

The Artist Book Foundation's 'Robert Kipniss: Shades of Nature' showcases the artist's 70 year career

By Justin Piccininni, The Berkshire Eagle
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Robert Kipniss' 1957 painting "Windbreaks" is the first one you see when visiting his exhibit at the Artist Book Foundation.

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NORTH ADAMS — A yellowing evening light shines on green grass and soft bushes of vermillion leaves. The trees, off which the leaves still hang, line a cultivated field creating a slalom-like trail that snakes from the foreground to a faraway hill and into the lurid yellow sky.

According to Leslie van Breen, founder and publisher of The Artist Book Foundation, it's a composition you might not expect from the acclaimed Robert Kipniss, whose visual art is featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and many others.

If You Go

"Robert Kipniss: Shades of Nature"

What: A free exhibit featuring a diverse range of visual artist Robert Kipniss' work, including paintings, prints, and poetry.

Who: The Artist Book Foundation

Where: Building 13, Mass MoCA 1327 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams

On view: Through Nov. 17

More information: 413-398-5600, artistbkfoundation.org

In 1982, New York Times art critic John Caldwell praised Kipniss' brutal realism, which conveys "alienation, isolation, even despair." This can be seen in his sparse wintry landscapes, with simple houses devoid of human presence, trees with long skinny branches and angular leaves painted in monochrome. Caldwell went so far as saying that Kipniss' "world appears to exist without direct sunlight," as his scenes nearly exclusively take place in the peculiar glow of dawn or dusk.

Yet this autumnal 1957 oil painting, tilted "Windbreaks", is the first one you see when you walk into The Artist Book Foundation's new exhibit, "Robert Kipniss: Shades of Nature," and it couldn't be more different from the artist's characteristic nature scenes. The colors are diverse, with evening light flooding the scene; the lines are soft; and the nature — rows of trees forming "windbreaks" in a cultivated field — is lush and composed, drawing the viewer's eye through the vast landscape.

The free exhibit, on view in The Artist Book Foundation's office at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art through Nov. 17, marks the 10-year anniversary of their 2013 publication "Robert Kipniss: Paintings and Poetry 1950 — 1964," showcasing the now 92-year-old artist's early period.

The Artist Book Foundation is a North Adams-based nonprofit book publisher that specializes in producing art books.

The Kipniss exhibit — and book — is unique among The Artist Book Foundation portfolio, as it also features poetry written by the young artist.

"When he first came to me [to make this book], he said 'I want people to know that I had this other artistic practice. I was as passionate about poetry as I was about painting,'" recounts van Breen.

"At first, I said 'no. We don't do poetry books,'" said van Breen, who exclusively publishes visual art. But the decision to include Kipniss' poetry serves to highlight a major shift in the visual artist's career. According to van Breen, in

the late 1950s, Kipniss hosted a major art show in New York City, where his paintings sold out. It was then that Kipniss realized he could make a living as an artist, deciding to pack up his poetry journals and direct his full focus to painting.

“There was a significant shift when he let the poetry go,” says van Breen, and the contrast between “Windbreaks” and the other works in the exhibit is clear.

Take, for instance, the characteristic 1963 work “Branches.” In this graphite drawing, softly shaded branches curl peacefully in the upper two-thirds of a sheet of wove paper. Just below the branches, there is a silhouette of a simple grey house. A work like “Branches” almost resembles a Zen ink painting, a comparison which E. John Bullard, former director of the New Orleans Museum of Art, has made to Kipniss' work.

Though the book showcased in this exhibit focuses on Kipniss' work in the 1950s and 1960s, the installation features work as recent as 2015, illustrating the long arc of the artist's oeuvre. Three poems from the artist's early period are also displayed in the exhibit.

IF YOU GO

"Robert Kipniss: Shades of Nature"



This 1963 work "Branches," appears in the Artist Book Foundation's ongoing exhibit "Robert Kipniss: Shades of Nature."

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