

Arts & Entertainment

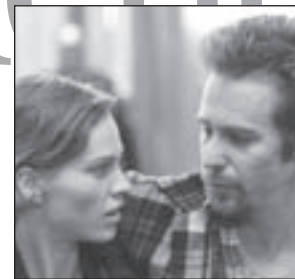
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French adventure enriches Kettler's art

By **Kaimi Rose Lum**

BANNER STAFF

Truro artist Kim Kettler has a thing for shellfish. She's done so many oyster still lifes that she's known locally as "the oyster lady," and when she isn't painting those craggy bivalves or the luminous scenes inside them she's rendering landscapes that are somehow related to oysters — shellfishermen working the flats, boats drifting in the harbor.

It's the "yin and yang" of this humble mollusk that attracts her, Kettler says — the way its hard, rocky outside contrasts with its soft, fleshy inside, its ability to "take muck and make something really fantastic with it." But what she also appreciates about the oyster is that it's a symbol for our natural environment.

"For us, it can be sustenance. It can be life-giving," she says.

Kettler's fascination with the oyster followed her on a recent trip to rural France. For 10 days in September she traveled through the countryside in the Massif Central with a group of 13 women artists, several of whom exhibit with Kettler at the Addison Gallery in Orleans. The



PHOTO COURTESY KIM KETTLER

With cows to keep her company, Kettler paints en plein air near the village of Frontenay sur Dive, in France.

tiny hamlet of Frontenay sur Dive served as their home base; from there the artists walked or bicycled into the surrounding farmland and forest, looking for new material to paint. Everything Kettler encountered — from hunters and fishermen out on their rounds, to cattle

and chickens roaming about, to buildings creatively assembled with local timbers and stones — reinforced her sense that this is a place where people truly felt connected to and respect their natural environment.

"What I really was smitten with was the prosperity and

abundance of the natural world there — it was fall, the sunflowers were being harvested, there were animals everywhere — and the simplicity." A close attention to nature permeated "every nook and cranny. Next to a little driveway there'd be a prolific garden growing," she says. "It was



remarkable how just about everywhere I looked someone was doing something beautiful with the environment."

Kettler was in her element. Here on the Cape she keeps bees, explores the tidal flats (she dated a Wellfleet oysterman for a time) and veers off South Pamet Road when the Mooneys' cows are out, not wanting to miss her chance to paint them. Even the way those French fields unfolded, one after the other, toward the horizon, reminded her of home — her Midwestern home in

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PHOTO KAMI ROSE LUM

Kettler shares some of her photographs from France.

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Missouri, where she lived before moving to the Outer Cape 30 years ago.

But at the same time it was all “rather new to me,” she says. “I’ve painted outdoors, I’ve painted plein air, but to go out every day and set up your easel and paint something was exciting to me. What I loved about this trip was how it shook me up. It forced me to think differently about how to approach a painting. I saw things with fresh eyes. ... It was very stimulating, aesthetically and visually.”

Soon Kettler had assembled a small portfolio of oil-on-linen landscapes. She painted cows in pastures, their flanks softly gilded by the light of the setting sun; she painted the spires of St. Loup, the church that towered over the village; she painted rows of sun-flecked tomato plants and orchards heavy with fruit. The world was her oyster.

There was just one thing missing: oysters.

One day, she says, she insisted to a few of her colleagues that they set out to find some speci-

mens of “huitres,” and off they went to the town of Richelieu, where they’d heard there was an open market. “I really wanted to find French oysters. It’s my holy grail,” she says with a laugh. There, among the stands of artichokes and haricot verts, she discovered a shellfish monger with a bucket of oysters. It got even better when on her last day in France, on a stopover in Paris, she met up with two old friends who treated her to a supper of fruits de mer at the venerable Cafe de la Paix. An opulent platter of oysters was brought to the table — the French oysters are much bigger and more bowl-like than Wellfleet oysters, she explains. She collected the shells from her shellfish encounters, cleaned and dried them, and carried them home with her on the plane.

Now new and exciting things are brewing in Kettler’s studio off Castle Road. French oysters are sitting for their portraits, and Kettler is drawing from a store of fresh inspiration. One of the best things about the trip to France, she says, was the exchange of ideas and the sense of camaraderie between the women, who ran the gamut from very well-established artists to just-emerging ones. (A selection of their work will be shown in an exhibition opening at the Addison Gallery next June.)

“There was a great sense of connectedness we found doing this trip together,” she says. It was an eye-opening experience “just to be with other people who [have] the same lifestyle,” who are dedicated to their art. One of the painters she met told her about an intensive workshop for artists in California called “Color Boot Camp,” and Kettler, still bitten by the travel bug, signed up almost as soon as she got home.

There’s no telling what she’ll bring back this time. Some West Coast oysters, perhaps?