FROM KANE TO GRAVES:

JOHN GRAVES PAINTS PITTSBURGH

By Lissa Brennan
Photography by Jane Freund
From certain Oakland windows, one can look through the glass to see the Monongahela River bow around the city. To the right, the water rolls beneath the Birmingham Bridge and through the South Side, pressing on to downtown where it merges with the Ohio to birth the Allegheny. To the left, it crooks past old warehouses and new complexes, curving around Hazelwood and Homestead to border Kennywood beyond.

The distinctive arc angling past a shore where mills once spurted fire and smoke and shopping centers now command the waterfront is known to some as “the Kane bend.” John Kane, perhaps the region’s most celebrated folk artist, featured this panorama in many of his works. At one point in his expansive and complicated work history, Kane found himself earning his living painting railroad cars for the Pressed Steel Car Company in McKees Rocks. He spent lunch breaks covering cars with pictures, an endeavor tolerated by his foreman as long as the images were covered over by the time the whistle blew. Finally, in 1927, his Scene in the Scottish Highlands was accepted for the Carnegie International exhibition. Instant fame followed, and to the joy of some and the agitation of many, the American art establishment finally recognized a folk artist. The Pittsburgh transmitted by Kane’s brush to canvas, including that abrupt and serpentine hook of the river, continues to be well-known to admirers of outsider artists across the globe.

From John Graves’ window, the Kane bend is a dominant feature of the terrain. And, like Kane nearly a century before, Graves is a self-taught artist employing pigment to chart the geography of Pittsburgh.

“The view looking left, to the east, from Graves’ window.”

“Some of what I do is from memory,” Graves says of his work. “Some is from cards and pictures. Most is out my window.” His easel sits on a table across the room, along with milk glass vases full of brushes and plastic grocery bags overflowing with photographs that he intends to turn into paintings — calendar snaps of beaches and houses, a series of Native Americans, a snowy owl and a mother wolf with her cub. When standing before his canvas, he faces the wall, and is far away enough from the portals that the view is no longer in sight. But, as he says while pointing with both hands to his head, “it’s all up here.”

An Ohio native who moved to Pittsburgh to attend decorating school (which he didn’t like, and consequently didn’t finish), Graves began painting in the early 1960s. He was managing an apartment house, and found himself with time on his hands, a plight which he doesn’t seem to enjoy. “I went out one day and bought myself a canvas and a set of paints,” he says. “I never had any training. I just thought I’d try it. I’ve been with it since.” He’d never sketched much before, but his mother could draw. Her brother had an auto repair shop and painted cars. “He could mix any color that you wanted, any at all,” Graves says. “I guess between the two of them I picked something up.” The proof appears all over his small apartment in Finello Pavilion, a public housing complex overlooking the river. One wall is adorned with images of Native American chiefs, stanch and stoic, standing before trees in ornate headdresses or leading horses through the snow. The men portrayed are Sioux, Pawnee, Cherokee, and Chippewa; Graves himself is part Shawnee. On other walls are paintings of fluttering hummingbirds and lazy cats, and a scrapbook is brimming with pictures of still more paintings — his niece’s dog, a portly dachshund; a laughing baby; a deer leaning to drink from a stream in a frozen forest; the usually over-populated corner of Atwood and Forbes, looking desolate (he went very early on a Sunday morning to take pictures of what the intersection looks like without people there). He’s painted the Majestic from the Gateway Clipper Fleet, a few figures looking over the deck. He’s preserved the fountain at the Point, bubbling upwards while behind it, an incline car pushes its way uphill. He’s even saluted Touch of Gold, the jewelry store where he buys Native American bracelets and rings.

Many of his works, though, simply represent the view. When we visit, the sky outside is heavy and colorless as fall nears and the seasons begin to turn. Directly below, bricks glisten in the courtyard, and the last hibiscus of summer turns up its crimson head in defiance of the rain. A rickety, moss-colored garage lacks boards in patches, looking like a mouth full of broken teeth, while white siding fades to yellow in houses nearby. Leafy trees standing tall between close and clustered South Oakland rowhouses go yellow, while evergreens claiming yard space further beyond retain their hues. And farther still is the river.
PAGE 21: Graves and his mural, which decorates the basement rec room of his apartment building.

_The New South Side_ shows another view of the bend in the Monongahela River, with office buildings taking the place of the steel mills that once lined the river.

Artist John Graves with his _The Lost Mills_ (also seen on the cover) with the "Kane bend" and Pittsburgh's South Side beyond.
Today the water is murky gray and portentous. This mood is one that Graves has undeniably captured in some of his depictions. In others, he's shown the multi-faceted scope of the landscape's ever-changing character, from one end of its spectrum to the other. In spring, the course runs pale green and clear, trees budding yellow and rosy dawn above. Summer brings cobalt water, ripe emerald leaves, and blazing ruby sunset. Other autumn days deliver a wedgewood firmament, foliage riotous in orange, and the streaming rush a crisp jade. When the days are short, his palette goes navy, purple, and gray, and finally, blanketed in white new snow with only flashes of red and black automobiles offering signs of life.

The climate is not the only source of alteration to the horizon. "The mills were all here when I came," Graves says. "I watched them all disappear, and I watched new things come." His documentation provides a history of the mutation of the region. Early works are filled with belching smokestacks and coal-heavy trains, the air sooty and the roads that parallel the water dominated by trucks. More recent paintings chronicle the development of the riverbank and the streets nearby, with the Hot Metal Bridge bearing heavy commuter traffic to the FBI building, technology centers, and offices in flux. In all of Graves' portrayals of his vista, St. Henry's Church is nestled into the South Side slopes. The cross is always visible, but Graves has never been there.

Whatever the subject, Graves thrives on detail, precision, and a realistic interpretation of the subject at hand. His commitment and dedication have won him consideration which continues to grow. While the waiting area of Finello Pavilion favors generic starving artist seascapes and the hallways are bedecked with Japanese style prints, one wall of the basement recreation room is augmented by a mural of his impression of the scenery outside. Executed directly onto the wall, with thick black lines surrounding as a frame, he's recreated the world as seen from one window on the seventh floor. Skyscrapers burst from downtown, the Tenth Street Bridge forms a yellow span, houses dot the slopes, and the old clock measures time atop the former Duquesne Brewery. For some time, a painting of Graves' hung in the lobby of his complex, but management preferred the universal, non-descript ocean. Graves took his own work back, and, like Kane with his lunchtime railroad cars, promptly painted over it.

One work was then regrettably lost, but at least many more survive. Graves' work is vast and varied, despite a break of several years beginning in the late 1970s and lasting until 1991, during which, as he explains, he just sort of lost interest. He began again when recovering from surgery, a situation that left
him, again, with time on his hands. Since then, he's generated hundreds of pieces. Because of health difficulties, he hasn't been doing too much of late, but he's getting better and seems eager to get back to work; in a corner of his bedroom, stacks of canvases lay covered with sheets and flats of plastic, ready to go.

It's probable that all those canvases will soon be needed. Graves is somewhat in demand. A few years back, he was the subject of a small feature, “Look Who's Living In Public Housing,” in a city housing authority newsletter. The photo was brought to the attention of local art promoter Patrick McArdle, who is working to make others aware of Graves and other local self-taught artists. McArdle approached Graves about supporting his work and bringing it from the pavilion to the gallery; Graves agreed, though surprised by the interest and invitation. “I never had any idea of being in a show,” he says. “I just did it because I liked it.” McArdle included his work in several exhibitions, both in Western Pennsylvania and beyond, and now his paintings are owned and appreciated by collectors in Chicago, Florida, and California.

Graves' own taste in painting is somewhat traditional. He's not a particular fan of modern art, leaning more toward the realistic, but cites no specific favorite artists or works as personal sources of inspiration. “I just like painting,” he says, referring to the art of others and the act of his own. He's heard people refer to the Kane bend and compare his work to that of his predecessor. Though he's grateful for the compliment, he's not very familiar with Kane. “People say my paintings are like his,” he says, “but I've never seen any of them.” While Kane's river might be the same landmark on a map a century later, Graves' visions of his city are completely his own.

Lissa Brennan is an actor, director, playwright, and journalist. She's been published locally in In Pittsburgh Newsweekly, Pittsburgh City Paper, Pulp, and the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, nationally in Essence Magazine, and soon-to-be-internationally in the British Outsider Art publication Raw Vision.