



Roland Kulla, "C&O Canal Bridge II", 2012, acrylic on canvas.

Kulla's 'C&O Canal Bridge' series returns to museum

Posted: Wednesday, February 12, 2014 2:07 pm

By Rebecca Massie Lane

Special to The Herald-Mail

"Player with Railroads"

"Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;

Stormy, husky, brawling,

City of the Big Shoulders."

—*Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), U.S. poet. "Chicago," (1916).*

During the fall of 2010, the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts presented an acclaimed exhibition, "Architectural & Industrial Realism" featuring three artists. Rick Dula, Roland Kulla and Stephen Magsig explored architectural and industrial realism by capturing factories, steel framed river bridges and city storefronts.

Organized by the George Billis Gallery in New York City, the exhibition resonated with the museum's audiences. Visitors recognized landmark factories, impressive and marvelous steel bridge construction, and crafted woodwork and leaded or plate glass of beautiful city storefronts.

All three of the artists visited Hagerstown for the exhibition reception and they spoke about their work. They saw landmark downtown storefronts and other architecture, old factories, and steel construction bridges, in Hagerstown and Washington County and these images called to them as worthy subjects for paintings.

On his visit to Washington County, Detroit artist Roland Kulla was especially fascinated by the old C&O Canal Lift Bridge in the Cushwa Basin. With the idea of a painting in mind, he took numerous study photographs of this steel feature during his 2010 visit.

Like all good ideas, this one stayed in Kulla's mind, and he eventually completed a three-part painting, a triptych, of this intriguing landmark in Washington County. The lift is a peculiar bridge with a very specific function. It was expensive to install and was ill-fated in its timing. All these aspects make for a particularly compelling subject.

According to a Dec. 14, 2013, Herald-Mail article, the railroad lift bridge could be moved up and down to allow canal boats to pass below. In the early 20th century, both the canal and the Western Maryland Railroad were in full operation, though the rails were out-competing the canal for efficiency and speed of delivery for wares between Cumberland, Md., and Washington, D.C. Faced with the need for a rail spur to the Cushwa Basin warehouse, and the necessity for this spur to cross the canal, the lift bridge was conceived, designed and executed. Now, it is a remnant and most likely is "one of a kind" in the U.S.

Thus, the enhancement of Roland Kulla's interest in this project. His three-lift bridge paintings focus in on particular sections of the bridge and are composed using very dramatic angles and contrasting colors between the bridge's rusty red and the cerulean blue of the sky. When Kulla completed the paintings, he was very committed to having them shown at the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, so much so that he drove them here from Detroit in the late fall. This artist's concepts rise from his experiences, living in Chicago and now Detroit, pursuing seminary, then art. Kulla completed a Master of Arts from the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, and served and helped people in need for years before painting became his life's pursuit.

Kulla wrote about his inspiration for the paintings: “I first visited the Washington County Museum of Fine Art when I was part of the Architectural Realism show organized by George Billis Gallery in 2010. I met Jean Cushwa whose family ran Cushwa’s Brickworks on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. I hadn’t heard of it, but I went the next day to Williamsport and visited Cushwa’s basin. I found the little railroad lift bridge over the canal and took a lot of shots. When I got back, there were so many good ones I couldn’t decide which to paint — so I did three of them. Later I learned that this bridge is quite unique — possibly the only asymmetrical lift bridge remaining in the country. It was built to provide access to the power plant in 1923, but the big flood of 1924 closed the canal, so it was used simply as a railroad bridge after that.”

The paintings have been on display in several shows in the Chicago area, but I’m especially pleased that they will be shown at the museum. It’s like they are coming home.

Now, according to The Herald-Mail article, the C&O lift bridge is to be restored to its former usefulness, allowing canal boats — now pleasure craft — to pass along the canal giving today’s visitors to the park a taste of the experience of canal boats of the past. Such an experience might ignite the imagination of a child who could feel the call of adventure on the water, the mule on the towpath, the creaking of the boat, the bump of its hitting against the sides of the locks, the shadows of trees, the secret sounds of the woods, a bald eagle sighted on the Potomac River. These are the things we pine for, the poetic communications of nature, simple machines and quiet rhythms. But our yearning is not just for the 19th century experience of a Huckleberry Finn boat trip on the river. There is also the lure of 20th century machine and loud, exciting factory. Specifically, the Carl Sandburg experience of rapidly growing cities, riveted steel bridges crossing vast rivers to link natural resources with factories, satisfying the nation’s need for progress, speed, efficiency, cities filled with muscled workers speaking a hundred different languages. And Roland Kulla’s paintings speak to that urge for ambition, industry, design, activity, employment. They celebrate the noisy factory and steel bridge era, but with cropped edges and a limited color palette. They are not sensory-overload paintings.

Just as the C&O lift bridge is a crossing of the 19th-century canal with the 20th-century railroad, so Kulla's hyperrealist paintings provide a stepping off place for your consideration. Using subject matter from a dynamic and screeching era, they are quiet and meditative. Roland Kulla's photorealist paintings will be on view in the museum's lobby until April. Wouldn't it be fine if the paintings also found a permanent home in Washington County? *Rebecca Massie Lane is director of Washington County Museum of Fine Arts. To find out more about the museum, go to www.wcmfa.org.*

Roland Kulla is represented by:

George Billis Gallery

www.georgebillis.com

212 645 2621