

J. E. KNAUF

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## **PRESS**

### **Riding the Edge**

"J.E. Knauf explores an improbable combination of opposites"

By Lynn Pyne

Whether he's balancing on a surfboard or painting in his studio, Arizona artist J.E. Knauf enjoys taking risks. It might seem odd that a 49-year-old artist from the Arizona desert who paints southwestern Indians and rodeo cowboys checks the Interact every morning for the California surf report. "A little bit fishy" are the exact words Knauf laughingly uses to describe his shameless obsession with riding the waves. He keeps a longboard patterned with Hawaiian flowers waxed and ready in his studio.

Beyond testifying to a certain "aloha spirit," the surfboard stands as a symbol of the driving force behind Knauf's life and his art: He rides the edge. Always. Striving for balance and seeking the thrill of the unexpected. "I've always liked the feeling of being on the edge," says the blue-eyed, white-haired artist who looks younger than his years. "There's such a sense of elation."

Knauf's words on surfing could apply just as easily to his passion for painting: "When you're out there, right on the edge, the ocean is alive. It takes on a different shape each time, with a varying amount of force. And there's always that element of risk that makes it sweet. I feel like I'm existing between two worlds."

In his art Knauf is compelled to explore an improbable combination of opposites: realism and abstraction, hard geometric edges and flowing organic shapes, tight draftsmanship and unpainterly smudges. One heightens the other and the results are dramatic, not unlike the powerful effect of ocean waves exploding into rolling, white-foamed breakers.

Each painting takes Knauf on an adventure into the unknown. He pours himself into the paint yet deliberately leaves blank spaces and question marks so that viewers can discover their own answers. "I worry sometimes that I've given too much information, made it too clear what the painting is about, and that people will dismiss it and leave," he says. "I'd rather keep the element of mystery and let the viewer fill in the blanks. It's more satisfying for the viewer and for me, too." Once again it's a matter of expanding the sphere of what is commonly defined as "southwestern art."

The subjects of Knauf's paintings are striking: craggy-faced Native Americans, fiery dancers, rodeo calf ropers, and whipcord riders on bucking horses. They take the spotlight and grab the viewer by the throat. It would be easy to appreciate Knauf's figures on that level alone. Yet just when everything seems clear--yes, this is a cowboy on a bronco--along come the questions. Hmm, I thought this was a feather, but really it's just a smear of paint. If this is a rodeo, why does the background look like scenery on a theater stage? If this is realistic, why does it

dissolve into smudges and blobs of paint at close range?

The truth is, that's what Knauf wants you to notice and love--the tiny areas of abstract expressionist painting that could stand alone. The scratches that dig into the layers of paint and tug at your curiosity. The streaks that spoil the perfection because he wiped at the painting with a terry-cloth towel to see what might happen. It's a dialogue in paint, and if it captures the attention of people strolling through a gallery, the artist silently cheers.

"I want to involve people in the sensual experience of moving paint around," Knauf says. "I want to leave the door open so they can see where I've been, physically, on the canvas -- the scratches, scrawls, and smears. Yet I want the overall subject matter to be strong and powerful enough to attract them. Ultimately they can take joy in the nuances, the subtleties, the things that have painterly aspects aside from the subject-related stuff.

If such a philosophy sounds curiously modernist or avant-garde for a southwestern painter, it can be traced to Knauf's modernist training and experience. He studied at the University of California at Irvine in the early 1970s with Ed Moses and Billy Al Bengston, under department head Tony DeLap. Other contemporaries included Larry, Bell, Robert Irwin, Vija Clemens, Sam Francis, and Bruce Nauman, all of whom had already received some recognition as artists.

Like most of his peers at the university Knauf's paintings were nonobjective back then. "It was a time when the amount of shock value you invested in your work and life determined your status as an artist," he recalls. "The art that came out of the university then made Ed Kienholz, who made funky assemblages and elaborate tableaux with political overtones, look like a craftsman. The only, graduate student showing in Los Angeles was the extreme conceptual artist Chris Burden, who was either having himself shot or crawling on broken glass. It became apparent to me pretty quickly that I wasn't going to be happy on this particular career track."

Starving as an artist in a rented garage didn't match Knauf's idea of the lifestyle he wanted either, so he traveled the world in search of adventure and embarked on a series of odd jobs and entrepreneurial endeavors that spanned two decades. Refinishing boats, cleaning swimming pools, marketing snow-ski products, managing a hotel and RV park, selling commercial real estate, designing swimming pools, and doing landscape design and construction were a few of the things he tried. As a landscape architect he created innovative, award-winning designs costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, but as his success mounted, so did the financial risk and the stress.

Knauf; like many of his generation, had experimented in his teens with recreational drugs that crippled his emotions and his ability to deal with the realities of life. As the stress increased, so did his efforts to escape through alcohol and drugs. "It wasn't fun," he says.

Knauf's life spun increasingly out of control until six years ago, when he quit the worst of his addictions. "I started feeling things again," he says. "The first year I felt like I had all these exposed nerves--even TV commercials made me cry. But when negative things that I'd avoided in the past came up, I found that they wouldn't kill me. They were just part life:."

Now Knauf counts his blessings every day. Shortly after kicking drugs, he rediscovered painting and began experimenting with southwestern subjects at night while watching TV with his wife and two teenage sons. Art became a passion that led to a full-time career when he was introduced to art dealer Betty Wilde (of Wilde-Meyer Gallery, Scottsdale), who began showing his work. A hundred people attended the reception for his first solo show, and even though nothing sold on opening night, Knauf remembers telling his wife, "This is it. It doesn't get any better than this!"

Knauf's technique and materials are unusual. He cuts hollow-core doors to size, then fills in the edges, creating a wooden surface that is resilient and able to support multiple layers of paint. He covers the surface with an aqueous ground, which consists of swirls of water-thinned gray or golden-tan pigment that usually remain visible in areas of the finished painting.

Next he uses a fast-drying, translucent oil medium to paint the central figure and other elements, applying it in layers. "It dries so quickly that once you put something down, you can't go back and paint it out--you lose the translucency," he says. "You're pretty much stuck with your first gesture. It's a little like working with water-colors or Japanese inks."

Between layers, Knauf applies glazes that achieve a glassy, mirrored effect, making it appear as though the paint is suspended in the glaze. In some ways, his paintings resemble those of the old masters, yet his bright colors and loose brush strokes make them unmistakably modern.

Knauf further manipulates his surfaces by scratching through the paint and then using a towel to blur the brush strokes so that they don't appear so deliberate. "I'm always wiping things out--making them hazy or fuzzy in order to find a balance between the planned and unplanned. I work on that edge, balancing the objects based on where I want the viewers eyes to go in the painting."

Just as Knauf arranged natural organic shapes against formal geometric edges in his landscape designs, he often sets his human and animal subjects against grids or geometric backgrounds. Like scrim on a theater stage, his planes overlap, playing tricks with the viewer's perceptions.

Knauf is concerned enough about realism to use Native American models, yet he studiously avoids too much reality, refusing to paint details with any degree of precision. What appears to be a necklace is more often a drip of paint. He is once again riding the edge between reality, and illusion, tradition and the avant-garde, geo-metric and organic shapes, deliberate strokes of paint and messy smudges.

And in art, as in sports, maturity brings a certain caution and thoughtfulness. With each painting, Knauf is aware of contributing to an ongoing dialogue within the arena of southwestern art, as well as making an emotional impact on his audience. More is at stake here than mere self-indulgence.

"I don't paint alone," Knauf says. "There's always an audience back there. When I'm standing in front of a painting I feel the viewers reaching out and tugging at me. It's all part of the experience of making art."

Lynn Pyne is a writer living in Phoenix, AZ.