



Kevin  
Wolf

Never  
Not  
Looking



Kevin Wolff

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Essays by

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Devening Projects

April 9 - May 15, 2021







# Nothing was ever good enough: That was the principle of Kevin Wolff's life.

He didn't adopt it so much as just live it out. In considering work for this show, Dan asked of a piece, "Is that finished?" I had to laugh. Kevin didn't consider any of his work finished; he would sign or title pieces only as circumstances demanded—because they were never good enough. Once, when we stumbled by chance on a decades-old painting of his tucked away in an obscure gallery, Kevin stared intently, went home, got a brush and paint, and returned to render fuzzy what had until then been a sharp line. I kept lookout.

By that time, I was used to this. I met him while we were both biding time in Indianapolis. I hadn't known him long until I figured out that he possessed the most acute senses of anyone I had ever known. The eyes were all-seeing. He would hear things that escaped Krypto, Superman's dog. And he'd often say to me, "Smell that?" Twenty minutes later, I would know what he was talking about. He kept those senses in continual play as he constantly assessed everything. Kevin was quite taken with Jacques Callot's "Vigilant Eye," making a sculpture, drawings and a painting of it. Well of course. He could relate. Kevin Wolff was never not looking.

The sense that most informed his work, however was touch. You can see it on the extraordinary surfaces of his paintings and drawings. It's why nearly everything he created at least references the body or flesh.

His process evolved into something he called—again, only when pressed—abstract realism. His initial source was often a photograph, one he found or took himself. He next would create a rough sculpture using flesh-colored clay. He would meticulously light the resulting maquette, photograph it again and then begin to paint using the manipulated photo as his source. He was thrilled when I showed him how he could further manipulate images using Photoshop and layout programs. While I'm not sure he ever articulated it or perhaps even realized it, this grew from his conviction





that a thing was not good enough. He needed to make it better. Touch it. Re-create it.

This show focuses on a subject that factored into much of Kevin's work—men/masculinity—although Kevin was loath to define himself as artist or his subject matter as a genre. That would imply his oeuvre was defined, that you could “call” it, that it had settled to become good enough. By his own refusal of admission, Kevin Wolff was not a gay artist. Never mind that the show at Buffalo's Hall Walls that infamously launched his career featured wall-sized in situ self-portraits, stark naked lurid tantric yoga poses, rendered in visceral red-portraits that left

Kitty Carlisle Hart speechless when she saw them during her visit as chair of the New York State Council on the Arts. Never mind that his longtime (and essentially only) gallerist Hudson brought the work of Tom of Finland to the United States as an “opening act” for a show of Kevin's art at Feature during the gallery's Chicago run.

Kevin's subjects were rarely beautiful by any standard definition. In that sense, they were never good enough. They needed his eye and his touch to find beauty; they begged for his re-creation. I came to understand that was a big part of our personal relationship, and I only truly understood us when I realized that our re-creation worked both ways. One of his more complex works thematically is a portrait of a bust he created of Sophia Loren, whom he adored almost but not quite as much as he adored Anna Magnani, which made sense given Magnani was not a conventional beauty. His Sophia is bald, and Kevin distorted her classically symmetrical features to be just off enough (“the wonky eye” he called it) to render the work both beautiful and disquieting. He also revered Audrey Hepburn. When I asked him if he planned to give Hepburn the Loren treatment, he scowled and said, “Of course not! Audrey's too beautiful.” (I knew better than to ask about Magnani. Kevin would not watch the DVD of *Mama Roma* I gave him for his birthday. “I can't stand to watch Anna suffer,” he explained.)

Similarly, Kevin created a series of images of juiced-up, “beautiful” bodybuilders. Once remade in clay, they became grotesque, their “cut” muscles rendered as actual gashes. Kevin intentionally distressed them



to make them look decayed. He even tried melting one maquette with a hairdryer, but it didn't work out as planned. Some read this as Kevin's "revulsion" with his own physical imperfections that resulted from having a tumorous kidney removed. Perhaps. But I understood it as a reaction against "gay" esthetics' tyrannical insistence on perfection and beauty. His subjects had gone to ridiculous lengths to make themselves "perfect." Kevin's touch re-created them back to human.

Kevin also loved (re)creating spaces, looking for just the right furnishings, just the right thing to hang on the wall. But it was a moving target, an unending process. We rarely stayed at the table where the maître d' sat us; Kevin would look around and find a spot he thought was better and insist we move there. He criticized the art hanging in every space he ever entered. "Why don't they put out the good stuff?" he'd ask. And while those reading this who didn't know him (and even some who did) may well be thinking insufferable ass-acher, the truth of his constant criticism—his never not looking—was an infinite capacity for hope. It can be more. We shouldn't rest until we've made it better.

His colleagues knew well that Kevin could be fiercely critical of the work of other artists—canonized or not—and that came from the same impulse. He had a term he used for painters who he felt demonstrated enormous yet under-realized facility; he inserted "fucking" between their first and last names. Pierre-Auguste Fucking Renoir. David Fucking Salle. Even, especially, Norman Fucking Rockwell. When singer Lana

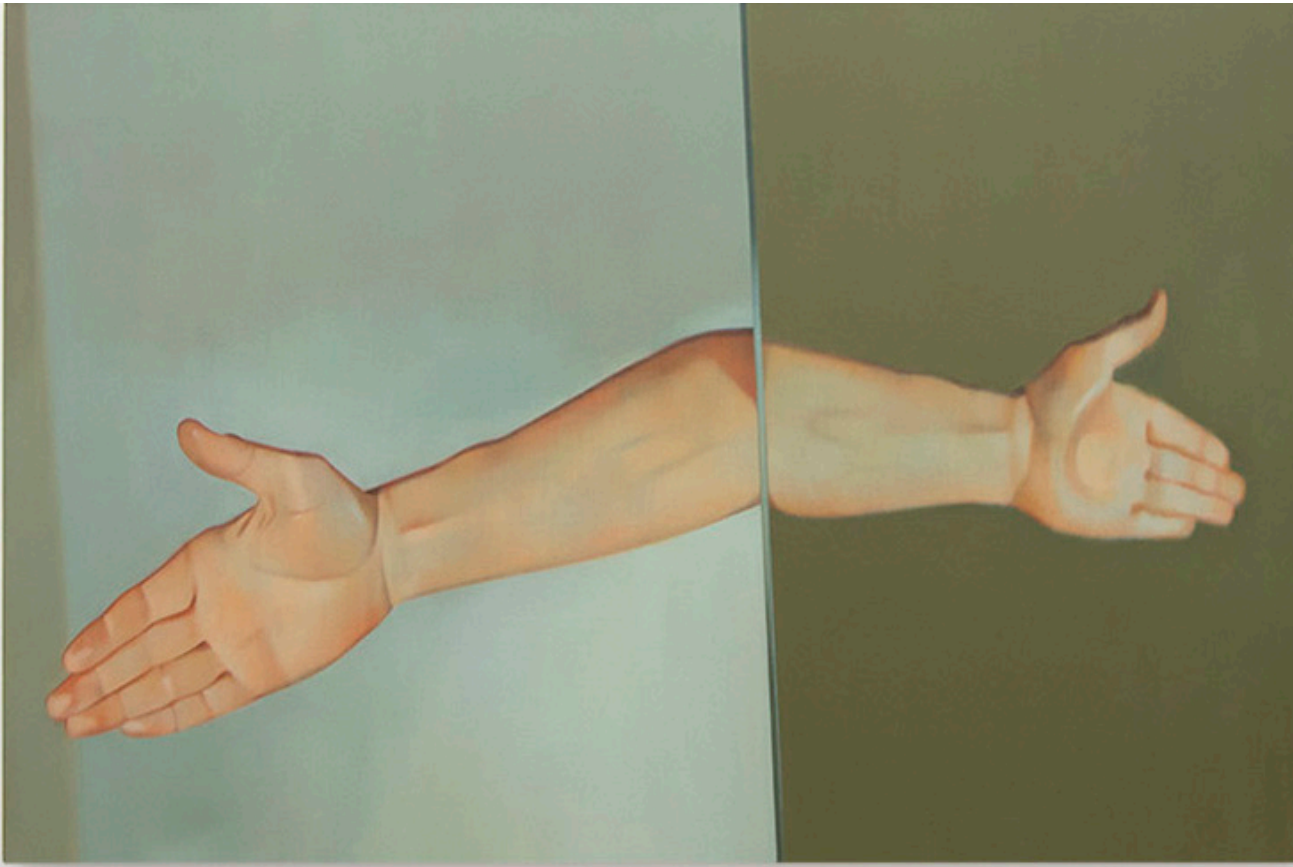
Del Rey released her critically acclaimed, career-defining album *Norman Fucking Rockwell* in 2019, I thought *How did she know?* When Devening Projects first proposed this show pre-pandemic, I lobbied to call it "Kevin Fucking Wolff." He would have loved it, but I realized it wasn't good enough.











Kevin never heard Lana Del Rey, although given that he adored Peggy Lee, Julie London, "lost" bad girls and sad pop music, I feel sure he would have approved of her. To my knowledge he never did tantric yoga, naked or otherwise. He did paint and draw, right up to the very end, before he lost a nearly two-decade fight with cancer. Cancer—linked to the lost kidney—that could be fairly well managed because, as his oncologist explained, it was slow and stupid. As a life-source siphon, it was just barely good enough.

At the end of Kevin's life, I employed a home hospice worker to look after him while I was at work. On the day of the night Kevin died, the nurse called me aside and said, "Kevin was yelling at God today. He pointed at the ceiling and said, 'You better put out the good stuff.'"

I know this: Wherever Kevin is, there's art. And it's not good enough.

— David Scott, March 2021



## Fleshed & Prescient

I met Kevin Wolff in 1986 at the time of a solo exhibition of his paintings at Feature, Chicago. Thinking now-of then and since, as our mutually cautious professional respect for each other's work proceeded to what became an endearing friendship—I can 'see' that even in that first meeting Kevin revealed all, and what was yet to be. His astonishing paintings and works on paper accomplished over three and plus decades were somehow already signaled; his entirely evident sense of privacy, clearly drawn; the inner wisdom, cosmic foolery and wonderfully wicked sense of humor evident as well in his very presence and 'present-ness.'

Provocative, provocateur: Kevin Wolff luxuriated in, reveled in, words—anecdotes from his own life and those whose lives

he read of, and vicariously lived through; lines from films, lyrics from songs, truths gleaned from other artists, all took surprising form—became Kevin-specific kernels of insight tucked into his first-inquisitive, then-opinioned, sometimes-un-interrupt-able, side of our conversations.

As counterpoint and radically so: Kevin Wolff's perceptually disconcerting, even eerie images—envisioned by his mind's eye—drawn and painted with consummate, ever-self-critical-facility, insisted: be quiet and look again; indeed so compelling, I might amend my just-invoked insisted, to insert instead some version of 'shut-up and pay attention.' And yet his works' sheer visuality—even true awkwardness is granted elegance from his hand—persuasively make their case with grace rather than aggression. Difficult person-



al or social relationships, attendant to his / our human condition, engage the very conventions of illusion and rich complexities of perception in metaphorical terms—for example, presenting both the figure and its mirrored 'double' as one confounded, contradicted, fleshed, translucent body.

In 2002, I had occasion to write of Kevin Wolff's work, and cited his 'embrace of certain historical, figurative painters—the later works of Goya, Rubens and Guston may be recalled—yet Wolff taps an urgent strain of images and anxieties specific to our contemporary moment.' Approaching twenty years since, Kevin Wolff's vision still opens onto those earlier and on-going concerns, while prescient to others new, now urgent and anxiously-held.

— Julia Fish, March 2021



## RAMBLINGS ON KEVIN WOLFF

I met Kevin Wolff at Feature Gallery in Chicago in 1983. He had just joined the gallery, as had I. I still remember him seated across from me in one of Hudson's orange chairs, with his blue, blue eyes and ready smile that always seemed like it was preparing to frame words that were forming in his big, quick brain. We bonded immediately and remained friends for thirty-five years. A year after he died, in 2019, I was honored to have the opportunity to curate a show of his extraordinary paintings and drawings at the Elmhurst Art Museum. Ditto what Hudson once said, "I'm in love with the way he paints." (The way he draws too.)

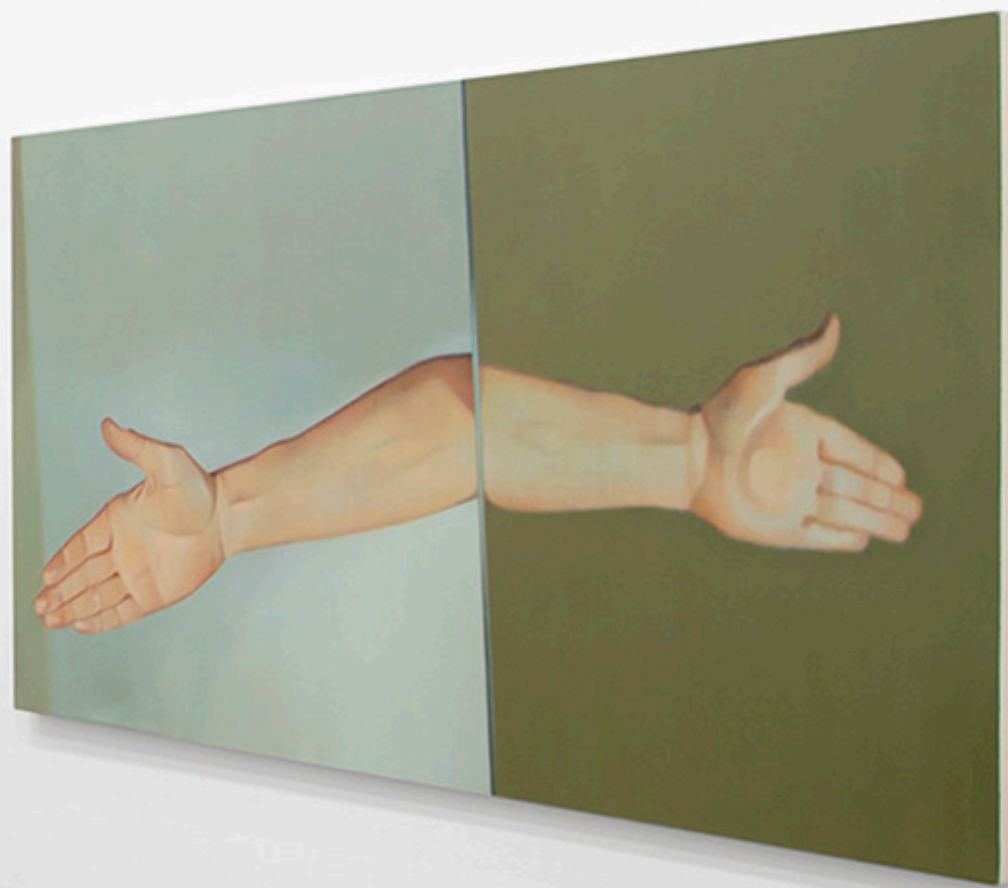
I'm grateful for my wonderful memories of Kevin, among them: a generous surprise birthday dinner he once gave for me; the time he literally fell off his chair at a dinner party after too many martinis; the welcome sight of Kevin in Paris after a terrible day; our shopping trip for an outfit for my opening (Kevin insisted I wear red); and discussing his brilliant diptych B0B, his only language painting, with its symmetrical palindromic relationship to the body.



A friend once told me this joke: A turtle was traveling along the highway and crashed into a snail coming off the exit ramp. The police came and asked what happened. "I don't know," said the snail. "It all happened so fast." Although we had many years with Kevin, it ended too quickly.

— Kay Rosen, March 2021











I met Kevin Wolff in 2006. We were part of the same MFA critique panel at SAIC. That day, we had lunch, the first of countless lunches. Our pattern: a little eating, a lot of talking—mostly from Kevin and mostly about teaching. I loved the force of his certainty. For him, drawing was an ethical imperative; learning to draw was a moral act. He made his priorities clear with his contempt for bullshit—no faking, fudging, noodling or limp decisions. The exactitude of relationships, the precision of line weight, interval, organization, nuance; there really was a right and wrong. He was perpetually dissatisfied with his students, and they loved him. They told me: "He hated everything I did. I've never learned so much from anyone."

Kevin was funny, in a dry-witty-kvetch way. His words were edged. He was good at sarcasm. He had a gentle face. In my mind, he always had one eyebrow raised; but oddly, I can't picture his actual eyebrows, just his eyes (behind his glasses), which were focused and serious. His work has the same edge as his words—intelligent, complex, dark-funny, finely honed. Underneath though, tender, like flesh.



My regret: we never visited each other's studios, and we never drew together. We said we would. We made near plans. Kevin and David bought a house not so far from Paul and I, and we both worked from home, both with studio-garages, and it was obvious we'd get together. We postponed, because... no hurry, right? (This makes me cry.) Kevin talked reverentially about remodeling and carefully choosing the surfaces in his home. I imagined his immaculate taste. I thought, "I have to clean and fix everything before he comes over. Should I paint the walls?" Anyway... we never did it. I missed out. After he died, I visited their home as part of a memorial celebration, and saw that my preconceptions were stupid. Their house was profoundly, lovingly comfortable. All surfaces were touchable and well touched.

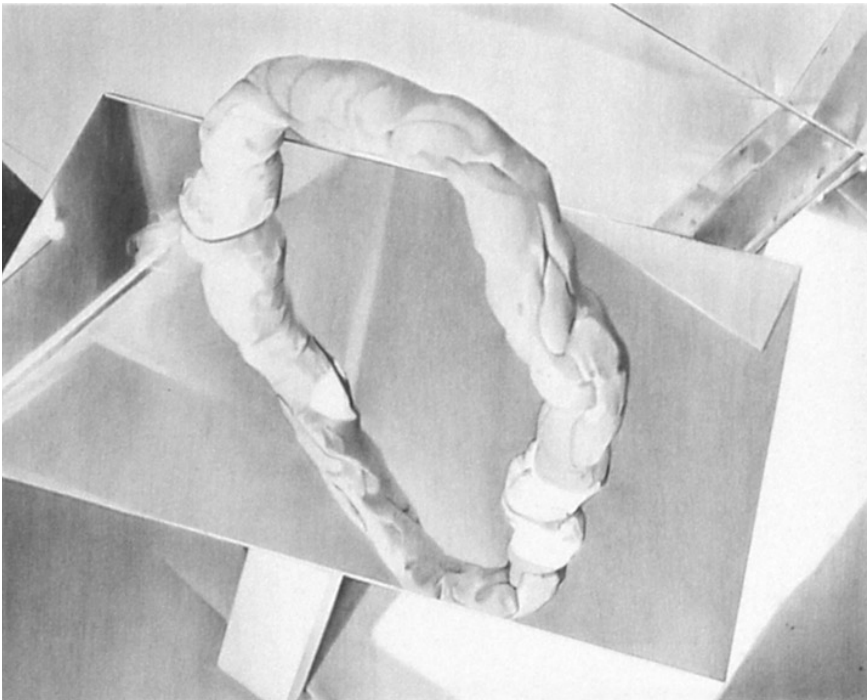
— Anne Harris, March 2021

I got lucky having Kevin as a teacher in 2001 and became close with him and his work for the following 17 years. Originally, I wanted to write this solely about his art, but I can't seem to separate the art from the man. Kevin was always all in in everything he did.

I've had some great teachers, but he really opened my eyes to seeing at a different level early on. No matter how uncomprehending or disobedient we were as students, he had a great ability to control the room and show us how to look deeply into something. This translated directly into his paintings. No matter how unruly his subjects became, he controlled every inch of those elegant surfaces with an incredible level of precision and wit. What we see in those paintings is what he wants us to see.

He brought an incredible level of clarity to how he perceived things.

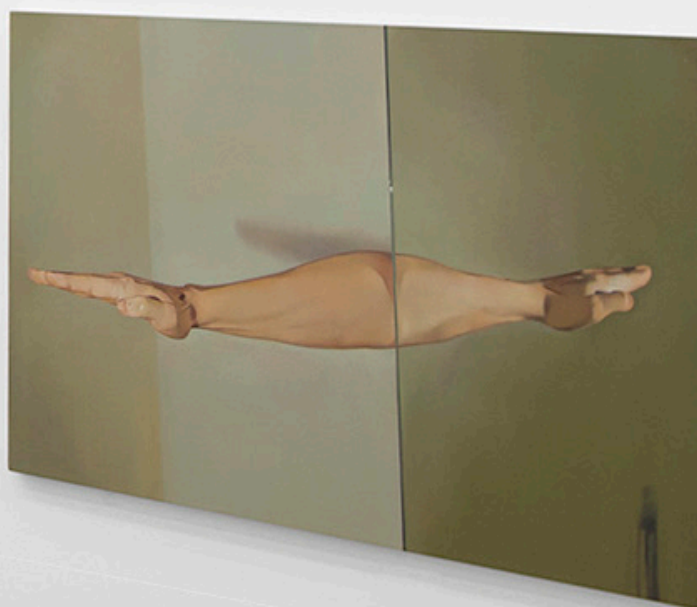
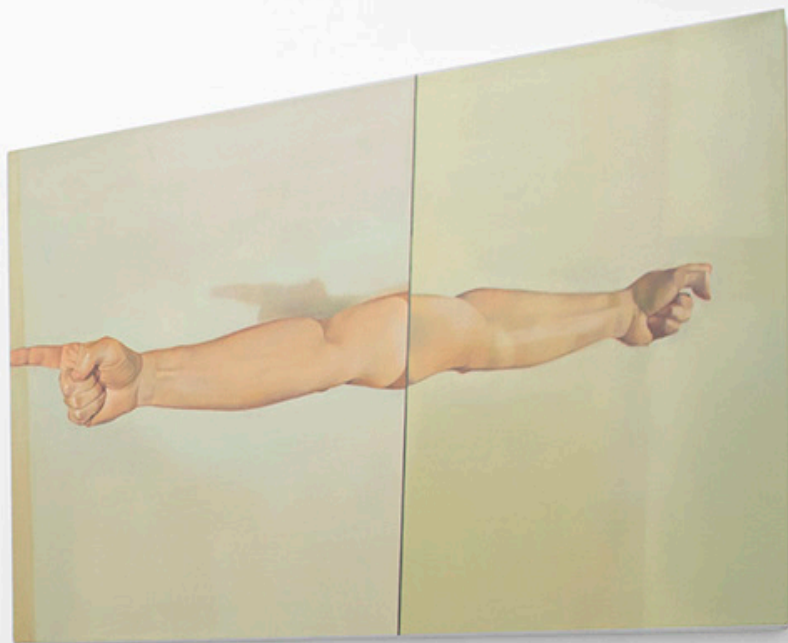
When I would visit, he always had something new to show me in his library. Even



though he was deeply critical, he was so open and excited to find and share new discoveries. In art, it re-

ally came down to the object and how far someone was able to take it. He was always looking for something, and he always put the work in as a viewer to absorb everything, analyze it and embed it into his own work. I remember going to a Picasso show







at the Art Institute of Chicago with him some years ago where I had made a lazy remark about "not being into" some of the prints. Oh my god, what a scene! By the time it was over, everyone in that gallery knew what he saw in those prints. He wanted so much out of the experience of art, equally in making and in viewing, that he expected all parties to put the work in. There was no off switch with him, and I deeply admired him for that.

I have a lot of love for Kevin, and I owe him greatly for the impact he has had on my development as an artist.

— Ben Murray, March 2021





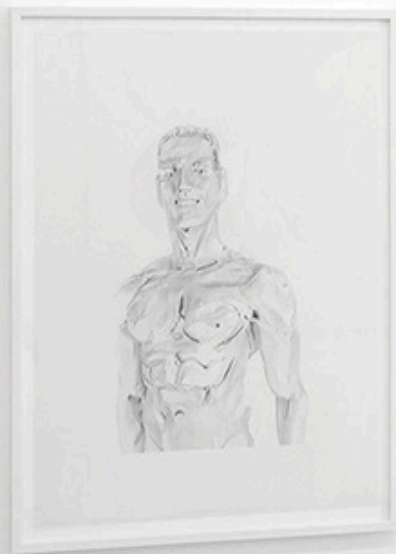
I met Kevin during the summer of 1979, when I taught a class for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was in graduate school, and was friendly with several other student peers: Bill Cass, Erica van Horn, Tom Denlinger, and others who I had the pleasure of meeting. After I moved to Chicago more permanently in 1981, Kevin and I renewed our acquaintance, socialized occasionally, and he hired me to work on painted backdrops at Ronsley Special Events, where he was beloved for his humor, work ethic, and for entertaining us with his vast knowledge of musical soundtracks.

During the years before his untimely death, Kevin taught for SAIC's Painting and Drawing department, and entertained everyone in the museum's Department of Prints and Drawings whenever he brought his classes in to teach from the collection. His observations were always astute, outlandish, and reminiscent of Sam (Anselmo) Carini, a curator there who likewise was a beloved raconteur (full disclosure, Kevin was an intern in Prints and Drawings in the 1980s).

Kevin's honesty was sometimes brutal, but it was exactly what his students needed to hear—a rare reality check during a period when they heard a lot of “art talk.” In his art, Kevin was equally provocative and also generous, and so it's a welcome occasion for Devening Projects to remind us and present an exhibition of his works.

— Mark Pascale, March 2021









As an artist, Kevin Wolff knowingly and carefully held in suspension a set of engaging contradictions. Few artists that I know have had such a deep reverence for past art—from European painting tradition to be sure, but also from other parts of our world's cultural history. He was a student always. Yet, while he embraced a representational approach drawn from attributes by these artists that he considered individually, and considered within the broad context of their time, and then in comparison across time, Kevin seems to have felt no stricture, no hand on his hand, as he went about determining his own work in painting and drawing. His subjects of course were personal and situated close by, but informed by a time distant. His compositions were equally elegant, puzzling, even ungainly, again mindful of widespread options imprinted by art history. And his method was as it had to be, given his ideas, his stubbornness, and his need for their realization, usually conducted in slow motion, so that the integration of parts could coalesce around his intention, to be fixed in memory.

— Richard Rezac, March 2021





I had admired Kevin's work for many years before we became colleagues at SAIC. Mutual friends brought us together socially and I will never forget the evening we met. Kevin, who could speak brilliantly about almost any subject, was dazzling, joyful, playful and hilarious. An intellectual and connoisseur, with a seemingly unlimited curiosity, Kevin's many interests were wide ranging and deeply researched.

That combination of brilliance, ease of communication, wit and personal charm, made Kevin a valuable instructor and admired colleague. He had a devoted following amongst students and was a great mentor to them. His example inspired many to follow the dual paths of dedication to both one's studio practice and to teaching.



Kevin and David's fabulous parties were festive occasions. They opened their home to friends and family where one could wander about freely, enjoy the superb cuisine, appreciate their wonderful collection, library, and of course, Kevin's work. To visit Kevin's studio was to be immersed in the world of his images. Surrounded by his gorgeous paintings, drawings and sculptures, as well as his enormous archive of collected images, the atmosphere was charged with Kevin's profound love of and belief in, the mysterious power of images and their ability to engage, inspire and delight. Fortunately, his important and richly rewarding art continues to inspire and amaze.

— Richard Deutsch, March 2021



Kevin Wolff (1955-2018) was a Chicago-based artist and teacher who was born Buffalo, N.Y. He received his undergraduate degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Wolff had a long and impactful career as a mainstay of both New York City and Chicago's art scenes, exhibiting at, among other venues, Feature Gallery, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Renaissance Society, Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Suburban. His work has also been exhibited at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, the New Museum, the Grey Art Gallery and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Wolff's reputation was in part solidified by his inclusion in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, but it was his 30-year association with Feature Gallery and its director, Hudson, that epitomized Wolff's artistic personality. Wolff was with Feature from its early days in Chicago through its relocation to New York and up to Hudson's death in 2018. Hudson cited Wolff as the artist with whom he had the longest running association, and he explained that longevity by stating simply: "I'm in love with the way he paints." For over two decades, Wolff taught figure painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and at the Herron School of Art and Design at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

#### Image list:

- 4 Odalisque, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 36 inches
- 5 Man on a Stick, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
- 7 Screaming Fans, photos, thread, size variable
- 8 Arm, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 inches
- 9 ReBob, 2006, oil on canvas, 60 x 96 inches
- 10/11 Installation, Never Not Looking, Devening Projects, April-May 2021
- 13 Kevin Wolff, studio view
- 14/15 Installation, Never Not Looking, Devening Projects, April-May 2021
- 17 Studio view
- 20 Installation, Never Not Looking, Devening Projects, April-May 2021
- 21 Untitled, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 19 inches
- 23 Untitled, graphite on paper, 22 x 28 inches
- 24/25 Installation, Never Not Looking, Devening Projects, April-May 2021
- 27 Man with Frames, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
- 28 Hanging Man, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
- 30/31 Installation, Never Not Looking, Devening Projects, April-May 2021
- 33 Big Mug, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 34 x 43 inches
- 36 Self-Portrait, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

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Curated by Dan Devening and David Scott

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