

Water Arts & Craftsmen

North Carolina's Fine Artists and Artisans

Kyle Highsmith

Raleigh, N.C.

BY MARIMAR McNAUGHTON

Sunlight beams from Kyle Highsmith's paintings. The artist sees life's bright moments and captures them on canvas in a flurry of brush strokes dipped in brilliant color. Loosely painted en plein air, Highsmith's work is a study in putting the pigment down in layers, leaving airy, open spaces, like the beat between a good yarn and the punch line.

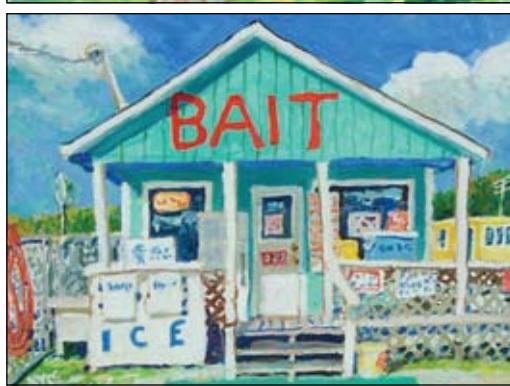
In a van outfitted like a mobile studio, he combs the beaches looking for paintings. "It's not that I go out and decide to do this or do that, it's more a lifestyle than a product," Highsmith says. "I go out and look at the whole world and cut a piece out of that that will make a composition."

He cruises the coast looking for relic buildings, piers and boats, drawn to the vernacular – sentimental structures that represent a vanishing culture. "I enjoy being at the coast whether it's here or the Caribbean or the Mediterranean. More enjoyable things are happening near the water than they are inland," he admits.

Although he says painting is not a social activity, the gregarious Highsmith makes acquaintances wherever he goes – to Montana to fish; to France and Italy to paint; this month he journeys to the Outer Banks; and later this year to Key West. He will paint en route, bringing his rolled-up canvases back to his downtown Raleigh studio to add the defining deep reddish browns and blues – the shadows, and what he calls the pay-off that brings the subject into focus.

"People have come in and picked out unfinished paintings and then I finish them. All of the elements are there. They are just there in a rough form," Highsmith says. "If people are looking at unfinished paintings, I tell them to stand back and squint their eyes.

"People are attracted more to paintings that include the water, but water by itself is not very exciting," he says. "I go to the coast looking for paintings. Sometimes I'll paint the coast, but it doesn't have any water in it, but it implies eating some wonderful seafood, implies a culture at the coast. I like the association of the water."



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His paintings represent a little adventure and almost always stir up a story. One of his most popular pieces, he says, hangs in a Morehead City restaurant. It represents an old yellow house trailer. "It pretty much takes up the canvas. You see some blue sky, some yellow-green grass ... probably a TV antennae. It's as simple and monumental as it can be. If it was the state capital it would be as boring as hell," Highsmith jokes dryly. The house trailer, Highsmith says, tells a time-honored story of college-student summers at the shore.

Another familiar coastal scene is found onboard a private luxury yacht. Framing a ubiquitous bait shop, instantly recognizable for its quirky, seacoast charm, it brings a smile and a story to its admirers.

Highsmith's evocative paintings are gobbled up as soon as they are hung. There are still a few tasty pieces left of this season's feast at New Elements Gallery in Wilmington, Visions Gallery in Atlantic Beach and the John Silver Gallery in Manteo, which always features a sample of his work.

Starting the paintings, he says, is like eating dessert first ... it goes down real easy. "I have so many unfinished paintings here in my studio ... on the walls, against the walls, and I am heading out to start some more," he says.

So it is to Varnamtown he drives to look for old wooden work boats, to Calabash and Little River Inlet, the old bridge at Sunset Beach, the marshes and live oaks at Holden Beach, the wooden piers of Atlantic Beach and the Outer Banks.

"I can drive by a place for years and go by one time and the light is a certain way. There is something different. The windows are open and I can see it as a painting.

"It really is of the moment." 🎨