

Making Marks: **Kevin McGraw**

New Works 2007

Paintings by Kevin McGraw

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Kevin McGraw draws near the canvas, he paints on a vast surface that often spans nearly six by six

feet, wide as the Midwestern plains and expansive as the sky. His work is abstract, but the ideas within each painting are near tangible forms fighting for position on the canvas. The shapes seize territory, colors stretch and drip and assemble into muscular patterns. You Tube reveals two large cylindrical shapes, separated yet connected by a thin line of yellow. Whether it is a cable, pipeline,

human limb, or product of your imagination, the tenuous connection against a cold field of blue makes a chilling statement.

Swoop is a bold, feisty composition that barely contains the movement suggested in the title. Elemental colors of red, yellow, and green whirl like an ambulance racing around a bend. The kinetic flow of the overriding yellow swoop is held in check by a circular wheel of green not quite

read to remain still.

And so the works continue, demonstrating McGraw's command of color from vivid to subdued palettes and his penchant for thrusting paint on the canvas with deliberation. Whether using dynamic strokes or delicate lines, he employs sharp angles, loose organic forms, controlled drips, veering swipes, rectangular blocks, and fluid curves. McGraw makes his mark through the complement and contrast of broad, contemplative fields of paint, such careful achievements, and the go-go action of post-modern existence in relentless pursuit of leisure. These works are somewhere between motion and stillness, wild and tamed, urban and natural, man-made marks and primal instincts. Each painting is a formal restraint in size that struggle to contain the ideas expressed.

Kevin McGraw kneels on the floor of his studio perched above The Newsroom, a classic Midtown

dive bar he owns that was formerly known as Kenny's Newsroom. Getting into the second-floor studio involves passage through a door on the first floor, leaving behind the near-physical imprint of smoke and tall tales hanging in the air, traversing through narrow hallways and up a stairwell, and finally entering into bright chambers of light. It makes sense that an artist would choose this sunlit aerie overlooking the gritty street flow of Broadway. The natural illumination serves McGraw well as he paints on massive canvases that seize attention with bold brush strokes and kinetic fields of color. He wears a white, long-sleeved shirt and painter's pants splattered with pigments as if Jackson Pollock had tested designs for abstract tattoos on the garments. The bangs of McGraw's steely gray hair cascade down his forehead as his intense eyes scan the painting on the barren floor. His hand clutches a brush loaded with paint and then he descends on the canvas like a falcon spotting a target. McGraw makes his mark with a decisive, fluid stroke that suggests instinct, experience, and experimental spirit working in conjunction. As a local artist with nearly two decades of exhibited work and involvement in the Kansas City-

Lawrence art community, McGraw has made his mark many times over.

For the past five years, Gallery No. 8 has been one of the first art spaces on the east end of 18th Street to show work by emerging and established artists as an alternative to better known venues. Past shows have featured the work of Megan Lynch, Paul Randall, Damian Carillo, and established artists like Stretch. “We helped young artists get good exposure who couldn’t exhibit in bigger spaces,” says McGraw, “like lithographer Laura Isaac, painter Chris Davis, and gems like Guinotte Wise, who now has metal sculptural work at the Hilliard Gallery. Laura is one of the best litho print makers around.”

Joined by The Late Show Gallery owned by Tom Deatherage and Zone Gallery, owned by Stretch, McGraw’s gallery has extended the eastern boundaries of the Crossroads Arts District. These galleries have attracted an audience seeking critical and innovative work for serious consideration rather than for passive visual consumption typical of First Friday passersby.
Gallery

No. 8’s first exhibit featured graffiti artists that painted on wood and artist demand for the space grew immediately. “We were booked for the first two years after we opened,” says McGraw. In 2002, Denise became pregnant with Shea within a few months of the couple’s acquisition of the building. Before the real estate purchase, the couple had tried to have a child for a couple of years to no avail. “When I found out about the pregnancy, I was half-scared and half-excited,” says McGraw. “I thought to myself, ‘What are we going to do?’”

These two major events, a pending birth and the practicalities of living downtown with a child, were not necessarily mutually exclusive for the first few years. The couple decided to remain in the Crossroads and raise their daughter. “It’s a great place, super quiet and not crime ridden. People need to see the energy of the area,” says McGraw.

He recalls the art parties and community events in the early days. “The house we moved from at 56th and Locust had burned down. So, we joked that we moved from one fire to the next,” says McGraw. The former fire station turned gallery remained a sentimental favorite for local firefighters that dropped by to visit. When the gallery opened, McGraw held a party and an unofficial contest to see if people could get in and out of a fireman’s gear in less than twenty seconds. “Guests had a great time. It was madcap,” he says. “That doesn’t happen in neighborhoods now. I’ll really miss the energy and fun.”

Now that Shea is growing older and more active, the parents want to provide a yard for their growing daughter to play in and also want to consider future schooling options. The building remains for sale and the gallery will serve as exhibition space for McGraw’s retrospective for the time being.