

# Kevin Cook

## WHEN THE SOUL DANCES



It's about inspiration. It's also about preservation. It's about lauding the landscape in its natural state with the hope others will agree to keep it that way.

This is part of the philosophy of Kevin Cook whose art hangs like the beating heart of the wilderness.

"It was actually the English artist John Constable that first grabbed me," said Cook of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century artist that inspired Thomas Cole who in turn founded the Hudson River School of Art.

"One of the things he insisted upon was studying clouds and cloud formations. He did many, many studies of clouds to the point where, in relation to painting, he even called the sky the 'Chief organ of sentiment.' He felt it was the sky that would define how the painting should be seen and what the mood of it was. That was always something that grabbed me, that somebody else saw skies the way I did."

From there it was a progression toward the Hudson River School of Art and the painters that made the wilderness such an appealing subject. But here Cook adds a bit of a twist.

"Some of their romantic notions were that they wanted to paint from nature," Cook explained, "but they also saw this unspoiled wilderness as a source of endless bounty, and that it was something that was God's gift to us. We had this huge new continent that was all wilderness and we could take whatever we wanted from it. That helped spread the idea of Manifest Destiny in the 1800's. Now, however, it seems to have come around a little bit. Well, for me anyway. Though I'm still painting in that style, now it seems to be about preserving what bounty we still have. And using it as wisely as we can. So, it becomes more of an environmentalist approach now."

It was an art teacher, Barbara Lane, who first awakened the artist in the boy.

"Early on I had a childhood art teacher whom I adored, who encouraged me to follow my own vision," he said of Lane. "We're still friends today."

Though he jumped on his vision and enrolled in a SUNY college to become an art teacher, it was the art professors' penchant for abstract expressionism that nearly killed the artist in Cook.

"I think they just felt there wasn't any room for anything else to be expressed, so they kept telling me that landscape was dead and what did I want to be doing this for," Cook said. "They almost beat it out of me. I didn't paint for about five years after I got out of college."



*Clockwise from upper Left: The artist at work outside his upstate NY home. 'Fly Away Home' (30 x 40), 'Catskill Farmland' (12 x 16), 'Eden's Gate' (24 x 36) 'Kaaterskill Falls' (24 x 18); all oil on canvas.*

Happily, the influence of Barbara Lane was stronger. After a stint of five years teaching art to elementary school students, Cook proceeded to the Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz to teach art and to paint. He would take the guests to the actual sites on the grounds that hosted earlier artists, such as those from the Hudson River School of Art. This is where his love for nature and the immediate local landscape grew.

"I think that really honed my skill an awful lot. I had to learn to how it is they worked and painted because impressionism came afterwards and that's kind of paramount in most people's minds, doing whole painting from start to finish, having this whole direct representation of what they had seen, and creating their impression of it using paint very roughly. And yet, the Hudson River School didn't do any of that. They believed very strongly that it was important to go outside and sketch from nature because that is how one knew God – to draw from nature. And so, they would do drawings outside and the occasional color study, but they felt, as do I, that the painting process itself needed to take place at a distance. They would return to their studios and combine these sketches and drawing and ideas and create the larger, elevated landscape from that. And the idea, the romantic notion, was to filter what you've seen through memory so that you create that sense of romantic longing for this kind of slightly idealized landscape. And their idea, too, was to not try and have their own hand show at all in the

painting. I try to do that too, meaning that the brush work should be very subdued and that you should allow the image itself to come forward instead of your brush work from doing it, so that there's not the individual showing."

He is one of those fortunate souls who can be an artist and pay his bills at the same time. His paintings are becoming increasingly popular and enable him to devote time to his art.

"I feel really blessed in a way because there are so many people making really wonderful art that does not get appreciated, and yet I guess that there is just this neat kind of congruence that what I like to paint, people want on their walls. It's really amazing to me."

Cook said that he tries to imbue his paintings with his own spirituality and to show the sky as symbolic of heaven and a source of light in our lives.

"I tend to want to show these moments of light breaking through, so there's often a very dark shadowy foreground and then a light filled sky to accentuate this path toward the light we are taking."

True art, for Cook, should elevate. But, it can elevate in any number of ways. It can provoke, make one angry or be controversial.

"My bent is toward beauty and showing that. I am truly a romantic along those lines."

His lines can be viewed at the Windham Fine Arts Gallery, Windham, NY. For further info please call 518-734-6850. Or visit [www.windhamfinearts.com](http://www.windhamfinearts.com) CMR