



Expect the Unexpected, the title of a Center Street Gallery show of new works by Kay Stratman, evokes the unpredictable nature of her medium: watercolor on sakishi board. Works like *Not Red*, seen here, began without expectation and evolved in color, composition.

Serendipity shapes artist's brushstrokes

Who: Kay Stratman

What: Expect the Unexpected, solo show of brush paintings

When: Reception 5-8 p.m. Thursday; show hangs through Sept. 20

Where: Center Street Gallery, 30 Center St.

Web: www.centerstreetgallery.com

By Katy Niner

To demonstrate the possibilities of sky to her students, Kay Stratman started with a turbulent blue wash anchored by a sliver of emerald land.

Serendipity made the simple scene harmonious, so she developed it beyond the demo.

Much later, she added one snowy ridge. More time passed and she decided to trace a second shadow contour. "Should I add birds?" she asked advisors like Ryan Wright and Elizabeth Kimball of Center Street Gallery, who have represented her work since she moved here two and a half years ago. Center Street will host a show of her new works, *Expect the Unexpected*, for a month, starting with an evening reception Thursday.

The Importance of Empty Spaces now exemplifies her art: Its creation was unexpected, its composition, succinct and contemporary.

About 25 years ago, Stratman met a sumi-e artist and immediately felt drawn to the "controlled spontaneity" of Asian brush painting. She spent years studying the brushstrokes derived from calligraphy, mastering the technique and the tools: bamboo-handled brushes, sumi (stick ink) and rice paper.

In recent years, she has focused more on p'o mo (splash ink) painting, a technique of applying watercolors thickened to the consistency of ice cream on shikishi board, a paper board layered with gold or silver metallic topped with a film of rice paper and finished with gold trim. The metallic lends luminosity; the board allows her to pour and tip colors together.

Expect the Unexpected showcases her evolution from traditional to contemporary compositions.

"When I start, I have an idea, but [the painting] has its own idea," Stratman said. "The better I get at it, the finished piece is more my idea rather than the board and water." Surprises still abound. A new series of critters tested technique. She had to keep their bodies dry while creating colorful habitats and then focus the paint on the small plane of the creature.

Sometimes, background hues seep into the critter's contours, or reverse – the animal blurs with background. An iridescent purple-brown gecko borrows colors from the surrounding rock; blue wisps bleed from the fingers of a frog.

Stratman's scenes are location inspired, not set. Cross-country skiing at Grand Targhee informed *Diamond Dust*, a snowscape topped by a brilliant blue sky. The play of Northern Lights in a deep canyon reminded Stratman of the steep drama of Cascade Canyon.

A series of giclee prints, also available at Center Street, evokes places like the Gros Ventre Range, the Grand Canyon, the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah mountains.

While canoeing in the Boundary Waters, she looked west from her campsite and found a sunset painting. A few careful details pull an impression of a thicketed foreground from the sky blazing pink and orange. The spindly tree slicing the painting recalls traditional sumi-e compositions, Stratman said.

Some pieces become whole with setting, like a pure purple and orange watercolor with no brushwork. "I always liked it but I didn't know what I wanted it to be," Stratman said. Then the bubbling water feature in the Snake River Canyon gave it an identity: *Champagne*. "It just needed a name."

Her recent works have become more colorful. Perhaps her palette is influenced by the bright array in Center Street, she wondered. Or maybe its the rare quality of light here.

Colors found in nature can be disastrous in paint. The bold background behind a plum blossom branch works because she let the gold of the shikishi board show through, a metallic pause between colors.

Dawn Day Dusk explores the shifting play of sky and water throughout the day. With no references to land, the seascapes muse on nature through abstraction.

When finished painting, Stratman adds her chop, a stone carved with a symbol that serves as a signature. Stratman's chop evokes the Chinese saying "If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing bird will come."

Its placement "must add to the painting, but not detract," she said.

The triptych challenged chop placement: She didn't want to disrupt the simplicity. She chose to leave her chop on only one section.