

Seven By Gaylord Kellogg

Matthew Kirkpatrick

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Nude Girl in Fragmented Light #2, 1920

Oil on canvas

Before tragedy would befall the artist and his family in 1924, Kellogg spent years working on a series of impressionistic portraits of nude girls in near darkness. In the late works of the series, the paintings verged on the abstract, so much so that the nude girls would be difficult to identify without the title. In this early example, however, the nude is clearly visible in the fragmented light. Though one might question Kellogg's obsession with painting (and obscuring) images of naked girls, one could also applaud his problematizing representations of taboo subjects. Were the girls to be painted realistically, the images in this series would be overtly sexualized, but because the figures are obscured, even in this more realistic example, the viewer of the painting is thrust into a difficult subject position. When confronted with the title of the painting and the

image before them, viewers cannot help but imagine the girl. In later paintings, as the girls became more difficult to ascertain, the eroticism of the paintings only increased as the nudes appeared to be shrouded in the darkness of a bedroom. It is notable here that the subject of *Nude Girl in Fragmented Light #2* is set in a public place, a café, surrounded by begging feral cats.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Nude in Crumbling Fortress #17, 1922

Oil on canvas

The seventeenth in Kellogg's *Nude in Crumbling Fortress* yet again depicts a nude girl crouched in the rubble of a ruined fortress. Note the intricacies of the broken stone and how the window edges frame the scene, as if the viewer is looking over the old courtyard from a tower above, spying on the girl below. Note how the girl appears to be made of mist. Bathed in cool light, she is barely recognizable; she is a ghost, a smudge. She is paint.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Nude in Crumbling Fortress #25, 1923

Oil on canvas

In #25, the penultimate in the regrettably long series, one can still discern the edges of what might arguably be the stony remains of a crumbling fortress. Though the cubist "fortress" is nearly abstract and the

nude girl merely a pale shadow among sharp lines and jagged shapes, #25 is a metaphor for the entropic deterioration of the monuments (and girls) so vividly depicted in the earliest paintings in the series. Compare this with paintings from Kellogg's *Arbor* series in which skeletal trees seem to yearn for foliage, thirsting in a Beckettian nightmare for life where there is none. Desolation and entropy are here depicted through cubist abstraction, and though barely recognizable, perhaps portends Kellogg's tragic and dark later years.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

The March, 1924

Oil on canvas

Some Kellogg scholars believe this is one of his last really *good* paintings, that his later, post-1927 paintings lose something, either simply from age or, because so deeply was his life touched by the horrific events of 1924 that he lost some combination of his inspiration, talent, and work ethic. The details of the tragedy can be found easily via other sources, but why be coy? It seems unfair to suggest in a museum that visitors go elsewhere for information. In the spring of 1924, on a hiking trip in a remote area of southern Utah, Kellogg's two sons become stuck waste-deep in memory mud while playing near their campsite. As recounted later to authorities, Kellogg's wife, and then Kellogg himself, waded into the mud to retrieve them, but became stuck themselves. Several hours into the night, his youngest and admittedly weakest son perished from exposure. His second son followed, and by morning, his wife, too, had died. Kellogg, stuck only a few feet from his dead family, watched helplessly as a Bald Eagle ate his family's eyeballs, heads, necks, and finally, their torsos. Inexplicably, Kellogg himself was spared.

When he was finally rescued 36 hours after first becoming trapped, the bodies of his family had been pecked clean to their waistlines, their skulls, spines, and skeletons above the mud eaten and bleached by the sun while Kellogg suffered only what rescue workers described as an “intense tan.” Though not relevant, it is interesting that a donkey will get stuck in memory mud while a mule will not.

In *The March*, Kellogg showcases his pre-1927 style at its height in the five figures, eroded and insect-like, walking toward an unearthly sunset. The crude, hewn figures, slender and gnarled, suggest the people walking toward darkness have been stripped of nearly everything, humans whose souls have long left their diminished bodies.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Two Birds, Blue Ball, 1925

Feathers, oil on emery paper, mounted on plywood

Kellogg retreated from public life from 1925 until 1927, a period during which, some scholars argue, the artist produced his most important work. Kellogg’s *Two Birds, Blue Ball* marks the beginning of this period and reinvigorated the public’s interest in the artist as he shunned his usual subjects—arbors, crumbling fortresses, nude girls cast in fragmented light—in favor of animal subjects, here entwined birds hovering over a smooth, blue ball. The presence of the blue orb, like an alien billiard ball in the otherwise pastoral scene, suggests a scar or a hole. Perhaps it suggests other metaphors. The ball is so obviously out of place, and yet, the birds pay it no heed. Notice that the artist chose two females—the plainest birds—as his subjects. The painting is one of

the artist's first uses of collage, incorporating actual feathers collected by Kellogg on long early morning walks.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Hanging Blouses, 1927

Oil on plywood with cotton, taffeta, nails, aluminum.

Hanging Blouses was created at the end of Kellogg's self-imposed exile, the bulk of which he spent in a drafty barn near the town of Bivalve on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. During this time he produced some art in his studio in the barn's loft, though he spent most of his days crabbing and meditating on the tragic events of 1924. In *Hanging Blouses* we see Kellogg fully incorporating non-traditional materials—bits of cloth and hardware—into his decreasingly realistic paintings, though here one can plainly see women's blouses hanging on a clothesline in an otherwise empty field of what could only be wheat. One cannot help but wonder: to whom do these blouses belong? It is difficult to disassociate the blouses—clothes without bodies hanging far away, it seems, from any domestic space, inexplicably left in a wheat field—with what befell the Kellogg family early in 1924. The distant crows, witnesses to the terrible emptiness, are the only sign of life. Who wears these blouses? Why taffeta? Why crows? I don't know the answers to these questions, but regardless, this is one of Kellogg's worst paintings; imagine, gluing bits of cloth to an otherwise fine landscape.

Gaylord Kellogg

American, 1891-1937

Bald Eagle #3, 1935

Oil on plywood

In *Bald Eagle #3*, the deterioration of Kellogg's health can be seen in the tremulous, almost amateur strokes, here depicting a menacing eagle, wings spread, a family of rats struggling to climb out of its gaping mouth. Like a black hole, the eagle's dark, disproportionately large throat from which the rats scramble seems to open into another world, a world just beyond our reach. If you stare into it long enough, you will be able to glimpse it on the other side of the darkness.

By 1935 Kellogg's mental health had begun to crumble. Exhausted by depression and nearly incapable of making art, he spent the last two years of his life painting a series of bald eagles in an increasingly abstract, childlike style. After nearly a hundred of these paintings, Kellogg froze to death wandering the streets of lower Manhattan during a blizzard.

Matthew Kirkpatrick is the author of *Light Without Heat* (FC2) and *The Exiles* (Ricochet Editions). He teaches creative writing at Eastern Michigan University.