

On the Periphery: An Interview with Artist Kevin Cyr

by Erica Vermette

Kevin Cyr is a Maine-based artist known for his paintings of vehicles, as well as his sculptural works depicting unique shelters and transitory homes. He studied illustration at Massachusetts College of Art and worked as a studio assistant to the painter Kehinde Wiley for five years. He has had three solo shows at Jonathan LeVine Gallery, several group and solo shows at other galleries, and is currently with the Alden Gallery in Provincetown, MA.

Cyr “sat down” (via email) with artist Erica Vermette (previously featured in Résonance: Vol. 1) in late fall of 2020 to discuss his Acadian heritage, cross-border identity, and the meaning of “home” through the lens of his work.

EV: Tell us a bit about your upbringing and your relationship to Franco-American identity.

KC: I was born in Edmundston, New Brunswick, a small city in Canada right across the border from Madawaska, where I grew up. My mom is French-Canadian and with full credit to her, I grew up speaking French. To this day I still speak French to my parents and brothers as well as my extended Canadian family. I think that alone has really cemented my Franco-American identity.

The town of Madawaska was a great place to grow up. My childhood was very much like the movie *Stand By Me* in the sense that it was a very free-range upbringing. It was very typical in many ways, doing what kids did growing up in the late 80s and early 90s. Building treehouses, throwing ninja stars, playing on train cars, and riding dirt bikes.

The town has changed quite a bit since I lived there, but it’s still a small paper mill town. One interesting aspect of the paper company is that the pulp is produced in Canada, then piped over to the American mill for the actual paper production. I say that just to reinforce how reliant Madawaska and Edmundston are on each other to this day. Both towns celebrate their Acadian heritage. Family names were established in the 18th century and span the border. The farm fields and the Acadian culture was established well before the borders were settled, which has infused people on both sides of the border with a strong Acadian identity.

EV: Since the theme of this issue is “Borderlands: North and South,” I want to focus for a moment on the Maine/Canada border and also the idea of liminality in general as it relates to your work.

KC: “Liminality” is a great term; I can see how the idea of not fitting within a single group is reflected throughout the scope of my work. I’ve always considered myself a painter, but I studied illustration at Massachusetts College of Art. While developing a body of work and becoming known for painting vehicles, especially beat-up old vans, I created a whole other body of work that I consider Sculptural—like the Camper Bike, Camper Kart and Shanty Chateau. Those life-size, semi-functional pieces look sculptural in a gallery setting, but once taken out into the world they could easily be confused for real objects, despite being very unusual.

I’ve heard a fellow artist from Northern Maine say that he was never a joiner; I certainly feel that way as well. It might very well be that growing up in Northern Maine, the small pocket of French-speaking Acadians has led to a fierce independence among its people. I’ve always been on the periphery in social settings, too, never quite comfortable with only one peer group. So, when thinking of artistic choices I’ve made, I can see how my art career mirrors my personal life and my upbringing, and where the idea of liminality relates.

EV: How did growing up right on the border, with ties on both sides, shape your ideas about home and identity?

KC: I grew up with a really strong sense of home, which spanned both sides of the border. Having been born in New Brunswick, where my mother grew up means my home is the town I grew up in as well as the town I was born in. All her siblings still reside in Edmundson, as well as many members of their extended family, so going home means spending as much time in Canada as it does in Madawaska. I’m not sure all residents from Madawaska have the same feeling. Without having family members that are Canadian I’d imagine there is much less of a connection. Despite that though, the region’s Acadian heritage provides a strong cross-border shared identity. Both sides of my family were among the first European settlers arriving in 1785, so I’ve never felt only American, yet I’m not quite Canadian, but I certainly identify as 100% Acadian.

EV: How, if at all, would you say this relates to your transitory house works like Camper Bike and Camper Kart?

KC: I think my life experiences have as much to do with the themes of transitory works as growing up on the border. I've always been pretty good at making things. I'm sure the many treehouses my friends and I built gave me the confidence to begin making mobile structures. Also, several weeks each summer were spent camping at a nearby campground in Canada, which is a direct aesthetic link and interest in campers. During my college days, and for a while after, I was a bike messenger in Boston. Having biking as part of my life daily is the connection to using bikes in my work. My most influential life experience, though, was spending time in Beijing, where I witnessed China's working class and Beijing's bike culture firsthand. I was especially drawn to the large three-wheeled bikes, or rickshaws, which was a very common vehicle used by working-class people. Combining my earlier life experiences and the things I was seeing in Beijing lead to designing and building the Camper Bike. Acquiring a three-wheeled bike, with a large bamboo flatbed, became the impetus for creating a whole new body of work.

EV: Whenever transitory housing comes up, it inevitably evokes questions about poverty, class, and privilege. Can you talk a little bit about how that intersects with your work, and how your upbringing and experiences traveling and living overseas have informed your views?

KC: The sculptures I've made certainly touch on the issues of poverty, class and privilege. I've been contacted by a handful of people in difficult situations inquiring how to build a tiny camper, or ask if I could build one for them, not realizing that my projects were solely for the sake of art.

That was when the issues of class and poverty really hit home, realizing that my camper projects were about more than just my nostalgic, privileged upbringing. Growing up, my family spent a lot of time camping and even just using our pop-up camper in our backyard, but it was always about fun and recreation. That was the initial spark to creating mobile shelters, but as my projects evolved, I realized the ideas behind them could touch on social issues [like] housing insecurity and poverty, while still sparking one's imagination to set off on [an] adventure. All while tapping into pop culture themes of a post-apocalyptic world.

My 2011 show titled "Home in The Weeds" touched on a wide range of issues through the pieces I made. From an attractive camper towed by a vintage Schwinn, which represented an autonomous lifestyle, to an installation of a fallout shelter within the gallery floor, which depicted an extremely pared-down dwelling.

EV: There are two other “borders” or divides I want to look at in terms of your work. You’ve talked a bit about growing up in a small town. Can you speak to the tension between the rural and the urban in some of the housing pieces? Especially pieces like *Shanty Chateau* and *Cabin Tent*, that have interiors that are instantly recognizable as rural and Acadian but are presented or installed in a variety of outdoor and gallery settings.

There’s also this divide between private and public space in these pieces—both in the way they present themselves as private “homes” apart from larger spaces, and the fact that they’re presented both in the private space of a gallery and in public settings. How do these different presentations change the way the pieces are accessed, and what do they have to say about who space “belongs” to?

KC: There is certainly a huge divide between urban and rural; it’s likely bigger than ever. The *Shanty Chateau* is a good example of mixing rural and urban. My intention was to build a shelter that could be disguised or camouflaged in an urban setting, with intent to repel onlookers, while the interior would be reflective of a quaint little cabin, creating a comfortable home. At the time I hadn’t thought of it as tension, but more as utilizing aspects of urban decay and rural simplicity to create a dichotomy in the piece.

Cabin Tent has very similar themes, with the additional ability to deconstruct and relocate, in both a real-world setting and in an art-world setting, like a gallery. My hope is that the pieces become interesting enough as art pieces and believable enough to look plausible as actual shelters, blending the lines of real and imagined.

EV: Can you talk a bit about the physical process of creating these pieces? What’s your favorite part?

KC: It’s hard to narrow down my favorite part. It’s incredibly fun to come up with an idea and design it on paper, but the really rewarding part is to see it come together in a life-size scale. During the construction it’s a lot of trial and error, and things happen that I could never have imagined through sketches. Finding the objects is really fun as well, they become part of each piece. The objects add to the look and become part of a narrative, so much so that I’ve made paintings of those objects.

EV: What about your painting process? What is it about painting that appeals to you, and what parts of the process do you enjoy most?

KC: I consider myself a painter; I couldn't imagine not making paintings. I almost always paint vehicles; even most of my sculptural work is based around a vehicle of some kind. I like how objects can tell a great deal about people and society, especially cars and work vehicles. Painting objects has become a way to document the life around me and finding the subject matter is a huge part of the process.

The physical act of painting might be the most enjoyable. The creative reward comes through grouping paintings to form a cohesive show. It's a great feeling to put together a good show.

EV: How has the pandemic and the civil unrest of the past year impacted your life and your creative process? Do you think it will inform your work or process going forward?

KC: Finding time has been the absolute biggest challenge for creating work. Trying to balance family and work, like so many people, has been almost impossible. But as long as that remains my biggest worry, I'll certainly consider myself extremely lucky.

It's hard to imagine it won't inform my work, I'm just not sure how yet. So far, I don't think I've been able to process a whole lot of it. I was so engaged in the election and the Black Lives Matter movement, it consumed a lot of my energy. And to think that we're still so deep in the middle of this pandemic is completely exhausting. Hopefully when we come out on the other side, I have a chance to reflect through my work.

EV: What are you working on right now?

KC: At the moment, I'm finishing up a painting for a group show at Hashimoto Contemporary in New York, and I'm working on a couple painting commissions.

Kevin Cyr's work can be found at www.kevincyr.net and [@kevincyrstudio](https://www.instagram.com/kevincyrstudio) on Instagram.