



Beth Schultz

Lisa Grossman, Painting the Luminous Kansas Landscape

All photos by Lisa Grossman

On a back road in the Flint Hills on a sunny day, you can drive for miles, seeing only the plains unscrolling toward the horizon. However, on such a trip you also might be surprised to see a woman standing in front of an easel, intent upon painting these undulating plains and that horizon. Her truck, loaded with her painting and sleeping gear, would be parked off to the side. She would be glad to see you, however, and reaches out her arms as if to greet you and to embrace the entire prairie stretching out before you.

This enthusiastic and dedicated painter most probably would be Lisa Grossman, who has been committed to painting the prairie *en plein air* since 1990. Lisa explains that her paintings' "central theme has been open space, my inspiration the wide skies and prairies of eastern Kansas and the Kansas River Valley. The power of this place and my emotional respons-

es to it are the true subjects of my work. My wish is to share some of what I've discovered and to offer a new way of seeing these open prairie spaces and waterways." Through numerous exhibitions and with over 1800 of her works in public and private collections the world over, Lisa has succeeded in illuminating and sharing her vision of these wondrous places.

Raised in rural Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, Lisa has painted since she was a child, studying art at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh and later at the University of Kansas. She explains that she came from a rural, blue-collar family, but that so long as she can remember, she has had a drawing utensil in her hand. She feels "deeply fortunate" that for her the line between art and life has always been blurred. Out kayaking these days on the Kansas River, she says, she is thinking of painting, and when she is painting, she is thinking of kayaking.



The Kansas River threads its way through sandbars and a darkening prairie.



Lisa renders the sky and rolling prairie in an impasto rhythm of line and shadow.

Although as a child, she had fantasized about “wide, open spaces” through *The Little House on the Prairie* books and through movies, she became transfixed by the Kansas landscape soon after coming to work for Hallmark Cards in 1988. Since moving to Lawrence in 1996, she has dedicated herself to painting the Flint Hills, the Kansas River, and other Eastern Kansas prairie sites—in all seasons and all weathers, at all times of day and from diverse perspectives. She remembers her early response to the prairie, pondering “how to make something interesting out of a spare landscape.” She wondered then how Georgia O’Keeffe might see the prairie. After buying her first car which allowed her to leave Kansas City to spend time seeing the prairie, Lisa discovered it was “exhilarating to be outside painting.”

She realized above all that “the prairie’s great gift is space. Here I can think. Here there is room enough to feel expansively. Prairie-time is time for thinking and feeling.” Her encounter with the land’s shifting patterns of light and shade, its response to weather, its undulating rises and dips, and its long horizon precipitated her profound and ongoing commitment to her craft. Generally, Lisa prefers painting in the fall, winter, or spring, in late afternoon or evening. Surrounded by the prairie’s immensity, she says she experiences “an inner expansiveness: there is room for vaster thinking that leads to discoveries.”

Although for years Lisa worked primarily on land before an easel, when the sinuous, sensuous, unwinding Kansas River came to be central to her vision of the prairie, she recognized that the river was best visualized from the air. Photographing from a plane thus became her primary means for capturing the river’s undulations. Now she also uses a drone to capture images of both the land and the river from the sky’s perspective. Contemplating the importance of the river for her prairie vision, she recognizes that “my work really does emerge from the prairie much as the Kaw River emerges from the same prairie. Ideas and impressions are filtered by the wind and grasses, soils, limestone, from many points of view, but following the shape of the watersheds and converging into several tributaries, gathering into one massive body of work downstream. . . . I know there are endless metaphors related to rivers, but I thought how, really, the river emerging from the prairie has inspired it all for me.”

Considering her ongoing, overall commitment to painting the prairie environment, both land and river, Lisa often invokes the significance of the horizon: “I have been intrigued by the idea that I might be in pursuit of the horizon, a moving target, from various vantage points.” But above all it is the sense of space—inner and outer—which characterizes her paintings of both prairie and river and which she seeks to convey in her painting.



From the beginning of her vocation as a *plein air* painter, Lisa has been recognized nationally and throughout Kansas as bringing a new visual interpretation to the prairie. Numerous distinguished museums, hospitals, universities, banks, convention centers, businesses, and law firms have purchased Lisa's paintings for their collections. In addition to painting Kansas' landscapes, she has also illustrated fifteen of the state's iconic creatures—mammals, birds, insects, reptiles—in the award-winning *Kansas Bestiary* (2013). A dedicated environmentalist, she has been artist-in-residence through the National Parks Service in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and New Mexico. She is committed to working with diverse Kansas environmental organizations, including

the Jayhawk Audubon Society, the Land Institute, and the Symphony in the Flint Hills. As secretary of Friends of the Kaw, Lisa helps guide river trips and provides visual materials for outreach and education, in addition to fundraising. Finally, Lisa maintains that the open spaces of Kansas have given her a tremendous gift: an inner expansiveness, a sense of enhanced possibilities and discoveries. She believes as well that painting open spaces connects her “to the seasons and cycles of celestial bodies, to Earth's shadow at either end of the day, and to the planet's curve as it is revealed in long, arcing clouds.” As an artist of the prairie, she hopes, above all, to inspire people to connect with a particular place and, thus, to connect with the planet itself.

