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Artist Bowling sees the light through landscapes

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An exhibit of new paintings and etchings by Katherine Bowling is at the David Floria Gallery through March 19. (Mark Fox/Aspen Times Weekly)

Almost as soon as Katherine Bowling landed in Aspen last week, David Floria, who is presenting a series of the artist's new work at his David Floria Gallery, wondered if Bowling would be interested in making images of the



local mountains. On the surface, it made good sense; for the last 20 years or so, Bowling has focused on landscapes in which natural features – ponds, woods, fields and skies – predominate. Bowling, however, is a stranger to Aspen's mountains; she made her first trip to the Roaring Fork Valley two years ago to teach at Snowmass Village's Anderson Ranch Arts Center. And if there is a critical element to Bowling's work, it is familiarity with her surroundings. "I would never paint these big mountains," said the 51-year-old Bowling, whose exhibit, featuring new paintings and etchings, opened last week and runs through March 19. "I'd have to be here three months, and focus in on the mountain trail, a few leaves on a tree." I have to not just see it, not just capture it in a photograph, but know what it's all about. And that means living with it."

The current exhibit features work that, in one way, represents a wide range. There is a frosty blue winter scene, a farm field that lets you imagine the warmth. There is a moon visible through a stand of trees, done in dark, muted colors, and a jet trail through a vivid blue sky. But, geographically speaking, those paintings are the product of a tiny sliver of terrain. Almost all of the landscapes are more or less literally outside the front door of Bowling's upstate New York retreat, a house in the northern Catskill Mountains town of Potter Hollow that she has had for 15 years. The various ponds in the Floria show are, in fact, the same pond, seen from different angles, in varying seasons. Bowling spends half her year, generally the colder half, in New York City, where she has had the same small East Village apartment for nearly 30 years. The large majority of her creative life takes place between the two habitats: The photos she works from are mostly from her Potter Hollow



property; she paints there and in a Brooklyn studio. The lack of change in scenery hasn't hampered her creativity, but enhanced it." You can look at the same trees – I've painted them as trees, as shadows, their reflections in the water, different times of day or year. Bird nests in the trees," said Bowling, who describes herself as a recluse, happiest by herself, but who is also chatty and personable. "For me to do the kind of work I do, it's about observing the landscape in front of me and being intimate with it. My view is, you don't have to go far. This is the same view, the same thing I've been painting for years. I can stay in one place and find endless things to paint. The time of day, the light, the details." As much as those very specific spots have influenced Bowling, she doesn't seek to memorialize them in her paintings. Though she works from photographs, she generally does not attempt to reproduce the exact landscapes her camera captures. Oftentimes, a painting will combine pieces from several photos. "They're not about specific places," said Bowling. "If they read like, 'You know where you are,' then I have not been successful. They're generic shots. I'm not interested in painting the grand view, the panoramic view. It's about the everyday things, the details you may overlook to get to that. The path you walk on." Bowling's work is also not about creating a mood. All of the pieces in the show bear one-word titles – "Pond," "Trail," "Cover" – to keep at a minimum the conveying of emotion. "No sentiment," said Bowling. "Because they're not about sentiment. I don't paint sentimental things."

So if Bowling's work is not about specific places, and not about emotions, just what motivates the art? For Bowling, it is simply about painting, about capturing light and creating texture. To a lesser extent, they are also about the



natural forms, what Bowling calls “the abstract, geometric qualities in nature.” (And perhaps to an even lesser extent, this specific series is about horizon lines, which vary in placement from almost the bottom of the canvas to near the top.)Early in her career, Bowling specialized in abstract paintings on canvas. It was not a particularly successful venture; she only gave up her waitress jobs some 10 years ago. In the mid-1980s, Bowling discovered spackle, a type of plaster that she substituted for regular canvas. She now calls that her “eureka” moment.

“I found myself as an artist when I found my medium,” she said. Spackle is a hard material that absorbs paint, as opposed to canvas, which acts as surface for the paint to lie on. Spackle permits Bowling to build up layers of paint, which she sands away, then paints over again, creating not so much texture as light. Some spots on her paintings have as many as 20 layers of paint, giving them their distinctive richness.” “The way I paint, what I paint is light – light hitting the trees, coming off of surfaces,” she said. “The plaster medium absorbs the paint, and it creates this depth. It’s inherent – it comes from within and imbues it with this light. The paint doesn’t just sit on the surface.” There was one other big breakthrough. After graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University, Bowling made what was for her an easy choice, picking a move to New York City over graduate school. Her early work was mostly abstract paintings, but around the same time she discovered spackle, she also began doing landscapes, a style that ties her to her native Virginia.” “You can’t escape your roots,” said Bowling, who grew up in Richmond. “A lot of landscapes, the feels, come from Tidewater, Virginia, which is replicated, in a way, in upstate New York. There’s a childhood



memory of looking at things that is very deep. Your first insight of looking comes from your roots. “When I started painting landscapes, I think that came from Tidewater, a region that’s known as the Northern Neck. It’s got a lot of creeks and water and fields, and flat expanses of lands ringed by trees. That ring of tree line is like a drawing to me.” Bowling’s early landscapes were nearly abstract, generalized; “very foggy,” she says. Since she began basing the paintings on photographs, they have become more focused and less general. And Bowling has found the place where her specific landscapes – the look of a group of trees, the way the moon peeks through a woods, how the snow lays at the edge of a pond – have a wider resonance.

“By getting more specific, by being more my landscape, they become more universal, in a sense,” she said. “And more people were able to appreciate them.” Stewart Oksenhorn’s e-mail address is stewart@aspentimes.com