

## 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.*

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### # 19 / Lisa Grossman, painter, printmaker, Lawrence, Kansas

The American Midwest is home to a surprising number of traditional landscape painters, both professionals and amateurs. They are following in the footsteps of the old-timers whose names became well known and their works still cherished and honored in the main galleries of many American museums: Ernest Blumenschein, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, Charles M. Russell, Frederic Remington, Peter Moran, Walter Ufer, Albert Bierstadt. Traditional, representational landscape painters continue to find a loving public in America, at least in the Midwest, even if the attention of most contemporary art critics and connoisseurs has long passed on to new approaches. Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe--they were the American forerunners; contemporary artists such as Dennis Angel, Trine Bumiller, Diane Dandeneau, Jim Colbert, and Robert Jessup continue to take the landscape to new levels. Yet traditionalists like Idaho painter Victoria Adams do not fade away; in Kansas she has hundreds of colleagues (Kristin Goering, Joseph Logenbill, Kim Casebeer, Judith Mackey, Stan Herd, to name a few), all expert “technicians”, but with an eye and a pallet so traditional that one cannot but wonder what, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, drives them and their public other than a basic love of the land and working *en plein air*. Anyway, I stand amazed.

And sometimes I stand in amazed admiration—for some of these painters are such unique talents that their traditional eye and conventional subject matter may them be forgiven. In general, though, my own attention and appreciation goes to artists with a broader view, who demonstrate they acquired a personal eye and unique pallet that leads to an unexpected approach; who change, add to, and experiment with the landscape. One of these contemporary talents is Lisa Grossman.

In my opinion Lisa is one of the leading landscape painters of our times. Originally from Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, Lisa Grossman lives and works in Lawrence, Kansas, “because I fell in love with the tallgrass prairie.” She honors the prairie with sensitive “descriptions” that, sometimes, appear to be close to representational yet offer proof of such an exceptional way of working with her subject that the results may easily be judged abstract. Lisa moves with ease, or so it appears, across the borders of representational and abstract painting. Her “prairie skies” surpass reality, as do her “overviews” of the Kansas, or Kaw, River, the stream she loves so much she can be found kayaking there often. “I’ve been fascinated with floating, paddling, and the mesmerizing cadence of ripples my boat, the wind, and the current make,” says Lisa. “Initially, I saw the Kaw as most people do, an interesting blur as you drive over one of the bridges. Later, with maps, I sought out places where I could get close enough to the river to paint it. There are some beautiful spots but they are few and far between and the views are fairly limited. In 2002 I was flying back from Los Angeles, and as the plane passed over Lawrence I was thrilled to catch a glimpse of the Kaw stretching west into the sunset. This shining, sinuous line coming through the prairies made a deep impression on me. The elevation revealed the beauty of our living, dynamic, waterway to me, with its huge sweeping bends and ever-shifting sandbars. It transforms itself every day, every season, and with every weather event. Since 2005 I’ve been exploring the river by kayak. Each experience is magical. There’s incredible freedom, silence, and the ability to see wildlife without terrifying it, all in my backyard! I’ve really only just begun to learn about and experience this river. In my future river work I can only hope to find the current and see where it takes me.”

No photographer can do to a landscape with his camera what Lisa does with her brushes. She recognizes both the physical and metaphysical beauty of the Kansas landscape. “When we see Lisa’s paintings and prints we engage them knowing that we can borrow her vision for a time and that she is seeing just a little more than we do, a little sharper, a little more sensitively the variations of light, formations of matter and effects of gravity that comprise the physical conditions of life,” wrote Rick Mitchell. “But it isn’t just the land and sky she comprehends; it is also the astounding fact of their existence.” Lisa shows us that the land is more deeply beautiful and alive, independent of us, than we can know. Her sense of light is astounding; what she can do with ripples in the Kaw River makes me speechless; what she can do with clouds in the sky must be enough to send Georgia O’Keeffe into an envious frenzy in her grave.

The horizon, the Earth’s subtle curvature and atmospheric shadow, is a dominant feature in Lisa’s paintings. “I am in pursuit of the horizon from various vantages,” says Lisa. “They link my work as well as the prairie sense of space. My work emerges from the prairie like the Kaw River emerges from the same prairie. I know there are endless metaphors related to rivers, but I think how, really, it is the prairie and what emerges from it that has inspired it for all of me.” It led to a sustained meditation on open spaces. The power of place, and to her visceral responses to weather and shifts in light, color, and seasons, have been the true subjects of Lisa’s work.

Says Lisa: “My work has always been about shifts and the ephemeral. I’m not so much trying to freeze moments in time as much as I am attempting to convey my experience of them.”