

## The Re-Emergence of Ron Kingswood

By Todd Wilkinson

“Art is an adventure into the unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks.” —Mark Rothko

Are we to trust an artist who is not inherently brave, a creator of visions not considered, at least somewhat, *twisted* in comparison to others who run only in packs?

I pose the question here only half in jest.

As people who savor nature, is there not, for us, a heightened sense of intrigue, mystery, and meaning awaiting in the works of painters and sculptors who venture far beyond the boundaries of safety?

Ron Kingswood is a Canadian painter of both wild places and the animals that inhabit them. I can tell you with conviction, having written about wildlife art for more than a quarter century, that he is a refreshing iconoclast.

With this showing of new works, Kingswood is returning from a self-imposed exile, punctuated by introspection. That Jonathan Cooper and Park Walk Gallery have prevailed upon Kingswood to inaugurate his comeback here, and not on the other side of the Atlantic, is a coup.

“Ron Kingswood is not a conventional wildlife artist and there is a lot of eager anticipation about his new work,” says Swedish-American animal sculptor Kent Ullberg, renowned for his wildlife monuments that can be found today at over 60 different public spaces on three continents. “Ron is like no one else. He isn’t normal. He is extraordinary.”

Some ten years ago, Kingswood was hailed as one of the bright contemporary talents in North American wildlife art. Massive canvases were acquired by, among other institutions, the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson, Wyoming; Kingswood was enjoying a long run of being juried into the prestigious Birds In Art exhibition held annually at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum

in the U.S. state of Wisconsin, and he had a long list of enthusiastic collectors.

Among those who sang his praises were the late American mammal painter Bob Kuhn, the famous Canadian Robert Bateman, and others.

Then, much to the shock of his colleagues and galleries, Kingswood walked away, not impetuously, but he knew he needed a break. Many thought he was crazy, twisted even, for leaving behind commercial “success” and for having the audacity to give no explanation other than he was tired of contributing to a genre that he found formulaic, unimaginative, and derivative.”

In seclusion, Kingswood embarked upon a bold stretch of experimentation and what he calls “unlearning.” Before he could interpret nature with fresh eyes, he set out to deconstruct his old ways of thinking about color, design, composition, and purpose.

To convey the spatial grandeur of landscapes, he stretched canvasses across studio walls and immersed himself in Rothko-esque color fields like an abstract expressionist. Details become unrecognizable and yet wavy fens or tree branches would exude qualities of architectural design. If he did place a subject in a scene representationally, it would be met with an asymmetrical counterbalance of negative space. Kingswood experimented with banded color harmonies, and varied surface textures, and unconventional compositions that had animals and birds exiting or entering at the edges.

Only after he was pressed by colleagues, galleries and collectors to explain his absence did Kingswood respond by penning a poignant and very public essay for the American online publication, *Wildlife Art Journal*. Provocatively titled “Is Animal Painting Dead?” it challenged wildlife artists to aspire to be more than mere renderers of wildlife subjects, and to show that “wildlife art” could move beyond its widely disparaged cliché of super-realistic illustration seemingly lifted off of photographs.

In his piece, Kingswood wrote, “For me, the ambition to achieve something loftier was always masked by the seduction I had for the physical subject I was researching. Perhaps another way of putting it is that I was blinded by the subject, To bring this sentiment to my own painting, my direction and orientation would demand an alternative journey from where I had come from. My origin was a complete yet literal understanding of a work of art, and I was

departing upon a quest for something intangible. It was I who needed to unearth the potency of experience, using my own ability, previously veiled, to communicate. This was what great artists had been saying for centuries, and I had just uncovered it.”

Kingswood’s mastery of his medium has become even more dynamic and mesmerizing, setting him further apart. Art historian Susan Simpson Gallagher, former curator at the National Museum of Wildlife Art and an admirer of Kingswood’s evolution, once told me this: “His compositions aren’t intended to provide a tidy, self-contained narrative. That’s the joy of being an artist—demanding that viewers use their own imaginations on the most basic level. The irony is that Ron is one of the most sophisticated painters I’ve ever come across. There is a level of intelligence in his work that is mind-boggling.”

Kingswood transcends the labels placed on wildlife art and he certainly defies the stereotypes that critics try to impose upon it. His meditative scenes, with subtlety and reserve of palette, pull us into soothing quiet outdoor places where we want to be. “I believe in the creator of heaven and earth,” he notes, saying there is a divinity in nature that commands his reverence.

Kingswood also has an innate homing instinct for northern Europe. “My dad and mum emigrated to Canada in the late 1940s after the war and my affinity for European culture, especially the nature-loving aspects, remains strong,” he says from the home he shares with his wife, Linda, outside of Sparta, Ontario.

Doubtless, like many UK viewers seeing the artist’s work, Kingswood is a rabid birder. He lives on five acres of land perched along the northern shore of Lake Erie. On a clear day the skyscrapers and smokestacks of Cleveland, Ohio can be seen in the distance. But between Kingswood’s studio window and that city in another country is a vast gulf of maritime space, including coves, bays and marshes where millions of birds pass through in spring and autumn. Waterfowl, pelicans, wading birds, and millions of passerines.

When it comes to describing stylistic influences, Kingswood says he relates more to a very talented group of contemporary animal sculptors and carvers. The group includes Ullberg, Steve Kestrel, Tony Angell, Walter Matia, and England’s own Simon Gudgeon. “They are making art that speaks to people in this century. It isn’t passé. It’s innovative and exciting,” Kingswood says.

“Of all the living wildlife painters, he has one of the greatest senses of abstract design and contemporary treatment yet when he does make a representational portrayal of wildlife, it is with total understanding of his subjects,” Ullberg says. “Some contemporary artists, especially city dwellers who have had little genuine contact with nature, throw animal imagery into their scenes and it just doesn’t have impact. He’s not trying to give the viewer a cheap thrill. Unlike those who paint bison storming across the prairie or elephants on the veldt, Ron paints what he lives and that gives it truth.”

Jonathan Cooper can feel the gravitational pull emanating from Kingswood’s aesthetic. “Ron has an individual contemporary vision. I see what he does as the natural progression of the greats that have come before him,” he explains. “The artists that stir the soul and make you want to know more. There is a great honesty and artistic ability in Ron Kingswood’s unique interpretation. Nature has never been more important and we all know how it is under threat. His work makes you stop in your tracks to admire the beauty and then it makes you think.”

Todd Wilkinson is an authority on wildlife art in North America. He is also an environmental journalist and author of the recent, critically-acclaimed book, “Last Stand: Ted Turner’s Quest to Save a Troubled Planet.”