



LEFT  
**Young Woman  
Waiting**  
2010, oil, 24 x 23.  
All artwork this article  
collection the artist.

# *Symbolism & Strength Beneath the Surface*

Through dramatic design and striking subject matter, **Kathleen Gray's** paintings deliver subtle messages of strength, resilience, and hopeful expectancy.

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by **Allison Malafronte**



*All the artists featured in the preceding pages aptly fit this issue's overarching theme of "The View From Inside." Whether through interior or figurative work, Bartlett, Fenske, Assael, Ginsburg, and Silverman are painters who pull from within to make powerful statements about the personal and universal truths around them. The final painter tied to this theme, Connecticut artist Kathleen Gray, is certainly no exception.*

Her main aim as an artist is to engage and connect with the viewer on a level beyond what is seen on the canvas, and in addition to looking inward and outward while composing her thoughtful paintings, she also continually looks upward.

The concept of hope is a constant thread throughout this artist's life and work. She spent many years coping with an extremely difficult illness, and at one point looked death directly in the eye. But she survived, and painting is part of what helped her escape the pain during that time. "I was convinced there was no way I had been given this gift just to have it taken away," Gray says. "So I persevered and pulled through, and now so many of my paintings convey messages of patience, faith, and hope. I very subtly put these messages into my work, I don't want to make overt statements or make the viewer uncomfortable. But I think the sentiments come through on their own, often without me having to explain my initial intention or the experience behind it."

The human condition, life and death, and beauty and truth are topics that have been explored by artists for centuries, and Gray also often reflects on these ideas in her work. But it is the moments of waiting and hopeful expectancy explored in her paintings that reveal who she truly is as an artist and allude to the resilience she has developed throughout her life. "Waiting is something all of us face, and portraying it is frequently on my mind," the artist says. "I have learned a great deal about waiting while dealing with my illness. To sit through a 7- to 8-hours-long treatment is an amazingly difficult feat, and there is no greater human longing than waiting to be well. I have a great deal of compassion for others who struggle with this, and not just those who suffer with sickness. To wait for a moment in time, to watch life go by, to believe you missed something while you were waiting. Isn't this something we all experience at some point in our lives?"

Gray's striking image of an unworn taffeta dress draped on a mannequin, bathed in raking light and surrounded by a collection of windblown leaves, is the perfect visual symbol of



a missed moment in time—and is appropriately titled *Waiting*. The artist imagined a young woman anxiously anticipating the kind of spring or summer evening meant for a gown of this nature, perhaps the prom, a gala, or a grand ball. But the setting sun streaming through the unseen window and the slow accumulation of dried leaves and faded blossoms suggest the ending of one season and the beginning of the next—and with that, the idea that this moment, this once-in-a-lifetime event just beyond the doors, has passed and the imagined experience may never be realized.

On the same topic of waiting—this time with the anticipation of healing—is Gray's painting *Young Woman Waiting*. "This beautiful young woman is struggling with a chronic illness," Gray says of the subject portrayed. "Because of the pain, she wears braces on both arms and special stockings. She's slowly getting better, and I wanted to give her a portrait that could be a reassuring link to her future. When she sat for this painting, she took off her braces, slipped on a silk dress, and put her legs up on a pillow. With one look in the mirror, she saw her old self. The screen in the background is full of boys and girls, a reminder of her past job teaching young children, and the only jewelry she wears is symbolic of her faith, her family's love, and her role as a wife and mother."

Alongside these contemplative moments of stillness featured in Gray's paintings is some of her more direct imagery, which engages viewers through dramatic subject matter and strong spiritual symbolism. One can look at *The Spirit Transcending*, for instance, and consider the power-

LEFT  
**Waiting**  
2009, oil, 26 x 36.

BELOW  
**At Rest**  
2004, oil, 23 x 34.

BOTTOM  
**The Spirit  
Transcending**  
2010, oil, 30 x 42.







ful connotation of the outstretched arms, see the young boy lying on a table in *At Rest* and wonder whether this is temporary or eternal sleep, and notice the last bit of light illuminating a steeple in *The Village at Twilight* and sense a lingering spirit of hope. Which is exactly the kind of reaction Gray hopes her work elicits in viewers—for them to see beyond what is depicted, and to sense the moments in her own life that connect to moments in theirs.

“I want the viewer to take a second look at the painting, to think about why they’re connecting to what’s depicted,” Gray explains. “I’ve noticed that I can sometimes walk through an art gallery at an embarrassingly quick rate, and if I’m not drawn to a work from across the room, I may just pass it by. But the paintings that pull you in are the ones that are have something going on beneath the surface. They’re the ones

that engage you because the subject or the inspiration behind it is familiar, relatable, real, relevant—human. We all deal with so many of the same joys and sorrows, and art can help us reach one another through our shared experiences.

“The gift of painting came unexpectedly to me,” the artist concludes, “and I always believed there was a reason. At this point in my life I can look back and see that there were many reasons this talent was given to me, one of which was to get through a difficult period of illness. It gave me small, tangible goals that I could achieve inside a world where pain was not the primary focus. Through my paintings I’d like to subtly remind people that this world is available, and that hope is never lost.” ■

*Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.*

ABOVE  
**The Village at Twilight**  
2010, oil, 24 x 36.



LEFT  
**Green Pears**  
2009, oil, 14 x 11.



ABOVE  
**Rebecca Expecting**  
2002, oil, 36 x 23.

## About the Artist

**Kathleen Gray** began painting in 1997 and is primarily a self-taught artist. She defines her style of painting as classical realism and counts Sargent, Zorn, and De Laszlo—as well as Holbein, Hans Memling, and Allan Ramsay—as major influences. She is a resident artist of the Salmagundi Club, in New York City, and a member of Allied Artists. Her work has been accepted in several national group exhibitions—including member and nonmember shows at the Salmagundi Club, the Allied Artist annual exhibition, and The American Artists Professional League grand national—and has won awards in those and other shows, including Best of Show and Best in Oil. To see more of the artist’s work, visit her website at [www.kgrayfinearts.com](http://www.kgrayfinearts.com).