

Vibrant Legacy

Wolf Kahn discusses why contemporary art may be remembered as the decline of painting.

**Interviewed
by Jason Coates**

During his 50-plus years as an artist, Wolf Kahn has witnessed the rise and fall of many art movements. Kahn studied under fellow German émigré Hans Hoffman in the late '40s and later befriended several legendary New York artists such as Elaine De Kooning and Larry Rivers. Often thought of as straddling the line between abstract and representational, Kahn's work consists almost exclusively of vibrant outdoor nature studies.

Through April 30, Reynolds Gallery is displaying a whopping 44 of Kahn's recent paintings and pastels. Kahn also will be donating a piece, as will many other artists, to an auction taking place at The Autism Center of Virginia Art Gala. The event will be held at the home of Alan and Deborah Mihaloff Kirshner, whose granddaughter is autistic. The auction's proceeds will benefit the Faison School for Autism.

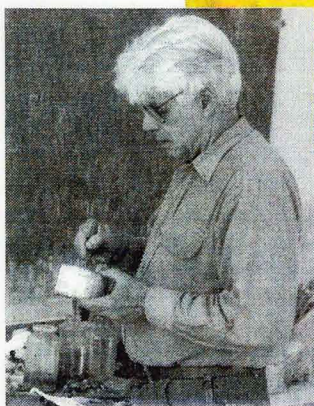
Just days before arriving in Virginia as the honored guest artist at the gala, Kahn shared a few thoughts about his art with *Style*.

Style: *Your work has always defied categorization because it contains elements of both the abstract and representational.*

Kahn: Well, I think I'm a representational painter. I was taught by an abstract artist, by Hans Hoffman. But unless I have an image that is recognizable, I don't think I've done my job ... that I haven't lived up to my own aims as a landscape painter. I always have a horizon, I have a sky, I have foreground, middle ground and so forth. Which is not abstract. Abstraction is, you know, formal interplay. But I like to simplify and make it look as though I'm concerned with formal interplay.

Your work is driven mainly by color?

No, it is driven mainly by ideas of quality.



Kahn

"Orange Tangle" is one of Kahn's vibrant nature studies that straddle the line between abstract and representational.

When you are starting a painting, what are your objectives overall?

To become a good painter [laughs].

And do you feel you've achieved your objective?

No. You know, I had a prize that I won in Vermont, which was a lifetime achievement award from the governor. And I said I don't want that lifetime achievement award — I want a "middle-aged trying" award.

In the early 1950s, do you remember making a conscious decision to forge your own path and go against the prevailing abstract expressionist movement?

I was part of a group that used the freedom gained by the abstract expressionists and began to paint representational subject matter, you know, with a very lively, broad brush stroke — and I am still engaged in that. I'm interested in freedom.

There is a particularly vibrant piece in your show at the Reynolds Gallery entitled "Last Glow." It depicts a band of lemon-yellow

sky transitioning to a purple-magenta and is broken up intermittently by reddish-brown trees. Do you typically start out knowing what colors you will be using, or is it more intuitive?

Never. I mean, that's one thing that I learned from abstract expressionists, which is to be totally opportunistic to let the painting make its suggestions as you go along. You know, live for the moment.

So your approach is more intuitive and less scientific.

It's not scientific at all. In fact, I'm against knowing what I'm doing.

Do you paint plein-air?

No, I hardly ever paint plein-air, usually in the studio.

From photographs?

Out of my head. Most of my paintings now are from the storehouse of memory. And then others are from pastels that I might do outside and then work out in the studio. But I don't paint plein-air very much anymore.

There seems to be a recurring image of

the barn in your work. What is the meaning behind it?

Well, I once said that the barn in American history is like the Greek temple was for the Baroque painters — a memory of a golden age in which things were simple and direct.

You have an interesting perspective because you have been around to see many art movements come and go. In your opinion, how will art historians categorize our contemporary period in the future?

As the decline of painting.

Care to elaborate?

Well, you know, compared to the optimism of, let's say, impressionism, for example, or even abstract expressionism. We are not that optimistic anymore.

So you are saying that people don't believe in painting like they used to?

Yeah, let's say fewer people believe in painting the way that the majority used to. I'm still one of the ones that still believes in painting, of course.

Are there any younger artists working currently whom you admire?

Oh, yes, many of them of all stripes. Many of them abstract. And I have a daughter who is a painter and a son-in-law who is a painter. Of course, I admire the hell out of them. And I have a wife who is a painter — of course, she is not a younger artist anymore. We've been married 47 years.

How does that add to your work, being married to a painter?

Well, we can talk about issues together. I can show her my work, and she is very severe. And she has high standards for me. You know, we are always just interested in each other's work.

How do you feel about the art scene in Richmond and the city in general?

Well I've met a few of the painters and sculptors, such as [Heide] Trepanier, who is a good painter, and also Robert Stuart. All people I admire greatly. I think [Richmond] is very beautiful. I like the Fan. I just generally love Virginia because it's so lush. I just like the South. I'm very fond of the American South. I've done a lot of traveling through the South, and teaching there, too. I've taught in Syria, Virginia — a place you probably didn't know existed. It's near Culpeper. ... I've had shows [in Augusta, Ga.] at the Morris Museum of Art. For the occasion, I became a "Southern Artist." **S**

The Autism Center of Virginia Art Gala will be held April 16 at 5 p.m. Special guests include Edward Cantor, Sally Mann, Larry Sabato and Eugene Trani. Tickets are \$150. To purchase tickets or for more information, call 827-3801.