



This page: Lisa Grossman's "Pink Air,"

2002, oil on panel, 9 x 12 inches.

Opposite page: Jeff Aeling's "Cattlepond and Retreating

Thunderstorm," oil on panel, 50½ inches x 80½ inches.

BY MAUREEN SULLIVAN

Artists often paint their surroundings. French artists produce countless sketches and paintings of the historic Arc de Triomphe. In San Francisco, the picturesque Golden Gate Bridge provides nonstop subject matter. In New York, it's often the entire imposing skyline that artists choose to memorialize on canvas. In Kansas, it's a portion of land you may have passed through while journeying over the river and through the woods (or down Interstate 35) this past holiday season — the Flint Hills.

Maybe you snooze though the Flint Hills on your way to Wichita, but many artists find them to be one of the best geographical inspirations in the region. For those collectors similarly inspired by these majestic landscapes, we've sought out a sampling of Flint Hills-inspired paintings and photographs. Be prepared to be amazed — after a recent tour of Kansas City galleries, we found that there's a wide range in what constitutes a Flint Hills painting.

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THE LAST OF THE TALLGRASS

What makes this corner of the Heartland so unique? For one thing, it's some of the last unspoiled tallgrass prairie on the continent. Tallgrass is just what you'd picture — grass that grows to a height of 5 feet or more. And of the 400,000 square miles of tallgrass prairie that used to cover North America, only 4 percent remains, primarily in the Flint Hills, according to the National Park Service. Add in the fact that the Flint Hills' tallgrass is on rolling hills — unique for Kansas — and you've got a picturesque landscape as well as one that's almost extinct.

How was this ecosystem preserved in the Flint Hills? The rocky soil of limestone beneath the Flint Hills made plowing nearly impossible, so the prairie wasn't lost to farming. Beyond that, it's believed that early settlers mimicked what they saw Native Americans doing — routinely setting fire to



the land to burn off the old grass and underbrush, allowing new grass growth to generate to lure bison, antelope and deer to graze on. In fact, if no fires were set as they are annually in mid to late spring, the grasslands would be overrun with trees. So the very thing that inspires some artists — the burning fields — is what preserves the

unique wide-open prairie landscape that speaks to other painters.

FROM THE PRAIRIE TO THE LIVING ROOM

If you want a reminder of the Flint Hills' natural beauty hanging in your home, there are plenty of galleries in the area where you can start your search.

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become very well-known.

When you ask around about artists who concentrate on the Flint Hills, many gallery owners will mention Schwarm. Schwarm's 2003 book, *On Fire*, has garnered him national attention for his photos of the controlled fires used to preserve the Flint Hills prairie. Schwarm has been devoted to witnessing and documenting these annual fires for over a decade. His works range in size from 18 inches by 18 inches to 4 feet by 4 feet, and most of them are limited-edition prints. His photos are all shot with film, not digitally, using available light — almost as challenging as keeping ahead of the fires themselves.

Aeling, who used to live in Kansas City but is now based in St. Louis, likes to familiarize himself with a landscape by visiting it again and again. He goes to the Flint Hills at least a couple of times a year, according to gallery owner Sherry Leedy. During a fall 2005 show at the gallery called "Rain and Light," the artist showed paintings from a 24-hour period he spent in the Flint Hills while a storm was brewing. The results were dramatic — and quite varied for paintings of the same place within such a short time period.

Aeling "seeks to capture the moment," says Leedy, who adds that the weather, which can change quickly in the Flint Hills, and especially the light and its rapid changes are what give his works — which can be as large as 4 feet by 6 feet — their drama.

But the drama is nothing new. In fact, it's as old as the Flint Hills themselves. "He is trying to get at the continuity of what's always been there," Leedy says of Aeling, who paints the prairie as it has been in existence for thousands of years, without fences or telephone poles in view.

Perhaps this is part of the attraction for many of these artists, that in a modern world the Flint Hill still yield a picturesque scene that has remained unchanged and awe-inspiring, whether seen in person or hanging on a wall. ♦

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Dolphin, an art gallery and frame shop in the heart of the Crossroads, offers works by one of the most popular Flint Hills artists, Lisa Grossman. Grossman, who works mostly in oil but does some prints, is a plein air painter. Plein air is a technique harkening back to the Impressionists where the work is not only sketched outside in front of the natural subject but also painted there. Even her large works, as big as 36 inches by 60 inches, are started at the scene, not in the studio. And though her work tends more toward the abstract — you won't see the detail of blades of grass in her paintings, for example — it's very accessible, as evidenced by the fact that her landscape paintings, which usually sell out at her shows, aren't restricted to local collectors, says gallery owner John O'Brien. They're shipped all over the country. This appeal to collectors nationwide, who may or may not know the Flint Hills that inspire the

work, speaks to what O'Brien calls the "pure honesty of her painting."

"The nice thing about Lisa's work is her landscapes are pretty much approachable, not like an abstract painting," O'Brien says. "She can cross many boundaries in an art world. Her paintings are very approachable, but they're also fine art and appeal to a critical eye."

Over at the Leopold Gallery in Crestwood, there's more to be found that pleases both collector and critic. Four of the 11 painters that gallery owner Paul Dorrell represents concentrate on rendering the Flint Hills in their work: Kim Casebeer, Louis Copt, Phil Epp and Phil Starke.

Dorrell says his Flint Hills paintings are bought by a "broad range of collectors — it's really based on the style of the artist."

Indeed, Leopold's four who paint the Flint Hills represent a wide range of styles.

Starke is the most traditional, almost Impressionistic in his paintings of the Flint Hills. Casebeer and Copt are contemporary; both are more abstract in their Flint Hills renderings. Epp's work is almost surrealist, says Dorrell.

Dorrell sells the Flint Hills-inspired paintings to collectors across the nation — Samuel Goldwyn Jr. owns an Epp painting of the Flint Hills — regardless of whether they're aware of what the Flint Hills are. "They're fascinated by the sense of freedom and style of the painting," he says of these collectors.

Back in the Crossroads, the Sherry Leedy Gallery for Contemporary Art features two artists who capture the Flint Hills in unique styles of their own: Jeff Aeling, who paints the Flint Hills among other landscapes, and Larry Schwarm, whose photographs of the annual Flint Hills fires have