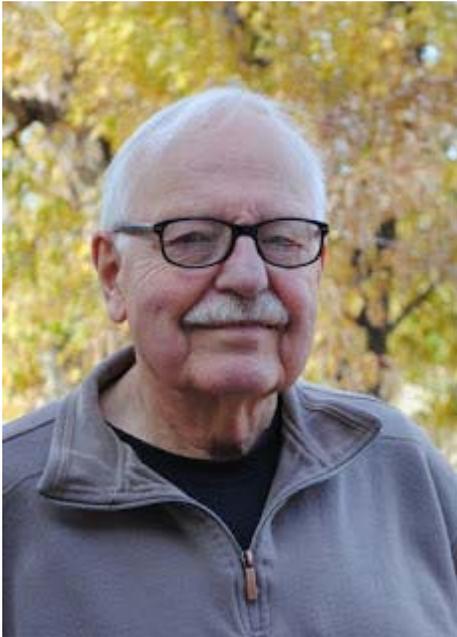




THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 2018

## Ron Kroutel, Emeritus Professor of Art at Ohio U, Talks About His 50 Year Journey



In January Ron Kroutel, Emeritus Professor of Art at Ohio University's School of Art + Design, celebrated the opening of a retrospective exhibition titled *50 Year Journey*. As one might expect there are a variety of chapters in a journey of any length, and especially one of half a century. Though half the 36-piece show was taken down earlier this week, the other half remains on display till later in May.

Kroutel was thirty-two when he moved from inner city Detroit to rural Athens to teach at O.U. on the fringe of Appalachia. To some extent it proved to be a bit of culture shock. So begins his story in the book that accompanies his retrospective, published by the Kennedy Museum of Art where his work has been made available to the public.

**EN:** *In your earliest work you explore a lot of the "new channels" that were emerging, such as Pop, computer art, conceptual art. At what point did you begin to have a feel for your own voice?*

**Ron Kroutel:** Before I studied at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I had no formal art training. I just loved to paint and draw. But once in college, I was intimidated by how little I understood of art history and of modern art. Cubism and Abstract Expressionism were a total mystery to me. And my lack of technical knowledge about painting and drawing was scary.

(For example, in my first painting class I had my little tubes of beginners' oil paint and a 9" x 12" canvas board. The guy next to me made his own stretchers, stretched his own canvas and applied rabbit skin glue and an oil ground. When he began painting, he threw a jar of thick old dirty turp on the canvas and using a rag he wiped out the main structure of the still life. At that moment I began to understand what it meant to paint!)



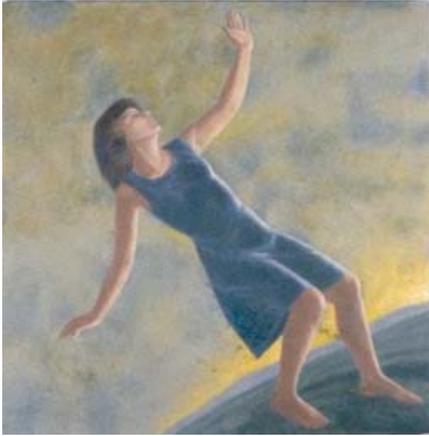
"Red Corner" -- Early abstract painting



"Frenzy" -- Oil on linen, 48"x 109", 1975

I continued to chase modern art for twenty years--Gorky, Matta, Larry Rivers, Stella, Heizer, Acconci and Beuys. Finally I caught up to contemporary art and life became art and art became life. In this void I began making nine inch square pencil drawings of possible conceptual ideas. These led to paintings that were not entirely coherent. I felt my journey had begun.

In this period of crisis I had the opportunity in 1973 to teach in Florence, Italy for three months and then to travel afterwards to Munich, Prague, Paris and London. This was my first trip abroad and it changed my life. I came back to my studio and realized that I needed to find something that was challenging and meaningful, something that needed to be painted, something not connected to pop irony or conceptual minimalism. What grew from this in 1974 was "Animus I: Anger." It portrayed a basic human experience that was present in all human history, yet it was present in a contemporary setting. I truly didn't care how it was received by others. I felt confident that I had found my own way.



"Falling Woman"-- Oil bar on linen, 60"x 60", 1985



"Rhyme: Hand & Pincers"  
Pencil on Arches paper, 30"x 22, 1970



"Bridge" -- Oil on linen, 72"x 58"

**EN:** *Who have been your biggest influences as far as finding your own path?*

**RK:** Once I began painting my narrative work in 1974, I felt isolated from other like-minded artists. While Acconce and Beuys provided a conceptual stimulus for emotional human performance, painters such as Sidney Tillim, Altoon Sultan and Martha Mayer Erlebacher gave me a sense of community. As a student at Ohio University in the early 1970's, [Frank Holmes](#) initially inspired in me a belief in the validity and importance of representational painting. And Hopper and Munch always hovered in the background as a bedrock foundation.

During my first trip to Europe, all the greatest from the past fired me up. From the reliefs of Ashurbanipal in the British Museum to Maso di Banco's great St. Sylvester 14th c. fresco in Santa Croce to Vittorio Carpaccio's series *The Legend of Saint Ursula* in Venice, all made me see that ambitious undertakings like these could be a life-long involvement.

I feel about my art as Herman Melville felt about his writing, " I would be as free as air but I'm down in the whole world's books."

**EN:** *Before you ever pursued a career as an artist, when did you first get the inkling that this was where you were headed? How did it happen?*



"Athens County--Vines"

**RK:** In grade school and high school, kids thought I would be an artist. Though my first formal education in the arts at nine was in piano studies, art always loomed as a vague goal. My uncle, Frederick D. Ogden, was a painter who supported his family with Constable-like landscapes, and his example subconsciously made a career in art as a real possibility. Also my family, all immigrants from Southern Bohemia, strongly supported education and encouraged my interest in the arts. The first one in the entire family to go to college, I had other opportunities than factory work.

**EN:** *What were you seeking to convey in your floating figures? You seem especially drawn to movement in these.*

**RK:** I showed an early figure painting to Sidney Tillim in New York City in 1975, "Animus III: Athleticism." It's of a floating runner chasing a frisbee on a gridiron. He laughed at the word "Athleticism" and said that all floating figures are about sex. There may be truth in that, but I also think they are about freedom, soaring to new possibilities. And there is also the danger of gravity. In general, I put my figures in motion because their actions are a positive statement of emotional reactions to living. They are more fun to do.

**EN:** *In the mid-eighties you turned to horizontal, monochromatic landscapes. What was the driver for this change in subject matter and approach?*

**RK:** My turn to landscapes in the mid-eighties was determined by three main factors. First, I was running out of juice on the figure after fifteen years. I needed a new direction. Second, the Central American foreign policy of president Ronald Reagan was so upsetting to me that my figures (see "Falling Woman") seemed too remote from my sense of life. Third, a series of seminars with well known critics made me aware of postmodern issues. Craig Owens, Robert Incus-Witten, Donald Kuspit and Clement Greenberg created for me a new context for thinking about my art. While I didn't want

to imitate postmodernism, it did give me something to resist.

Two years of blind-alleys, mistakes, false steps and failed experiments finally led to the large erasure drawings that I did from life. Done in the back of my Ford Econoline van, I drove around southeast Ohio until I found an intuitively right subject, went in the back of the van to draw in my mobile studio, and then drove around until I spotted another likely subject to add to the first. These 25 drawings were well-received and were awarded an N.E.A. Midwest Regional Fellowship.

**EN:** *Your later landscapes are especially evocative. Can you describe the evolution from your earlier work?*

**RK:** Eventually I wanted to extend the erased charcoal drawings into paintings. A difficult transition, my process became somewhat different. Many small sketches were done in the van but then back in my studio they were combined, cut up, traced, rearranged, rejected painted on and finally assembled in a satisfying combination of images that then formed the general basis for a large painting. Everything in the painting was thus taken from life but distorted and constructed in a dark representation of our times. You can smell that air in these paintings.

**EN:** *Anything I should especially ask at this point? That is, would you like to add anything here?*

**RK:** My current work attempts to synthesize my early figure paintings with the landscapes. This is complicated by my need to understand my new environment in Colorado and to have my figures interact with altitude, wind and the vast space of the west.

While there are many great representational painters today that I greatly admire, I feel a certain connection with Neo Rauch (founder of the new Leipzig school), Jerome Witkin, Steven Campbell and Robert Schwartz. Again, too many to list. I always try to steal from the best!



The artist with wife Pat Wolf.

\* \* \* \*

**EdNote:** Ohio U was my Alma Mater. I have many happy memories of being an aspiring young art student who spent many hours painting in Seigfred Hall. I remember some of his work from my time there. Ron Kroutel was, I believe, a strong influence on my third-year artist roommate [Steve Derrickson](#).

Posted by [Ed Newman](#) at [6:46 AM](#)

1 comment:

**Don Vogl said...**

Marvelous narrative, I Didn't know about all the countries & influences you experiences And were involved with & learned from, I made 4 visits to Paris & 5 other places in Europe plus 4 trips to Africa,,, So much to see, so much to learn from, Especially the museums.. So change is a word that never gives a full blown definition till there is something to document, But being open to change shows the real creative person... Congratulations on your accolades, splended show in all the art as well,, Many happy returns.. Don Vogl

[April 27, 2018 at 6:16 PM](#)