



above, Fifty Amp Fuse, 2013, oil on canvas, 46" x 34"
left, Rising Canon, 2012, oil on canvas, 58" x 36"

Fairy Tales That Never End

written by Debra Usher

I became enchanted with the art work of Kai McCall last year when his painting was chosen to be our summer cover. His work, a masterful combination of dreams and longing, captures our

heart and imagination. Each painting tells a story that holds quite a different meaning for each and every person. When we look at the work of Kai McCall we are left pondering a question we are not sure we should ask.

Visual Fairy tales

Like protagonists from fairy tales, the fanciful characters in Kai McCall's paintings confront various obstacles as they navigate their way through enigmatic situations in mythical or dream-







above, Musket Shoot, 2013, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"
 right, In Search of Drones, 2013, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"

like settings. It's hardly surprising, then, that Kai's first artistic stirrings began during the zealously imaginative years of early childhood.

There was never any doubt in Kai McCall's mind that he would one day become a painter. Since his mother was a printmaker and he grew up in a house bursting with art on its walls, looking at and thinking about paintings began when Kai was just a boy. "I remember being about 5 years old and already I was thinking about becoming an artist. Gazing at other people's paintings and daydreaming about the worlds inside them was so enchanting for me that it seemed self-evident that I would make my own paintings, too, someday," he says.

Life-Changing Encounters

So it remains true today that Kai stumbles upon his greatest personal inspiration when he comes face-to-face with another artist's highly impressive work. Growing up in Montreal, two exhibitions had a particularly strong influence on Kai. The first was

a Picasso exhibition held at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1985, which he visited when he was an impressionable 17 year old. The show was curated to highlight Picasso's maturation through the various 'periods' of his career, so what struck Kai most was that Picasso's practice of art making reflected the ups and downs and growing pains of different stages in his personal life.

"The exhibition unfolded like an infinitely deep receptacle of the artist's stories and emotions. Picasso's art accompanied him through each phase in his life's journey, like a diary. Nothing was deemed too big or too small a subject for his work – whatever he was experiencing, he was able to make great art about it," Kai recalls with admiration. Although Kai's paintings don't look anything like Picasso's, he points out that he came away from that show in awe of Picasso's ability to transform his individual experiences into paintings that touch the world in a universal way, by way of their mythological and historical resonances. This lesson is very much alive in the spirit of Kai's own work.

The second exhibition that fundamentally shaped Kai's perception of painting was a Tony Scherman show, hosted by Waddington & Gorce in the mid 1980s. For Kai, these paintings were remarkable because of the artist's powerful, almost violent, technique. Scherman's encaustic medium (molten wax and pigment) seemed to communicate the difficult struggle of making the paintings – the spattered and burnt wax running down the canvases in thick, threatening rivulets. As the encaustic finish mirrored the menacing nature of Scherman's subject matter, Kai knew that he had witnessed the perfect marriage of subject, materials and method for the first time that day.

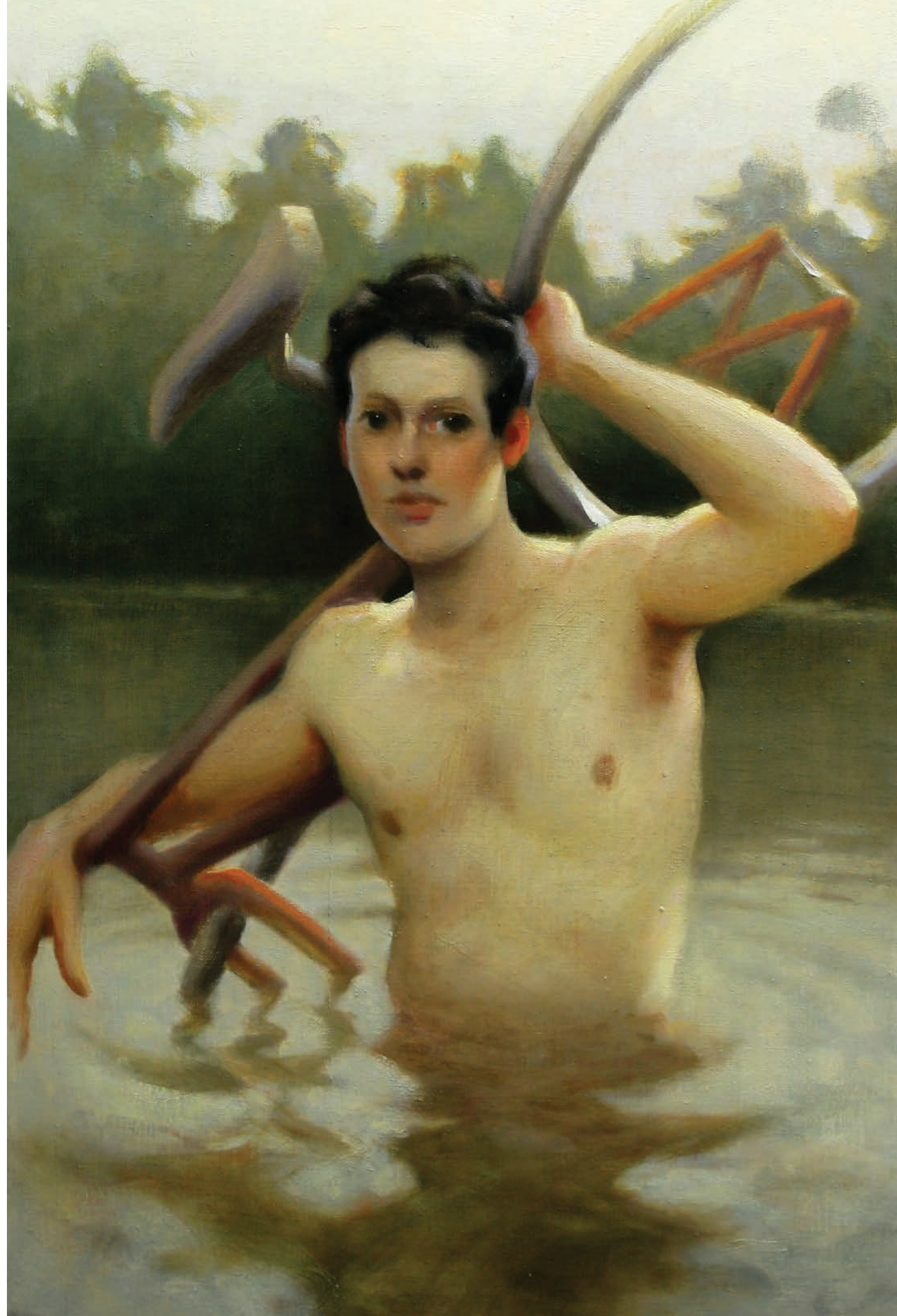
Kai's current paintings of imagined scenes, set among billowing clouds or on tropical islands, are heavily influenced by Scherman's example of achieving harmony between subject, medium and technique. "The elements of process and concept in a work of art are woven together so deeply that it's impossible to separate them. My paintings have their roots in the flamboyant style of 18th-century Rococo art, which explored the precarious coexistence of innocence and artifice. I try to achieve delicate and sumptuous effects - particularly when painting shimmering fabrics or



She Never Escaped My Mind, 2013, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"



The Shadow, 2013, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"





nearly transparent skin tones. Otherwise, their whole meaning would be lost," he states.

Starting Out in the Art World

In 1985, Kai began his first formal art lessons at Dawson College in Montreal. After Dawson, he enrolled at the University of Western Ontario, where he earned a combined degree in English and Visual Arts. Although he learned a lot at university, Kai was an independent spirit who was eager to graduate and start his professional art career. "It wasn't remotely glamorous," Kai reveals, grinning. "I shared a studio in Toronto with a friend and I began saying 'I'm an artist' when anyone asked me what I did – even though I only finished two paintings over the course of my first year in Toronto, and destroyed one of them because it was terrible!"

In his twenties, Kai grew very aware of how many artists eventually stopped art making in order to pursue fall-back careers. In his view, one of the most important decisions he ever made was never to formulate a 'Plan B.' Though he had to take various small odd jobs on the side to earn money, Kai insists that these early years of struggle are the most important in an artist's career since it's the time when a painter develops his or her working routine. Kai insisted upon painting every day during those critical years – even when progress came very slowly.

"The fruits of my second year in Toronto were only slightly better than those of the first, so I started hurling all sorts of things at my canvases – oil paint, house paint, spray paint, wax, sand, etc.," he says. It was an interesting period of trial-and-error experimentation, but in the end it taught Kai that the kind of results he desired required a more disciplined approach. So, he set about improving his drawing skills and learning to paint with a greater sense of perspective and depth. Soon after, Kai visited Paris and became enamoured by the Louvre's 19th century paintings. He eventually moved abroad to London, where he made a home for himself working in a large studio building amongst a hundred fellow contemporary artists. Gradually, Kai had to do less and less outside work to make ends meet and he was able to focus 100% of his attention on painting.



above, *I Was Alright Until I Fell in Love With You*, 2011, oil on canvas, 58" x 36"
left, *Always*, 2011, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"

The 'Disciplined Approach' to Painting

Having honed naturalistic drawing and painting skills, Kai's 'more disciplined' approach to painting starts with the creation of small 5"x4" sketches – a size that forces him to focus on a simple central image and one or two key design elements of the composition. Gradually, he experiments and discards unwanted approaches. Once a basic composition and spread of tones is decided upon, Kai employs a model for life drawing and exploratory photography. After working with a model, he refines his sketch and only then is he ready to enlarge and transfer the drawn image onto a canvas.

"The actual painting process is complex and difficult to articulate," he states. "Generally speaking, I establish the main tones and atmosphere, and then I attempt to carry that feeling forward as the painting develops. I apply





above, *Something in the Way She Knows*, 2013, oil on canvas, 52" x 36"
 left, *As She Was Walking Away*, 2011, oil on canvas, 36" x 24"

oil paint directly to my canvases and I prefer not to change much once it's been laid down." In short, Kai's technical procedure is a matter of mixing the exact right tone, at exactly the right value and applying it in exactly the right shape. "Being precise and concentrating on the major shapes and feeling I want to evoke are both paramount. It's easy to get caught up, spontaneously, in the details – but doing so can weaken the overall effect of the picture. It's important to stay disciplined and not get side tracked by each new brushstroke. The hardest part of painting is recognizing only those rare occasions when one should embark on a major alteration of a painting's original plan," he warns.

Treasures Mined from History

After 14 years in Europe, Kai returned to live in Montreal. While now married with three children, he still paints every day and continues to expand his knowledge of art history and visual culture, so as to import fresh elements and approaches into his own practice. For Kai, continuously looking to art from the past is crucial, because a painter must

never stop developing his or her eye. "Looking at the best paintings from history helps me sharpen my judgement of how best to translate my ideas into simplified arrangements of tones and colours. Looking at art books is an essential part of this process, as is travelling to see the actual works in museums and galleries all over the world," he notes. Kai, himself, looks at everything from ancient Egyptian art to 1950s magazine illustrations and it all influences the paintings he makes.

In particular, Kai attributes his juxtaposition of fantastical imagery and traditional figurative painting techniques to studying the works of artists such as John Sargent, Giovanni Tiepolo, Giorgio de Chirico, Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Diego Velazquez. Another theme that frequently arises in Kai's work is the unexpected combination of pictorial references from the European and North American art historical traditions. "Having lived in Europe for many years, this seems a natural way to express the role various homes and cultures have played in my life," he says.

Though Kai's paintings are partially autobiographical, insofar as they reveal insight into his personal life experiences, they are also largely inscrutable, even to him. Kai describes his painted figures as "semi-autonomous individuals, whose poses evolve as I paint them and ultimately become defined by the actions they assume in my compositions." He adds: "Through the process of painting, the physiognomies of the figures gradually evolves as I alter their hair, posture and clothing. By refining and revealing each figure, they gradually carve out roles for themselves in a painting's narrative. Despite the recognizable imagery and actions of the characters, the overall meanings of the works elude us all. They are like fictional stories with the concluding chapters missing – their resolutions suspended in time, their outcomes ambiguous." Happily, those of us who have fallen in love with Kai's paintings are eager to be spellbound by his works, forever.

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