

PAINTING PARTNERS

*Husband and wife
Kenny Harris and Judy
Nimtz reflect on each other's
work, art-making and the
impact of travel prior to a
rare joint show at George
Billis Gallery.*

BY JOHN O'HERN

The exhibition *Painting Partners* offers a rare opportunity to see the paintings of Judy Nimtz and Kenny Harris in one place. Husband and wife, they paint in adjacent studios but seldom exhibit together. They share the walls of George Billis Gallery in New York during November and, in December, the gallery's space in Westport, Connecticut.

Nimtz says, "Kenny's paintings are all about light and atmosphere. I feel he's not painting objects so much as painting light and shadow, and the objects that inhabit a space emerge out of this. It's so different from how I work, sometimes I feel I'm fighting against all the details I see. When I look at his paintings I feel the experience of the atmosphere, though I can't see them I know there are little shimmering particles falling through the light. I want to enter his paintings and spend time in his spaces."

Harris comments, "When I consider Judy's work, I think of how her figures always have a balance of the delicate with the powerful. It is a metaphor for the human experience: the flesh feels real and yet ephemeral at the same time. These silvery figures balance between realism and surrealism for me. I marvel at her attention to detail and anatomy, with a compressed flesh palette that makes my head spin! (A compressed palette is when the darks and lights are very close together in value.) This combination of poetry and craft in her work really inspires me."



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Judy Nimtz, *Temporária
in Beara II*, oil on panel,
48 x 24"

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Kenny Harris, *Grey Light,
Amsterdam*, oil on panel,
16¼ x 14"





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Kenny Harris,
Vintage Turntable,
Amsterdam, oil on
linen on panel,
21½ x 13½"

4
Judy Nimtz,
Eclipse, oil on
panel, 42 x 42"



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Two years ago, the couple spent seven weeks in Ireland. Their experiences there continue to animate their work. Nimtz adds, "Ireland has been a place of mystery and fantasy for me since I was young. Add to that I am what is called a hapa haole in Hawai'i—half Chinese and half white—with my white comprised of Irish and German. Being raised in Hawai'i by my Chinese mom, I felt very connected to my Chinese heritage but not so much my Irish and German. I think having this sort of unexplored part of me, mixed with my love of fantasy sparked my interest in Ireland."

Her paintings of herself in the landscape have an ethereal solidity. She says, "The landscape of Ireland occupies a big place in my psyche, and I wanted the connec-

tion between the figure and the landscape to be palpable. Ireland has been a place of beauty, mystery and fantasy for me since I was young, probably first coming out of my love of fantasy literature. Standing in the ancient landscape, near Neolithic sites, was extremely powerful for me—it was like a type of time travel. I resonated with the land, the history, and wanted that to come across in the paintings. So, at times my figure becomes transparent and the landscape becomes part of me."

She continues, "We were in Ireland when I saw Kenny up on this rock formation looking for vantages for his own photo references. I was immediately struck by how similar this image of Kenny was of work by Caspar David Friedrich, the lone

figure in the landscape looking outwards, a rückenfigur (figure seen from behind). Friedrich is one of my favorite painters and I knew then that I would make this painting of Kenny based specifically on Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. I used the exact dimensions and composition of this painting for mine. My intentions for *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* were quite different from the ones of me and therefore a more traditional approach."

Harris' paintings are of "light and shadow" as Nimtz observes. He seeks out the light of northern Europe which is in contrast to the light of his native Venice, California, where, he comments, "It is often stingingly sunny with no 'weather.' The fog and marine layer are also a low cloud cover. Now perhaps this



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is just my romantic nostalgia for the Old World, but I feel that Europe has high cloud cover with more gray light scattering around. It is very inspirational—interesting spaces patinated with age and history, with gray light revealing all the lovely half tones!”

The soft gray light allows objects to become one with their surroundings unlike brightly lit and shadowed scenes. He says, “In recent years I’ve become interested in losing edges and grouping shapes in my paintings. I’m trying to be less literal with what I see, forcing the viewer’s gaze in different ways. I still love the ‘describing’ aspect of representational painting, I just want to make the viewer work a little more for it—there is visual delight in connecting the dots. It is a game we painters play, with how we can lose an edge here or there to add atmosphere or direct your eye.”

In *Vintage Turntable*, the soft edges of the plant stand blend with their surroundings. The softness of

edges and light in *Red Interior, Amsterdam*, create a quiet ordinariness of an elegant space.

Nimtz and Harris come from different cultures and got together after many life experiences and when “we knew who we were as people and as artists.” They understood each other as artists and have grown as people together. Their love of travel makes having to lug their painting gear around the world almost a pleasure, but always an opportunity for discovery. ●

PAINTING PARTNERS: JUDY NIMTZ AND KENNY HARRIS

When: December 6-31, 2022

Where: George Billis Gallery, 180 Post Road East, Westport, CT 06880

Information: (203) 557-9130, www.georgebillis.com

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Kenny Harris, *Red Interior, Amsterdam*, oil on panel, 24 x 16”

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Judy Nimtz, *Wanderer Above the Sea*, oil on panel, 37½ x 29½”

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Judy Nimtz, *Dragon Spine*, oil on panel, 30 x 13¼”

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Kenny Harris, *Reminiscence*, oil on canvas, 64 x 64”