

Taylor Piggott Gallery  
62 S. Glenwood St.  
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# Color clairvoyance

Wolf Kahn applies a profound  
palette to landscapes

By Katy Niner

Every summer day in Vermont, Wolf Kahn, 82, rises early and begins working, first on pastels in a room downstairs. Then he slowly migrates to his studio down the hill, where he paints until lunch: tomatoes from the garden, bread and cheese from town. Afterward, he returns to work. Some days, he goes out with a friend to draw places in pastels bound for paintings in his studio. When his eyes tire, he turns to gardening and mail. Then he eats supper, often in Brattleboro.

This daily diligence creates landscape paintings and pastels that sing with color and hover above abstraction and realism: a barn sloped by lavender and aubergine, a pink-orange tangle of branches, trees trilling purple and lime.

"He is using colors to express the dance of nature," said Taylor Piggott, whose gallery is hosting Wolf Kahn: Refractions of Light — Paintings and Pastels, a show curated by art advisor Camille Obering in collaboration with Piggott. The show officially opens with a reception from 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 10, during the Palates & Palettes Gallery Walk.

Refractions of Light, which hangs until Oct. 24, features the breadth of Kahn's landscapes, from large oil paintings to small pastels. In his works, light seeps through layers of colors in closely related tones.

"He looks so much deeper," Obering said. "It's not what you see physically; it's the atmosphere."

His saturated scenes capture epiphanies experienced in nature, particularly in

places like Jackson Hole, Piggott said.

"If you look and really see, the colors he is using are present, but not at first glance," Piggott said.

Born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1927, Kahn was a precociously creative child whose talent was nurtured by his family. His father was the conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic Orchestra. At the onset of World War II, Kahn was sent to England and later joined his family in the U.S.

Coming of age as an artist in New York City during the dawn of abstract expressionism, he developed a keen instinct for color.

"I enjoy color," he said. "I find lots of ideas of color, first of all, in the paint box and the tubes of paint, and then my imagination goes to work on those colors. Every now and then, I find a place in nature that I can express in those colors. That's what I do. It usually comes from the act of painting, rather than the specific description I want to make."

In New York City in the 1950s, he studied under influential abstract expressionist painter Hans Hofmann and became his studio assistant.

"The most important thing [Hofmann] did in his person and his ideas, he made it seem possible to do important work and be a cultural figure, not just be a decorator and a person who makes objects for people with disposable income," Kahn said. "For him, being an artist was a high calling, like a poet or a composer. I think art is a high calling, and I try to act accordingly. I try not to be superficial and careless. I am a hard worker."



Kahn finds ideas for color in his paintbox and then uses his imagination to apply them to nature. "If you look and really see, the colors he is using are present, but not at first glance," said gallery owner Taylor Piggott.

Early in his career, Kahn felt conflicted about being an artist and tried different routes — getting a degree in philosophy, even logging for six months in Oregon, a job he found after researching the highest wages available to unskilled laborers (\$1.65 per hour).

"I regained my confidence working in the woods," he said. "I found out, even though I was working in the woods, I was still drawing and painting with pen and ink, and I enjoyed the work."

All along, Kahn has eschewed control, intention and description. Now, his macular degeneration makes the portraits of his early years impossible but seems to have honed his relational sense.

"I see color and tone very clearly," he said. "People tell me that I am doing my best work that I have ever done. I try very hard not to judge myself, to just do my work and let the devil take the hindmost."

For decades, Kahn and his wife, painter Emily Mason, have spent summers in southeastern Vermont — the soil of his

paintings — and winters in New York City. In Vermont, he finds himself tending to the garden and the neighbors' cows.

"I find that I have an easier time working in the city," he said. "Right now, for example, all the fruits are ripe, the garden is full of good stuff. I hate like hell to see the cauliflower go by. One gets busy with that. ... Painting sometimes takes second place. In the city, it always takes first place."

Boldly loyal to landscape, Kahn has paved a stalwart, sustaining path for himself.

"The act of painting is very enjoyable, especially when it's going well," he said. "It can also be depressing when it's going poorly."

Two years ago, in Yellowstone National Park, Kahn drew a slew of pastels, including one of a black moose standing against a dark band of bushes. In a picnic area near Old Faithful, he found a stand of lodgepole pines, all ordered in rows, with the ground dappled by buffalo droppings.

"There were these pools of colors," he said.