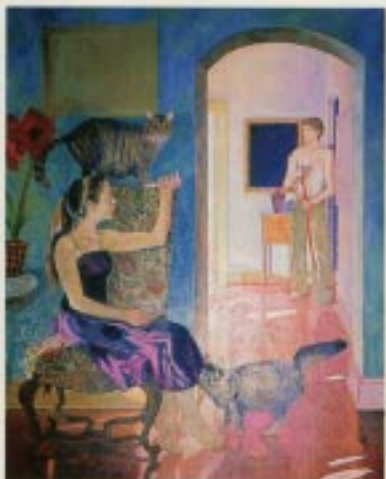
2 Using a grid. I concentrated on making sure the drawing was accurate. I used a Sharpie marker to make a 1-inch grid on Visqueen (transparent plastic sheeting). I laid the grid over the sketch. I then snapped a 1-inch grid on a 5x4-foot canvas that I'd already prepared with acrylic gesso. Next I transferred my sketch with a sanguine Conté crayon.



3 Starting with the darks. I use Daniel Smith's filbert brushes; I like Utrecht oils in small tubes. I began laying in my darkest color values—but got carried away with the floor shadows and reflections because the light was changing with the season. I eventually broke down and shot some photographs.



4 Glazing. I continued to work on the dark values in the closer room. I often use a green for the ground, but here it's Mars violet. At this point, I planned the lighter values that would lead the viewer's eye through the doorway. I continued to apply glazes, using a medium of four parts turpentine to one part stand oil.



5 Corrections and meditations. I tried to straighten my anatomical errors and reconcile the lighting so that it would seem to come from distinct sources. By this time, I'd been at work for seven weeks, and the light had changed so dramatically that it was hard to decide what to do with the mirror that would end up as a reflection behind the male figure.

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Photo by Jerry Markowitz

6 Not really finished. I tied up the surface detail and, because I had a show deadline, sent the painting to the photographer. Otherwise, I'd probably work on the picture for the rest of my life. I try not to inform a viewer as to what anything in a painting means; I think a painting's power is in its mystery and strangeness. I will say this, however: *Hannibal Crosses Into the Alps* (oil, 60x48) came about when I looked up an etching I loved in two encyclopedias and was annoyed to see that neither encyclopedia attributed the work to its artist.

built-up, reworked surface, where there are thick and thin passages of paint, and places, too, where the ground is still visible.

MB: *Glazing and reglazing seem related to working from life in that they take a lot of time.*

KJ: It takes me about 20 hours of looking at a living person to get a feeling for and a likeness of her or him. Sittings are about two hours long. Over what can easily be 10 or more sessions, sitters fall easily into the psychotherapy model. They talk more and more revealingly about themselves. I have to caution sitters for commissioned portraits to take care of what they tell me because I involuntarily paint it! Whether or not the sitter becomes indiscreet, he or she becomes dramatically warmer and more complex in that span of time. This evolution is what interests me in portraiture. I like to watch the painting become alive and intimate and complicated.

MB: *You told me once that painting is a process of association—one thing calls another.*

JK: Commissioned paintings are highly collaborative in that way: The subject plays a role by helping me fill the space around him or her with photographs, books or antiques—recondite, soulful things that they offer me with a touching diffidence. I always tell my sitters, “I throw in animals for free.” My sense of reality is more sociological than psychological; an individual is most understandable to me in a cultural context.

MB: *Your commissioned portraits are just as lively and intricate as your other paintings.*

JK: Usually I come to love my commissioned subjects. Screening is important in commissioned portraits because a good portrait is of someone who's likable, interesting and smart. I've learned that the very act of sitting brings out the best in people. I ask them how they understand themselves, how they want to be understood hundreds of years from now. These thoughts shine from their faces as they sit for me.

MB: *Artists who don't make their living by teaching often object to photographing their painting in stages, so you surprised me when you told me you'd be glad to send the progress of a work.*

KJ: I love step-by-step progressions! I love them because it's encouraging to see how artists make mistakes and still pull off the painting. I'd rather talk about technique than content. I think a lot of artists avoid any documentation of their process because they want to obscure the fact that they're copying photos, or projecting and tracing slides.

MB: *So it's often an illusion that the artist is working from life?*

KJ: I probably know a couple of dozen artists who avoid letting anyone see how they actually work. They hide their projectors! I've seen a

number of books and magazine articles that never divulge that the artist is a photorealist who's trying to pass his work off as being from life. I've also seen some really sublime paintings made with projected slides and photos, and have even given prizes to some of them when I jury shows. But a lot of the genre is true to its technical roots in advertising and billboard-making. Having said all that, I have to use photos, too, sometimes. I don't like it, but people can't always sit for 20 hours for me.

MB: Tell me more about your training—or lack of it.

KJ: When I was in college, I tried to transfer into the art department and the department head asked why. "I want to learn to paint and draw," I said. The guy laughed, propped his cowboy boots up on his desk and said, "Go somewhere else! Painting and drawing are over." I wound up mostly teaching myself. I admire neoclassical works by artists who've been trained in an atelier and I really don't know how to do it.

MB: But you do something equally wonderful.

KJ: I think that distinctive styles develop as a series of default attempts to do something else. Very few people whose work is peculiar in some way could produce a classical piece. But they actually are trying! We're all trying. Did

you ever read a little book on 20th-century sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti [*Giacometti: A Biography* by James Lord (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, out of print)]? It's a wonderful book. Throughout it, Giacometti is practically weeping, saying, "If I could only paint!"

MB: That's similar to what Monsieur Louis Bertin, who was sitting for his famous portrait, said of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres: "He used to weep. I continually had to comfort him."

KJ: Criminy! It's really hopeless if even Ingres thought he couldn't paint. An artist trying to work today within this very confusing area—the tradition of the masters—is up against a lot. On the one hand the tradition was lost and on the other hand it was rejected [by the Impressionists and subsequent expressionist painters], because it was suffocating. So I think that artists today pinball between those two things.

MB: Your surface is less painterly than it is a series of brilliant passages of clear color, yet you paint on canvas rather than on wood.

KJ: My husband builds my supports, which are made with a 2x2 fir frame and cross bracing; 3/8-inch plywood is attached to the frame and drilled out in a pattern for ventilation. I apply coats of polyurethane to both sides of the support, sand the surface and stretch the canvas, stapling the back. I use this kind of support to prevent the greatest insult to a painting, which is being punctured in the back. Then I apply acrylic gesso with a big plasterboard knife so the gesso is pressed hard into the canvas.

I sand after the first coat of gesso and again after the second and final coat. I also gesso the sides of the stretchers my husband makes. [Remember, the staples are on the back.] These canvases can be shown unframed because the sides look good. Then I lay down a neutral ground; one of my favorite grounds is Mars violet. I like a green made of Prussian blue and ochre, as well. [See the painting demonstration on pages 36-37.]

MB: You do a fairly complete drawing in graphite and then transfer it onto the canvas?

KJ: I usually transfer, grid to grid, a drawing that I've made of the major elements of the painting, so I don't have a perspective war to fight for months—the way I used to when I started painting without having done any preparatory drawings. The drawing and the canvas are proportional. If the canvas is 4x5 feet, the drawing is 4x5 inches. I make a 1-inch grid on Visqueen plastic film and lay it over the drawing. And then on the canvas, I snap a corresponding 1-foot grid with a chalk box. Then I transfer the drawing to the canvas with a Conté stick.

The radiant child

"I like classical *vanitas* [the genre of still life painting that reminds the viewer that death is imminent] subjects like flowers and fruit because I'm so relentlessly aware of the brevity of our tenure here," says Jardine. "I also just like flowers: I'm a gardener. Lily is my goddaughter; I ride my horse through the woods over to her house. Lily would often sit for me for hours when she was young. Here is Lily in Summer (oil, 40x40)."





Painting domestic peace

"An object can represent whole realms to me, as Japanese Ukiyo-e [paintings of the floating world] once represented my former life in a San Francisco Buddhist community," says Jardine. "Chinese Carpet (at left; oil, 8x6) shows a rug I treasure; that picture and Quiet Portal II (below; oil, 20x16) are part of a series meant to be shown together, as they're quiet meditations on tranquility and light."

Classical painting technique next prescribes making a *grisaille* underpainting, working from dark to light on a middle value ground. I periodically work this way as a sort of tune-up, but generally I rush into the color—trying to work from dark to light, while matching color to value. This rational approach usually falls apart in the emotional cascade released by the act of painting. One idea summons the next and I start sticking things in, willy-nilly. Painting isn't an act of reason; it's more like reading an omen or an augury, the way the ancient Greeks read the entrails of a bird.

MB: You were and still are a great encyclopedia reader. As a child you had five sets. How are painting, reading and looking at pictures related?

KJ: The heart of what I do is sitting and staring at things. It creates a kind of brain activity that's probably a lot like dreaming. It's like alpha waves, and it just makes me happy to sit and try to understand what I'm looking at as a painter, but I sometimes fail and have to use photographs. I didn't in the beginning. And it really wasn't until 10 years ago that I learned how to use a camera in a way that I could get something useful from a photograph. I don't think my paintings now are any better than they were a long time ago. Some Impressionist artist said, "We don't finish a painting. We just give up."

MB: Part of being a good artist is being painfully aware of the masterpieces of the tradition; then you have to keep painting anyway. That's not always easy.

KJ: Most of us, I think, operate with a grab bag of learning disabilities and we have a few things that appear to make us seem smart, but we're actually just jumping around our handicaps.



MB: You're really placing your work in the continuum of the history of art, whereas some artists put more emphasis on the here and now of having a career and seeking some measure of fame.

KJ: I've had very little talent for promoting myself. That's a different job from making art. I consider it the most splendid stroke of luck that anyone ever liked anything I made enough to give me money for it; I couldn't help making it, and I could have been born at a time when no one at all liked it.

MB: When I first saw your paintings, I was impressed by the sense of abundance. You typically placed the figure in an interior and then filled the space with actual objects like flowers and fruits



Collection Lisa and Ben Lavange

Nothing is incidental

Working within the allegorical tradition of Balthus and Edward Hopper, Jardine uses elements that have cultural resonance in *Lee and Kate Lavange* (oil, 49x49). In this commissioned piece, Jardine exemplifies what Robert Henri, in *The Art Spirit*, advised portrait painters to do: "Everything on the canvas—hair, coat, background, chair—should help express your idea of the subject's character." Here, the lacrosse stick tells something about the subjects' lives, and the reproduction of Renoir's portrait of two sisters at the piano (above the cat in the middle of the painting) is a visual echo of the painting it's in.

MB: *It must be lovely to sit in the middle of a light-filled room and paint it. It's an experience, which is different from looking at a photograph.*

KJ: I want direct experience; I don't want to mediate my experience with a screen or a lens. I'm afraid of a culture that unreflectingly substitutes the virtual for the actual.

and with fragments of images culled from the history of art. The newest work I've seen is different. There are interiors but the focus is on the light and often there are no people.

KJ: I've just gone through a transition in my life. While you're changing, you're trying to pay attention and you don't know what your retrospective history is going to be. I used to paint in the midst of chaos, because I had a young son and I couldn't close the door on visitors. My life has become more serene as I've gotten older. The new paintings aren't crammed with every detail possible—what I used to like to do—and I don't think I'll ever return to that.

MB: *You don't have a TV.*

KJ: I don't even know how to watch one. I spend a lot of time walking through the woods and poking things with a stick.

MB: *Your paintings are obsessive, but what I love about them is that they're not dark. They're filled with light and joy.*

KJ: I love to think of the poem "Sunday Morning." I think of Wallace Stevens sitting at his desk in some skyscraper and just trancing out.

MB: *Instead of thinking about insurance! Your life doesn't seem to be split that way; your art and your life are continuous.*

KJ: For a couple of decades it was as if I set up my easel in a train station and just painted the swirl of arrivals and departures. Life is quieter now; my paintings are quieter, too. I want to continue just peering at things. It's obvious that a lot of what goes on in my work is in my head. A lot of it is like taking dictation. There's a trancelike state that I live in to be a painter. A lot of what I do is not literal, in spite of my looking closely at things. ♦



About the Artist

KATHLEEN JARDINE's works in oil and in watercolor are part of important museum, private and corporate collections all over the country. To see more of her paintings and to read more about her, visit her Web site at www.kathleenjardine.net.

MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD is senior editor for *The Artist's Magazine*.