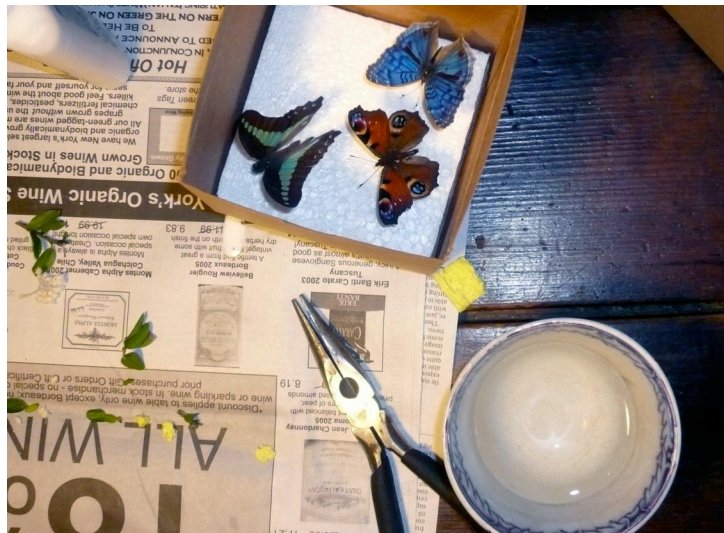


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From the Unknown Outward – The Work of Kevin King

Kevin King's paintings mirror his fascination with the various life forms and objects this world has to offer. He is a collector, who seeks earthly conundrums, be it in the shape of a dried poppy capsule, an insect's metallic armor or an exotic bird. In his work, he frames these collectibles as what they are: glimpses of the sublime. Through the act of painting, King pays homage to his subjects and provides them with a new life and longevity. Over the years, he has assembled a vast collection of found and gifted objects that are stored in his studio. Dead butterflies with their wings spread, tree branches, seeds and beetles for example are carefully kept in boxes, waiting to be re-discovered and even re-invented through painting. King pulls from this source to create otherworldly scenarios, in which creatures and plant life are fused together in harmony. His compositions are complex and show an incredible devotion to detail.



Detail View of the King's Studio

While his language is representation, his paintings are not representative of reality. He combines and alters his subjects according to his aesthetic and compositional concerns instead of simply illustrating what is before him. Meanwhile, his work exhibits an astonishing skillfulness in recognizing even minute characteristics that make up the extraordinary texture of nature. King's paintings are products of his free-flowing meditation on the objects he has selected for each specific work. To him, painting is a form of contemplation and a

transformative agent. Through painting, his subjects receive symbolic meaning as each reflects the magic of creation.

King's work process is four-fold. He starts with loose drawing. These are sketches, in which each object's general placement is only briefly addressed. Following is the construction of elaborate three-dimensional boxes, inside which the actual objects are carefully placed. At this stage, some of the artist's manipulations begin. Some of the objects might be fused together to generate new formations, for example. When the composition is determined, King begins to play with lighting, drawing the most expressive potential from the box not unlike a theatre stage. The last step before the actual painting starts is an elaborate drawing that captures the precise size of the intended work and gives much thought to shading.



Detail View of the King's Studio

King paints on copper, using oils. These materials provide him with a smooth surface that allows for masterfully rendered detail.

In a conversation with Kevin King in his studio, he addresses some of the thoughts behind his subjects, his working process, and explains his preference for materials. King's inspirational sources are as eclectic as the things he collects. Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell are important schools of thought. He refers to one fundamental belief of Campbell's, for example, that all spirituality is a search for the same basic, unknown force from which

everything came, within which everything currently exists, and into which everything will eventually return. Underneath the strikingly colorful surfaces, much of King's work honors the core of this idea: life is an all-inspiring mystery. In today's world, where contemporary media and steadily improving technology constantly enhance life's pace, King's work appears as the opposite. His work requires the viewer to take time and to carefully observe the different characteristics that make each element extraordinary.

One also needs to discuss King in context with the Surrealists. King shares their interest in dreams as gateways to the unconscious and hence, to larger truths. In addition, King's technique of fusing his subjects into unusual constellations reflects the Surrealist technique of irrational juxtaposition. King's paintings are metaphors, not for specific stories, but for the spirituality in general that defines this world. He creates poetry from nature. Meanwhile his visual inspirations are manifold. One recurring interest of his is ancient Islamic art, especially tiles and miniature painting. King is observant and absorbent of the many treasures this world has to offer and his paintings reflect the joy and awe that these things provoke in him.



Detail View of the King's Studio

INTERVIEW

Conducted in January 2008

Stephanie Buhmann: Kevin, your work process is incredibly specific and your materials of choice – painting on copper – require careful planning. I wonder, how much room there is left for improvisation?

Kevin King: Each one of my paintings involves the preliminary construction of a box. It is the stage, when I get to feel young, like a little boy almost, playing around with the different elements and when I can move the different parts around. I see how the things are interacting and I wait until the moment when something happens. Although I have a certain idea, which is expressed in the first drawings that lead to thinking about building a box, it is at this second stage that I find clarity. The work changes a lot from the first drawing to arranging the box. Once the thoughts are captured in the box, it gets harder to change elements except for the lighting. The lighting has always come from the left hand side due to the fact of how my easel is set up. I am right-handed so the light comes from the left as the same light illuminates both the diorama and my painting.



Kevin King, *Diorama with Yellow Warbler*, 2007
Oil on copper plate, 9 x 8 ½ inches

SB: Does the box disappear with the painting?

I always try to figure out how much I want the remnants of the box to show in the finished painting. Sometimes there is a wall, corner, floor, or cast shadow that leads back to the physical structure of the box. But I like that in each case I have to decide how much of the artificial construction of the box is going to be revealed. I have to decide how much I want to make it a part of the composition, especially in terms of abstract compositional shapes. It varies in each case.

SB: Do you think about the box as a theatre stage?

KK: Yes, very much so, especially psychologically. I think Joseph Cornell created the box as an entity of the mind in a certain way. I think of Surrealism and how psychology was at this major beginning at that time. It is the Surrealist idea of what takes place in the "box of our head." In other words, it is a projection of what goes on in our mind. Hopefully, through painting it then goes beyond what only is on my mind. I think of it as part of a mythic world. I read a lot of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell¹. I am interested in the idea that something personal can go beyond just being that. I am not trying to re-create myths that already exist in the outer world. I am only interested in my own play and hope that it transcends. I am really fascinated with myths and all the mysterious things that are around us. I have been interested in these things since I was a little boy. For example, I used to visit this diorama in our local library. Maybe ten years ago, I re-visited it made a drawing that then was worked into my first diorama painting. It was fascinating how much the diorama had changed since my childhood. It had really decayed. Most of the hummingbirds had lost their wings. It was sad but also fascinating, the muted colors and mood.

¹ Joseph John Campbell (1904 –1987) was an American mythology professor, writer, and orator best known for his work in the fields of comparative mythology and comparative religion.



Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Cockatoo and Corks)*, c. 1948
14 3/8 x 13 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.
Private collection. Sourced from Mark Harden's Artchive.

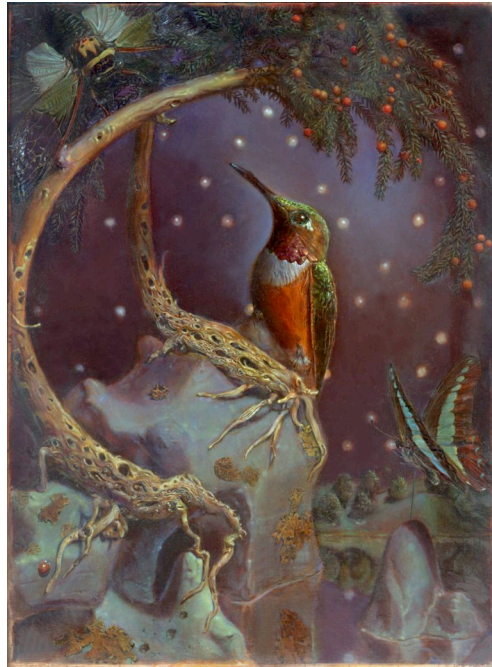
SB: One could argue that your decision to paint these scenarios that are staged in your boxes on copper, is an attempt to give them a prolonged life.

KK: Yes, just like the creators of the diorama, who also had the idea to preserve something for the future. It incorporates this *vanitas*² idea. I don't think of them as being a warning about the fact that everything is bound to decay. However, I do think of them in context of the fact that all the things around us are disappearing. Both in terms of biology and the way the world is changing. I do not expect my work to change anyone's idea about global warming, for example, although I am personally committed to these concerns. It is not my work's meaning. We live in a world where everything is disappearing. It is our whole experience: We grow older; we die; we disappear. My paintings relate to the concept of *vanitas* in that way.

SB: It is a form of contemplation?

² In the arts, *vanitas* is a type of symbolic still life painting commonly executed by Northern European painters in Flanders and the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term *vanitas* itself refers to the arts, learning and time. The word is Latin, meaning "emptiness" and loosely translated corresponds to the meaninglessness of earthly life and the transient nature of vanity.

I can put anything that I think is one of the most beautiful things in the world in these boxes and then I get to love it by painting it. It is a nice way of working that lets me relate deeply to anything that I think is beautiful.



Kevin King, *Night Scene*, 2007
Oil on copper plate, 10 ½ x 8 inches

SB: You paint a lot of incredibly fragile objects and creatures.

KK: I am very interested in mixing natural and artificial worlds. In my work, everything is supposed to look like it is alive, but you take a closer look and then the butterfly has a pin stuck in it for example. There is a transient nature to it all and fragility.

SB: Do you think of your work as creating “ideal” worlds? Particularly, when regarding the fact that you bring together creatures and plants that cannot be found together in nature?

KK: I do not think of my works as ideal worlds. But it is true, that all these things could never exist in the same environment together. If I think of the diorama at our library for example, I always loved the fact that it brought animals together that did not even share the same hemisphere.

I like the idea of using nature, but it is mixed in my head, through memory for example or dreams. My thought is not linear. The only reality is that I want you to believe in my little vision.

SB: When did you first start using copper?

KK: For many years I worked on wooden panels, just like the icon painters used to do. I enjoyed making them. But I saw some paintings on copper at the Metropolitan Museum and later, found a beautiful catalogue of an exhibition at the St. Louis Museum. I really liked these paintings and they were in such great shape, too. They were in almost perfect condition. Right from the start I was interested in utilizing the actual copper and let it shine through. Only one work by Chardin showed some transparency of the background. I have painted on copper for at least eight years and it took me until recently to figure out how to let the copper show through the actual painting, such as in a vein in a butterfly's wing. Now that I am realizing that I can do that I start looking for these insects that already bring these characteristics with them.

SB: The light and glow you get from the copper is astonishing. Your work at times looks like it could be lit from the back with a candle.

KK: The fact that these scenarios are limited within a box indicates that there is a greater world out there. As a child I always thought about how big and seemingly endless the universe was - how it goes on and on and where does it end. Cosmic.

SB: The idea of cosmos is interesting as I think your sense of movement is so specific. Everything in your paintings seems to spiral in- and outward at the same time.

KK: These are some of the dualities that I try to push. In fact, the dualities of life and death, the real and artificial, stillness and movement, I hope apply to these paintings as well.

SB: In all the new works you use creatures with wings.

KK: All cultures that I have ever explored have tied spirituality and transcendence to the image of wings. The cicada is a symbol of eternity, rebirth and immortality for the Chinese, for example, because they only appear every thirteen or seventeen years. I do not consciously think about these kinds of meaning, but I am interested in it. I hope that there is a deeper symbolic import, but it is not the reason why I gravitate to these things.

SB: How much background research is involved in your work? Do you read up on the different creatures you use in your images, their behavioral patterns, biology, or even symbolism?

KK: Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I get on the internet to acquire background information. In this recent work, for example I painted a Fiery-throated Hummingbird. Because I did not have a good picture available, I had to do quite some research. Sometimes I learn about certain characteristics, which lead me to manipulate the composition in order to reflect this knowledge. It depends on if I can figure out a way to do it, visually as well psychologically. But all these elements do not really have anything to do with reflecting nature as it is other than that my subjects are fragments of nature. I often end up turning things around to un-familiarize the objects. In one of my latest works, for example, I paint the backs of dried poppy seed capsules or the backs of pinecones. It is interesting how you can simply take the back of something and everyone becomes suddenly unfamiliar with it. Then, of course, I also use artificial things to abstract reality further.



Portrait of a Boy
Roman Period, 2nd century A.D.
Encaustic on wood, height: 15 in.
Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

SB: However abstract, there seems to be something eternal about your imagery. Though visually very different, I am reminded of the sensibility found in Faiyum³ portraits for example.

KK: I love those paintings. I don't think of myself as being closely related to that, except for in the way that I try to create the sense of life from something already dead, so that they touch both worlds. One of the first artists I was very interested in was Jan van Eyck (ca. 1395-1441) and also other Northern Renaissance painters. Now I think of these painters as being less influential on my work. I feel that by now I have already absorbed this sincere focus on detail. But there was incredible spirituality in the fact that they were able to create an image with such a likeness of the real world. Today, images are such a large part of our world and we lose track how at a certain point in history, the ability to create an image with a true likeness of something was indeed a miracle. Especially in the Northern Renaissance masters I sense that. Now I see myself looking more at Eastern art, such as early Indian

³ "Faiyum mummy portraits" is the modern term for a type of realistically painted portraits on wooden boards attached to Egyptian mummies from Roman Egypt. They belong to the tradition of panel painting, one of the most highly regarded forms of art in the Classical world.

miniatures that have a strong Persian influence. I am interested how in the works stylized fragments of nature, such as flowers or trees become actual design elements. Also the movement is important. When looking at antique Turkish tiles for example, everything seems to move up- and downward; sideways, but also inward. In a way, the movement is cosmic. But I tend to look at a lot of things, even at Lalique jewelry - its innovative use of enamel. I actually majored in gold and silversmithing in college though I always intended to be a painter. In a way I feel that in my work I can be both a painter and enamellist.



Ceramic tile produced in Iznik, Turkey
Second half of 16th century,
Collection of Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

SB: It is interesting that you went back to working with metal, choosing the copper plates as support, as you were familiar with it from your days in school.

KK: There was a whole period where I felt a bit lost, going from gold- and silversmithing to painting, trying to relate both worlds. My early works are much more stylized. They are small and they as well are very crafted, but I feel that in these newer copper paintings I came back to what I loved from earliest memories. Most of my work has always had animals in them however. They evoke the contemplation of how man relates to the natural world. That has always been a

significant theme, but then the detail and very labored process are much more recent and relate to my initial training.



René Lalique, *Dragonfly Woman*, c. 1897-98
Gold, enamel, chrysoprase, moonstones and diamonds

SB: I keep thinking of your mention of Dutch still life painting. In these works, nature and its fragments are often employed as metaphors. In fact, they are often riddles that one can decipher. Your work feels symbolic, but do you create actual metaphors? It seems to me that you paint scenarios of your imagination, almost like writing down notes on a past dream. We as viewers can easily relate to your work, as it is mythic but not dogmatic.

KK: I do hope that people do not read my work as simple narrative. It is easier for me to trust a visceral reaction to art rather than anything intellectual. I do like to put the viewers in a place, where they do not have the answer. It's a lot like life: you know that something is going on, but not what exactly. I love the work of Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), the symbolic weight he bestows on simple objects, as well as the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917) and Forrest Bess (1911-1977). I am fascinated by the personal symbolism both painters use. You cannot necessarily ascribe specific meaning to the works, but you right away sense that they are deeply symbolic. You could almost say what something could mean, but to put it in words would be wrong. The works are just potent energy. Even in

catalogues I've seen of Bess' work, in which his symbols are catalogued and explained, I feel not closer to the true meaning. In fact, I do not find this kind of literalism helpful. They are not the key to the understanding. And there are of course other mystic painters, such as Blake, whom I admire.



Albert Pinkham Ryder, *Seacoast in Moonlight*, 1890
Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

SB: That's where art differs from literature. It is visual and sensual and descriptive of something that cannot be said in words, or at least without changing the impact.

KK: Yes. I love all the arts and how each form has its unique strengths. Art for me is about this very personal dialogue and necessity. I think that much in our time is focused on noise and the next big story. I instead like to focus on the small truths and myths that surround us.



Forrest Bess, *Dedication to Van Gogh*, 1946
Oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 17 3/4 inches
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago