

THE KEY TO MEANINGFUL EXPRESSION IN AN ABSTRACT

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# Watercolor *artist*

## Paint Outside *(Even in Winter)*

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**FIND YOUR FOCUS**

**7 Ways to Make  
Viewers Linger  
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DECEMBER 2019

**A Juror's Guide to Making  
Show-Worthy Art**

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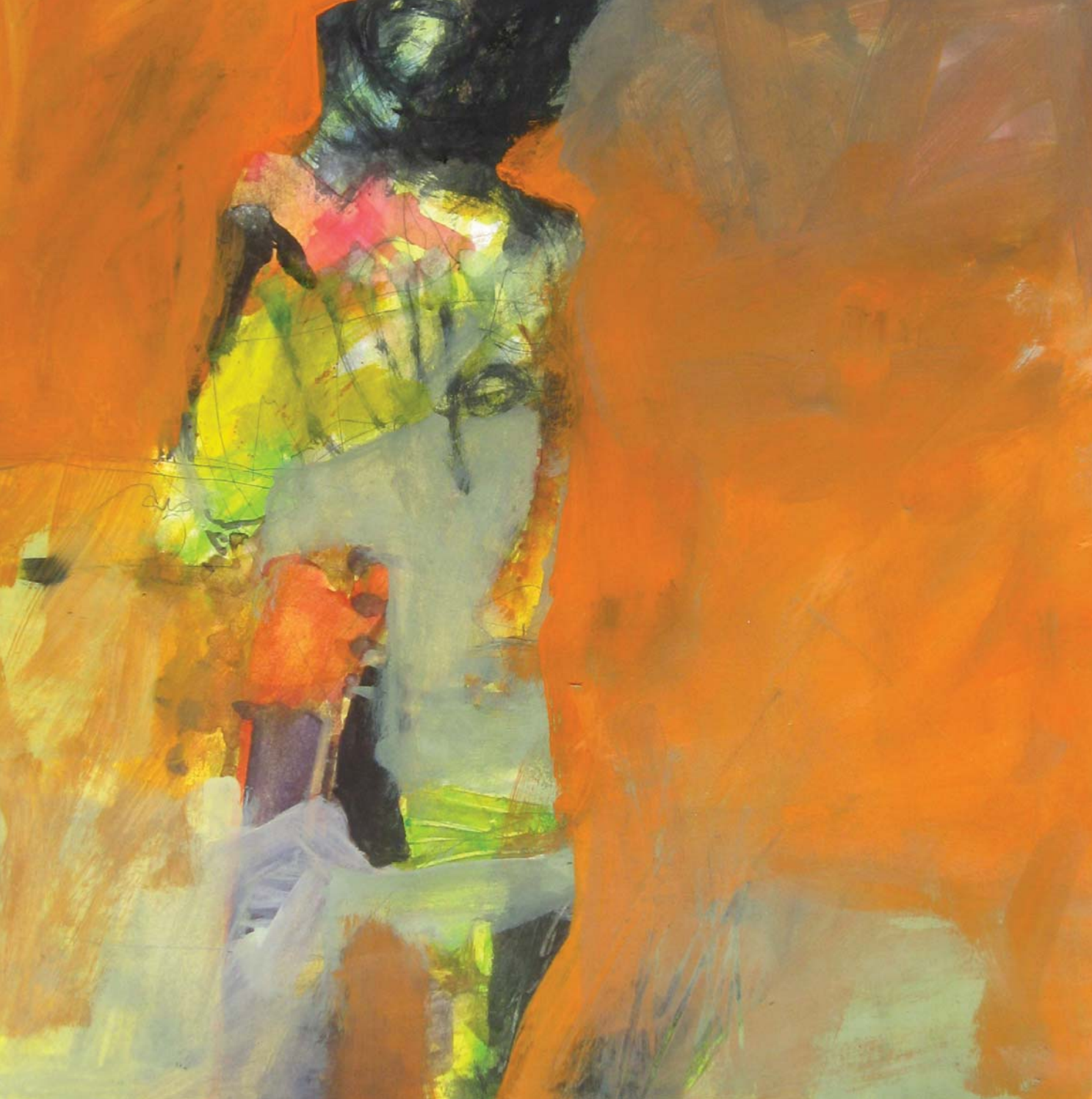
# Figurative, Abstract, Lyrical

**STAN KURTH** ADEPTLY STRADDLES THE LINE BETWEEN ABSTRACTION AND REPRESENTATION IN HIS WORKS FEATURING EMOTION-LADEN COMPOSITIONS, COLOR AND EDGES.

By John A. Parks







Stan Kurth's paintings explore the exciting territory that lies between abstraction and figuration. Deploying a largely abstract repertoire of layering, dripping and mark-making, along with an almost classical sense of composition, he includes representational elements that are sometimes powerfully assertive, sometimes obscured, and always mysterious and potent.

Suggestive outlines of human figures, animals, buildings and other structures, along with purely abstract elements, inhabit a pictorial world of shallow painterly space. Color is

varied and sometimes dramatic, pitching soft grays and muted hues against areas of flamboyantly saturated color—powerful oranges, harsh greens and blaring yellows. More drama is created when a generally soft-edged painting presents sudden straight and razor-sharp edges.

The works seem to yearn to take on everything: human life, abstract thought, aesthetic pleasure and

ABOVE  
**Vestige of Embers**  
(watercolor,  
gouache, ink and  
gesso on paper,  
15x15)

OPPOSITE  
**Barrier Anxiety**  
(watercolor,  
gouache, ink and  
acrylic on paper,  
15x15)



LEFT  
**Raptor Anxiety**  
(watercolor, acrylic  
and gesso on paper,  
14x14)

OPPOSITE  
**Rail Man**  
(watercolor,  
gouache and ink  
on paper, 15x15)

a wide range of feelings—from restrained, almost depressive moodiness to wild elation. “My paintings are expressions of my life experience—everything that has touched and moved me along a path to the latest work,” the artist says.

## The Path to Meaningful Expression

The genesis of Kurth’s work began with earlier attempts at rather different types of painting, much of it representational. “My work has changed quite a bit over the years,” he says, “and I hope it will continue to do so. At one time, I wanted to paint like Raphael Soyer [Russian-born American, 1899–1987]. Many of my earlier paintings were failures, at least in my mind.”

It turned out that failure and rejection were powerful contributors to Kurth’s search for meaningful expression. “I was once rejected from a major juried exhibition,” he recalls, “and decided to rework the painting with an ‘I’ve-been-rejected-and-don’t-care’ approach. I applied layers of paint, along with some gestural

mark-making, smearing, scratching, scrubbing, scraping, scribbling, splashing, glazing and blending over the underpainting. I was manipulating the surface in a manner I had never done before, and I wasn’t worried about the result or if it would be successful. I had attained an expressive freedom in painting that I hadn’t previously experienced. The following year, that painting won an award of excellence in the same exhibition. Far more important than the award was what I had learned using that approach.”

## Painting Is Life

Kurth’s discovery that he could open himself up to a wide range of intuitive manipulations of paint and imagery led to his current process, in which he simply launches into a painting with little idea of what’s going to happen. He’s adamant that he doesn’t wait around for inspiration before starting. “Chuck Close [American painter, b. 1940] said it best,” he says. “‘Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work.’ That’s how I feel about inspiration.

“Painting is my life,” Kurth continues. “If I’m not painting, I’m thinking about painting. I’m teaching painting. I’m reading about painting. I’m going to museums and galleries to study paintings. I’m attending openings and exhibitions to see paintings. I’m involved with numerous painting groups and associations. I’m using social media to see paintings and engage with other artists. I guess you could say breathing is inspiration enough for me. I go to work.”

For Kurth, being at work means keeping multiple paintings in progress, often in a variety of media and sizes. Continually working and completely immersed, he trusts that his vision will unfold with the paintings.

“I begin a painting with the confidence that my collective thoughts and feelings will predicate the necessary moves,” he says. “Starting with random marks and color, I build a library of elements, including value, texture, line and shape. Some I quickly enhance; perhaps I fill a shape with color or a value gradient, or I add a line with contrasting width and value.”

In this first stage of the process, Kurth is generating his own subject matter, in a sense pulling it out of thin air by allowing chance movements of the hand and brush to create marks and shapes with which he can then begin to work. Even at this early stage, he’ll sometimes reject things that appear, wiping down marks or brushstrokes and trying again.

Other influences, memories and associations are already making their presence felt in this generative process. “Although paintings start with lines and marks randomly drawn using ink, crayon, oil pastel, charcoal or colored pencil, they’re not always quite random,” says the artist.



**“I BELIEVE GOOD PAINTINGS GET THE VIEWER’S ATTENTION  
WITH COMPOSITION AND HOLD IT WITH CONTENT.”**





“Sometimes shapes appear from my life experience. For example, I might see something resembling the front fender of a 1940 Ford. It’s merely a starting point and may not appear in the finished painting. I was an avid model builder as a boy, so the shape is ingrained, as are many others.”

Clearly, the artist makes himself open to every possible suggestion, and early shapes might include anything from parts of figures to animals to structures. “When I feel the library is adequate, I shift into compose mode,” Kurth says.

Instead of generating new imagery, he’ll engage in a dynamic dialogue with the subject matter he has created. “I diminish or enhance portions of the painting for balance and unity,” he says. “For example, I may want to shift the color and value balance by glazing using thin layers. The glaze darkens value and unifies the color underneath simultaneously. This creates unity because the hue of the glaze is now a part of all the colors below it.”

## Ambiguity Influences Narrative

While Kurth embraces representational elements as part of the initial library in his paintings, he’s careful to retain a certain ambiguity in the status of these images. “I believe good paintings get the viewer’s attention with composition and hold it with content,” he says. “My work often contains vague or ambiguous representational forms like humans, animals, cars, furniture and other assorted personal archetypes. Because of their ambiguity, the relationship with the more abstracted elements in

ABOVE  
**Windowpane No. 22**  
(watercolor, acrylic  
and gesso on board,  
19x19)

OPPOSITE  
**Monolith**  
(watercolor and  
gouache on paper,  
21x21)



the painting lends itself to a wide range of narrative for the interested viewer.” For Kurth, it appears that the artist’s role is to draw viewers into a world in which their own imagination can be unleashed.

Although Kurth remains open to all kinds of elements and subject matter in his painting, he inevitably finds that various themes recur. Some of these he groups into series of paintings by title. One such series is “Coastal Anxiety,” encompassing paintings in which landscape-like elements dominate.

Another of Kurth’s series is “Windowpane,” a title that refers to a name for the hallucinogenic drug LSD. These paintings seem to acknowledge the “mind-opening” aesthetic of the 1960s counter-culture. Yet another series, “Loner,” incorporates images in which a single, isolated figure dominates.

In spite of these groupings, the range and variety of Kurth’s paintings are considerable, and his open approach often yields the most unlikely of images. In *Raptor Anxiety* (on page 26), for instance, a series of broadly brushed areas of brilliant color coalesce around the image of a running figure. In the background, a large yellow shape takes on the vague appearance of a dinosaur. Kurth did this painting as a demonstration, with the subject matter emerging through suggestions and chance as he proceeded.

Similarly, *Rail Man* (on page 27) arrived as a surprise, a figure that suddenly took on the look, the artist realized, of a train conductor standing at the door of a rail car.

Other paintings appear to be more or less entirely abstract. *Windowpane No. 22* (opposite) presents a rather stately composition of rectangular elements, each with a lavishly built surface in which overlays of semi-transparent paint create considerable color richness. On the right, the artist has scratched back through the paint with the end of his brush handle, a sgraffito technique that reveals the color beneath.

In *Monolith* (at right), the artist arrives at an image that feels as though it’s both an abstract structure

and the painting of an abstract structure like a building or sculpture.

In other paintings such as *Loner No. 27* (on page 30), Kurth appears to embrace an almost entirely narrative approach. In this work, a carefully drawn hand and arm seem to rest on the back of a bar stool; a drink is positioned alluringly on the bar. Here, as in many of his paintings, the color settles into opposing zones, with darks and muted grays dominating the top of the painting and brilliant eruptions of saturated color bursting from the bottom.

Sometimes the abstract elements themselves take on narrative or literal roles. In *Loner No. 14* (on page 31), for example, what appears to be a simplified figure is crushed tightly into the painting by large areas of brushed grays that surround it, almost as though the paint itself has imprisoned it. The subtle changes in the grays are brought about by variations in the

## Toolkit

### PAINTS

- various watercolor, acrylic and gouache brands

### SURFACE

- canvas or paper

### BRUSHES

- various brands, sizes and qualities. “I use quality-brand paint and surfaces, but brushes are another story,” Kurth says. “I do use quality brushes, but the ones I like the most are the ones I abuse, the ones I’m not afraid to push against the grain.”

### MISCELLANEOUS

- palette knives, scrapers, brayers, pencils, markers, crayons, wax, charcoal, graphite, ink, gesso







colors that lie underneath them. Kurth's deft use of layering and glazing techniques allows for color that's both subtle and active.

## Detours on the Path

If change and variety are a hallmark of Kurth's painting, they've always been part of his life. While art has always come first, he has taken a number of detours. "I think everyone is an artist when they're young," he says. "You learn to walk. You learn to talk. You learn to draw. It stuck

with me. My aunt gave me a small canvas and some oil paints when I was 4 years old, and I painted my first oil painting in her studio. I've been painting and drawing ever since, and I still have that painting."

Nonetheless, when it came time for college, Kurth didn't major in art. "I have a bachelor's degree in history and English literature from Northern Arizona University," he says. "I reasoned

ABOVE  
**Loner No. 27**  
(watercolor, gouche  
and ink on paper,  
15x15)

OPPOSITE  
**Loner No. 14**  
(watercolor,  
charcoal, crayon,  
oil pastel, acrylic  
and gesso on paper,  
21x14)

it would please my father, a lawyer, if I received a degree and then went to law school. I never did go to law school, but I did get the degree, and all free electives credited to my transcript were fine arts classes. When I graduated, I had quite a few semester credit hours in fine arts. I kept taking classes in the years following and accumulated more semester hours in fine arts than in history or English literature. I really didn't want to be a lawyer and, as it turned out, my father would have been happy with anything I wanted to do.

"In the '70s," Kurth continues, "I landed a job in a commercial studio doing layouts for directory ads, which launched my commercial art career, and I made a living in graphics for 40 years. I painted in the off hours and got involved with local art associations, showing work in those types of exhibitions."

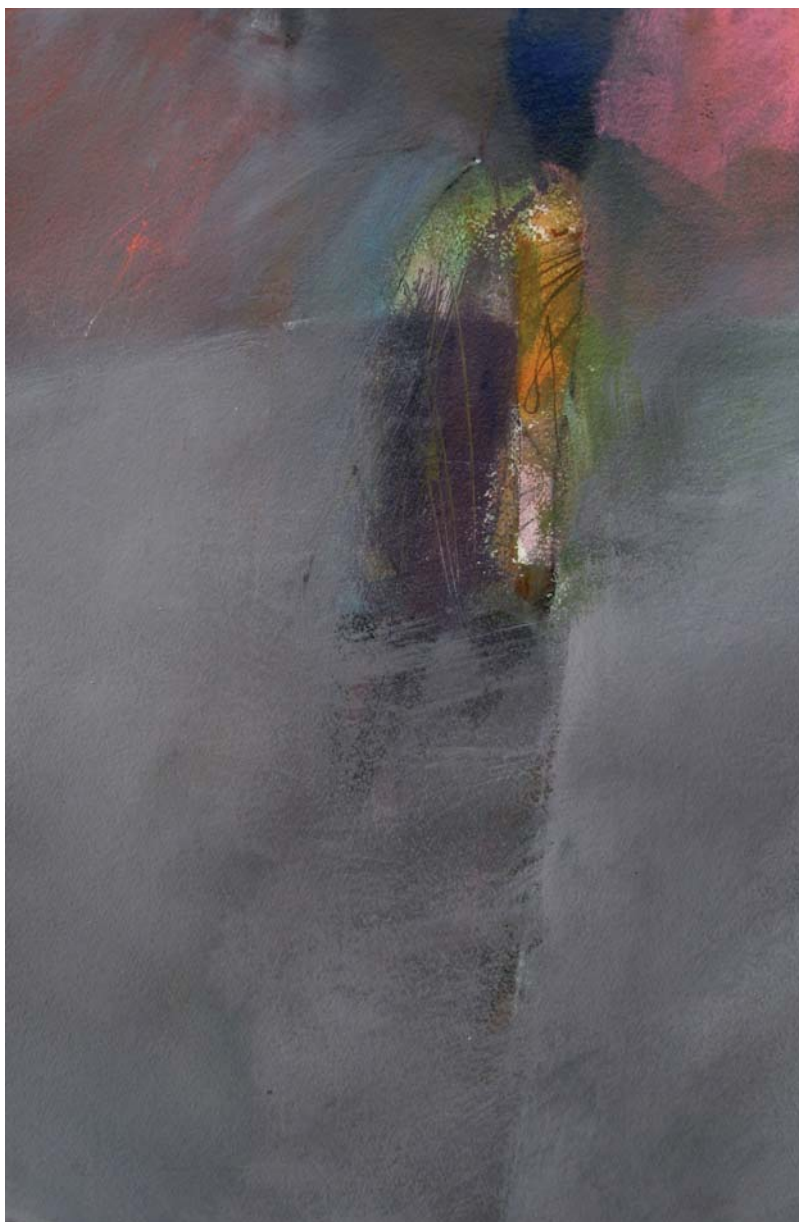
Kurth's career experience certainly contributes to his fine sense of design and keen eye for weight and balance in his compositions. As an avid student of painting, he has been influenced by many other artists. In recent years, Richard Diebenkorn (American, 1922–1993) has been his chief influence. Kurth, like Diebenkorn, began as a representational painter before engaging in a kind of lyrical abstraction married to a fine compositional sense.

Asked about how he'd like people to respond to his work, Kurth is thoughtful. "Philip Guston [Canadian, 1913–1980] said something like, if you're painting for an audience and keep painting, the audience will gradually leave and then you're just painting for yourself. And then when you leave, that's when the painting gets good. I think he was right.

"I strive to make paintings I like," Kurth says. "In the past, I've painted for an audience in my head, and many of those paintings stagnated. I guess the ideal viewer of my work would be an appreciative one, but in the end, it doesn't matter how anyone responds. My job is to offer it up." **WA**

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*John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York.*



Turn for a demo

## Meet the Artist



MATTHEW BIRD

Stan Kurth ([stankurth.com](http://stankurth.com)) was born and raised in Phoenix, the city where he still resides. He studied English literature and history at Northern Arizona University while completing many courses in painting and drawing. He worked as a graphic designer for 40 years, painting in his spare time. These days, he devotes himself entirely to painting while teaching workshops around the country and exhibiting widely. He's the winner of numerous awards in juried exhibitions and is a signature member of several

watercolor societies, including the National Watercolor Society, the San Diego Watercolor Society and the Western Federation of Watercolor Societies. His work is represented by Esprit Decor Gallery, in Phoenix.



# Orange Sunshine

Stan Kurth uses lines to enhance the color passages as a contrast to broad washes and bold strokes.



## Step 1

I filled the surface with a wet-into-wet wash of orange and red and a grayed-down yellow, leaving scattered whites. The beginning of any painting is always a random one; I don't start with a plan.



## Step 2

I began to draw using an oiler—a syringe attached to a small plastic bottle—filled with watered-down black gesso. I constructed a web of lines, which may or may not become part of the final composition.



## Step 3

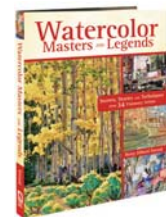
The painting became more complex when I added a veil of gray over part of the middle of the painting and a darker gray to the upper left. Notice that parts of the original painting were left as they were. The gessoed line receded when covered by the veil of gray. The veil of gray has made the upper passage yellow-green.

**“I BEGIN A PAINTING WITH THE CONFIDENCE THAT MY COLLECTIVE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WILL PREDICATE THE NECESSARY MOVES.”**



## Step 4

I cut into the painting using more grays. The amorphous light green shape at the bottom is now a square, and I added more lines to the pink shape. I also painted around the square protrusions, forcing them into prominence.



This demonstration is excerpted with permission from *Watercolor Masters and Legends* by Betsy Dillard Stroud (North Light Books, 2016).



## *Final*

I obliterated the left upper quadrant of the painting, leaving only snippets of shapes from the previous step. I painted negatively on the right, creating a figure who magically emerges from the chaos. The rectangular mid-gray between the bottom shapes brings **Orange Sunshine** (watercolor, acrylic and gesso on paper, 21x14) to completion.