

Glimpses of the Extraordinary

Andre Kohn conjures curiosity and wonder from everyday moments

BY ELIZABETH L. DELANEY



COUPLES WALKING, a woman reading, children playing: these are the moments that exist largely as background noise in daily life. These are also the scenes that painter Andre Kohn savors—the slices of life in which he finds spirit and meaning. “I’m seeking my own unique, poetic interpretation of the moment,” says Kohn of his work. “I’m striving to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.”

Kohn himself has led what most would consider an extraordinary life. He spent his early years on one side of the world, then gave up life as he knew it to embrace the ideals of a new culture. His personal and professional achievements embody the American dream, but so, too, do they emblemize the desire to realize one’s voice by finding a passion for creativity and seizing it.

BORN AND RAISED in southern Russia near the Caspian Sea, Kohn grew up in a highly creative environment, encouraged by his parents to draw, paint, and sculpt freely. (He was even allowed to draw on the wallpaper.) His mother and father both had a background in education and realized the importance of helping a child find his or her voice.

“Music and art were everywhere,” he says of his boyhood. In addition to creating his own work, he fondly remembers helping his father carve jewelry and other gifts for his mother.

Kohn and his parents nurtured his passion for art throughout his childhood, and at the age of 15, he apprenticed in the studios of several noted Russian Impressionist and realist painters. The young artist was also a distinguished athlete and trained as a marksman on a trajectory toward the Olympics. However, by the time he turned 16, his drive to pursue “the never-ending creative process” won out. Kohn knew beyond any doubt that he wanted to become a professional artist.

Kohn embarked on his higher education at the University of Moscow, where he earned a coveted spot in the school’s prestigious and highly competitive fine-arts program. However, in his third year of university, Kohn experienced a major geographic and cultural-paradigm shift. His father, then a high-ranking member of the Russian army, was invited to participate in the first international post-Cold War officer-exchange program, which consisted of a yearlong stint at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, AL. In 1992, while Kohn was visiting his parents in the United States, his father announced their intention to remain in the country, thereby setting the family on a new course. Kohn wasted no time embracing his vastly changed life. He enrolled in the art program at Auburn University at Montgomery after becoming the first recipient of the International Peace Scholarship there. He went on to earn his bachelor of fine arts degree three years later.

After moving to the United States, Kohn held a variety of jobs to make ends meet—including house cleaner, picture framer, and car salesman—all while building his portfolio. He moved to Arizona in 2000, intrigued by the geography, climate, and ethos of the American West, especially its vast landscapes, horse and ranch operations, and Native American sites. He painted those themes for a while but eventually found that he had taken the subject matter as far as he could. At that point Kohn fully embraced his current brand of fig-



▲ **Watching the Herd**, oil, 20 x 19.

◀ **Morning on the Beach**, oil, 17 x 17.

urative work, which ultimately would provide him with a broader, more challenging set of creative possibilities.

KOHN’S ARTISTIC influences include Russian painters Nicolai Fechin, Valentin Serov, and Filipp Malyavin, as well as John Singer Sargent, Eugène Carrière, and Edgar Degas. He has been most influenced over the years by Fechin, whom he describes as a master of his own voice, able to expand on his classical background to create his own language of interpretation in both substance and technique. Ultimately, this is what Kohn strives to do in his own work: to elevate his visual vocabulary and fundamental aesthetic elements, all the while infusing his unique viewpoint



representation

Andre Kohn Fine Art, Scottsdale, AZ; **Heritage Gallery West**, Paso Robles, CA; **Westminster Gallery**, Harrogate, UK; **Mary Martin Gallery of Fine Art**, Charleston, SC; **Jones & Terwilliger Galleries**, Carmel and Palm Desert, CA; **Waterhouse Gallery**, Santa Barbara, CA; **Howard/Mandville Gallery**, Kirkland, WA; **Joe Wade Fine Arts**, Santa Fe, NM; **Shaw Gallery**, Naples, FL.

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into each piece of art he makes.

Lifelong learning is important to Kohn, who remains eager to observe and study with other artists even in light of his own professional success. “It’s important for artists to learn from each other,” he says. “If I thought I could learn something new, I would follow an artist wherever he or she taught.” To that end, he has studied at France’s Studio Escalier and has also taken many classes at the Scottsdale Artists’ School. Kohn loves to travel as well and frequently finds source material for his artwork during his explorations. Among the various places he has visited around the world, he cites France as his favorite, and he plans to return this summer to garner additional inspiration.

Kohn’s intense desire to learn dovetails into his painting process nicely, as he continually strives to hone his technique. He often learns from the “happy accidents” that may initially appear as mistakes but eventually allow him to break the rules just enough to push his creative edge. He believes this part of the process is not simply beneficial but crucial, so that an artist can move beyond basic craftsmanship and toward more complex, advanced work that projects a distinctive voice.

Kohn’s artwork exhibits a high degree of tangibility—the embodiment of his physical and intellectual exploration of materials. “I’m in love with the idea of having a blank, white canvas,” says Kohn, who relishes the endless potential within each unmarked area. “It’s all about the process for me. I love the smell of the studio, the feel of the brush in my hand, applying the paint to the canvas. And in the end, it’s an incredible feeling to see my work on someone’s wall,” he says.

Kohn refers to his painting style

as “contemporary figurative expressionism.” Propelled by dynamic, gestural brushwork and lush coloration, his compositions harness the energy of a singular, often quiet, moment in time. Heady textures and layers of pigment combine to create a tactility that pervades each canvas. In fact, one of Kohn’s signature structural elements is his preparation of each surface. He layers modeling paste onto the blank canvas before he ever makes a mark, thereby creating an intrinsically dimensional composition. Such a process makes the texture part of the painting itself, not simply a visual overlay.

Always interested in challenging himself artistically, Kohn finds figuration the most stimulating in terms of style and subject matter. “The human figure is simultaneously the most simple and complex subject matter to work with,” he says, referring to the “infinite gestures” to be found observing people in their natural states.

Profoundly inspired by French Impressionism, Kohn places much of his compositional focus on the many visual facets achieved through color interaction and light play. He keeps a tight rein on his palette, working with no more than eight colors at a time. This practice allows the artist to explore the complexities of each color, while also maintaining an intimate focus on the subject. He works in simple narratives that extract extraordinary aspects from ordinary life, offering intimate glimpses into the journeys we all take. His compositions have a universal quality, void of a specific time or place and accessible to a wide range of viewers. “My paintings are light,” he remarks. “They are simply about moments in everyday life.”

At the same time, Kohn’s paintings conjure elements of curiosity and wonder. A woman seen from behind



Retail Therapy Series #25, oil, 36 x 12.



Leaving Marseille, oil, 19 x 12.



Sisters Series #6, oil, 24 x 14.

walking in the rain, a man with a cane paused on the sidewalk, or a couple gliding across the dance floor all evoke a sense of comfortable intrigue—their stories are ambiguous, yet most viewers can relate. Kohn often hides his subjects’ faces, and when visible, they remain obscured, allowing the artist to retain that sense of mystery. He leaves their stories open-ended—full of the potential energy he loves and primed to begin a visual conversation between viewer and painting.

“I find the creative process magical, even therapeutic,” remarks Kohn, who considers the ability to express oneself creatively of paramount importance in attaining true fulfillment. “You can

achieve anything you want with hard work,” he says. “Whatever you do, fall in love with it. Make it your own. Learn as much as possible. That’s how you make a success of it.” And that’s exactly what Kohn has done.

Today, nine galleries on both coasts and in the United Kingdom carry Kohn’s work. He has a robust commission business as well. He further expanded his role in the art world in 2014 when he opened Andre Kohn Fine Art in Scottsdale. “I had been marinating in the industry so long, I felt like I knew enough about it that I could run my own gallery,” he says. “I wanted to promote other artists, both well known and emerging.” His gallery

currently represents 10 artists.

Kohn’s life and career have been chronicled in a monograph titled *Andre Kohn: The Endless World of a Moment*, which was published in 2012 and is now slated for a second printing. The new editions will be available in September. ❖

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See more of Kohn’s work at www.southwestart.com/featured/kohn-a-aug2016.