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The Painter's Veil: A Conversation with Wolf Kahn

A rare glimpse into the mind of an artist whose unique blend of Realism and Color Field painting has, at almost 80-years-old, made him a living legend.

By Eric Cohler



Wolf Kahn in his New York City studio.

Wolf Kahn is one of the most celebrated American painters working today. His sense of light, of the play of sunlight and shadow across a field and then across his canvas is incredible not only for its subtlety but for its luminosity. Wolf is a painter's painter, richly steeped in the tradition of landscape and of representational art. This places Wolf firmly in a league of his own. Few artists today can command a brush the way that Wolf does. His brushstrokes are masterful and magical. His ability to layer paint thinly onto canvas is practically a lost art. And lest one think that Wolf's ability to represent his beloved Northeastern United States and especially the Connecticut River Valley is confined to canvas, he is also a superb printmaker, and his use of pastels, a notoriously difficult medium, is notable for its beauty, control and range.

Kahn immigrated to the United States from Stuttgart, Germany in 1940, and on the cusp of his 80th birthday he still works with the controlled intensity of a European, especially in his Teutonic discipline. He is a prodigious artist, and when he and his wife, artist Emily Mason, aren't traveling, he spends many hours a day in his studio in either Vermont or Manhattan. People are passionate about Wolf's work, and his shows are standout celebrity-strewn events more akin to a 1960s "happening" than to an art opening. Collectors, the press, the occasional socialite and students literally crowd the galleries to pay homage to this master of light. I spoke with Wolf this summer along with Jerald Melberg, who has represented the artist since 1980, and with Miles McEnery, Director of the Ameringer & Yhoe Gallery in New York. Both men refer to Wolf as "Wolfie," which



Central Tree, oil on canvas, 30 x 30"

"I love Wolfie's work. It is such a departure from the expected interpretation of the American landscape. I've placed hundreds of his works in collections all over the country since establishing the gallery."

— Jerald Melberg, Gallery Owner



Gallery Owner Jerald Melberg, left, and Wolf Kahn.



Ochre & Blue, oil on canvas, 60 x 52"

has been Wolf's lifelong sobriquet among his family and friends.

Eric Cohler: Wolf, what is your philosophy of art, of life?

Wolf Kahn: I believe that art exists to celebrate the visual sense rather than to make a political statement. As a private citizen I am interested in politics, but not as an artist. Art is about spontaneity and enthusiasm; it shouldn't be too ordered or too rigid. It's about fluidity and an open

interpretation of what the artist "sees."

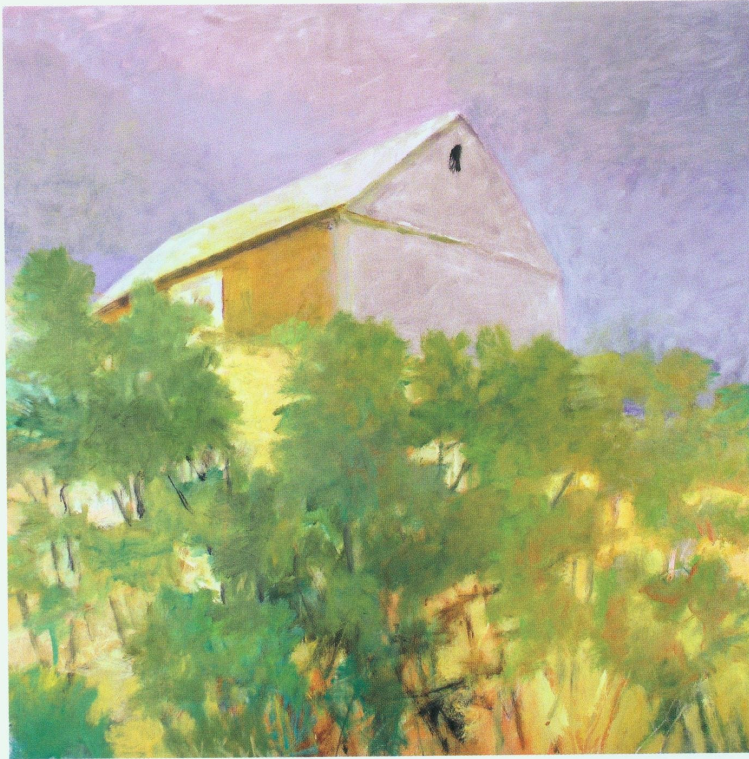
EC: And this view extends throughout your personal life as well?

WK: Absolutely. I'm a passionate gardener as well as a collector and teacher. I celebrate life in all its forms. Put simply, I love beauty.

EC: In your career you've met some of the greatest American artists of their time. Can you share some of the names and their insights?

WK: De Kooning, Rothko, Kline,

Motherwell, Avery. I would meet these artists at the Cedar Street bar (Cedar Tavern), and we'd discuss art and technique. It was an incredible education for a young artist, and I was very young at the time, barely out of my teens. Rothko was quite influential in my work, and Emily and his family had been friends since she was a girl. De Kooning was an amazing artist, and I enjoyed dinners and drinks with him immensely. I also studied with Hans Hoffman, one of the greatest



Gray Sky, Gray Barn, oil on canvas, 52 x 52"



Diagonal Tree Painting (Pink), oil on canvas, 44 x 44"

WK: It's a natural progression and perhaps an insatiable longing to be the best that I can. I owe that to myself and to the public.

EC: Your public worships you.

WK: Well let's just say that I'm appreciative of an informed audience, but I also like teaching. It's one of the great joys of my life as an artist. Seeing the transformation and growth in a young artist makes it all worthwhile.

EC: What is your philosophy of art?

WK: There is a saying in German that translated into English is literally: "In art, order should appear barely visible through a veil of chaos."

EC: Meaning?

WK: Freedom of expression, letting the canvas speak to you, spontaneity as guide first and foremost; immediacy. Cézanne said that Poussin was trying to paint nature over, and I like to believe that although I am interpreting nature, I am representing it as well; I help nature take its course.

EC: When was your first museum exhibition?

WK: One of my first shows was at the Mint in Charlotte. That's where I met Jerald Melberg. He was exhibitions curator at the time and had come up to New York looking for artists for a museum show. When we met, I was impressed and gave him a few paintings for the show. Over the next few years we became friends, and when he opened his gallery in 1983, I signed on and have been with his gallery ever since.

EC: Jerald quotes you as saying that "pastels are the dust on butterfly wings." He apparently owns up to 40 of your pastels and four or five paintings.

WK: That's a lot of pastels . . . Yes, pastel is a difficult medium, and to be successful with it one needs exacting control but not so much control as to lose the freshness.

EC: In which collections is your work included?

WK: The Boston Museum of Fine Art; The Hirshhorn; The Mint; The Brattleboro Museum and many others.

EC: Have you had a major retrospective yet? You certainly have earned one and deserve an exhibition.



Many Branches, oil on canvas, 22 x 26"

WK: We're working on this. I did have a wonderful exhibition at the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, SC last fall.

EC: Can't wait. Who are some of your favorite artists and influences on your work?

WK: The Dutch—Van Rysdale; Rembrandt; Van Hoyen and the late impressionists, Degas and Bonnard and of course Mark Rothko. I like painters who make use of veils of color, who use “descriptive” paints and who are on top of their game. For myself, I'd like to one day collect O'Keefe, Diebenkorn and Janet Fish.

EC: And Emily Mason and Wolf Kahn of course.

WK: That's no problem.

EC: I know that you curated a show at the National Academy of Design in New York in 2004, *The Artist's Eye*. What was that experience like for you?

WK: A lot of work! Seriously, it was great fun and a learning lesson. I was able to see many of my favorite painters together and to see how their work interrelated with mine. I also was able to get inside a curator's mindset. Very tricky, that.

Jerald Melberg: I love Wolfie's work. It is such a departure from the expected interpretation of the American landscape. I've placed hundreds of his works in collections all over the country since establishing the gallery.

Wolf Kahn: Jerald is amazing. He had driven up to New York in a van in the

mid-eighties to pick up paintings for an exhibition at his gallery. The van was broken into overnight and all of the works stolen. Jerald paid me for each and every picture. That's a rare quality and one that makes Jerald so special. At the time the detective handling the investigation asked if the paintings were beautiful, Jerald said yes. The detective said that then they would never be found. He was right; to this day only one has been recovered.

Eric Cohler: There's that adage about beauty again. Jerald, what do Wolf's paintings say to you?

JM: They speak volumes about color and mood, shade and gradations of light. They move me and give me tremendous pleasure. I always tell my collectors not to buy a



Burl II, oil on canvas, 52 x 60"

picture unless it ignites the imagination. It's not about cost; it's about passion and a feeling of connectivity. Wolf's art "feeds me" emotionally and spiritually.

EC: So it's the ineffable for you as well? I thought that only happened to the client, not the dealer.

JM: Most of us are one and the same. Art contributes to an abundant life and enhances one's personal environment. A poster may do this for some, for others a Hockney painting, but the reaction to art is the same for the truly passionate. Wolf told me "that everybody knows what a tree looks like. I don't have to make it look that way." And he doesn't. He delivers a fresh perspective that is uniquely his own.

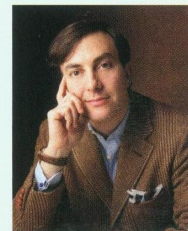
WK: Jerald is too kind. But he's right in that I hope that my take on landscape and nature is my own. I see the world differently, and I was blessed with an eye that is mine alone. Following the status quo is not for me.

EC: For many of the greats, such as Monet and Matisse, or architects like I. M. Pei and Philip Johnson, much of an artist's most iconic work is done late in life. Wolf, what would you like to be known for one day?

WK: As the person who brought traditional landscape painting up to date.

EC: I'd say that you've already made that milestone. ●

Eric Cobler, president of Eric Cobler Inc., holds a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation from the Columbia School of Architecture. He won a Designer of the Year Award in 1998 and in 2000 the D&D



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