



Keith Jacobshagen

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Keith Jacobshagen

The following interview between Keith Jacobshagen and Melissa Rountree took place in January 1993.

MR *Your art training was in design. When and how did you begin painting?*

KJ I actually began painting – like many people do – as a kid, and even though I studied design, I was painting during my time in school. I didn't begin to respond to painting in a really personal, revelatory way until my senior year at the Kansas City Art Institute when I took a drawing class from Bill Fuhri, who taught in the night school. His seriousness of purpose and his attitude toward making marks was extraordinary to me. I was introduced to something that seemed to go beyond just teaching and into another realm, perhaps you might call it the realm of the "other." It conjured up emotions in me that made me decide to take painting seriously. In graduate school at the University of Kansas, although I was there to study illustration, I pursued painting in classes with Robert Sudlow. Bob got me to go outside and work directly from the landscape.

MR *In an interview in 1988, you stated, "I want there to be a kind of balance between a sense of formal exploration and at the same time a kind of metaphysical and spiritual exploration."¹ Would you discuss the formal aspects of your painting?*

KJ One thing that most artists come to understand is that before a painting is a landscape or a still life or a portrait, it is also a sum of parts that are about shape and color. The success of any work depends upon its formal abstract dynamics – shape, color, positive-negative space and the arrangement of these elements on the picture plane. These things inform and elaborate on the subject matter and give a painting its energy. When my paintings work, they work at a level that is consciously formal. I also hope that the images go a step further into some kind of spiritual realm, but I can't be guaranteed of that. That's a kind of romantic wish on my part. If people come to a painting and they respond in a very positive way, then I think that they respond both to the formal dynamics of the painting as well as the subject. Let us hope they'll have some kind of emotional experience with the painting that will go beyond words and beyond some kind of intellectual explanation. I suppose that it has something to do with the spiritual aspect of it. I don't know if spiritual is the right word for it.

MR *Then it would be appropriate to say that you hope to evoke responses from the viewer on a metaphorical or spiritual level as well?*

KJ There are times when I read the paintings in the most practical way and I believe that they are simply about seeing the light falling across a space in the landscape in the late afternoon. I know that there are also times when I understand that a painting is about my relationship with my wife, the memory of a lover, memories of flying with my father when I was a kid or conversations with various people. The paintings have to be about my life. I wouldn't be interested in them if they were only documenting the landscape. They have to go beyond that. Landscape is about geography and topography. On another level, it becomes a metaphor for other things that I don't always understand. People have their own sort of symbiosis with a painting. They bring their ideas about metaphor in a painting to me. Sometimes I'm amazed that I hadn't thought about what they see, although what they've seen is very natural. I wonder why I didn't recognize that. To a degree, I'm an old-fashioned painter and not a modernist painter when I talk this way. I don't want the painting to be only about itself. I want it to be something more. I aspire to that. I'm not always sure exactly how I reach it and sometimes I'm not absolutely sure that I reach it at all. For me, the painting is about

geography and metaphor, but it is also about autobiography. It's about those moments in my life when I'm making the painting. The autobiography of my life goes into the painting, but it's not necessarily there for people to read as they would read a book.

MR *In the 1988 interview you said, "One of the extraordinary things that happens when you're painting, if you're lucky, is that you make a kind of breakthrough into a state of grace at times. That doesn't happen very often, but it happens sometimes. And at the end of it, you sit back in a state of sublime exhaustion and you say to yourself, 'I don't know exactly what happened, but something very extraordinary happened.'"² Would you discuss this aspect of your work?*

KJ That's not something that I consciously aim for. If I did, it would scare me to death and I wouldn't make anything. I am interested in the formal structure of how I make these things, but I'm not interested in a ruthless, systematic, programmed involvement. I don't have any set of rules – I just work. I shift things around; I alter color and light. At the same time that I'm adjusting these things and moving them around, I also let myself go with the painting. Occasionally, other things happen while I'm painting where I'm in a sort of state that is such a charged place to be, but it can only come out of work. I can't do it any other way. It rarely happens at the beginning of a painting. It happens along midpoint when I've done a lot of physical work and I'm somewhat tired and maybe slightly irritable and maybe starting to lose patience. Suddenly something happens – it may be the way in which I make a stroke of paint. It may be something just so small that I can't even consciously tell you what it is. But it happens. To a certain extent, it's like a long-distance runner who comes up to the "wall" and either breaks through the wall and finishes the marathon or doesn't. That happens to me in making the painting. The paintings always have the most incredibly delicate balance between success and failure. It's the most interesting when it reaches that state. I can either go too far with it and court ruin or not go far enough. When I sit astride success and ruin, that's when it seems to be working at its best because of the tension. It's like a riddle being solved, and yet at the end when I solve it, I'm not really sure how I solved it. I guess I don't want to know too much about it.

MR *Your earlier landscapes were painted on location. When and why did you move back to the studio?*

KJ When I first started painting directly from the source in 1966, I thought I would never come back into the studio again. The countryside was my studio. I tried to become immersed in the landscape and somehow make something of that. It was a very exciting experience. I worked directly from the source from 1966 to 1978. Occasionally during that time, I would try to make a painting in the studio, and it never seemed to work. Standing before the landscape and nature encouraged me to make the paintings. I was not capable of going back into the studio and working from imagination. By 1977 or 1978, I began to feel that working from the source was becoming a kind of tyranny. I had to get away from the landscape to see it clearly. By painting part of a canvas outside and part of it in the studio, I could be more involved in the formal aspects of things. So, about 1977 or 1978, I began making paintings that were from memory, but I was also bringing paintings in from out-of-doors and using them for studies in the studio. I discovered that when I was in the studio, I had a greater freedom to imagine, to change color and to alter things that I would not have done if I had been looking at them directly.

MR *Do the post-1978 paintings represent a synthesis of the real and the ideal?*

KJ Yes, I think that's what I would call it. Also, I came to feel very strongly about what I call the patina of memory. The difference



Dog Days, Platte Valley, 1989, oil on canvas, 44" x 100", Collection Kansas City Art Institute, Mary and Crosby Kemper Collection
Gift of the R.C. Kemper Charitable Trust and Foundation

between direct observation and direct observation combined with memory began to interest me. Memory gets wonderfully cluttered and builds layer upon layer of experience and idea. What is done in the studio is not necessarily the "ideal" but is something removed from the direct source of observation. In the studio, the activity of painting itself becomes as important as the activity of observing the landscape when I'm outside. Outside, I didn't feel free to alter or to leave out or to invent. I still go out four or five times a week and I draw or make watercolors. Most of the oil-on-canvas work is done in the studio and much of it addresses this idea of observation and memory – bringing a lot of things together at once in one format or image.

MR *There are several of your journals included in the exhibition. How do they relate to your work?*

KJ The journals relate a great deal to my paintings. Oftentimes, when I'm working on a painting in the studio, I'm referring back to journals. I have also made paintings in the studio that came from reading things in my journals. In fact, due to the recent intense cold, I haven't been able to stay out for long periods of time to work. But one thing that I do is write in my journals when I get back from the country, and I've written several passages that are going to end up being paintings because the words that I wrote are so rich to me that they literally conjure up images in my head. Sometimes, when I'm working on a painting in the studio and I've come to a point where the energy of the painting and my energy for making the painting seem to be subsiding, it's not at all unusual for me to go back and look through my journals. I look at the little paintings that I make in my journals and read what I've written and sort of energize myself to continue the painting. The journals are a part of the process.

MR *Which painters have influenced your work?*

KJ When I began studying painting seriously, I looked at 17th century Dutch landscape paintings and the 19th century English painters John Constable and J.M.W. Turner. I constantly look back at American painters Frederick Church, Albert Pinkham Ryder and Martin Johnson Heade. In the 20th century, I have a great affection for people like Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, John Marin and Arthur Dove. Even more contemporary is Wolf Kahn, who made a deep impression on me and encouraged me to continue to work.

Some people might be surprised to discover that I have looked at a lot of people like Willem DeKooning, Mark Rothko and Frank Stella.

MR *How do you see your work in terms of landscape painting in this century?*

KJ I certainly feel a kinship with many contemporary painters, although I don't have a lot of contact with them. In a way, I chose to live in Nebraska because there is a certain kind of sublime isolation here that I really like. I believe that one can be as sophisticated about what's going on while living in Lincoln as one can be living in New York. I feel I'm just a part of this long history of people who have paid attention to the landscape and made it a catalyst and excuse for making a painting, which is what subject is really all about. We all find something that somehow works in a kind of close symbiosis with our fears and our needs and our desires and our concepts, and we use that in some way as a catalyst for making paintings. In my case, it's the landscape because I feel that it has a very broad representation, almost a kind of international understanding. Everyone can relate to it. Some people would find that to be a negative, but I think it is very positive. I appreciate what other people are doing, and I have enormous respect for those people who have come before me and sort of built the road, who have stuck to it. I think specifically of people who have come before me in the last 50 years, during the raging Abstract Expressionist movement – during a time when Clement Greenberg was almost like Joseph McCarthy. If you didn't follow his dictation, you just weren't going to be paid attention to. Artists like Jane Freilicher, Jane Wilson, Wolf Kahn, Paul Resika, Paul Georges, Jack Beal and a whole countless group of people were immensely strong-willed and followed their voice. They stood up for what they believed in and made it through Abstract Expressionism and were able to maintain their balance through this onslaught of Greenbergian criticism. These are the artists who gave me and other painters the faith to continue and to say that the landscape is a very valid place to be working and making images. I see these people as great heroes. I would like to think that I'm a very small part of that.

1. Deeds, Daphne, *The Valley Series: Recent Paintings by Keith Jacobsbagen*, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988.

2. Deeds, *ibid.*

Biography

Keith Jacobshagen was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1941. He is currently a professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Education

- 1968 University of Kansas, M.F.A.
- 1965 Kansas City Art Institute, B.F.A.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1992 Dorry Gates Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
- 1991 Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa
- 1990 Babcock Galleries, New York, New York
Dorry Gates Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
Sardoni Museum, Auburn, New York
- 1989 Roger Ramsay Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1988 Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska
The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma
- 1987 Landfall Press, New York, New York
Peru State College, Peru, Nebraska
- 1986 Roger Ramsay Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1984 Museum of Fine Arts, Utah State University, Salt Lake City
Norman R. Eppink Art Gallery, Emporia State University,
Emporia, Kansas
- 1983 Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1992 John Pence Gallery, *American Landscape Painting, Past and Present*, San Francisco, California
Tatischeff Gallery, *Under the Influence, Mentors/Teachers/Colleagues*, Santa Monica, California
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters,
Hassam and Speicher Purchase Exhibition, New York, New York
- 1991 Mitchell Museum, *Spirit of the Landscape*, Mt. Vernon, Illinois
Wichita Center for the Arts, *Public Territory*, Wichita, Kansas
- 1990 Joslyn Art Museum, *Midlands Invitational 1990*, Omaha, Nebraska
Sioux City Art Center, *American Myth*, Sioux City, Iowa
- 1989 California Palace of the Legion of Honor, *Viewpoint Seven: Twentieth Century American Landscape Drawings*, San Francisco, California
Joslyn Art Museum, *Selected Work from the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation*, Omaha, Nebraska
- 1988 Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, *Private Choices*, Lincoln, Nebraska
- 1987 Philbrook Art Center, *Collector's Choice*, Tulsa, Oklahoma
Federal Reserve Board, *Artists Who Teach*, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 Herron Gallery, *Contemporary Midwest Landscape*, Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
American Academy of Arts and Letters, Childe Hassam Purchase Award, New York, New York
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *American Realism: Twentieth Century Drawings and Watercolors*, San Francisco, California
- 1985 Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, *Kansas City Art Institute's First Century*, Kansas City, Missouri
Tucson Museum of Art, *New Vista: Contemporary American Landscape*, Tucson, Arizona
- 1983 Kunsthalle, *Contemporary American Realism Since 1960*, Nuremberg, Germany (organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)
Sioux City Art Center, *Twelve Midwestern Realists*, Sioux City, Iowa

Selected Collections

- Amlis Realty Co., Chicago, Illinois
- Burlington Northern, Kansas City, Missouri
- Chase Manhattan Bank, New York



Near Ashland, Near Dark, 1990, oil on canvas, 60" x 56",
Collection Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Smith Jr., Chicago, Illinois

Comdisco, Rosemont, Illinois
Federal Reserve System, Washington, D.C.
First National Bank of Omaha, Nebraska
General Mills Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Hallmark Cards Inc., Kansas City, Missouri
Joslyn Museum of Art, Omaha, Nebraska
Kansas City Art Institute, Mary and Crosby Kemper Collection,
Kansas City, Missouri
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska
Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas
Stinson, Mag and Fizzell, Kansas City, Missouri
United Missouri Bancshares, Kansas City, Missouri

Acknowledgments

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Finally, we owe considerable thanks to Melissa Rountree, associate curator, Hallmark Fine Arts Collection, for organizing the exhibit.

Bruce Hartman, Director, JCCC Gallery of Art

The artist wishes to dedicate this exhibition to Marguerite and Norman Jacobshagen for their unwavering support and understanding.

Cover: North Road, End of Dog Days, 1989, oil on canvas, 56" x 60",
Collection Stinson, Mag and Fizzell, Kansas City, Missouri

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