



# LIFE

BY TIM KENNEDY

## COMPOSED

Working in acrylic and collage, **KEN KEWLEY** renders observed subjects as compositions of interconnected shapes, color blocks and patterns.

**K**en Kewley's witty, incisive paintings and collages have been a fixed, if slightly underground, feature of the art world for more than 20 years. He is a prolific artist, producing works in the traditional genres of still life, landscape and the figure, but he also produces abstract works that contain a strong whiff of the tangible world. His attitude is agnostic concerning materials and methods of working. Whether he uses a brush or produces work that consists primarily of collaged, painted paper, it's all painting to him.

While his work exudes beauty and pleasure, a directness and flinty rectitude lie just beneath the surface. He is heir to Emerson's transcendentalism and John Dewey's pragmatism, philosophies that emphasize experience, direct learning and doing. In addition to his work as an artist, Kewley regularly conducts workshops across the country and internationally. As he says, "The best way I know to contribute to society, to the world, is in finding beauty, creating beauty and showing others how to see and create beauty." Kewley is the Johnny Appleseed of art.

### Melding Abstraction and Realism

Kewley's early still life paintings of desserts, done in oil, most closely resemble the broadly understood idea of realism—that an artist produces a likeness of his or her subject. He addressed these subjects in a forthright manner, placing a dessert in front of him as if he were





going to sit down and eat. The scale of these paintings was one to one.

"At some point," he says, "working from life became restrictive." Taking landscapes as an example, he explains, "I may draw from a landscape and later paint a landscape in the studio, but I don't look at the drawings while I'm in the studio. The shapes, patterns and forms have been ingrained, and they reappear."

Today, Kewley makes little or no distinction between work that holds

a recognizable subject and a painting that could be regarded as fully abstract—to him the entire process is abstraction. Yet he also thinks of himself as a realist. "Instead of rendering fragments of the world," he says, "I adjust the abstraction that makes up the world into something that provokes the excitement of the visual world." This definition is apt to the extent that his work presents the reality of color, shape and pigment in an undisguised manner.

He never ploddingly renders a slice of cake, yet through the magic of arranged color, value and shape, we can feel the texture of the icing on our tongues (see *Piece of Cake*, page 55). In his abstract work we may not be quite able to discern the identity of things, but we do sense, for example, the presence of a table and perhaps a latticed screen behind the objects, and we are confident that the entire ensemble is bathed in air and light.

### Material Concerns

About 15 years ago Kewley abandoned oils in favor of acrylics, preferring their fast-drying quality and opaque matte finish. He uses nine colors: titanium white, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium orange, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, phthalo green (blue shade), phthalo blue (green shade), dioxazine purple and Mars black. He paints on panel or unprepared paper, and never uses a medium—just water to thin the



paint. A favorite brush is the Blick Scholastic synthetic No. 12 round, the end of which he sometimes subjects to a school pencil sharpener to create an incising tool. He also uses a card stock straightedge to negotiate the paint and the edges of his forms. A good example of this technique can be found in *South Beach* (above), the use of the straightedge discernible in the tree and the architecture. Moistened paper towels prove useful for carving away wet paint along a straightedge in order to transform a shape.

He has come to depend increasingly on collage, calling its use "painting using dry paint." For collage material, he cuts 1½x8-inch strips of copy paper to which, after a painting session, he applies mixed and remixed leftover paint, regardless of the color. He paints half of the strip one color; the other half, another color. He then cuts these strips in half lengthwise, setting them aside for future work.

In 2010, during a hospital stay, Kewley developed a way of drawing that reinforces his sense of form as it relates to collage and painting. He had brought with him a 3x5-inch drawing pad and, to make sure the pad would last through his recovery, he drew two squares on a page with a ballpoint pen, using a credit

### MATERIALS

**SURFACE:** ¾-inch cradled Ampersand gesso panel or Canson 140-lb. watercolor paper

**ACRYLICS:** Golden Heavy Body

**MARK-MAKERS:** Utrecht series 233 synthetic No. 12 round, sharpened end of Blick Scholastic Wonder White long-handled No. 12 round (used as an incising tool), card stock straightedge, Bounty paper towels

**COLLAGE MATERIALS:** Hammermill Copy Plus 20-lb. printer/copier paper strips adhered with Lineco Neutral pH adhesive or Golden matte medium

ABOVE: *South Beach* (acrylic on paper mounted on board, 6¾x9½)

OPPOSITE: *Landscape III* (acrylic on board, 18x24)

PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Abstract Table* (acrylic on board, 12x12)





card as a straightedge. Then, working freehand with the card as a loose guide, he made abstract drawings in each square, one after another. He has never stopped making these drawings, although he now uses card stock rather than a credit card, and the squares have evolved into double squares, circles and ovals. He has produced thousands of compositions, and he teaches the approach to drawing as a key technique during his workshops.

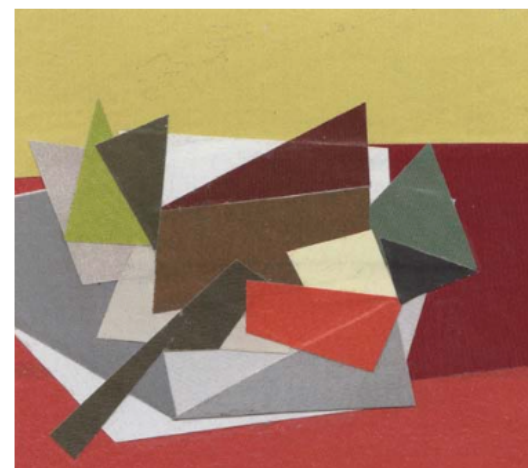
#### Controlled Workshop Frenzy

The workshops Kewley orchestrates with the assistance of his 16-year-old

daughter, Clara, are electric events with Kewley and his students in constant motion. Students first create 2-inch square compositions, using the straightedge and ballpoint pen technique Kewley devised during his hospital visit. The straightedge is used to draw everything—even organic shapes.

In the earlier workshops, a clothed model, surrounded by flat shapes of brightly colored fabric pinned to a wall, sat in a chair at the same level as the students. The only guidance Kewley gave was to draw a line and then respond with another line, and so forth, without

thinking. He set a challenging goal: five drawings in five minutes. After this exercise, students began a 4x6-inch painting with the instruction to mix color and fill the paper. As students worked, they were also to paint swatches of paper to be used later for collage—and they were not to wash their brushes between mixing colors. Next, students began a second, slightly larger painting. As they continued working on that same piece, Kewley shifted the setup by switching and replacing the fabric pieces, and the model adjusted his or her pose and changed clothing. The



**Piece of Cake** The collage *Chocolate Cake Collage* (left; collage, 2¼x2½) shares the same basic composition as the painting *Chocolate Cake with Pears* (right; oil on board, 8x10). To Kewley, creating a collage with painted collage papers is just another form of painting.



lesson conveyed was that the world is in continuous flux.

Later workshops followed a different format, incorporating the use of a copier/scanner/printer. At the beginning of the workshop, students received sheets of copy paper, each printed with 12 squares measuring 2x2 inches. As in the earlier workshops, they created compositions with straightedges and ball point pens, and painted strips of colored paper. They would then use the copier to

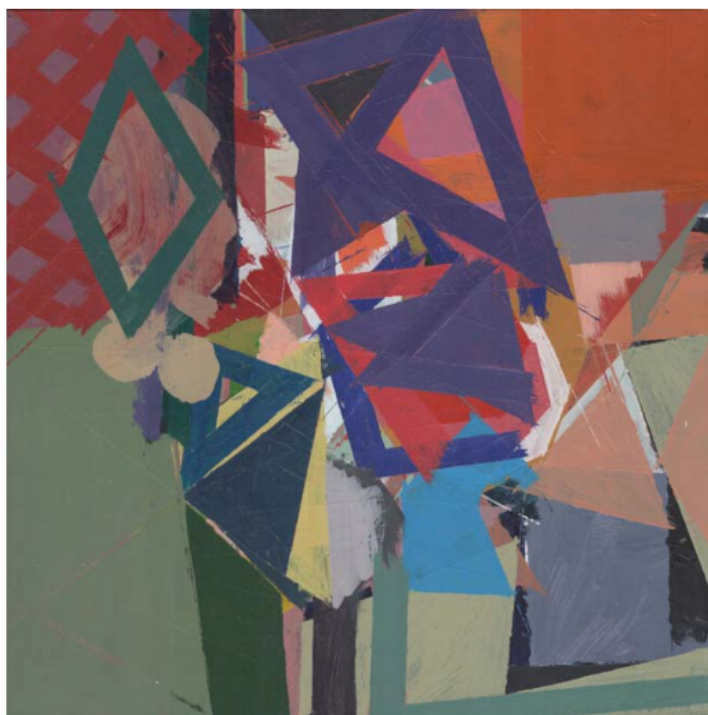
print their compositions. Upon this copy they would create a series of iterations. Sometimes the prints were black and white; at other times colored. Kewley would direct each step of the process. He might tell students to add two shapes to each square and, later, to add only circles—or squares. During the course of a workshop, 12 students working together might produce more than a thousand collages.

On the second day of these workshops, students would work with

ABOVE: *Landscape VI* (acrylic on board, 12x24)

OPPOSITE: *Seated Figure, Purple Skirt* (acrylic on board, 12x12)





three or four collages per page, repeating the techniques from the previous day, but this time they would combine figuration with abstraction. Rather than refer to a directly observed subject, such as a model or landscape, they would refer to their work from the previous day. Students reported that the workshop allowed them to slow down—to learn to build a composition and allow it to live on its own.

In recent years, Kewley has added the element of sculptural construction to both the workshops and his own work. He builds three-dimensional shapes from corrugated cardboard folded into planes and fastened with masking tape (see *From Sculpture to Drawings*, opposite). After painting the cardboard, he will either work directly from a model or invent landscapes that might include houses, trees and even hanging laundry. The resulting sculptures are a worthwhile end in themselves, with the side benefit of informing paintings and collaged works. To this end, parts of the sculptures can be moved around, adjusted and lit in countless ways, and Kewley will then draw, paint and collage from these maquettes.

### Theory of Art Education

In preparing for his workshops, Kewley has developed 300 pages of notes on the role of education in art, which he is editing into a book. His attitude toward the subject is ambivalent; he regards artistic creation as a state of grace and, as a result, he's attracted to the work of children and the art of non-Western cultures. He is skeptical of the belief that talent is rare, thinking instead that what really makes a successful artist is desire and sustained work.

His notes are full of jeremiads against the study of anatomy, perspective, rendering and plein air painting when they are approached with a too literal, technique-obsessed attitude. He castigates art schools for insisting students weigh down their work with ideas extraneous to visual art and for insisting that students develop their voice and style in an artificial,



self-conscious manner. In Kewley's mind, the student has an innate quality of individuality. He believes the student's voice and style will emerge naturally if he or she is given enough space and room. His overarching theme is a fundamental rejection of preconception and formula.

Kewley is skeptical also of novelty for its own sake. Instead of pushing students to make something "new," he encourages them to "do something old better." He feels that a sense of the contemporary world will enter the work naturally if the student just keeps working. He's suspicious of efforts to artificially insert emotion, style or ideas into a work of art. "When one does something in a straightforward manner, it reaches a deeper emotion than if one is trying to be expressive," says Kewley. "Emotions can get in the way of emotions." He searches for unity in a work of art that he considers

"Godlike," summing up this attitude by stating, "Art is life composed."

Putting his educational theories into practice, Kewley doesn't give workshop demonstrations or critiques. In a cursory manner he explains how to use the materials, but the stress is on direct experience with simple techniques, such as butting colors against one another, comparing values and overlapping shapes. The point is to downplay the notion of facility in favor of comparing forms. Imposing "correct" drawing at this point might actually slow the process. He points out that "good painting is not good rendering," his core belief being that strong figuration relies on strong abstraction. He may actually chide students, saying, "Go ahead, study color theory; it's not going to make your color better." But there is more theory in the methods that Kewley advocates than he lets on. For example, he arranges his

ABOVE: **From Sculpture to Drawings:** On the left is Kewley's abstract cardboard construction of a model on break, with knees bent and feet up. The sculpture served as a maquette for several compositional drawings created with ballpoint pen and straightedge (on the right). From the maquette and/or the drawings, Kewley could go on to create collages or paintings.

OPPOSITE TOP: **Bouquet IV** (acrylic on board, 24x18)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: **Italian Studio I** (acrylic on board, 12x12)





palette from light to dark. This is color theory; you will find that the same schema is a core idea from the writings of Johannes Itten, a German artist who taught at the Bauhaus.

### Compositional Flow and Connectedness

To Kewley, the interaction of compositional elements is paramount. Critic and art historian Leo Steinberg (1920–2011) compared Matisse’s *Joy of Life* to a visual circuit—like the circulation of blood. His feeling was that, as viewers, we are not rewarded by the “rendering” of any one of Matisse’s figures in the painting, but instead by the sensation that our eye is kept in constant motion from color to color and form to form. This is the kind of movement Kewley advocates. Differences of shape and size, light and dark, curved and straight edges are read in terms of direction and velocity. Color moves too, for as it is mixed, it is always moving toward one named color or away from it and heading toward another. The ostensible subject matter should present the viewer with shapes that suggest rather than explicitly render a tree or a house. Kewley’s advice is not to arrive at any solution too quickly, that it is better to treat the composition like a 1940s Hollywood romance, in which, after a series of improbable obstacles, the characters will find true love.

If Kewley acknowledges a master, it is Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963). During slide lectures, Kewley often shows a sequence of Braque compositions. It turns out, however, that the slides show portions of just one painting, each subsection a perfect composition in itself. Kewley thinks of this effect as “bracketing.” Within each composition, one element is held in place by others, which, in turn, are secured by other elements. Within the composition these codependent portions simultaneously expand outward and rewind back into themselves.

Braque, particularly after his early Cubist years, fits into the long French tradition of painting in the Grand



PHOTO BY MOLLY HOLLANDS

**KEN KEWLEY** received a bachelor of arts degree in art from the University of California, Santa Barbara, the College of Creative Studies. He lists his 10-year tenure as night watchman at New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of his art education. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in prominent venues, such as Gross McCleaf Gallery in Philadelphia, Lori Bookstein Fine Art in New York City and Rothschild Fine Art in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Visit his website at [kenkewley.com](http://kenkewley.com).

LEFT: *Bouquet III* (acrylic on board, 24x18)

OPPOSITE: *Figure I* (acrylic on board, 24x12)

Manner, which art historian Jack Flam has described as “cooked” painting—consisting of taste, balance and judgment. In his most recent paintings, Kewley can be seen as being part of this tradition. *Bouquet III* (above) is a good example. Instead of referencing an existing motif, the work calls on the realm of memory. Kewley relies on tropes found in the playbook of synthetic cubism, such as the table surface parallel to the picture plane and the decorative screens receding behind the still life. Even so, Kewley tells the

story slant—the base of the table rests on the painting’s bottom edge; the playful form of a star peeks out from under the tablecloth. The spiky form of a basket or bowl holds a variety of circles and starlike forms that can be read as flowers or fruit. Taking a tip from Braque, Kewley uses stencils to construct the patterns on the screens. Still, there’s so much in the painting that’s not a reprise of Braque but rather American and contemporary. The reading of the forms in the painting is speedy—the eye zips back and forth

across the composition—and the color is exciting and hot.

Kewley’s path as an artist has been characterized by strikingly fresh work noted for its clarity and sensitivity. In his notes Kewley quotes Duke Ellington: “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing,” and then clarifies, “Abstraction is the swing.” ■

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