

a
picture
tells a
story



"Common Nighthawks," by Kevin Veara.

Tattoo artist's love of bird expressed in paintings

If you are bird-watcher living in central Illinois, you probably already know Kevin Veara.

Veara is known for his humorous and easy-going approach to introducing people to bird watching on his popular Lincoln Memorial Garden bird hikes.

If that doesn't ring a bell, you may know Veara from seeing him on area bike trails.

Or you may know his art. Some of it may be standing right next to you. For 20 years Veara has been a tattoo artist. His shop, Black Moon Tattoos, can be found just off MacArthur Boulevard on Edwards Street.

In a way, he has combined his interests to produce stylish paintings of birds and flowers that satisfy his creative urge in a way creating tattoos at the direction of his customers can't.

"I actually went to school for painting and I graduated from (Southern Illinois University) Carbondale in 1991 with a master's in fine arts," Veara said.

He started his art education at Springfield College in Illinois and Sangamon State University, graduating in 1987.

But a career as a painter would have to wait.

"Then I stumbled into tattooing in 1992, and I didn't paint much for about 15 years," he said. "I painted here and there but I could never find what I wanted to do. Every two or three years, I would do two or three paintings but I would never be happy with it."

What he learned was that he was trying too hard to satisfy other artists or find some way to make his mark in the art world.

"I didn't paint much for 15 years because I was torn between trying to be a painter's painter and painting what I like to paint," Veara said. "In some ways I was trying to be relevant."

About seven years ago, Veara tried again, finishing some paintings to display in the kitchen of his house. He was surprised at how well they turned out.

"I thought, 'Wow, I kind of still have it. I didn't know I still had it,'" he said.

Then he tried some more paintings based on his interest in bird and nature.

"I get to paint my birds like I always wanted to," he said. "After about

two years, I was painting and stacking them. I probably had 25-30 paintings.

"Somebody asked me, 'What are you going to do with those?'," Veara said.

He took them to a gallery and then was asked to have his own show.

"That just opened the flood gates, and I've been doing this really steady for the last five years."

Living with nature

Veara lives close to nature, too, at the last stop on a dead-end road overlooking the South Fork of the Sangamon River.

Hummingbirds buzz by his front door that opens into a forest of oaks, hickories, maples and sycamores. Unusual plants like wild hyacinth and Michigan lily are coming back thanks to some of the hard work to clear unwanted brush and weedy species.

Near his house south of Springfield, he's build a studio that doubles as a library and a place to hang the many custom-built bicycles he owns. His girlfriend's chicken coop is built onto the outside.

He says he doesn't have much time to ride these days, but his cycling hobby literally hangs over his head as he works.

One wall is filled with books, including books of birds and plants, especially orchids. The workspace is relatively small, at one end of the long, narrow building.

Currently he is working on a black-asn-white painting of bobolink, a grassland bird that has been disappearing as hay fields are replaced by corn and soybeans in the Midwest.

Teaching with humor

Veara is serious about birds, and serious about preserving and protecting them.

He's also serious about introducing people to the world around them. He just doesn't come across that way.

During his bird watching hikes at Lincoln Gardens, he jokes in a self-effacing way about identifying difficult

groups of birds, such as flycatchers or sparrows.

"They have wood peewees and phoebes here," he said scanning the treetops around the nature center. "They just fall under the 'nondescript olive bird' category.

"And then you start getting into the flycatchers and they all have eye-rings — so just ignore them, because they all look the same."

Everybody laughs, and Veara had taken the pressure off new birders before the walk even starts.

"Really, this is the best spot in the park," he said. "We should just bring lawn chairs — reclining lawn chairs."

Veara approaches bird watching with an artist's eye.

"In some ways, it is teaching them how to see," he said. "When people see a Baltimore oriole up close they say, 'Where did that come from?' Well, they've been around you forever. You just never took the time to notice something that bold and that bright living right under your nose."

Veara said he hopes people will begin to see, and then to protect.

"When you open people's eyes up to that, they start to notice the world around them," he said. "My whole point is if people notice the world around them, they are less likely to destroy it."

But what fun is birding without a little humor?

Pointing out a family of Canada geese on Lake Springfield, Veara offers a bit of tongue-in-cheek advice.

"Whenever you see the Canada geese with the babies, pick them up. They love to be cuddled," he said with a laugh. "You will learn all about protective behaviors."

He also has some fun with a group of scouts trying to meet a bird-watching requirement by recording a set number of species.

He jokes the kids should give him credit for birds he identifies by song.

"There's a white-eyed vireo, and a robin," Veara said. "Do you have a robin

on your list? Well, you better get it on there. And put a KV next to it."

'It frees me'

Veara said he got into the tattoo business in the early 1990's at a time when it was exploding.

Tattoo artists were making names for themselves, and the person getting the tattoo was more canvas than customer. Generation X'ers helped bring tattoos into the mainstream.

"I like the fact that I am in a service industry," he said. "I ask, 'What do you want? Do you want hummingbirds with lilies? Then, let's go for it.'

"I am not personally involved in their choices because they have to live with it."

With painting as a creative outlet, Veara said it makes him a better craftsman in the tattoo shop.

"It has left my tattooing more open," he said.

Veara said there is a freedom to painting because he is not tied to creating a photo-realistic view of the bird.

"I made a decision about four or five years ago — probably out of skill level but also out of a view of what was going on in the art world," he said. "A lot of the birds have been modified. They are not anatomically correct. Feathers are different lengths, bills different lengths. I hand-make decisions. It would fit so much better if it was shaped this way.

"There may be a bit of laziness in there, but it frees me to do what I want."

— *Chris Young*