

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



#2 / Karel Delfos, painter, watercolorist, Rijswijk, Netherlands

He is the one exception to my rule for Creative Creatures that they are either Americans, or Europeans who came to visit me often in the U.S. Sadly, he died of cancer before he could hop on the plane and see for himself what he was longing to turn his eyes upon, the immensity of the continent's wide open spaces and the colorful magnificence of its deserts and grasslands. I am writing about him because he really should have made it to the tallgrass prairie. In my opinion he was one of the best cattle painters of the second half of the 20th century—and man, what a ball he would have had in the Flint Hills...

Karel Delfos painted more than bulls and cows. His subject matter changed over time; he had his Fish Period, his Egyptian Desert Period, and more. But what most impressed me were his oils and

watercolors of “beef on the hoof” painted in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The following is a (short) translation of what I wrote for the catalogue that accompanied his last, grand solo exhibition, in the Rijswijk Museum in 1994. I couldn’t attend—I was already on the road in the Southwest.

Suddenly there appeared bulls and cows in Karel’s studio. They were placed in the Channel fog of France’s Normandy coast, cold, uninviting, the land rather black than green, the sky always threatening. The watercolors he was creating were larger than he usually produced. One was of a most frightening black bull, the other of a brown cow, a formidable dame until you noticed she was a pseudo-cow and only good for artificial insemination. The story these paintings still tell is of power and impotence, of ruling and serving, of resisting external circumstances and of submission and being victimized, of treason and fidelity. If the message appears so strong it is because of the directness and the unshakable force of the painter’s hand; Karel ravished the paper, applied layer after layer of color then roughly removed them only to add new layers time and again, this way taking the aquarelle technique to a new level and ultimately creating a shocking finished art piece.

The animals and the landscape they are put in become one in a pictorialization that is very realistic, very representational, yet totally abstract at the same time. Karel continued experimenting and eventually created his most impressive work ever while using acrylic on canvas: ‘Bull in Normandy, 1991’. For three years I was the proud owner of this 40” x 40” masterpiece that after my departure for the other side of the fence, those greener pastures of America, became the center piece of the Delfos Collection of the Rijswijk Museum. Again he worked and reworked the image, until the acrylic started to tell stories of its own. This is a very classic painting—a Dutch Master, almost Rembrandt-esque, better than Potter’s famous bull. Karel’s bull stands in a desolate landscape with, in the far distance, some ruins or remains of... are it WWII Westwall strongholds?

Karel’s bull appears to be lost in this landscape, as if he is the last one standing after a dark disaster of which some remains are still polluting the sky—nevertheless, far, far in the distance, and very small, stands the largest bull Karel ever painted. The proudest bull, the most dominating of them all. Everything bad already happened to him, nothing can still threaten him, you can throw thunder and lightning at him but he couldn’t care less. If one would ever get him down, no doubt he would die grinning sardonically, because he would just know who had really won. Funny—if I look back at the many self-portraits Karel Delfos painted in his lifetime I notice the same daring posture, the same ironic if not skeptical grin.

I left this big bull behind but traveled with one small watercolor (now hanging behind my desk in Matfield Green), Karel’s farewell gift to me. It is titled ‘Happy Valley’ and he has put me in it, and I am standing there clearly somewhere in the American West where a mob of wild bison is stampeding straight towards me and I am calmly concentrating on eating a chunk of Old Amsterdam cheese. He painted this piece without knowing I would end up in the Flint Hills—I at the time had no clue either, although I had read William Least Heat-Moon’s ‘PrairyErth’ already. I think of Karel often while hiking on the open range.

Ton Haak, May 2012