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### In artist's vision, an icon in the flesh

Orr knew nothing of NYC gallery nude



A painting of former Bruin Derek Sanderson. "He can pretty much bloody well do what he bloody pleases," said Sanderson. (Kurt Kauper painting)

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By Geoff Edgers  
Globe Staff / November 29, 2007

The look is unmistakably Bobby Orr: the tousled locks, boyish face, and muscular body turned to make a quick stop on the ice.

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non-nude portraits of several hockey players, Kauper's show features an homage to former Bruins center Derek Sanderson, who is painted standing next to his locker with his hockey stick - and nothing else.

But there is something missing in Kurt Kauper's 7 1/2-foot-tall oil painting of the Boston Bruins legend: Orr's uniform. Or any clothing at all.

The image of the iconic hockey star is a centerpiece of the former Scituate resident's latest exhibition at the hip Deitch Projects gallery in New York, "Everybody Knew That Canadians Were The Best Hockey Players." Along with

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**Q:** What do you see in the image below?

"Hey, you know, he has poetic license, he can pretty much bloody well do what he bloody pleases," said Sanderson, now a 61-year-old investment manager for Boston's Howland Capital Management, who, like Orr, did not pose for his portrait and did not know about it until contacted by a reporter. "I just hope he's a good artist."

Sanderson declined an offer to view the image, but art-world types would tell him not to worry. They say Kauper, whose works have been shown in the Whitney Museum of American Art's prestigious biennial in New York and at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, among other places, is a masterful painter who creates realistic portraits of subjects he has never met. Some pieces in the current show sold for \$135,000. (One nude Orr remains available; the other has been sold, as has the Sanderson.)

A Kauper painting of a fictitious opera diva was shown as part of a 2002 group show at the Worcester Art Museum, placed next to a work by 19th-century painter James A. M. Whistler. Susan Stoops, curator of contemporary art at the museum, said Kauper's skills as a realistic painter drew viewers into the work.

"His painting held up to every old master picture that was in the gallery at the same time," said Stoops. "You have to believe what you're looking at in order to be seduced. He makes the seduction happen because of his technical skills."

Those who have organized exhibits featuring Kauper's earlier nude portraits of Cary Grant said that the artist inspires debate and discussion among gallery visitors.

"This idea of his is not an ephemeral idea, it's a serious idea of the way in which we respond to the naked body," said Zina Davis, director of the University of Hartford's Joseloff Gallery, which showed one of the Grant nudes in 2004. "What are the trigger points, and what are the things that move us from what our expectations are into another realm? It's a high-concept kind of thing."

Kauper isn't the first contemporary artist to create imagined celebrity nudes. John Currin's 1991 topless portrait of actress Bea Arthur during her "Maude" era established him in the art world. But Deborah Kass, who curated a 2002 Brooklyn gallery show featuring a Kauper portrait of Grant, noted that Kauper has advanced the idea further.

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sold for between \$50,000 and \$135,000.

Not everyone is a fan. Orr didn't return calls about the paintings. And former Bruin Brad Park, who played briefly alongside Sanderson and Orr and looked at the works online, said he "would not walk across the street to view this art."

"I see a picture of Bobby with some genitals, and a picture of Turk with some genitals. That's hard to take," said Park. "I definitely would think Bobby would be uncomfortable with it. Derek, in his heyday, would have posed for it."



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Park also wondered how an artist could create a nude of a celebrity without permission. George Tobia Jr., an attorney at Burns & Levinson specializing in entertainment and copyright law, said Kauper could run into trouble were he to try to mass market Orr's image on T-shirts or postcards. But he has every right to paint him.

"There's a First Amendment right to artistic expression," Tobia said.

Kauper, 41, said he never intended to upset either player. Growing up in Scituate, he said, he was a huge fan of hockey and of Orr in particular. He remembers the pain of watching the Bruins lose to the Philadelphia Flyers in the 1974 Stanley Cup finals.

"I would call my interest in Bobby Orr more of an obsession at that age," said Kauper. "When we would play games in the neighborhood, cops and robbers, I would pretend I was Bobby Orr moonlighting as a cop."

Over the years, Kauper, who earned his undergraduate degree from Boston University and taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts until 2000, has earned praise for his portraits.

The hockey portraits, Kauper said, began in 2000 after he came across photographs of a series of old hockey trading cards and created his own versions of Orr and several other long-retired players. Then he set the portraits aside.

Inspiration struck after a visit to Paris. There, Kauper saw one of his favorite works, a 19th-century image of Napoleon ascending to heaven by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. In the work, the French general is nude.

"You certainly couldn't do that nowadays - represent a cultural icon in the nude as a gesture of adoration and immortalization," said Kauper. "That gets to how nudity is perceived today. It occurred to me that it would be interesting to try to make a painting of an icon in the nude and see what kind of response I got from viewers."

Returning home, Kauper first created the Cary Grant portraits. The reaction, he said, surprised him.

"People didn't really ask the question so much as assume that I'm gay," said Kauper, who is straight and lives in New York with his wife, photographer Annelizabeth Wells, and their two children. "If a woman paints another woman in the nude, it would be interpreted as a painting having to do with a woman's identity. But when a man paints this painting, it's associated with homoerotic activity."

After completing the Cary Grants, Kauper returned to the ice. He looked at the images on the hockey cards, which reminded him of 19th-century locket portraits.

"A locket portrait is a portrait of somebody you love and want to hold close to your heart," said Kauper. "When I think back to my obsession with Bobby Orr, it had a lot to do with almost a crush on Bobby Orr - and I don't mean that sexually. So is it physical? It's not physical in the sense of erotic lust, but there's definitely some physical attraction to Bobby Orr's image and his body."

*Geoff Edgers can be reached at [gedgers@globe.com](mailto:gedgers@globe.com). For more on the arts, visit [boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/exhibitionist](http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts/exhibitionist).*

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