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*"I have to get to the ocean several times a year - there's just something in my DNA that needs to see the ocean...and breathe it in and be humbled by it" - Kathleen Dunphy*

# KATHLEEN DUNPHY: *Classic California*

by Nick Fox

Sometimes, when speaking with an artist, a real artist, you get the feeling they are conveying only a fraction of what they really see. That's the feeling I got talking with Kathleen Dunphy. Her works capture the color, openness and beauty not just of her physical surroundings, but something even more elusive and ephemeral, the free and open spirit of old California.

Kathleen hails from Rockville, Maryland, which she describes as, "regular, suburban DC." Her father worked for the government and her mother was a homemaker. "She was very artistic but never had a way to express it, other than having a beautifully decorated house (and being a beautiful woman). We were not museum-goers or art collectors, but Mom took adult education classes at the local high school in art appreciation and bought as many books as she could afford. She also saved Green Stamps and cashed them in for prints of Old Master paintings. We had a Reubens over the piano and a Vermeer in the living room. They were printed on pressed paper and had plastic "gilt" frames. I still have the Vermeer- "The Milkmaid" - it's one of my prized possessions and something I'd grab in a fire. We also had Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" on our sun porch, and much to my delight, when the sun faded the cheap inks it was printed with, Mom let me use my crayons to color it back in."

Her parents encouraged her art, her mother buying her paint-by-number kits and materials. Her mother's support was not unconditional, and praise was hard-won, but it was worth it. She had an excellent eye. Though she died in 2017, Kathleen misses her mother's eye and encouragement.

Kathleen's father was a big fan of her work, too, even though early on he wanted her to be focused on finding a

profession at which she could earn a living. Being an artist was not that profession.

"I always wanted to be an artist," Kathleen said, "but I came from a family where there was not an artist anywhere--I always joke that I never knew an artist until I became one. Because it was just not 'what we did.' We were a conventional 1960s family, typical dad goes to work and mom stays home and raises the kids." Kathleen's siblings were six, seven and eight years older than her, "just enough age difference that I spent a lot of time alone, and I think that fostered my creativity." While her sister did beautiful ceramics and is an incredible gardener, none of her siblings pursued art as a career.

Around fifth grade, Kathleen's parents bought a "run-down farmhouse" near the ocean for weekend use with some acreage that allowed her to wander free. "I just loved it, but it was a place we went to on weekends."

Like so many born artists, Kathleen found high school intolerable. "I hated it, and desperately didn't want to go to college." Her birthday being late in the year, she was only seventeen upon graduation. "For want of anything better to do, I went to the local community college, and much to my delight it was filled with people who really wanted to learn and there were none of the social machinations of high school. I loved it."

She signed up to take all introductory classes at Rockville's Montgomery College, but was mistakenly placed in Art 201, a figure drawing class with Dr. Allan Marsh, for which she had not fulfilled the prerequisites. The rest of her schedule made it difficult to reassign her to Art 101, and she went to make her case to the director of the art department. "He could easily have said no, but he let me stay in the figure class. I



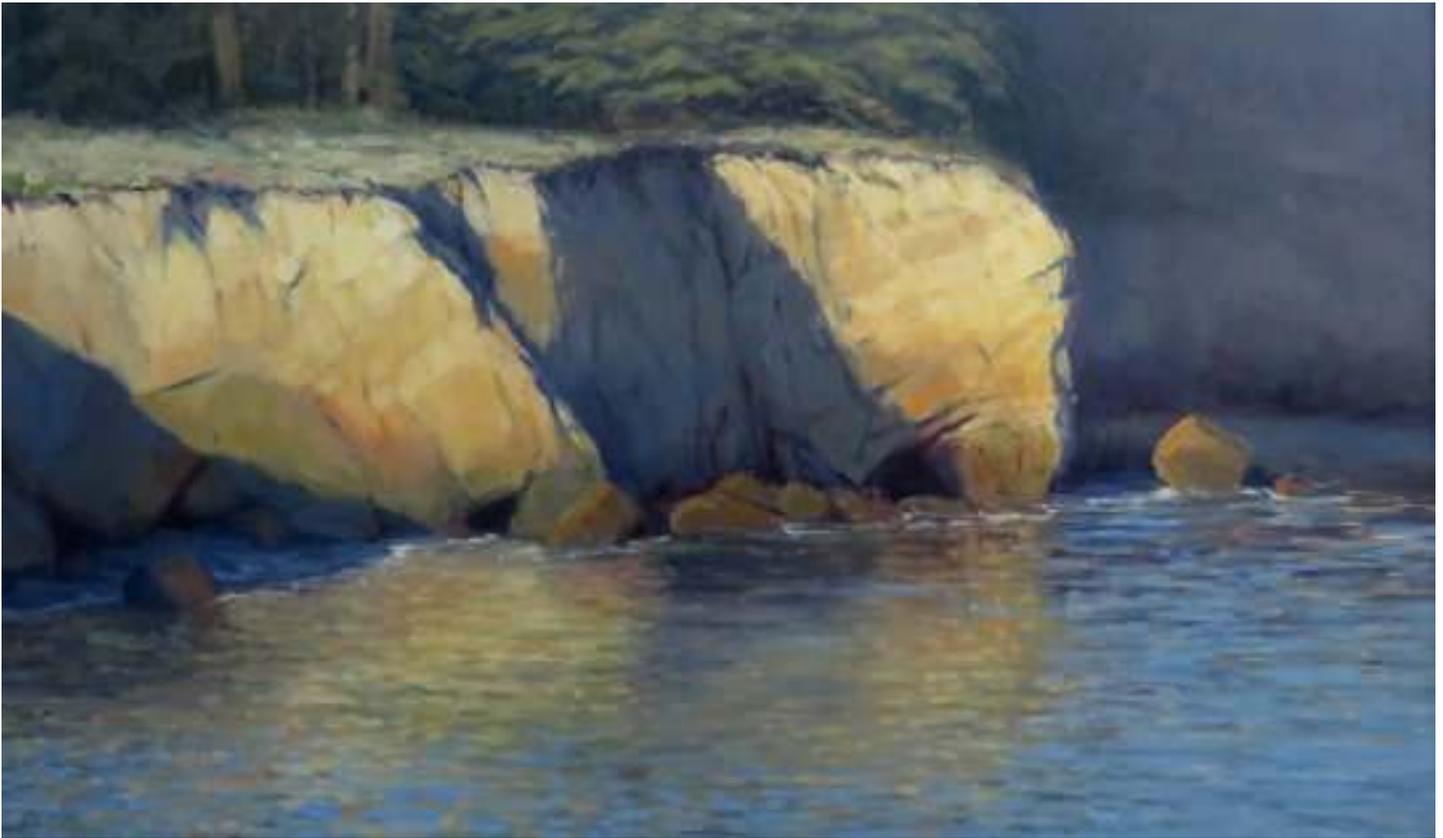
FACING PAGE: Kathleen Dunphy, *Every Shade of White*, oil, 12 x 16

ABOVE: Artist Kathleen Dunphy

BELOW: Dunphy on location

honestly think that if I had had to start with the 'draw the cube,' 'draw the circle' I might not have continued. That figure class was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. Everything I did just looked awful, but it was so exciting. There were people in the class who were at that time what I considered old (thirty or forty!), who were taking it just to become better artists and they were a real inspiration. But I was this kid who was just having fun, I loved it.

"It was just dumb luck that I got into that class. Dr. Marsh was my draw-



ing instructor for the two years I was there. I got a great foundation and got really fired up. Years later, once I felt I could truly call myself an artist, I reached out to Dr. Marsh but learned he had just died.”

Kathleen met her husband, Dr. Randy Smart, when she was nineteen. He was going to medical school through the military at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda. While he still practices medicine and runs a hospital district in Murphys, at the time he had just entered the Air Force. She credits him with being “totally the opposite side of the brain. All his life, he’s been somebody who gets up in the morning, has a great attitude, gets ready for work and heads out and gives it his all.”

The two moved out to Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California for Randy’s residency when Kathleen was twenty-one years old. “I had never been anywhere, we didn’t do a lot of traveling when I was a kid. In the car on the drive to California, I was like ‘okay, we’ll see what it looks like when the sun sinks



*All paintings by Kathleen Dunphy*

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Golden Hour*, oil, 30 x 60

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Wing and a Prayer*, oil,  
40 x 40

ABOVE: *A Perfect Morning in Pacific Grove*,  
oil, 12 x 16

into the ocean instead of the other side.’ And I got there and felt, ‘oh my gosh! I’m home.’ I felt instantly comfortable. There was something about it that I just loved.”

While Randy’s service brought in a regular salary, Kathleen decided to put out her shingle as a special events planner and floral designer to bring in extra money. “It was just great, I loved it. It satisfied the need to create but also paid the bills and was very dynamic and interesting.”

Randy’s family had roots up in the Sierra Nevada foothills, a few hours

from Travis. So while they were stationed there, the two decided to buy a parcel of land in Murphys. “Murphys was the point around which we pivoted as we traveled around the world. It’s what I consider the old California, the Classic California up here, the gold rush area. It’s at 3,000 feet, before it gets really piney and peaky. If you think about the gold rush era, this is where all those infamous characters from the gold rush lived. Our town has just 1800 people in it, and a lot of the old stone buildings from that era are still here. It’s very historical, lots of cattle, vineyards, a very bucolic area. We bought it thinking ‘it’s a beautiful place.’” Regardless, they didn’t really believe they would ever settle there.

And then Randy got an overseas posting at Ramstein Air Force Base in southwestern Germany. Knowing she

could run her successful floral and design business anywhere, Kathleen opened up shop. “Being a NATO base, we had generals coming in from all of these different countries for special events and I got to know the generals really well and got to decorate their houses for the holidays. I had my epiphany about becoming an artist there. One year I had decorated this German General’s house for Christmas and I’d just gone crazy, and done everything to the nth degree, anything to make the place more beautiful and artsy and as I was leaving, the General’s wife turned to me, and said, ‘Kathleen! You’re an artist!’ I remember I almost wanted to cry. Because I thought, ‘I am an artist! What am I doing here playing with flowers?’ And it really hit home for me that I had this in me, and I’m not doing it. I’m finding everything else in



the world to do, because I'm afraid to try this. It was just this moment of pure clarity when I realized, I need to wake up and quit running from this! "

Randy's next posting was to Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska. "I still have a stack of business cards that say 'Kathleen Dunphy, Floral Designer, Chugiak, Alaska.' But I realized 'I don't want to do this,' and I have to figure out this artist thing or go nuts. My husband was incredibly supportive, we just tightened our belt and cut our income in half, and I started drawing."

"I remember sitting at the kitchen table and wondering what the heck I should start with, and I thought, 'Well, I love dogs,' so I started drawing dogs. Hanging up photos of those drawings in vet clinics, I started getting commissions. Chugiak is a suburb of Anchorage, but there are a lot of animals up there. People have sled dogs so I did a lot of portraits of sled dogs. I did a lot of drawings of the Iditarod. I was doing colored pencil and graphite work, so it took hours to do one painting or drawing. It wasn't scalable, but it was a way to get started. I just needed to get started."

Kathleen started taking art classes at night at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, studying with the legendary teacher and artist, Hugh McPeck. "He was very encouraging, holding a private class on weekends with just four or five students and I was invited to that. I hadn't done any drawing or painting since those two years at Montgomery college, so it had been a long gap." It was under McPeck that she first began working in oils. "During this time, I was asked to show my work at Artique Gallery in Anchorage and was selling drawings and paintings." But then the

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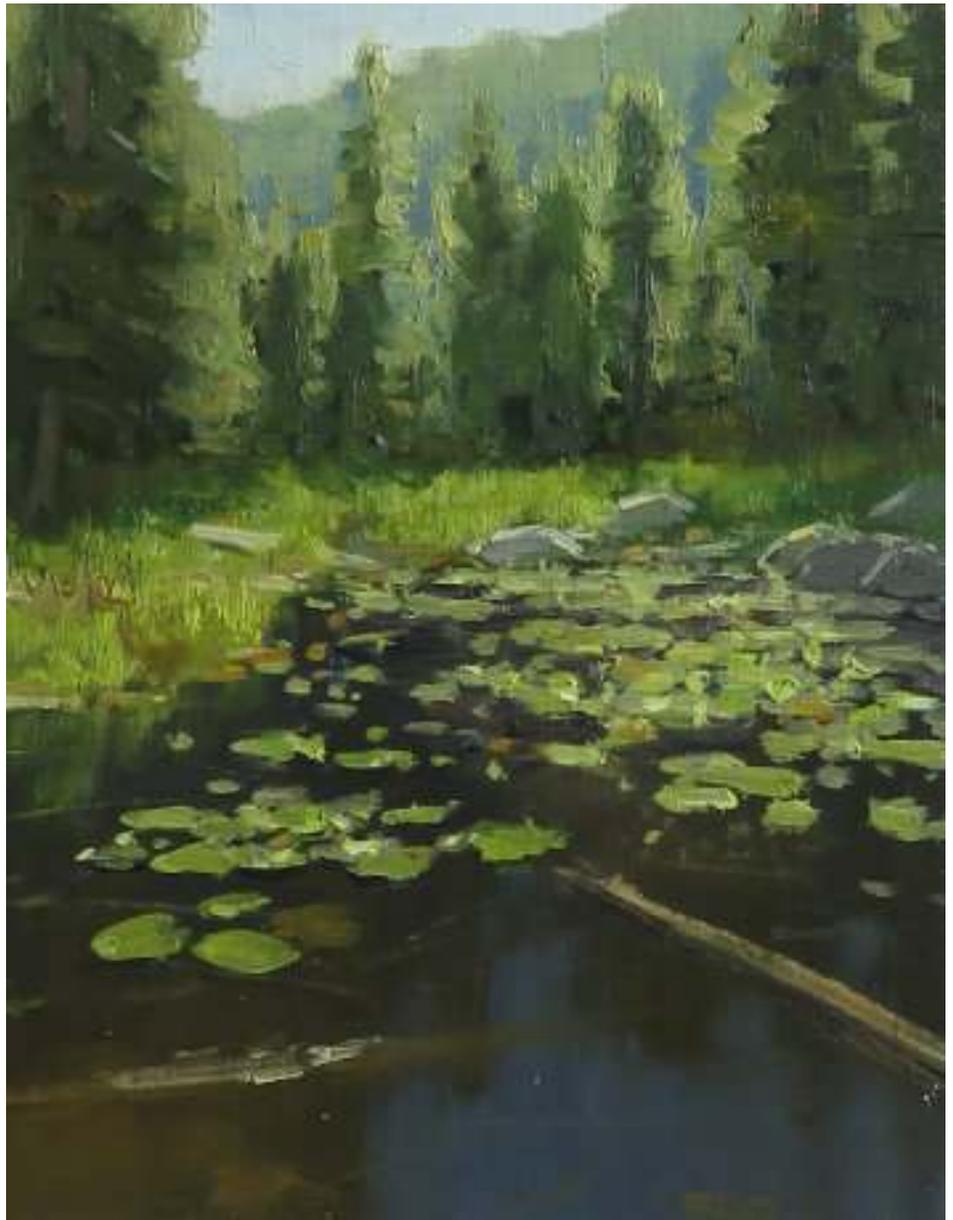
*All paintings by Kathleen Dunphy*

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Magic Hour*, oil, 15 x 30

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Siesta*, oil, 20 x 24

ABOVE: *Lily Pads and Lodgepoles*, oil, 10 x 8

RIGHT: *Gloucester Harbor*, gouache, 6 x 9





military decided they wanted her husband back at Travis AFB in California.

Moving to Davis, California, Kathleen lamented not having any “real art education.” She was trying to find classes around Davis, but many classes were too free form, others too abstract to be appealing. “There were all these classes where they didn’t care if the proportion was right, and it just drove me crazy. I was complaining to Randy about it one night at dinner and he said, ‘You know, one of the best art schools in the entire country is down in San Francisco.’ I said, ‘that’s a three hour drive!’

And he said, ‘Well then, just complain about it for the rest of your life.’

“I was reluctant, but I took my portfolio down to the Academy of Art College in San Francisco and I got a full summer study grant scholarship. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. All the people who teach there are working artists, who really, really know their stuff. I thought I was going to be a figure painter. But I realized that if I did only figure classes, I was going to spend my entire summer indoors. I love being outside, so I thought, there’s this one class called Landscape Painting on Lo-

cation, and I don’t want to be a landscape painter, but at least I’ll get outside and so I’ll go ahead and take that one. And I walked into the class, and the rest is history.

“I was just like, ‘Oh my gosh! I absolutely love this. I don’t want to be a figure painter, I want to take my paint gear outside, and I want to do as much as I can outdoors.’ And once I realized I could combine my two loves, which are painting and being outdoors, I said, ‘I’m done. This is where I want to spend the rest of my life.’ So, it was another really serendipitous moment--I’ve had



these times where I can't believe that the cards fell the way they did."

Brian Blood, CAC, OPA, one of her teachers at the Academy of Art, helped Kathleen overcome a hurdle that many artists never jump--the freedom to let unsuccessful works go. "You've just got to get the bad ones out," he said. To this day, Kathleen passes this wisdom on to her students. "In my classes, I always say you can't treat your paintings as if they're all precious. If it's no good, toss it and move on to the next work. Students don't want to. They say, "I could do this, and I could do that,"

and I say 'Yes, you could, but in the end you're just going to have a muddy mess, so learn from it, throw it out, and start over.' "

Another artist Kathleen worked with was T. Allen (Tim) Lawson, whose work was an inspiration. "With somebody like him, you don't know whether to be inspired or just quit!" But she continues that even artists of his caliber have paintings that don't live up to their own standards. "No painting truly fails. They just teach you something for your next painting."

Kathleen worships painting's holy

Kathleen Dunphy, *Wave Dance*, oil, 17 x 40

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trinity, Sargent, Zorn and Sorolla--"Sorolla the most." Trekking to see a Sorolla show in San Diego, she said "some of it actually made me cry. When you see a room full of Sorollas, it's almost too much. It's like oh, my poor heart--because it's too much, too beautiful.' They had one of his studies of the oxen pulling the boats out of the water. The butt of this oxen--I could look at this for the rest of my life. The muscles and the flesh and the way it was straining as it was pulling the boat out of the



water, you just go ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t stand this.’

“I always felt that I had to make up for those years that I was a floral designer, that I just had to work double hard to get where I wanted to be. I painted a ton, did print advertising, got a good website pretty early on. I did plein air festivals for a little while, feeling the only way to be a ‘real’ artist was to do plein air festivals, and then after dying a thousand deaths doing them, I realized that I just don’t like to stand in front of people and paint as a performance. I mean, I don’t mind it for a workshop--I love teaching--but those festivals are a whole different ball game.

“More than anything, the idea of not trying to put the cart before the horse, of trying to get better first, and then getting your work out there was how I really tried to pursue my career. Of course you also never feel your work is good enough.”

Over the decade or so Kathleen and her husband were obliged to live wherever Randy was posted, Murphys, once



so remote and untraveled, had become a tourism and wine destination. “My husband finished his tour of duty at Travis before retiring from the service, and we decided that we would build a house up on that property.

“My studio is a room in the house. I’ve always worked in the house, even when I was a floral designer. I love being home. I love animals around, and just love the idea of working and being able to do other things. And if I just want to glance at a painting or do a quick touch-up I can, without having to drive someplace or go to another building.

“We designed the studio to get north light. It’s small, just 15’ x 30,’ and then in the basement I have a larger space that holds all my frames and packing and shipping. This is just the right space. When it gets too full, I know I need to clean. When I have a show, and I have a lot of paintings out to see what works together it can get chaotic, but for the most part it’s the right size. It’s right off the kitchen/living room area, and opens onto the deck, and there’s a

ramp so I can use a dolly to move out big framed paintings.

“I paint everything all the time. I sometimes wish there was just one thing that I really liked to paint because I might be more focused, but I’m fascinated by everything. I’m like ‘Oh my God!’ look at the light on that cow! I’ve got to paint the cow. Or ‘look at the way that wave moves, I’ve got to paint that!’ or ‘look at the fog this morning!’ and I want to paint that. I spend half my life in awe, just looking at things. And it’s the challenge of looking at all that beauty, and wondering if I can take one iota of that and get it down on canvas, because there’s no way you’re going to get the whole thing. But can I try to grab a little bit of that beauty somehow? And even if I don’t, I still get to stand there all day looking at it, so you know, lucky me.

“I love so many different subjects. I really love animals, and the interactions they have with each other, so I love painting them. I have to get to the ocean several times a year--there’s just

*All paintings by Kathleen Dunphy*

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Down Time*, oil, 12 x 20

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Tracks*, oil, 8 x 6

ABOVE: *Follow the Leader*, oil, 40 x 60

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something in my DNA that needs to see the ocean, and needs to stand there, and breathe it in and be humbled by it. You know I can’t even put into words how I feel about it. It’s such a strong draw. And the coastline near me is unbelievable. How could you not paint? I feel ridiculously fortunate to have that nearby.

“I consider Monday to Friday work days. I don’t paint every day. I always want to feel that I want to paint. I don’t want it to be that I ‘have to get something down today,’ I want it to be that ‘I can’t wait to get working on these.’ You know, if you’re going to do this, don’t do it halfway. Get in there and do it. If a friend asks if I can meet for lunch during the week, I will often say I can’t. Painting has to be your priority. For me, painting isn’t something that comes af-



ter other things, other things come after painting.

“I’m finally living on a farm with animals. I’m an early morning person. I get up around five and start every day with getting the dogs out and taking care of the goats and the chickens. We use the goats to graze down brush. Once I come back in, I do email and take care of Social Media--they’re really marketing for me. I do it and get it done, and then try not to think about it again for the rest of the day.

“I’m usually in the studio by eight at the latest, sometimes earlier. Then I start painting, usually for five or six hours at a stretch. If I stay at the easel too long, I start to see diminishing returns. My perfect day is to paint in the studio in the morning and then get out in the afternoon. I try to Plein Air at least once or twice a week. I’m fortunate, even when it’s hot, in forty five minutes I can be at 8,000 feet, so I can get up high and get away from the heat, where it will be 70 degrees instead of 100.

“I will be out Plein Air painting, and I go, ‘you know, there’s something here, there’s a germ of an idea here.’ I

always start with preliminary sketches, little 2x3 thumbnails. Sometimes I'll expand that into a larger and more complex drawing to work out the idea more completely. Occasionally, but not very often, I'll do a small color study--but there's always a balance. I need to do enough preliminary studies so I can approach the painting without too much guesswork when I get to the canvas, but if I figure everything out, then there's nothing to discover. It's really important to spend some time thinking before starting. I have to make myself slow down and think it out before I start throwing too much paint around. But as I've gotten older, I've become a little more patient--though my husband might not agree!

"I never just take a plein air study and make it big in the studio. I find that boring, and the inspiration is gone. But I will take those studies and use them as jumping off points for larger works. Maybe the study that I have is a little turn in the creek, but the bigger painting will be the turn in the creek but also the mountains in the distance. Or maybe I'll have a small painting of a big scene, but I want to home in on the boulders in the creek and that's what I want to do the big painting of. I'll use them as color reference and inspiration, but then back in the studio I'll compose something different so that it's a new challenge and something that keeps me engaged.

"For studio works, I prefer to do a lot of my planning and sketching on the canvas the day before, and then the next morning get up and hit it. And just try to get as much of the painting done, regardless of size, as I can in one day--because that's the day of the highest inspiration and excitement. If I have to go back to a painting a thousand times, each time is a little less exciting for me. So I'll work like a maniac. I was doing a 40" x 50" the other day and I started at about 7:30 am and worked straight through until 5:30 pm just to get as much as I could on the canvas that day. And it'll need a couple more sessions,



but I got the gist of it down, and I got the excitement down, so now it's fine tuning, instead of still having to figure things out."

Kathleen holds regular workshops, but they're frequently sold out, so keeping up with her social media and website is recommended. She also recently released a teaching video, available on her website,

[www.kathleendunphy.com](http://www.kathleendunphy.com).

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*All paintings by Kathleen Dunphy*

OPPOSITE ABOVE: *Day's Dawning*, oil, 24 x 40

OPPOSITE BELOW: *Frozen*, oil, 16 x 12

ABOVE: *Courtland's Harvest*, oil, 16 x 16

BELOW: *Into the Mystic (detail)*, oil, 24 x 24

