

# *one door opens*

James Kimak's pastels are paving the way for his evolving—and rewarding—artistic career.

BY TAMERA LENZ MUENTE

221 (detail; pastel, 14x22)



**Piermont and Ash**  
(pastel and  
watercolor, 15x23)

**OVER THE PAST 30-PLUS YEARS, JAMES** Kimak has worked as an illustrator, a comic book inker, a graphic artist, a website design manager and a creative director, among other things. Through it all, he has regularly created and exhibited his paintings. In 2006, his pastel work opened the door to a new and challenging direction in his career that would bring together his diverse experiences: creating large mural installations for children in hospitals.

“My friend who is an interior designer for hospitals called me,” says Kimak. “She was working with a design firm on a mural project for a pediatric wing and thought my pastels would fit in well.” Kimak presented his portfolio to the designers, but they felt his work was geared too much toward an adult audience. About a year later, the same friend phoned again. “They had installed another’s murals, and no one liked them,” he says. She asked Kimak to come out and take a look. “I had no experience working on such a large scale, but I felt the murals were chaotic, with no flow, no story.” So Kimak put together a proposal and was assigned the project. This first mural at New York Presbyterian Hospital (see “Pastels for the Public,” on page 33)

led to many others that incorporate Kimak’s original drawings, photographs and pastels, digitally combined with text and works of art from major museums, institutions and local schools.

“Most of the murals I create are in areas of the hospital where children have serious illnesses that require long stays,” says Kimak. “At first, you might think the murals are busy. But the kids keep finding new things in them.” He calls the concept “distraction therapy”—using art to help young people cope with extended hospital stays.

### A Personal Connection

At times Kimak makes a pastel with a particular mural in mind, such as a lovely view of Central Park in autumn that became part of a suite of murals based on New York City themes at the New York Presbyterian Hospital. His pastel work, however, also stands on its own, as his more than 20 years of exhibitions will testify. Kimak’s favorite subjects are austere houses and buildings, mostly from New York City and its environs. “I grew up in Clifton, about 15 miles from the Lincoln tunnel,” he says. “My parents loved to go to the city, so we went there all the time. I’ve traveled a lot, but I’ve never really



**Backdoor, 9 p.m.**  
(left; pastel and  
watercolor, 15x22)

**House on Curve**  
(below; pastel and  
watercolor, 14x21)

lived more than an hour-and-a-half from the city. Now I’m north of the city, in a wooded area, but I can be on the Washington Bridge in 15 minutes.”

One of Kimak’s mid-career pastels speaks of this personal connection to his family and the city. He made *221* (on pages 28 and 29) shortly after his mother’s death. The work captures the solitary, melancholy beauty of an urban building entrance at night. Under the glow of a streetlight, the green doorway becomes an otherworldly portal. A figure stands in the lobby, her back to the doors. This shadowy woman is the artist’s mother, Helen, who so loved to walk the city streets with her family.

While deeply attached to the New York region, Kimak does turn to new subjects on occasion, finding inspiration in places he’s traveled. Yet, he says he’s “not a big sketcher,” and prefers to capture scenes with his camera while traveling, for reference later in the studio. *House on Curve* (at right), for instance, depicts a white, Gothic Block Island farmhouse perched on the side of a cliff overlooking the deep blue waters of the Atlantic. “It’s a place that affects me,” he says fondly of the island off the Rhode Island coast, where he and his family vacation often.

Kimak usually selects his subjects intuitively.



Award-winning mural designer **James Kimak** ([www.kimakdesign.com](http://www.kimakdesign.com)) has been an exhibiting painter and pastel artist since the late 1980s. He was a founding member of the Piermont Flywheel Gallery in Piermont, N.Y., and has been represented by Allen Shepard Gallery in New York City. His work has been exhibited at the Edward Hopper House Art Center, the National Art Club, the Parrish Art Museum and the American Museum of Illustration. Kimak has worked in illustration and design for CBS, NBC, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, among other prestigious clients. He lives in Orangeburg, N.Y., with his wife Angela, a designer and high school art teacher, and their two children, Sam and Jamie, the latter of whom is studying art at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.



Photo by Sam Kimak

Something just catches my eye when I'm not necessarily looking for a subject. They often end up having a strong structural shape as a central focus, although I do occasionally do straight landscapes. Many times, they're subjects that one would normally pass by without noticing," he says.

### Artistic Heritage

It's no accident that in 1993 Kimak was invited to have his first solo exhibition at the Edward Hopper

House Art Center in Nyack, N.Y., the birthplace of the famed American realist painter. Like Hopper, Kimak often communicates a sense of isolation through architecture and dramatic light in his work. In *Backdoor, 9 p.m.* (on page 31), a screen door stands open beneath a porch light. Has someone just gone inside and left the door ajar? Or, does the house stand empty and neglected? Kimak's portrayals of architecture—sometimes with human presence, other times with human absence—beg narrative interpretation.

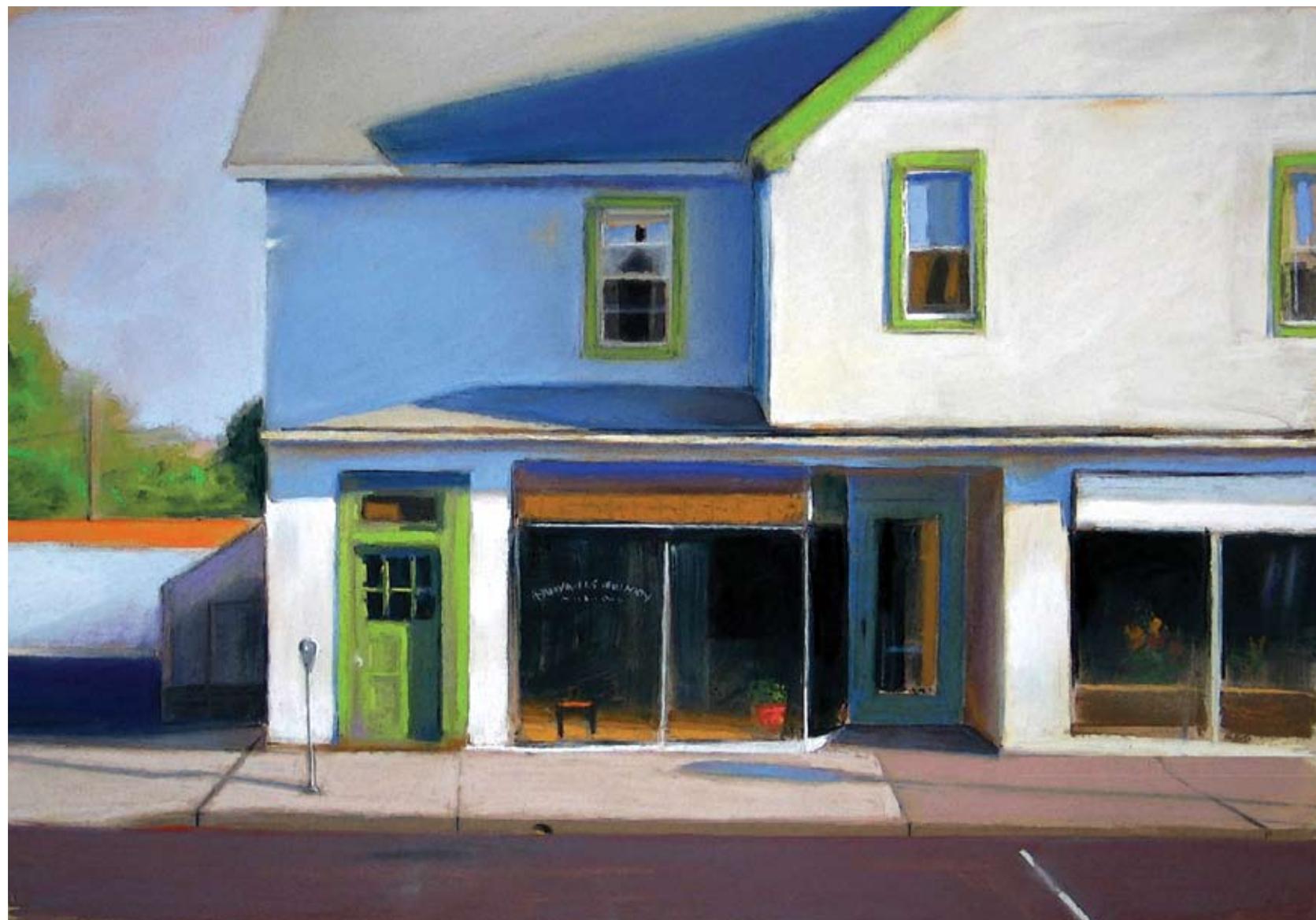
In *Pearl River, 5 p.m.* (below) long, blue shadows fall across the sidewalk, signaling that the

sun is low in the sky. Most of the picture plane is taken up by a partially shadowed, white building. The street is empty and quiet, and nothing stirs in the building's dark windows. The mood is one of a small town that has rolled up its sidewalks for the evening. "The fact that buildings in my work are, or were, occupied makes one imagine the untold stories that may have taken place," says the artist.

Hopper hasn't been his only inspiration. While Kimak's work is representational, its roots lie in the abstract. "As a designer," he says, "I'm drawn to certain geometric shapes and the effects of light on them from a graphic perspective." In this vein,

he enjoys the structural compositions of Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud, and the flattened, minimal paintings of Fairfield Porter. Even the bold colors of Abstract Expressionism have influenced him. "One of my favorite exhibitions

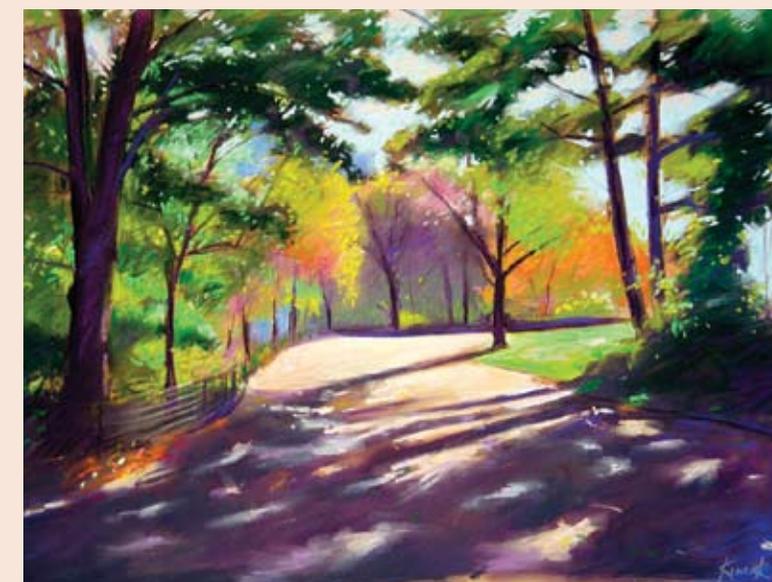
**"Everything that has led up to where I am now is directly related to my ability to draw."**



*Pearl River, 5 p.m.*  
(pastel and  
watercolor, 14x21)

## pastels for the public

James Kimak draws inspiration for his work from the city dearest to his heart, New York. Typically, his pastels feature houses and buildings in the area, but when he's painting a pastel for a mural, he looks toward a broader vista, such as this Central Park scene, which became part of a series of murals for the New York Presbyterian Hospital.



*Autumn Path, Central Park* (pastel and watercolor, 17x24)



Finished murals inside the New York Presbyterian Hospital

was a Mark Rothko show years ago,” says Kimak. “There were galleries full of these huge, vibrant paintings. I was really blown away. It was an almost spiritual experience, simmering with energy.”

He also says that Impressionist Edgar Degas’ pastels had an early impact on him, and it’s easy to see Degas’ influence in Kimak’s skillful drawing. Kimak says the importance he placed on drawing early in his training as an artist was integral to his success in both his fine and commercial art. “When I graduated from college in 1976 I had good drawing skills, and for some reason I wasn’t that worried about what I was going to do after graduation,” he says. “As a senior, I worked as a staff illustrator for the school newspaper doing caricatures, courtroom drawings and the like. I soon discovered that *The New*

*Haven Register* needed an illustrator, and there was this comic book artist looking for an inker for DC Comics.” Both hired him on the spot. “All because I could draw. The pastels, the murals, my illustration work, the fact that I learned computer graphics as early as 1982. Everything that has led up to where I am now is directly related to my ability to draw.”

### Getting His Hands Dirty

One of the reasons Kimak enjoys pastels is that after spending so many years on a computer as a commercial artist, he loves to get his hands dirty. “I love the texture, the messiness of the medium,” says the artist. He’s worked primarily in pastel for more than 15 years. “I’ve always felt more confident as someone who could draw rather than

**Guest Room**  
(below; pastel and acrylic, 22x31)



**Capra's Muse**  
(left; pastel, 20x28)

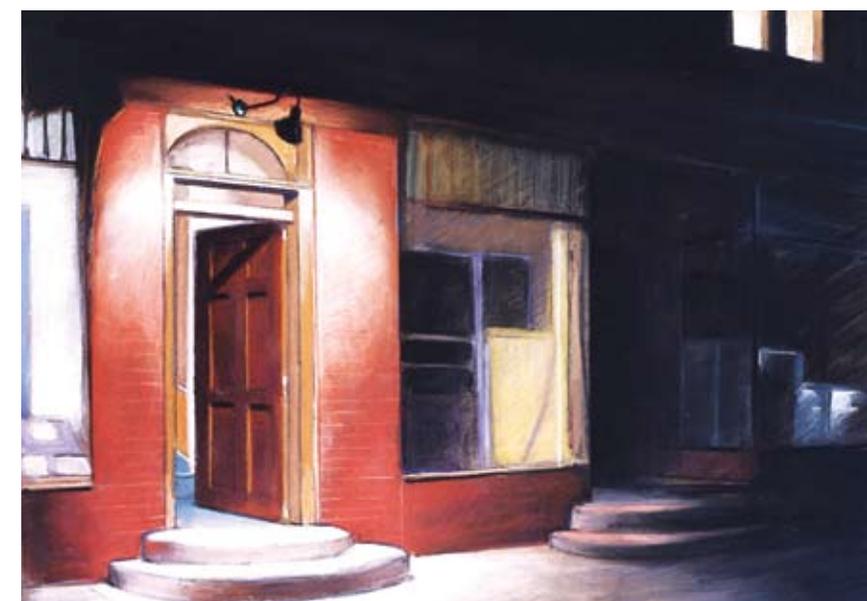
**11 p.m.** (below; pastel, 14x20)

someone who could paint. I’ve made and sold a lot of paintings, but I didn’t always feel at home. Pastels, to me, were a natural step that incorporated both drawing and painting techniques.”

Kimak uses a sequence of nontraditional pastel techniques. He usually prepares illustration board with a watercolor base, lightly sketches in the design in pencil, and then begins drawing with soft pastels. “A hallmark of my work is the use of water-based brushwork,” says Kimak. “I create large sketchy areas of color and then use damp brushes to create a kind of gouache look. It gives a more painterly appearance to my work.” He typically builds up broad layers of color with a wet brush before adding details. Occasionally, he gessoes a Masonite board, laying in pastels combined with acrylic paints. He displays these without protective glass, which according to Kimak is challenging since it requires extensive use of fixative and finishes.

So how does Kimak strike a balance between his busy mural business and his pastel work? “I’m very goal driven,” he says. “I like to paint toward a goal, such as an exhibition. Some people might think that working under pressure stifles creativity, but for me it doesn’t. On the commercial side, I’ve always worked under deadlines and pressure, and I kind of like that.”

Indeed, Kimak’s professional life is diverse. He feels quite fortunate to be able to use his diverse skills to create not only personal work but also work that benefits the community. “My career has run in so many interesting directions over



the past 34 years,” he says. “Now I find myself in the incredibly fortunate position of creating large mural installations for mostly pediatric patients at major hospitals. I get to use all my different skills. Beyond the creative satisfaction, the work I’m creating now can actually benefit sick kids and their friends and families. How great is that?”

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View more of James Kimak’s pastels at [www.pasteljournal.com/article/kimak-pastel-gallery](http://www.pasteljournal.com/article/kimak-pastel-gallery).