

Photo finish



Bear Kirkpatrick wins Artist Advancement Grant

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FEATURE

by Jeanné McCartin

Up to the challenge

Bear Kirkpatrick has \$25,000 to create his next art project

There are a few things to know about Bear Kirkpatrick. His circuitous path to art photographer is like a cross between leap-frog, pinball and a scary movie. Regardless, he works hard at whatever he's playing at — and he just landed the \$25,000 N.H. Charitable Foundation's 2012 Artist Advancement Grant.

Kirkpatrick received the funds for a specific project he's embarking on. — But first the path.

After earning his master's of fine arts in writing at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, he focused on writing and metal sculpture. "Wow, I almost forgot that part," says Kirkpatrick.

After about five years he transitioned into furniture making. "I learned how to do a skill, used the metal work and the woodworking. Five years later I was making furniture for Bono."

During this time he picked up a camera for the first time since his college darkroom days. It was simply a matter of saving money on studio shots for his furniture.

"By that time digital cameras were out. Spuds like me could just go buy a camera. You didn't need equipment, a darkroom and chemicals. It made a difference."

Not long after he was hired by Robert Wilson to install the artist's video portraits.

"Initially I was building the stands because I had the metal/furniture background. ... One thing led to another," says Kirkpatrick, a fairly accurate summary of his general path. "I started installing those video portraits in homes and museums all around the world. I'm still doing that now. I had four in Europe last fall."

Gone were the furniture-making days.

"One, the economy tanked and no one was buying fancy furniture. And lots of my New York clients were ripped off by (Bernie) Madoff. That put the brakes on furniture. ... I just transitioned."

WHAT 2012 Artist Advancement Grant recipient Bear Kirkpatrick; Finalists Lauren Gillette and Rose Umerlik

WHERE The Parlor at Plainspoke, 18 Sheafe St., Portsmouth,

WHEN Reception Sept. 12, 5:30 to 7:30; exhibit runs Sept. 13-21

CONTACT 433-5969; www.plainspoke.com, www.plainspoke.com/parlor
Info <http://www.nhcf.org/page.aspx?pid=1220&srctid=1&erid=257206>.

Following the thread back to the start of digital media/art photography proves a bit difficult. Kirkpatrick pauses quite a while; apologizes for taking so much time, then it hits him.

"It's unbelievable! This tiny thing you do changes things."

In this case it was a line of jewelry he designed for men and during the furniture days. As with the furniture he started taking his own product studio shots.

"So I started using live models — that was it! I needed live models for the jewelry." The line was modern and sexy, it seemed natural to use naked models to "add that dimension," he says. "I did clothes stuff too, but used both naked men and women."

With no design he started to expand, shooting as often as time would allow.

"I was just doing it for personal pleasure on the side — trying to make something I would like to look at. It was challenging too," he says. "It is very difficult to make something you like to look at. You have to control all kinds of tools, camera, setting, light, flashes, ... and, how do you direct the person?"

"The first thing that really mattered was

when I brought ... big strobe lights out in the woods at night and just started shooting night landscapes with flashes. There were no models at first. It was tree portraits."

The effect of flash outdoors at night fascinated him. "You're not

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A portrait of Mary Dyer (1611-1660) by Bear Kirkpatrick.

ON THE COVER
Cover and centerspread design by Mary Francis. Cover photograph of 2012 Artist Advancement Grant recipient Bear Kirkpatrick, courtesy.

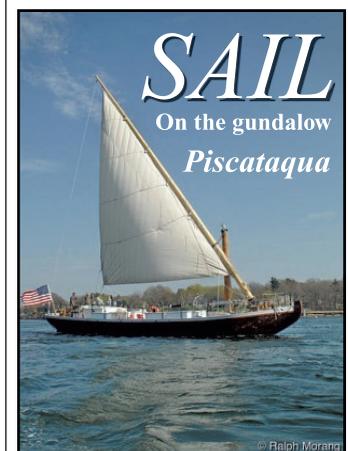
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Keep an eye on Artist Advancement Grant recipient Bear Kirkpatrick

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beholden to the sun, you can move the light, show things about trees you can't see in daylight," says Kirkpatrick. "I think bodies are like trees. When I started to introduce bodies it was the same thing. I started to see things in bodies you don't see in daylight."

That was five years ago, when his photography took the turn toward art.

The approach and concepts evolved; many of his ideas stemmed from books, he says. A major influence was Mircea Eliade's academic theory "About areas of the sacred world that show through the profane world," says Kirkpatrick.

That's what I was looking for in these pictures with the trees and the people."

He began searching out wooded areas throughout the United States that spoke to the concept. "Places that looked different than others, like the sacred coming through." There, with light and human forms, he created stories.

The next artistic move came abruptly; two armed men in uniform can have that effect.

Last summer Kirkpatrick was set up in a "beautiful field of ferns," accompanied by a model and assistant.

"We had a giant tent, my lights, batteries, tripods ... a huge setup I bring to the woods with two carts, all the stuff strapped on like a tinker," he says. "It takes a while to set it up. I was just about to start shooting when armed federal officers started yelling!"

They grabbed the cameras, separated the trio and started cross-examining them. "They asked my model if she was there against her will. It was not funny," he adds.

Kirkpatrick had set up on federal land; he had veered off the trail, cut branches with a machete and was carrying a saw and pocket knife. "They had me on a bunch of things," says Kirkpatrick, who was questioned for three hours.

Once out of the wooded area they looked up his Web site and saw he was legit. "They fined me, but not my model or assistant." He was told not to do it again, "you're in the database."

Truth was he'd photographed exclusively on federal land; it was often the most pristine.

"Well that got me thinking about what I could be doing," he says. "All my people are naked. And I realized at

some point I'd have to start clothing them. ... I just couldn't keep doing that."

And that, he says, presented new challenges. Clothes can prove more difficult, in the choosing/designing, acquisition and the shooting. "That's when I started talking to (people) about clothing ... trying to figure out what it's all about."

He also came up with a new series; one that has him fired up, and got him the grant.

"It's a series of portraits; they're clothed mostly. ... It's portraits, of early American settlers, my own forebearers. On both my parents' sides I have a rich history of puritan ancestry. Some really crazy figures too, really nut jobs."

His girlfriend's dad will play Miles Standish, and his girlfriend,

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A portrait of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) by Bear Kirkpatrick.

Zoe Litsios, is Anne Hutchinson, "who was thrown out of Boston for heretical actions; a brilliant woman."

The ideas kept rolling in along with the needs — clothing, use of animals, hairstylists, assistants on the shoots and postproduction.

Kirkpatrick, who was a grant finalist twice before, says he credits the grant process with the project's clarity. "We often don't

plan it out. For the grant you have to really map the thing out."

"And a benefit of that, of having to map it out ahead of time, is in your mind you'll take more risks then in body. ... It's 'if we gave you \$25,000, what would you do with it?'"

"You might propose things for the fun of it. So you might actually propose things beyond what your ability seems to be at the time.

You'll be riskier, take the virtual risk. Then when someone says 'go,' you say, 'Oh, my God.'"

Actually when Kirkpatrick got the call that informed him he'd won he said nothing. Even after the caller repeated it he was silent.

When he rallied, "I wept. I was stunned," he says. "What I want now is to prove I can meet the challenge."



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