

ART

A King Ranch descendant goes rogue

Matt Kleberg finds freedom in filling canvas with stuff of illusions

By Molly Glentzer

Before he found his voice as an artist, Matt Kleberg had to break free of an epic family story he loves.

He is one of “those” Klebergs — from Texas’ most famous clan of cattlemen, descended from the founders of the King Ranch.

This was not something he brought up the day we met at Hiram Butler Gallery. He dropped hints about growing up in Fort Worth, with a lot of family in San Antonio, that would register with an alert Texan — but he wants his art to stand on its own.

His first Houston solo show consists of four large paintings whose colorful stripes form architectural illusions that draw you deep into their space, then seem to pop out at you.

Kleberg was born a bit too late (in 1985) and a bit too removed (his father chose a career in finance) to experience daily the macho world of his grandfather, Dick Kleberg Jr., and his Uncle Tio, the last of the Klebergs to manage the legendary ranch before a corporation took the reins. But he grew up listening to their vivid tales about living close to the earth and running cattle across countless miles of hardscrabble South Texas terrain.

Matt Kleberg has always been an artist at heart, more like his mother’s uncle, Clay McCaughy, a well-known wildlife artist from San Antonio whom he calls “a hell of a watercolorist.” He was serious about drawing before he was a teenager, his imagination fed by frequent visits to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where he gravitated to big, monumental abstract paintings by Morris Louis and Clyfford Still.

But at the University of Virginia, where he earned a studio-art degree, Kleberg filled his canvases with figurative images from paternal family photographs: cowboys on horseback or riding a bucking buffalo in a rodeo ring. Cowboys after a hunt, posing with rifles and beers or their prizes. Native birds such as the caracara, a type of falcon.

You can see that he was trying to shake them off, often obscuring figures under blocks of color or surrounding them with sunlike rays. Until one day, about three years ago, when — much to his surprise — Kleberg plucked out the figure and stared at an empty block of



Hiram Butler Gallery

Matt Kleberg’s “Caterwauler” is the title work in his show at Hiram Butler Gallery.



‘Matt Kleberg: Caterwauler’

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Aug. 27

Where: Hiram Butler Gallery, 4520 Blossom

Info: 713-863-7097, hirambutler.com

color in the center of a canvas.

“All of the sudden in the studio I’m having a conversation with Frank Stella or Morris Louis in a way that I wasn’t at all, not in any explicit way, a week before — the painting right before that,” he said. “I think it was that point where the figures felt interchangeable that I felt the freedom to let them go.”

Kleberg and his wife, the artist Elizabeth Stehl Kleberg, had just moved to Brooklyn. He had joked about how funny it would be if he started making abstract, geometric paintings once they got to New York, but he didn’t really expect his work to evolve that way.

“I don’t know if it’s something about being in New York, where architecture just bombards you all the time. And part of it is that, if you just go wherever the work goes and follow it, a lot of surprising things can happen,” he said.

With a shadow around it, that empty central space on the canvas was like an open door. Maybe even a portal into himself.

Kleberg filled in the canvas with colorful stripes in contrasting colors that took on the appearance of walls, columns or curtains framing a proscenium stage.

“It’s like I emptied out figure paintings, but I wanted them to feel full and really active,” he said. “That’s part of where the stripes came in. They were a way to construct the space. The bright color was a way to set up a sense of rhythm.”

Mulherin Gallery, from New York’s Lower East Side, took one of the new, small paintings to its booth at last December’s Untitled Art Fair in Miami, and — almost as improbably as Kleberg’s style changed — he got noticed.

Mulherin and the Morgan Lehman Gallery in Chelsea gave

him a shared solo show this spring, and a New York Times reviewer liked it.

“The fair ended up being really important, and it only happened because of one little painting in a group show,” Kleberg said. “You never know when someone’s going to see something and open a door.”

Hiram Butler discovered Kleberg at the fair, too.

During his opening reception this month, the longtime Houston dealer told a prestigious crowd that he liked Kleberg’s work because it is about the act of painting itself, and nothing more.

There’s not a hint of cowboy culture in Kleberg’s work now, and the painter feels free to let his inner art-history geek shine through.

“That is a Stella thing — where the painting goes in forever, and out forever,” he said. “I paint a lot of layers. If I were to press harder I could fill in all the crevices. But if you scumble the paint lightly, you leave some of the paint underneath visible. It gives the painting texture and a sense of history; you can see that parts of it have been covered up or reworked. It kind of reminds me of a cement floor.”

At a time when figurative painting is all the rage, it probably hasn’t hurt that Stella — a master of abstract geometry — is on peoples’ minds, too. His huge retrospective, which opened last year in New York, is on view through Sept. 18 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

Kleberg loves that show but said he felt a little reticent about seeing it.

“He’s always been someone I was into, and then when these stripe paintings began, the connection was pretty obvious,” he said.

Stella’s paintings tend to be pristine, however, and Kleberg’s are intentionally imperfect.

“It’s important for me that these are geometric abstract paintings that still feel human,” he said. “The structure doesn’t add up mathematically. Things are still a little bit wonky.”

“Caterwauler,” the show’s title, refers to the wailing sound of rutting cats and mating owls, which the artist can imitate perfectly.

Kleberg said he likes “double activity” things — “This awful sound is actually a love song. These paintings are empty, but I want them to feel full. This space invites you in but pushes you out. Earthy colors next to these intense, bright colors.”

And perhaps, the idea that a guy from deep in the heart of Texas can discover himself in the concrete world of New York.

molly.glentzer@chron.com

TELEVISION

New JFK Jr. documentary looks back at ‘America’s prince’

By William J. Kole
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOSTON — “America’s prince” is getting a new documentary.

“I Am JFK Jr. — A Tribute to a Good Man” will air on Spike TV at 8 p.m. Monday. The film, which also saw a limited theatrical release earlier this month, captures the

fascination with John F. Kennedy Jr., from his early days toddling around the White House to his death in a plane crash in 1999.

It remembers JFK Jr. as “John John,” the tousle-haired toddler of the late President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, saluting his father’s casket after the 1963 assassination.

Highlights include his time as an assistant district attorney in New York, his 1988 People magazine “Sexiest Man Alive” cover and his 1995 debut as publisher of the splashy but short-lived magazine George.

Interspersed are snippets of interviews with celebrities and politicians who knew him well — from supermodel Cindy Crawford, who famously posed as a midriff-baring George Washington on his magazine, to actor Robert De Niro and boxer Mike Tyson to journalist Christiane Amanpour and others.

Not surprisingly, the film focuses on JFK Jr.’s death at age 38 on July 16, 1999, when the single-engine private plane he was piloting from New Jersey to Martha’s Vineyard en route to a family wedding on Cape Cod crashed into the Atlantic. Killed with Kennedy were his wife,

Carolyn Bessette, and her sister, Lauren Bessette.

Friends, acquaintances and pundits reflect on a life cut short and speculate what he might have become.

President, for instance? A clip of an interview that JFK Jr. gave to Oprah Winfrey is telling. She insists he surely must have thought about running for

‘I Am JFK Jr. — A Tribute to a Good Man’

When: 8 p.m. Monday
Where: Spike TV

office, and he responds, somewhat coyly, “There is this great weight of expectation and anticipation.” But maybe not.

“John was smart enough to know, ‘I’m junior. I’m not my father,’” another presidential son, Michael Reagan, says in the film.

“I believe that he had greatness in him,” CNN journalist Chris Cuomo tells the producers. “And I don’t give a damn if that meant anything about politics.”



Associated Press file

President John F. Kennedy spends time with his son, John F. Kennedy Jr., outside the White House in 1963.

ALLEY THEATRE

SUMMER CHILLS

ONLY TWO WEEKS LEFT!

Now through August 14

Tickets start at \$21

ALLEYTHEATRE.ORG

713.220.5700

FINGER INTERESTS, LTD. - IN HONOR OF JERRY E. FINGER ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

UNITED

DIRECTED BY GREGORY BOYD