

Ken Kirkby





Previous Page, *Looking Out*, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"  
This Page, above right, *The Marquette* for the painting in Canadian Parliament, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"  
left, *Two Fishers*, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

## Yours is **Mine** and **Mine** is Yours

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

Ken Kirkby was born September 1, 1940 in London, England, during one of the first air raids of World War II. While his mother was in labour, a bomb hit the hospital, landed in the room next door, and continued down into the basement without

exploding. Ken considers it an omen for how his life was going to be. His father moved them out of London, as soon as possible, but more bombs rained down in the next three cities, so they opted for the peace and safety of the countryside.







Previous Page, *Beyond the Marsh*, oil on canvas, 30" x 60"  
This Page, left, *Coastal Range*, oil on canvas, 40" x 40"

Ken recalls his mother saying he was scratching marks on the walls, floor and furniture before he could even walk. "One day, my father came home with pencils, pens, crayons and pads of writing paper, spilled them on the floor and sat me down in the middle of it all. Peace in our household returned – and my drawing and painting career began."

One day, the family was travelling across war-torn France, and stopped at a small-town cafe. "I was busy drawing, as usual. My father said, "Why don't you go over to that man reading the newspaper and show him your drawing? He likes to draw and paint like you." I did, and the man looked up from his paper with the most ferocious eyes I have ever seen in a human. He took my drawing and examined it for a long time. Then, he picked me up, sat me on his knee, folded a linen napkin, and told me in Spanish to hold the corners flat against the table. He took out a pen and proceeded to draw very rapidly. In less than two minutes, he drew a man on a horse, holding a lance which was pointed at a bull. He signed his name and then waved the napkin in the air, presumably to make sure the ink was dry. He said, again in Spanish, "Yours is mine and mine is yours," then handed me the napkin and placed my drawing inside his newspaper. He gave me a hug, and kissed me on both cheeks, put me back on the ground and sent me off to my parents. Only much later did I understand the significance of the encounter. His name was Pablo Picasso."

#### **A Primitive Prodigy**

"When my father started his business in Lisbon, he had a house built 25 km north in Parede. Soon after we moved in I was diagnosed with childhood



above left, *Wind Blown*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"

leukemia. Early one morning, I awoke to a raging gale. I dressed and made my way down to the cliff overlooking the Atlantic. The tide was out, giant waves exploding against the outer reefs. I was overcome by an immense building rage at this condition that was going to kill me, it was more potent than the storm. As I stared at the scene, I descended into a state of pure calm. I was not going to die and that was that. I made my way to the stony beach and walked out into the tide pools. A tall man stood over me, saying something but the wind ripped the words

away. He led me out of the water to a small shack cantilevered out from the cliff. He told me his name was Francisco, and gave me a cooking lesson while my clothes dried on the woodstove. My father had befriended Francisco but kept it to himself, allowing me to discover the old man on my own."

As time passed, Francisco taught Ken how to fish, hunt and build; showed him the beauty of the peasant ways; taught him philosophy, and how to think and understand in marvelous new ways. "Along with my father he was the biggest influence on my



above right, *Early Morning Still*, oil on canvas, 40" x 40"

life," says Ken. "His stories of people living in igloos, of polar bears and icebergs, completely consumed me. I wanted to become a Canadian."

Meanwhile, Ken's father had shown his son's drawings to Rui de Andrade, a prominent architect and artist. Rui's response was "No seven-year-old drew them." So, Ken had to prove his talent. "The architect had a pet monkey with a nasty habit of biting if you didn't keep a close watch. I drew a portrait of the monkey, one of the architect, and other objects in his office." Several days later, Ken's

father confided the architect's opinion. "He called you a natural, a primitive, fully fledged from the stones, a prodigy. That we should not send you to school, especially not art school."

Ken's father then proposed that Ken should draw every day, and present his best works each Saturday. At which point, his father would purchase them at an agreed price. The next Saturday, Ken presented his artwork, father gave him the money, then picked up the drawings, placed them neatly together and tore them in half, then in half again. Every Saturday





*Previous Page, top left, The Raven Said, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"  
bottom left, Mother and Child, Pangnirtung Fiord,  
oil on canvas, 40" x 60"  
top right, Just Passing Through, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"  
bottom right, Grandmother Drumming, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"*

*This Page, top left, Breezy Coast, oil on canvas, 30" x 60"  
bottom right, The Tantalus, oil on canvas, 30" x 60"*



the same thing happened. Finally, Ken asked why. "Because, if it's an artist you intend to become – this is how the world will treat you. An artist is not to do what has been done, but to come up with ways of doing what is not yet done, to disturb the old ways, the old order. That's how we got from the cave to here. A true artist must also be an inventor. His work must be useful. Art for art's sake is nothing more than a fashionable indulgence. Since this process takes time, say a couple hundred years, you are unlikely to have the luxury of knowing if your work can be considered art, or not."

At the age of 16, Ken's life took a major shift. The architect, Rui, had purchased one of Ken's drawings, then mounted a major exhibition of the young artist's work in Lisbon. "It was a howling success, with the public proclaiming the discovery of a young prodigy. In one fell swoop I went from a little undesirable urchin to a darling. The hypocrisy left me with a hollow sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. My wish to move to Canada became a full-blown obsession."

#### **Northern Wisdom**

The Canadian ambassador was a magnificent help with logistics. The Kirkby family left Lisbon as if going on holiday to Amsterdam, and landed in Vancouver on September 2, 1958. Ken found a job in a construction camp in northeastern BC, but yearned for the actual Arctic. Coppermine was the next stop, where he first encountered the Inuit. Throughout his years of far North travels, Ken was repeatedly shocked and heart-broken by the horrific living conditions facing these beautiful people.



above on both pages, *The Masquette for Isumataq*, oil on canvas, 2' x 25'8"  
 above left top, *Marquette 1*, oil on canvas, 24" x 76"  
 above left bottom, *Marquette 3*, oil on canvas, 24" x 76"

above right top, *Marquette 2*, oil on canvas, 24" x 76"  
 above right bottom, *Marquette 4*, oil on canvas, 24" x 76"

In Baffin Island, he came across the only Caucasian people he'd meet while in the Arctic. "One of the men was clearly trying to grow a beard, but it was very thin and made him look like an old man from a Chinese painting. His name was Pierre. We talked at length about the astounding landscape beyond the glacier. The Inuit call it Auyuittuq – the place that never melts. Before we parted, I learned his family name was Trudeau. Years later, as Prime Minister, he made Auyuittuq the first Arctic National Park in the world."

Ken returned to 'civilization' wondering how to draw attention to the atrocious conditions the Inuit were living under. "I did paintings of my experiences, from tiny drawings made during my travels, but I couldn't sell them – couldn't give them away. The galleries, such as they were in those days, were not interested." One day, while duck hunting in the Fraser Delta, he noticed great piles of driftwood. Investing in a couple of chain saws and an old pickup truck, he cut firewood, tied a black velvet bow around the nicest pieces, added his calling card, and placed them on

the doorsteps of the well-to-do. People bought the wood, Ken showed them his paintings, and his art sold, too, with surprising ease.

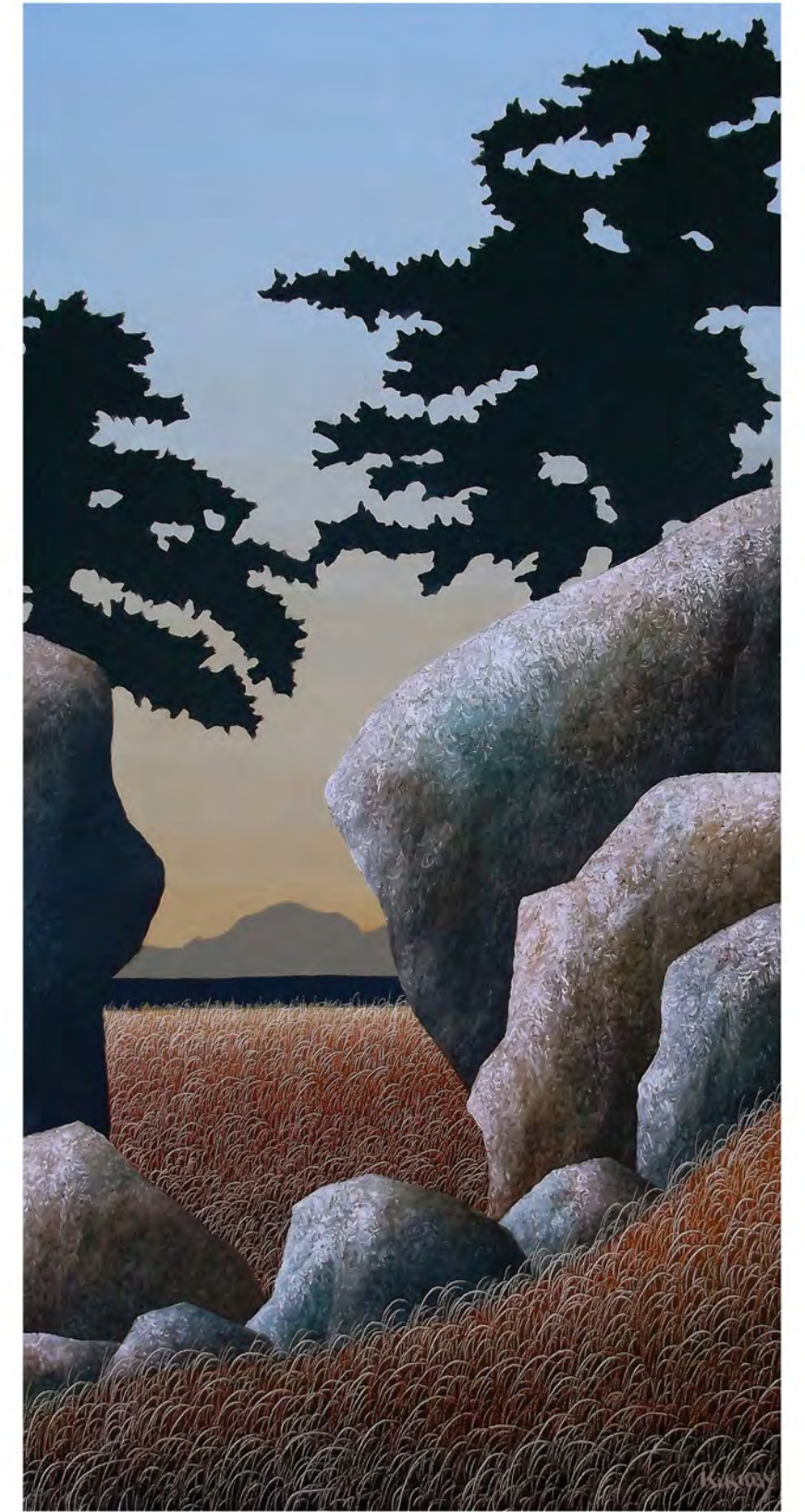
"During that time, Alex of the Alex Fraser Gallery took me under his wing and my career began to take off. But he was not the least bit interested in my North paintings. So, I decided to move to Toronto, where I painted the largest oil on canvas ever made, or so I think. This part of the story took 12 years, cost two wives, some friends and a hell of a lot of money." The painting is called Isumataq, meaning

an object or person in whose presence wisdom may show itself, and measures 12 feet high and 152 feet in length. It was unveiled in the Canadian Parliament in March, 1992.

#### Bliss at the Beach

Ken currently lives in Bowser BC in a small cottage on the beach. About 14 years ago, he became president of the Nile Creek Enhancement Society, a volunteer organization that restores dead rivers to their original state. "Funding for much of this work came off the





left, *Looking Out to Sea*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"  
above right, *Evening*, oil on canvas, 18" x 36"



above left, photo of Ken Kirkby  
above centre, *Calling Down the Sky*, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"



above right, *Felix*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"

end of my paintbrush. So, when friends come to visit, I often walk the 47 paces to the seashore at high tide, catch a Coho salmon on a fly and serve it to them for supper, along with some excellent Portuguese wine."

Ken's studio is on the mezzanine floor of a former boat-building facility, where steam engines from the nearby coal mines were serviced. It's located 50 feet from the high-water mark; 65 yards from his cottage door. He admits that the studio view looking east to Lasqueti Island, beyond to Texada Island and the Tantalus Range on the mainland, and in between the Salish Sea with its ever-changing moods, affects him deeply.

Self-taught, with no formal education, Ken's advice to artists is simply paint eight hours a day, seven days a week, and find your own way. "No one

can tell you what is in your own soul. I'm inspired by the savage immensity of nature and its infinite variety of peculiarities. For me painting is a joyful compunction, fuelled by ferocious discipline. The Arctic project took 31 years to accomplish, and the goal, the political statement, was achieved."

Most of Ken's techniques evolved from mistakes. "One day, I committed a goof and in great annoyance reached for a large house-painting brush and gave the canvas several strong swipes. Lo and behold, what had been a screwed-up sky turned into heavenly, windswept cumulous clouds. I soon learned to stop and consider each mistake, asking 'What's the good part of this bad situation?' I have a big gunny sack of previous goofs that now form a substantial array of marvelous discoveries."

"Painting is my first love, so far as the arts are concerned. I am an oil painter through and through. I tried acrylic paint when it first came out. It felt like painting with plastic, which is what it is. The stuff is bloody horrible. Mostly I use oil on canvas, other times I paint on wooden gessoed panels, which I coat with the finest marine enamel and then a mixture of oil paint, egg yolk, varnish and turpentine. The results are quite magnificent – occasionally bordering on the divine."

Sometimes, late at night, Ken travels over the mountain to the far valley... "All the while the green-eyed gorgons leer at me from the side of the road. Finally, I arrive at the house of the most beautiful woman in the world who protects me and hides me all night."

Note: Ken says this ARABELLA article comes "at an interesting time, perhaps even auspicious, since Nana Cook (also a painter and the love of my life) and I are working on a book together." Stay tuned for that one!

*Fine galleries representing Ken Kirkby include:*

**White Rock Gallery**

White Rock, BC  
www.whiterockgallery.com  
604.538.4452

**Mark Penny Gallery**

Ucluelet, BC  
www.markpenneygallery.com  
250.726.2012