

M            A            R            G            A            R            E            T  
T            H            A            T            C            H            E            R  
P            R            O            J            E            C            T            S

## Vivianite - The Painters Blog

### Alex Kanevsky Interview



**Vivianite: Your use of motion, light and color is truly stunning, how did you invent or learn your technique?**

**Alex Kanevsky:** I didn't really invent or learn it as a technique. I am a slow learner, so it developed over a long time. I am also fairly slow when it comes to actual painting. Slow but impatient. That can be a problem, but over time I figured out how to turn this contradiction into my own way of working. I can't do slow and methodical accumulation painting: I get bored with careful, planned sort of activity. I also depend on freshness of perception, what zen-buddhists call "beginner's mind". That is difficult to sustain over a long period. After a while you are just not a beginner.

So I work fast, trying to hit the right note every time. That is nearly impossible, so I constantly fail. But I keep coming back to a painting. It accumulates layers, each one - more or less a complete painting. Complete but failed. The layers are sort of like Swiss cheese - they have holes through which in right places you can see the previous layers. Eventually there are enough of "good holes" and also, because of all the repeated attempts, I manage to do a good top layer. And then I have a painting that has enough intensity in every passage to satisfy me. Then it is done.

**You have said, "Everything is in motion. Fast motion"; could you go into detail about how you are thinking?**

Well, everything IS in motion. "Fast" is a relative thing, of course. You know, glass in a window is actually a form of liquid. It is very slowly cascading down the window frame. That is why, you often see glass with slight wrinkles in very old window panes. People, whom I paint, are never still. They want to move, they are built for motion. It is actually painful for models to be still longer than 20 minutes. I like them, I find them endlessly fascinating, how they are built, the way they grow and shrink over time, how they move, act, express their emotions, etc. So I want to paint them the way they are, and to me they are defined by their motion. A brick is defined by its shape and people are defined by their motion.

**What inspires you?**

Everything. All first-hand experiences. John Adams wrote a beautiful composition titled "Naive and Sentimental Music". He took this title from a Friedrich Schiller essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry". Schiller decided that there are really just two kinds of artists: naive and sentimental. Naive artist works with the first-hand experiences, uncompromised by self-analysis. Sentimental are works that are self-aware of their place in history, theory, etc. One usually sees this kind of work accompanied by an artist statement. I think I am more naive than sentimental in the things that inspire me.

**You have been educated both in Lithuania and the US, how do they differ from each other?**

Things were a bit more formal and conservative at the University in Lithuania. More stratified. You were actually expected to be terrified of your professors. Then again, maybe it has more to do with the fact that in Lithuania I studied theoretical mathematics, and here at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts - painting.

**When I look at the progress of one of your paintings it's about 6 month from start to finish, how long does your average painting take to finish?**

If I get lucky - two weeks, but usually it is several months.

**What is the difference of painting landscape and the human figure?**

You see a figure from outside. A landscape you experience and paint from within. It is like eating soup versus swimming in it. Very different.

**How do you choose your models?**

I wish I had a clear answer to that. Then I would actually be able to choose them. As it is, I am always hopeful, but few models actually work out for me for very long. When it feels right, I tend to work with the same model for years. K.B. modeled for me for close to 15 years. When it works well, it is usually because a model is comfortable in her or his own body, open emotionally and interested in the proceedings. The best ones have certain silent emotional intensity. "Silent" in the key word though.

**In your photograph "Girard Ave. #3" there is a lot of interesting motion, do you use photos as reference when you paint?**

More as a departure point. I have always been painting both from life and from my own photographs. What attracted me to photos at first were aberrations, the unintended artifacts they produce, especially for a sloppy photographer like myself. When a camera produces an image it alters the reality in the ways that are not influenced by any aesthetic conceptions, emotions, etc. Being a human I cannot do this, can't be neutral in leaving my own imprint. I find both points of view, mine and the camera's equally interesting and useful. So I go back and forth between them. I have been doing it long enough, so now, if I wanted, I can paint from photograph and it will look like painting done from life and vice versa. Photography is completely integrated as a part of my work process. However as a straightforward reference it is not terribly useful.

**Could you tell us something about the painting "The Bride" (Above)?**

The people in my neighborhood are addicted to flea markets. Every summer they descend upon us like some sort of pestilence. I dislike them and usually don't stop to look. However once I was going by on my way to the studio and saw a woman selling a wedding dress. I stopped on a whim and bought it for \$6. It was a horrendous affair: all sorts of shiny polyester, fake lace and plastic pearls made for a grenadier of a bride, who must have been at least 6 feet tall and massive. A battleship of a bride.

A wedding dress is a fascinating object. It is a very complicated construction, made to be worn only once on the very important, life-changing occasion. A bride wants to look her best regardless of all the expense and trouble.

In the studio I started putting it on my models, both female and male of all sizes. Eventually there was a young woman, who had this quiet intensity that I mentioned earlier. When her and the dress were combined the effect was devastating, it was almost tragic. There is no point in describing it further; it is all in the painting. It was as if several harmless elements were combined to produce a powerful explosion. At least that was my perception of the event.

**What would be the ideal space to show your work?**

A room with white walls and plenty of space between paintings. Moderate light of a neutral color. I like squeaky wooden floors near my paintings. The rest is unimportant.

**What would you say to an artist just starting out?**

Build up your self esteem to the level that might seem unwarranted. This will help you ignore both positive and negative responses to your paintings. Both are usually misguided, since they come from the outside. Be your most severe and devastating critic, while never doubting that you are the best thing since sliced bread.

The moment something works well and is under control - is the time to give it up and try something else.

Put all your eggs in one basket. Precarious situations produce intense results.

Forget subjective, it is mostly trivial. Go for the universal.

**Thank you very much for your time!**