

Published June 5th, 2013

Artist's Saint Mary's Show 'A Real Honor'

By Chris Lavin



Paul Kratter Photo Chris Lavin

Paul Kratter is fast. He walks fast. He talks fast. He answers questions fast.

He even paints fast. He sets up his whole portable studio from a backpack in under two minutes.

"You have a finite amount of time to paint. The scene changes quickly," the Moraga resident said of his en plein air (done in the open air) work. "I would rather do four or five paintings in a day than paint a bigger piece and go back to the same spot two or three times to paint it."

Ironically, what Kratter creates in a couple of hours looks as if it took weeks. Now his talent has been rewarded this summer with a two-artist show at Saint Mary's College Museum of Art. The show opened June 1 and will be open from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays through Sept. 22. Martinez plein air artist Mary Lou Correia's work is also included.

Kratter, 57, has been an artist ever since he was a child. He can't remember a time when he didn't draw. He looked forward to finding Sports Illustrated and National Geographic magazines in the mail.

"I'd copy the covers," he said. His prowess landed him

in commercial advertising as an adult, illustrating things like the program covers for the San Francisco 49ers. In 2004 he published what turned out to be an award-winning children's book, "The Living Rain Forest: An Animal Alphabet," with Scholastic. It was a far cry from his plein air paintings: It took him seven years to finish it.

Then Kratter had his eureka moment. He attended a plein air event in Sonoma, and that was it.

"I fell in love," Kratter said - pointing out not with his wife, Tia, an art director at Pixar, with whom he raised two sons. "That had already happened. I just fell in love. I went out and bought paints the next day."

A stroll around Kratter's home studio, which is immaculate ("that's my wife"), shows familiar sights: the pear orchard in bloom at Canyon Road and Camino Pablo in Moraga, Half Dome in Yosemite, Mount Diablo. His favorite places to paint include Point Lobos, and the rural parts of Sonoma and Petaluma. Cityscapes don't interest him. Barns do.

And animals. He has painted cows. Moose. Birds. Many of his paintings feature a lonely road. "Anything that leads your eye into the painting," Kratter said. "You're telling a story. You want to feel the weather. When you paint in Yosemite when your feet are cold, you paint faster."

Sometimes he comes up with the titles for his paintings as he's doing them. A flock of red-winged blackbirds in Livermore led to "Serenaded." A spectacular early morning view in the Eastern Sierras - Kratter's annual trip with some other artists, which is the highlight of his year - is titled "The View with Coffee." It may have been called "The View with Jethro Tull," Kratter's default musician on his headphones.

Once he has unpacked his easel and paints from his REI backpack, Kratter assesses what he's looking at. He asks himself, "What's important here? This is it! It's like I have an animated ticking clock, and it's decision time. What's important? What do I edit out? That's just as important as what you put in. I paint well under pressure."

Kratter reached down to wrestle his shoe lace away from Zippy, his ever-chewing Corgi. Then he said, "Oh!" and rushed to get his paints. Staff from Saint Mary's College were on their way to pick up the paintings for his show. "I forgot to sign this one."

Kratter's work may be seen at his website, www.PaulKratter.com.

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