

Keith Siddle: Koi & Tropical Marine Artist

by Susan Boland, NoVA Koi



Since childhood, Keith has loved to paint and has been fascinated by wildlife, particularly fish. A self-taught artist, Keith has specialised in the study of fish as an art form since 1992. After a one-year foundation course at Maidstone Art College, he left in 1984 to work as an apprentice technician at a Fine Art Silkscreen and Etching print studio. Two years later he qualified as a Master Fine Art Screen-printer, then became the Studio Manager, where he worked with an assembly of internationally renowned artists.

On leaving to establish his own name as a professional artist, initially Keith's images were all derived from nature's natural beauty in colour and movement, including butterflies, feathers and cascading fruits. He soon decided to build a reputation by specialising in one subject and as a BSAC qualified scuba diver, the obvious choice could have been Tropical Marine fish, however Keith was drawn to Koi by their power, grace and majestic colour variations.

"In 1991, I travelled to Israel for the diving and to get ideas for my painting, however on my return I visited a garden centre and saw Koi for the first time. The impact was instant, I realised Koi were the perfect subject for my style of painting, so I began studying their shapes, colours and markings."

In the 1990s, Keith also learned from the many conversations with Koi hobbyists whilst exhibiting at the various Koi shows around Britain, then averaging 10 shows a year. He even exhibited at *Koi America 1999* in Philadelphia and the AKCA Seminar in Denver, CO.

Two highlights of his career came in 1997 and 1998, when he was commissioned to produce 12 new Koi images for the Tetra '97 calendar and the following year when he visited some of the top Koi breeders in the mountains of Yamakoshi, in Japan.

"The landscape was breathtaking, lush green dispersed by hundreds of glinting mud ponds. We were there to see the harvesting and it felt like the air was filled with anticipation and excitement. It was a great honour to see some of the world's most beautiful Koi and meet the people responsible. It made me realise how much patience, knowledge and dedication to "their art" is involved and that I needed to use the same methods in my paintings to do justice to these magnificent fish."

The stunning Koi seen on this trip proved a great motivation for Keith's art and inspired one image in particular, "The Fry & The Circle."

"The others in our group were busy choosing and buying the larger Koi, but I was drawn to 3 small vats teeming with fry. "The Fry & The Circle" pays homage to the scene, with a little artistic license. It combines illusion, movement, detail and composition, as from a distance, the first impression is of a dark circular shape surrounded by a mass of red and white. Closer, layers of more than 140 Kohaku Koi fry head in the same direction...but why? Look closer still and you will find 8 Tancho Kohaku strategically placed to lead you around the painting. In contrast with the rhythm of the mass of fish, a single "blocker" fish darts across the composition, bringing chaos to a world of harmony."

To create a contemporary, dynamic and eye-catching look, in addition to the anatomical correctness of the Koi, Keith uses both realistic or abstract backgrounds, with an emphasis on composition and design. Every painting is carefully researched and executed, often taking months to complete, as each scale is hand-embossed, then painted 7 or 8 times to create a 3-Dimensional effect. Many of these principles are evident in the new Limited Edition Giclée on paper, "Circular Flow." This edition of only 80 worldwide, shows 3 panels containing 7 varieties of Koi rotating clockwise. The Yamabuki Ogon, Kohaku, Orenji Ogon, Showa, Kumonryu and Sanke flow to form a circle. Their uniformity is broken by the Tancho Kohaku, which twists down and across, with the 2 bridging white gaps dividing the jewel like panels.

Some of Keith's limited editions have sold out and his work has received much critical acclaim. Notably, the hand printed aquatint etching "Face to Face", in which Koi meets Frog, was selected for the 1988 National Print Exhibition, The Mall,





London. In addition to the Tetra calendar, he has been commissioned to paint many of the Koi show Grand Champions and his work has been featured on a selection of magazine front covers including last year's International Koi Show programme and many Koi Carp magazine covers, the first being the March 1995 issue.

Probably his favourite painting is

“Centripetal.” The original is approximately 5 1/2' long x 3 1/2' high and with each scale hand embossed, it took nearly 2 months to complete. Like “The Fry & The Circle,” Keith was so pleased with the image that he has had them published (in a smaller size) as limited editions of only 80 Giclée prints on canvas.

With so much work and time invested in each painting, Keith freely admits that some of his original paintings are not affordable to everyone, so he offers a wide-range of products including Greeting Cards, Luxury Christmas Cards, Mini Prints, Limited Editions, hand printed Etchings, Giclées on canvas and paper, originals and commissions.

In a slight diversion to his painting style, a more graphic feel is used in the “East meets West” Collection, a set of seven limited edition prints. Incorporating the influence of the Orient, Keith's painted Koi have been placed over classic Eastern designs with carefully researched and executed early-seal and free-flowing calligraphy. The two Yin Yang images depict harmony and balance, an equilibrium which has been promoted through the popularity of Feng Shui and remains a recognisable symbol of the East.

In 1999, Keith became a Fine Art Trade Guild member and regularly attends many of the main Art Trade shows. This new market place coincided with Keith's willingness to diversify with his imagery without contrasting the Koi paintings. Inspired by his scuba diving experiences and the need for a new subject, led to the Tropical Marine fish editions. They were launched with great success at New York's DecorExpo and The Spring Fair, Birmingham in 2002, where Keith met and signed with Canadian Art Prints of Richmond, Canada who now publish his work as open edition prints and promote them worldwide.

This venture into the Art Trade has produced a variety of experiences, from working as “Artist in Residence” at The Deep, Hull's £45.5 million Millennium Commission lottery project, to two “One Man Exhibitions” at the Astley House Gallery, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire and Portico Gallery, Riverhead, Sevenoaks, Kent.

“2004 was an exciting year for me, starting with working at The Deep which was a fantastic experience. With my easels positioned by the main tank, an abundance of sea life including Sharks, Rays, Snappers and Wrasse swam by me...excellent, the perfect setting. Then to end the year exhibiting at two highly respected galleries was superb.”

The work of Nik and Maria Read of New Vision Productions, have been a big influence to Keith. “I really enjoyed the Living Jewels video series and got to know Nik and Maria through the many Koi shows we attended. Since then I have been privileged to be Nik's dive buddy for the filming of New Vision's “Dive the Reef” and “So you want to Scuba” videos. They were filmed around the Sharm El Sheikh area of the Red Sea, then in March 2004 we flew to Qatar to film around their coast and inland sea.”

Keith's main influences include: “The Ocean;” the painting techniques of contemporary British Artist, Terrence Warren; the Japanese woodblock prints of Utagawa Hiroshige, Katsushika Hokusia and Utagawa Kuniyoshi; the draughtsmanship of Hérge (George Remi) creator of Tin Tin; the vibrant, colour and passion of Van Gogh's paintings; and the detailed precision of the two 20th Century American artists, Norman Rockwell and Bev Doolittle.

Meet Keith Siddle at Koi America 2005, August 12-14, 2005.

Keith is bringing a special selection of his original artwork and will be introducing several new pieces at this event. The Keith Siddle Collection is also available through NoVA Koi, his U.S. representatives, at www.novakoi.com and click on the Keith Siddle logo.

