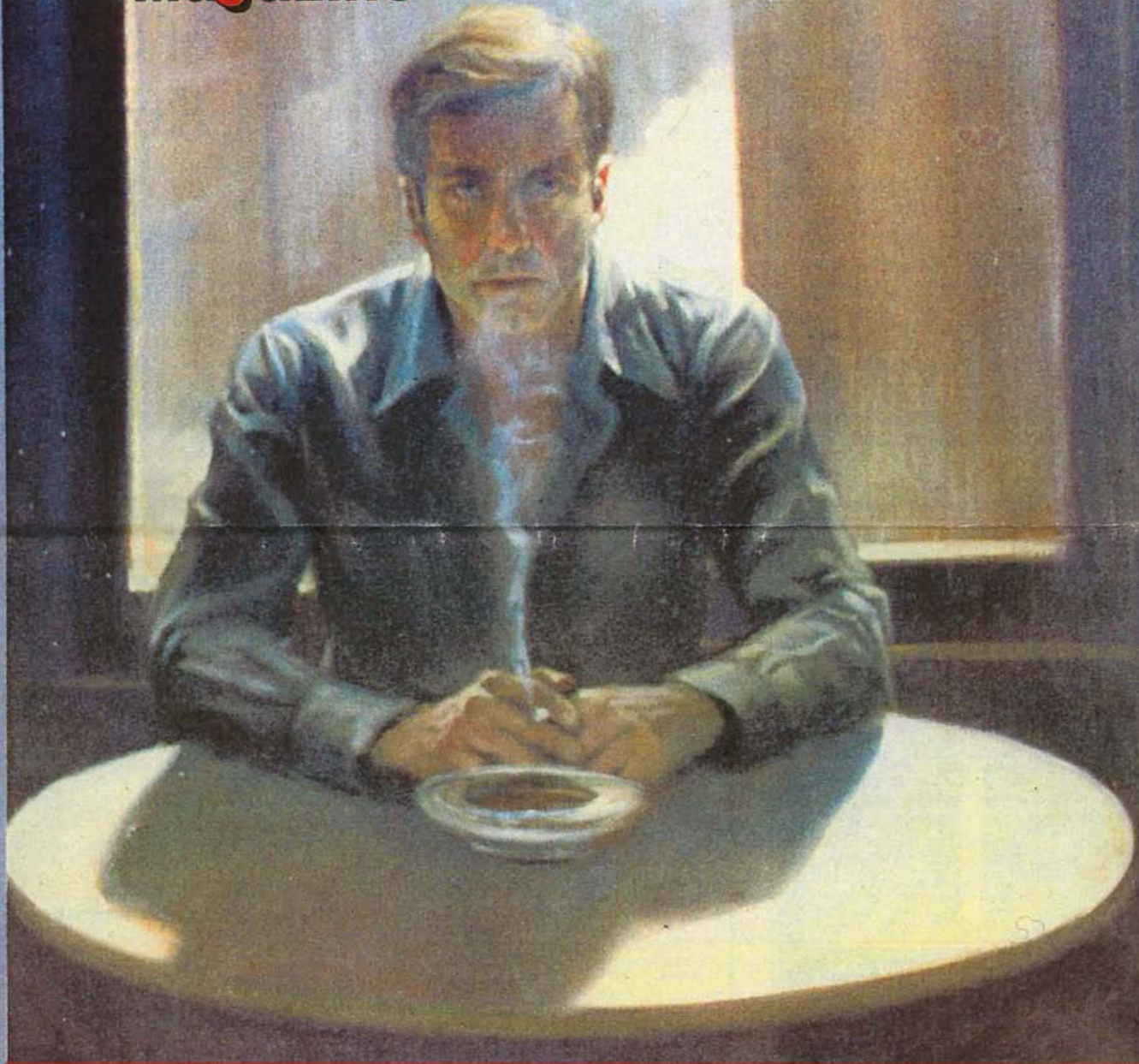


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**I**  
**IN THE MOOD**

Stephen Kuzma's paintings are more than pretty pictures. They pull you inside them, and they may not let you go.

## IN THE MOOD

# THE ART OF STEPHEN KUZMA

BY SALLY VALLONGO

**S**TEPHEN KUZMA is a realist painter who says, "I don't like the word realism." His artistic vision defies quick definition, but he tries anyway. "Still lives that are not so still," is one attempt.

"I know my images are clear, but I'm into things that are deeper than those surface things. I paint what I see and it starts from that. It's a visual impression, not something I think about and then paint."

Edgar Munhall, curator of the Frick Collection in New York City and a longtime collector of Kuzma works, says, "He's in the great tradition of American romantic realist artists of the 19th century."

"... Steve is like someone who's come out of the past, still alive and vital and related to these times," says Mr. Munhall. "He's very old-fashioned," adds Dean Walker, curator of the Ackland Museum at the University of North Carolina, another collector.

Kuzma paintings have been part of realist shows in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Berkeley Center at Yale University, the Guild Hall in East Hampton, N.Y., the Stamford (Conn.) Museum and many other east coast galleries. But no one can really categorize him, especially the artist himself.

"Sometimes I paint heavy moody things," he said during a visit to Toledo, his home town, last year. Those are big, brooding portraits and mysterious still lifes of details lifted from the grittiness of the city.

"Other times, I paint light, to refresh myself." These are the color-drenched landscapes — brilliant skies, the ocean, and endless fields of flowers — inspired by his summer sojourns to a Nova Scotia cabin.

"My heavy stuff is where I feel I'm at, although not all my collectors would agree with this," Mr. Kuzma said. He has been a New Yorker since the 1950s but has never severed his Toledo roots. He studied painting with Ernest Spring at his alma mater, Macomber High School, and with Frank Turner at the Toledo Museum of Art. He still visits his father, Stephen, here.

Slides of some of his large paintings imparted an initial impression of simplicity — plain forms, uncomplicated compositions, and rather murky colorings. But, on second look, simplicity yielded to complexity, inviting more



prolonged study.

Which is what his work is all about, Mr. Kuzma said. "It takes a while to see my stand. People who know my work can see it, the connections."

His connections start with the ordinary but quickly progress into emotional *chiaroscuro* of memory and suggestion as the painter probes the mystery of the commonplace.

"I just want to be a catalyst. I like the idea of that. I want to throw a bone into the game and let people make the game themselves. I don't want to tell them what it's about. I like the idea of not telling too much."

For example, a darkly dramatic scene of men in hoods huddled over a glowing fire is his vision of a street repair crew. Mr. Kuzma calls this one of his "psychological" paintings.

"They're just working asphalt, but the mood is such that you can read all sorts of other things in it. The painting suggests a lot of things." There are mystical overtones, a sense of ceremony in the forms huddled in firelight.

Another very affecting work draws the eyes to a pair of bare legs on a draped stretcher around which are gathered a circle of intent watchers. The angle suggests the viewer's head belongs to those legs; a sense of vulnerability develops.

Eureka! Mr. Kuzma would say. "The figures are almost like Easter Island statues. There's no mistaking, they're looking right at you."

"... I try to get people inside the paintings rather than just to have them look at them."

Part of his game is technical: his paintings, even the darkest ones, are filled with color, but color visible only on closer scrutiny. Seeming ready to burst through the surface browns and grays and blacks is a veritable rainbow of brighter hues.

Another is the detail, again, not visible on first viewing. In one of his more recent series based on reflections, Mr. Kuzma drew on historical references and personal memories to create a sense of the moment.

"At the last show in my loft, I had a Chinese vase filled with flowers. I saw this reflection in there." Pondering what he saw, he moved it into a larger context, pulling in references from all time.

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"Then I saw The Last Supper . . . Da Vinci's in particular. It was created by the windows reflected behind me in the loft. I just improvised the shadows to reflect the movement."

The result suggests Dutch genre painters yet is far removed from the literal quality of that time and place in its dreamlike synthesis of the universal. No accident there, Mr. Kuzma admitted.

"I keep a diary of dreams. I keep trying to find ways to keep moving, not get stagnant, and I want to use dreams."

But — and this has worked against him for years — instead of abstracts, this painter prefers real life to express the seen and the suggested. "My preference always was for images. I like the light and shadow. I kept that in my work," he said.

**HIS PREFERENCE** has kept him out of step with the mainstream art world. He hit New York City in the 60s, having finished a tour in the U.S. Navy (he painted murals and portraits while in uniform), and studies at the American Academy of Art in Chicago, and the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design in New York, all on scholarship.

"For a person who painted the way I did, to get into a gallery was just about impossible. Everything was abstract or expressionist. We were just totally rejected, so we formed our own co-op.

"I got into the first gallery that dared to raise its head and say it was a realist gallery. It was right in the middle of the abstract artists, the Fitzgerald Gallery."

At the Fitzgerald co-op, Mr. Kuzma did group shows from 1961-1965. During that time, he also took the Suydam bronze medal from the National Academy of Design, won the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation prize, and was represented in shows at the Hirsch-Adler, Mortimer Brandt, and Fulton galleries in New York City.

When the co-op gallery moved uptown, it went under. Like a growing number of New York artists, Mr. Kuzma turned to lower Manhattan for cheap living, working, and exhibition sites. At the time, the idea was revolutionary to city officials.

"There was no such thing as living and working, no zoning to cover that. We helped to create that by moving in. We moved in illegally with the idea it would go that way." By the early 70s, he was getting tired of the charade.

"I had lived in lofts in Little Italy, got thrown out by the fire department. I got tired of hiding," Mr. Kuzma recalled. "I got out."

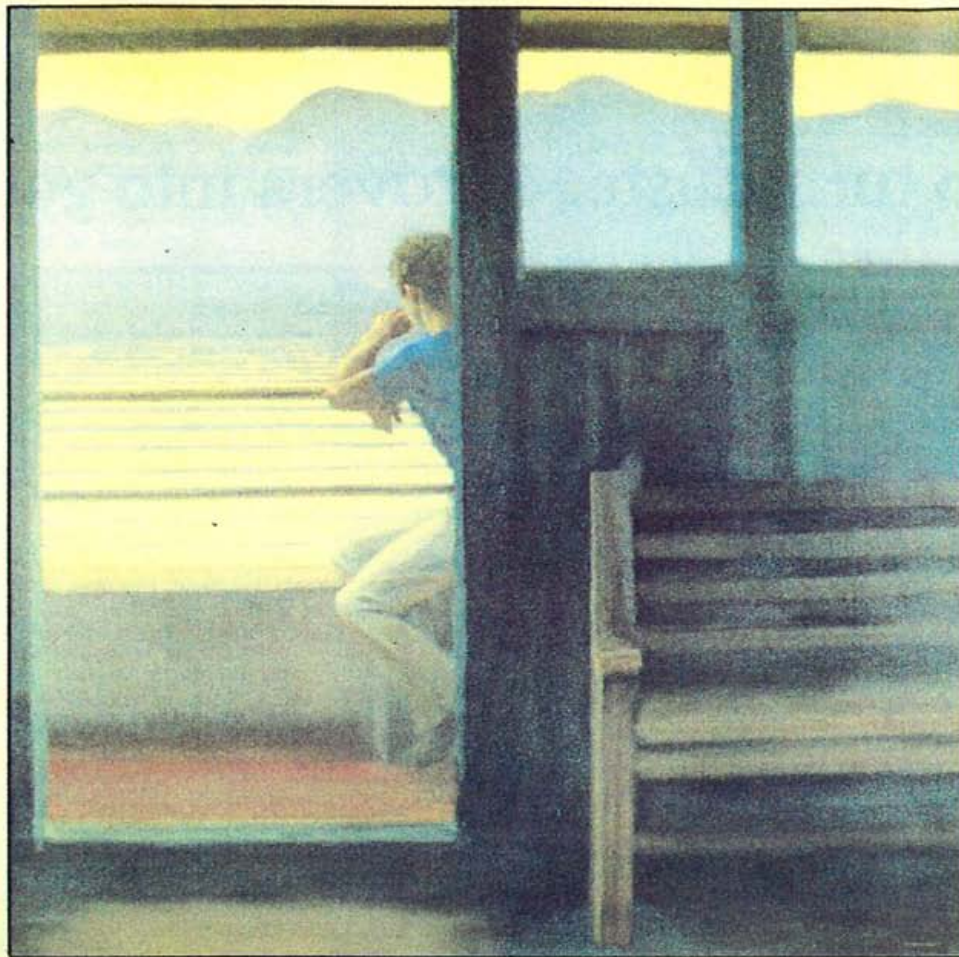
He was a pioneer in the artistic migration to SoHo warehouses. "They would buy lofts for a few thousand and then turn them into co-ops. They were very rough lofts, no plumbing, no wiring — everyone was taking a chance. Then they went down and fought city hall to change zoning.

"Now, it's overrun with tourists. A lot of artists then couldn't afford it now, with lofts going for half a million." Mr. Kuzma now lives at 133 Wooster St. at the corner of Prince Street. It's legal, large — 3,000 square feet — well-plumbed and lighted, has a kitchen and, downstairs, a landmark restaurant, Food. "It's a palace."

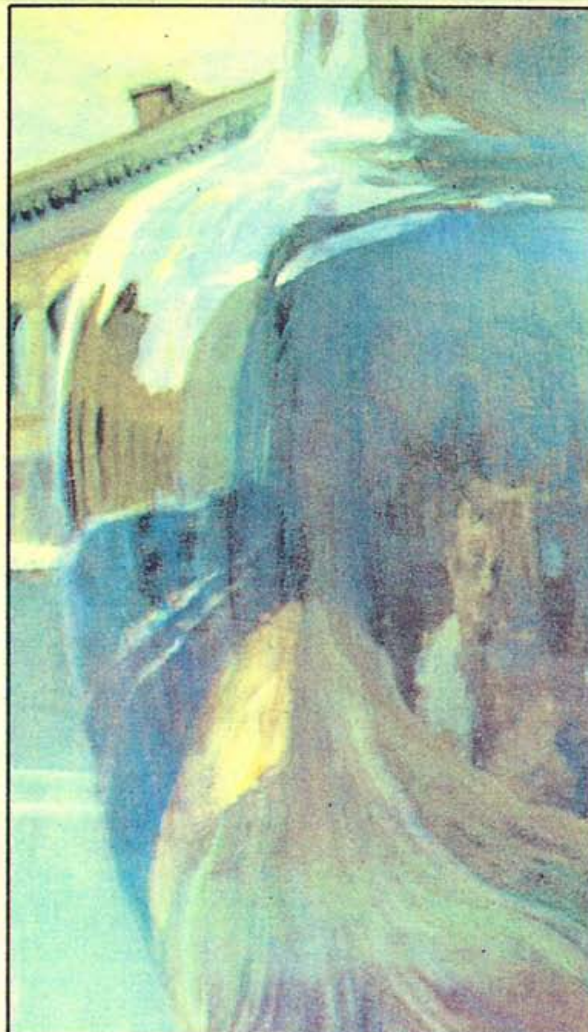
Not only is it home and studio, his shared quarters become a gallery once or twice a year. "I invite about 250 people, hire a band, hang up my paintings. I use word of mouth, I'm not a self-promoter. I don't like jumping out there and pushing my art. I like to focus on my work."

**TROUBLE IS**, as Mr. Kuzma knows, the name of the contemporary art game is self-promotion. At a time when, according to Mr. Munhall, new young artists may get \$50,000 to \$75,000 for a single painting, Mr. Kuzma hesitates to price his far more mature work in that range.

Cincinnati physician and collector Jack Selzer re-



Far left: "Man with Umbrella," part of series. Mixed media: Acrylic on shaped panel with a real umbrella. Left: "Journey to Itea" (Greece). Oil on canvas. Below: Vase from "Reflections" series. Oil on canvas.



"Sometimes I paint heavy moody things. Other times, I paint light, to refresh myself." — Stephen Kuzma

calls that this summer, when he and his wife, Carol, met Mr. Kuzma at his summer home and gallery in Nova Scotia, the artist was getting ready for a sale. "We got him to double his prices," Dr. Selzer says. "He sold everything."

At a SoHo loft show in February, Mr. Kuzma also did well, selling 16 paintings and other artworks. In recent years, he has added screens and large-scale folded paper works to his total output, working in pen and ink and in oil pastels, as well as oils.

Mr. Walker, who met Mr. Kuzma in New York, recently purchased one of the artist's later pieces, a folding paper screen done in brush and brown and black ink.

"The shape is like an oriental album but the esthetic is like a hand scroll, a continuous object. It's not abstract, it's a panoramic view from the porch of his place in Nova Scotia. It's very, very strong," Mr. Walker says.

Describing himself as a loner, Mr. Kuzma said he is looking for a gallery to represent him, a new sort of liaison for him. "My collectors see different things in my work. That's one reason I'm not in a gallery — I can't be packaged."

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## KUZMA (Continued)

Mr. Munhall met Mr. Kuzma through a Yale classmate, Cornell Franklin, who had shared a loft with Mr. Kuzma. He says he has pushed the artist for years. "Although he makes enough to keep himself alive, he's never gotten the recognition he deserves.

"... It's mind-boggling. He's using superb materials, good canvas, wonderful watercolors. Things aren't going to fall apart. You're getting good materials as well as wonderful ideas, real technique. I think he's just got everything."

As for why he hasn't made an art world splash: "It's a question of taste. People don't want romantic, beautiful pictures. They want something to make them suffer. But, someday he's going to be recognized."

**I**N THE MEANTIME, Mr. Kuzma continues to develop his unique vision. He said he would love to have a Toledo show, but inquiries at the Toledo Museum of Art got him nowhere. Individual artists often request such showings at the museum, says spokesperson Barbara Van Vleet, noting that no record of Mr.

Kuzma's request is in the museum files.

He is looking for another teaching position (one class he taught stayed together for a decade).

For diversion, he has received a plum commission from Mr. Munhall's gallery — a rare opportunity to copy one of the Old Masters the Toledo artist discovered as a young man. This is a painting by Francisco Goya, "An Officer (Conde de Tapa?)," one of three Goyas in the Frick collection. It's being done for the descendant of the painting's subject, the current Conde de Tapa.

"This is the most romantic," Mr. Munhall says. "Steve is painting it slightly larger than the original, so that there's no confusion about which is the original and which is the copy."

There's no confusion in the originality of Stephen Kuzma, who has pursued his ever-changing vision over three decades.

"I came into the art world with certain ideas and feelings, and it seemed a waste to throw that away because it wasn't in fashion. I don't go chasing after rainbows. I get influenced, I know what's going on, I can't fail to be impressed by certain things," he said.

But what he seeks is long-lasting recognition, not short-term fame. Fascinated by the time element of the performing arts, Mr. Kuzma wants his paintings to somehow change with the times, to offer fresh visions.

"Some people will have these paintings for years, and then they find something that's been in there all along," the artist said happily, adding, "Sometimes I don't even know what's in there." ■

*Sally Vallongo is a Blade staff writer.*



"Window washers." Oil on canvas (collection of Peter Rogers).



Soho street scene from artist's studio. Oil on canvas.