

# Domestic Scenes

By DAVID MASELLO



On the porch of a modest house in a leafy Midwestern town, a group of young people have gathered. It is a summer evening and a buttery lamplight glows through the living room windows. While some of the men and women are engaged in conversation and sipping from bottles of Harp ale, others appear to temporarily occupy that introspective middle distance. We can also see in some of their glances a tension both friendly and sexual. The figures are paying attention to each other, happy in each other's company.

This is a scene typical of the Bloomington, Indiana-based painter Tim Kennedy (b. 1954). In his large canvases (often measuring 56 x 48 in.), such attractive, casually garbed graduate students might be playing a board game, fixing breakfast, returning with groceries for a group dinner, or reading a book as friends come and go. They dress and undress without shame before each other, lounge shirtless on couches, or pad around barefoot. They are sharing their lives in a shared house.

In the catalogue for his solo show at New York's First Street Gallery in 2005, Kennedy acknowledged that the Craftsman-style bungalow he and his wife (the painter Eva Mansdorf) occupy is an "unspoken character in most of my paintings." The Craftsman home, mass-produced by Sears, Roebuck & Co. in the early 20th century, is "at once idealistic and practical," Kennedy believes. "It embodies the polar American impulses toward the utopian and the commercial equally. The house is my leitmotif."

That same idealistic-practical dynamic defines the figures who occupy Kennedy's tranquil yet charged domestic scenes. These people inhabit the middle ground of years between youth and adulthood. They appear to have left behind the carefree time of undergraduate life to assume the responsibilities that come with graduate studies. Some are likely teaching classes for which they receive a modest salary. They now have more in common with faculty members than with college undergraduates, who no longer regard them as peers.

Yet while these people are immersed in often esoteric (i.e., idealistic) academic pursuits, they may already be planning for, and haunted by, an uncertain future. As a professor himself (at Indiana University), Kennedy lives and works with such students; his pictures reveal a profound empathy with, and affection for, them. It is easy to imagine the questions they might be pondering: Will I enter a tenure track at a good university? Am I fated to be an itinerant, adjunct instructor? Could my dissertation be published? How old will I be when I finish my studies? Should I commit to the person I love, or will that complicate my life when I am ready to move on?

Over the last year, I have become friendly with a 25-year-old man in my office who is asking exactly these questions as he begins pursuing a Ph.D. in French literature. He remains both excited and daunted by the prospect of years spent studying the philosophies of OuLiPo, an obscure school whose adherents apply strict linguistic constraints to their fiction and poetry. (For example, Georges Perec wrote a novel in French without ever using the letter e.) Despite my friend's passion for such esoterica and his desire to become a professor, he worries already whether this pursuit is the right one. Upon seeing a Kennedy painting that I own, he immediately said, "I am one of those people."

Kennedy's paintings evoke in me a nostalgia for that point when I, too, shared houses with friends — settings for our practice runs at being adults. Like Kennedy's figures, we hosted dinner parties, erected a glider-swing on the porch (a common Kennedy accessory), and stayed on through the summer to cultivate a vegetable garden instead of returning to our hometowns. "The overarching theme for me as a painter is that of intimacy discovered in domestic life," Kennedy wrote of his 2008 show at First Street. "The patterns of quotidian domesticity. The uses that rooms are put to: cooking, sleeping, eating, reading, games, bathing, sex."

TIM KENNEDY (b. 1954)  
*PORCH AT NIGHT*  
 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 60 x 72 IN.  
 PRIVATE COLLECTION





Everyone in Kennedy's paintings is conspicuously young, in their early to late 20s. The men are square-jawed and slender, the smooth-skinned women wear sundresses and sleeveless shirts. Yet this is the precise moment when the earliest hints of aging appear, reminding us that youth is a passing phase. One of Kennedy's men still has a full head of shiny, black hair, but flecks of silver have emerged. A soft roll of flesh appears on the stomach of the pretty woman sunning herself in the yard. The couple in *Dancers* (2005) appears awkward and unpracticed; the woman leads them, aware, perhaps, that to secure love at this point in life requires a play of force rather than passivity. Kennedy's figures are learning to be adults, to live adult lives. As viewers, we see them immersed in these wonderful years of growth, and we recognize ourselves.

I am fortunate to own the large Kennedy painting shown above, *June* (2005). It focuses on an uncannily handsome man and a lovely woman playing cards on a porch in the afternoon. She has taken the time to dress well, and her toenails are polished and well manicured, as revealed in a pair of fashionable wedges. A pitcher of orange juice has been prepared, and fresh flowers are arranged in a vase. As the young man deals, the two hold glances suggesting they are friends and

potential, if not actual, lovers. We can discern an agenda that transcends their immediate activity; the card game is a metaphor for the method of play and the rules they are establishing.

This painting fills the wall above my dining room table where I sit for every meal. Every day I am happy to find the pair there, young and attractive, charged with a desire, perhaps for each other, and certainly for the lives unfolding before them. It is the height of summer, *June*, both on the calendar and in their lives. They have many years ahead, yet they are beginning to discern boundaries in the distance. Let's play the game, they seem to say: We'll have fun and establish the rules as we go along. ■

DAVID MASELLO is a New York-based arts writer and senior editor for *Town & Country* magazine.

TIM KENNEDY (b. 1954)  
*JUNE*  
 2005, OIL ON LINEN, 50 x 58 IN.  
 COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR