

# Q&A With Artist Karen Hollingsworth



**With a Solo Show Featuring New Works Opening at Principle Gallery Charleston this April, the Artist Opens Up About Her Vision and Passion as a Painter**

Karen Hollingsworth and Principle Gallery Director, Frank Conrad Russen sat down in their Charleston galleries newly renovated salon for ‘*Principle Art Talk*’ the first in a series of Q & A artist interviews.

For more than 17 years, American artist Karen Hollingsworth has created unique paintings of endearing, yet compelling wildlife and objects, photo-realistic figures and classic Americana interior spaces that are sure to send viewers down memory lane. She has achieved a level of national recognition and critical success that has followed her throughout her career and she has not stopped since.

**FCR:** Where did you grow up?

**KH:** I was born in St. Louis, MO. That was my mother's home town and where her large family lived. My father had immigrated to St. Louis from Europe after World War II. He became a college professor and we relocated a number of times in his search for a better position. When I was 6 years old we moved from St. Louis to a rural area outside of Carbondale IL. That was a lot of fun for me. We lived near a big state park and I spend blissful days with my dog exploring the wooded park and lake area. I think this period of my life inspired my love for natural objects. Back then, all kids were free range kids. You only went home when you got hungry or the Flintstones were on. Otherwise you were outside playing. After Carbondale Ill, we moved to Memphis TN, during the time when Martin Luther King was shot. The city was a tense place during the riots that followed his death, but I still loved living there. We moved to Atlanta GA when I was 15, and although I hated leaving my school and friends in Memphis, I found some great friends in Atlanta, who are still my friends to this day.

**FCR:** What's your first memory of being creative?

**KH:** My mother was creative, she was always working on some kind of art/craft project. I think my first memory of creativity was my mother giving me a bar of ivory soap and a butter knife, and I'd carve all kinds of things, I don't think I was more than 4 years old. I loved making paper dolls, finger painting, and of course drawing all the time. We didn't have much money, so if you wanted to play, you needed to be able to create your own toys. I spent a lot of time making mud pies, and all kinds of mud pastries! Interestingly, now I have a passion for cooking too! I was also very nearsighted as a child, and it wasn't until I was about 8 or 9 that my eyes were tested and I was given glasses. I think that's why I loved art projects that you could work on close up. One thing I remember from my childhood creations, and it still holds true for me today, is that when I draw, I go into a calm place, where I find a lot of peace. I have always been an anxious person, and drawing has been a great source of comfort.

**FCR:** Karen, your work is very distinctive. Who would you say were your influences? Were you a particular fan of any artists growing up? Where do you find your inspiration?

**KH:** Our family didn't go to museums or art galleries, so I didn't get exposure to fine art, but I did love comic books. I read them continuously and tried to draw my own comics. When I was ten we had a next door neighbor who was a professional artist. She painted portraits in pastel. At that point I knew that's what I wanted to do. In my teens I was a fan of Peter Max and loved anything painted by Normal Rockwell. The High School in Memphis I attended was called White Station and they took art very seriously there. The school had an entire building dedicated to the arts. They even offered drawing classes with a live model. When we moved to Atlanta the art department of the school I attended there was essentially a crafts class. It was pretty tragic.

It's funny when people tell me my work is distinctive. I love hearing that, but I can't really see it myself. I wonder if other artists feel that way. It's just the way I reproduce what I see.

I married young, age 18, to a watercolor artist. He introduced me to the work of Andrew Wyeth, and Winslow Homer. Along with many other watercolor artists. This was 1973 and watercolor was all the rage. It's kind of sad, but my first husband convinced me that I wasn't a good artist and that I should stop painting. I believed him! I even allowed him to throw away all my previous artwork. I actually didn't even draw again till I was in my late 20's and we had divorced, and had met my current husband, James Neil Hollingsworth, also an artist, who encouraged me.

Inspiration is a funny thing. When I try to hard to find it, it doesn't appear. But if I stop trying so hard, all the sudden inspiration appears. When my husband and I 1st began to paint, we would be at a restaurant or the home depot, or anywhere, and we would say, look over there, now that's a painting. We saw, and still do see paintings everywhere. I can spend all day on the internet, with access to a million artists, art galleries, and amazing photographers. Not to mention TV and movies. Also my husband Neil is an amazing artist whose work is a constant inspiration to me. And I have some amazing artist friends whose paintings I love. I even dream about ideas for paintings. But most of all I'm inspired by all the wonderful artists whose work I just adore. There are so many, but my favorites I have listed on my website on my Links page.

**FCR:** How long have you been painting professionally?

**KH:** I guess it depends on your definition of professional. I began painting portraits when I was about 35 years old. I was taking classes from a local portrait painter and I was working as a nurse. The doctors and nurses I worked with were my first customers. I must have painted hundreds of pastel portraits during that time. Then I began to get commissions from outside the hospital. Portrait painting is hard work. It's not always easy to please clients, and the pay is pretty meager, but I learned a lot. So when a close artist friend told my husband and I that he was selling paintings on ebay, I jumped at it. At first the paintings sold for so little it was embarrassing. But slowly I developed a following of buyers and the bids started to go up and up. It didn't take very long before I was making enough money to quit my job as a nurse. It was also during this time I switched from working in pastels to oil paints, and started to show my work in some local galleries. I loved painting portraits, but there was a lot of competition for jobs and commissions can be less than creative. So I switched to painting still life, and room interiors and explored all kinds of subject matter. If you count my time as a portrait artist I've been working professionally for 25yrs. But the last 17 years I've been supporting myself solely as an artist, selling my work through the internet and galleries.

**FCR:** What medium do you work in?

**KH:** At present, I work in oil on stretched canvas. I have worked in pastel, watercolor and pencil.

**FCR:** What is the most rewarding part about creating your art?

**KH:** It's rewarding in so many ways! Getting a call from a gallery letting you know that a painting has sold is always exciting, but I think my favorite part of the process is in the creation of the composition. Beginning with that initial idea, putting together the various pieces to see where it will take you, then doing the drawing, and finally painting. It's really fun! I also love the lifestyle of the artist. Working in your home at your own pace on your own schedule is really nice. If I need some time off I take it, and if I need to work all night getting ready for a show I do it. It is hard work, but in many ways I feel that getting to do this for a living, is like winning the lottery.

**FCR:** What is most challenging or things you tried to avoid?

**KH:** I avoid too much detail in my work. I'm not a photorealist like my husband. Type is another area I tend to leave out in my paintings. Neil's really good at it, but creating accurate lettering like on books or jars is something I steer away from if I can. Figures are another subject I don't do very often. Not because I don't like painting them, I love painting people, but they can be a hard sell. I will on occasion put a figure into one of my compositions as sort of a gift to myself and in time they will eventually sell. Principle sold one of my favorite figurative paintings last spring. Thank you very much.

I try to avoid putting too much in a painting. I think that's a mistake a lot of artists make. Sometimes less is more. I had to learn how to edit and balance my compositions!

A subject that I enjoy painting, and which is popular with collectors are birds, and they are challenging for me to paint. To be honest all of my paintings are a challenge. I've done hundreds and hundreds of paintings, but I still usually begin each one with the thought, "can I do this?"

**FCR:** I find that many artists generally work in obscurity, locked away in their studio, but certain artists like yourself receive tons of recognition. After a while, do you find yourself thinking about how your audience will react to your work?

**KH:** I'm definitely always thinking about my audience. I love the positive feedback I receive and the knowledge that my work is enjoyed by so many people. For many artists, painting a similar theme over and over is a problem. But I find it very enjoyable and interesting. I never know where the initial idea will eventually lead me. I try to explore what will make a painting interesting and unique. Many times I can find a way to incorporate an old idea into a new series. Example, I always loved painting wildlife.

Elephants, giraffes, ect. But just on their own, the wildlife paintings didn't have the right energy. But, when I found that I could put my elephants and giraffes on a beach outside of a window, pow, now you can't stop looking at it.

**FCR:** What do you hope people take away from viewing your paintings?

**KH:** I hope they will enjoy them. I don't think anything I paint will change the world! My paintings don't reflect any political or religious agenda. If I can create a painting that causes people to be intrigued, happier or calmer, then I feel I've done my job. I always say a painting is successful if a person will walk across the gallery to see it.

**FCR:** How has your work evolved over the years?

**KH:** My work has changed a lot over the years. It's gotten more narrative. I'm a better draftsman than I used to be. In the last few years I've begun my series of subjects on the black backgrounds, and I'm so happy with that! I think my work has become less moody and a bit more hopeful. Although moody paintings are just delicious and I hope to paint more of them!

**FCR:** What are you working on for 2016?

**KH:** I would love to dive deeper into those moody themes. Maybe I'll bring back my draped chairs, add stormy skies to one of my Window Scapes, or create more "strange" combinations. Sometimes I think being a little more experimental would be interesting, but then I remember when Joni Mitchell went pure jazz and how I lost interest in her music at that point. I don't want to lose my audience, so maybe the occasional odd piece would satisfy that urge. Figurative is a subject I'd like to explore more in 2016. I've been playing around with some interesting compositions involving women and wild animals.

**FCR:** How about a final comment that sums up how you feel about having your first **SOLD OUT** show at Principle Gallery last year?

**KH:** Pure Joy!!!!