



WOLF KAHN'S ABSTRACT LANDSCAPES: 1985 – 1996

By Maura Reilly, PhD

Wolf Kahn was an artist concerned principally with the direct, sensual experience of color, in the tradition of other “greats,” such as Pierre Bonnard, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Hans Hofmann, and Mark Rothko. Like Claude Monet, who chose to paint the same subjects again and again—including haystacks, waterlilies, and the Rouen Cathedral—Kahn primarily painted landscapes, but only as a ruse to explore color and light. Throughout his career, Kahn’s colors were often searing and jarring—blazing orange trees juxtaposed with hot magenta grass and skies of acidic yellow green. Color was responsive only to emotional expression and the formal needs of the canvas, not the realities of nature. His were not colors that sunlight finds in nature; instead, as the art critic Peter Schjeldahl once stated, Kahn’s “are colors that an aroused sensibility finds, with joy, in the act of painting.”¹

In a 1999 interview, Kahn explained what he was trying to achieve with color. “My choice of color is dictated by tact and decorum stretched by an unholy desire to be outrageous,” he said, adding, “I want the color to be surprising to people without being offensive. By offensive, I mean something that makes the teeth grind. I like shock effect, but shock that settles into a harmonious whole.”² The majority of his oeuvre from the 1950s until his passing in 2020 is characterized by “shocking” color combinations that coalesce into “harmonious” compositions. But it is his abstract landscapes of the mid-1980s through to the 1990s, in particular, with their blinding color combinations, that reflect his interest in what he, in 2008, called the “danger point” in color.³

1. Neil Genzlinger, “Wolf Kahn, 92, Who Painted Landscapes Using a Vibrant Palette, Dies,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020.

2. This quote is from a 1999 interview with *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* of Virginia on the occasion of a Kahn exhibition at Reynolds Gallery in Richmond, as referenced in Neil Genzlinger, “Wolf Kahn, 92, Who Painted Landscapes Using a Vibrant Palette, Dies,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020.

3. *Ibid.*



Pierre Bonnard, *Paysage de Cannet*, 1943
Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches
70 x 80 cm, Private Collection

4

Kahn's lifelong preoccupation with color was influenced initially by his relationship with his art teacher Hans Hofmann, who encouraged his students, in Kahn's words, "to use their imaginative fantasy to regard color as an independent entity."⁴ For Hofmann, color and shape were the building blocks of space. Kahn took this idea to heart and built up his compositions, using masses of saturated hues that "push and pull" each other into fictive spaces.⁵ For Hofmann, who argued that "a picture should be made with feeling, not with knowing," color was subjective, not objective.⁶ Kahn agreed. Indeed, as he once instructed students at the National Academy of Design, "Don't intentionally choose a color. Just pick it up."⁷ Hofmann also instructed his students "to view space as a whole rather than as a series of details," an idea that Kahn pursued throughout his career, opting to present nature as elemental forms, devoid of specifics. For Kahn, leaves on a tree, for instance, were of no interest; rather, it was the compositional power of the vertical form, that is the tree, which was paramount.

4. "In Conversation: Wolf Kahn with David Kapp and Robert Berlind," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2007.

5. "Push and pull" is the play between color, shape, and placement on a surface to create competing forces that produce depth within a flat surface. See James Panero, "Gallery Chronicle," *The New Criterion*, June 2007.

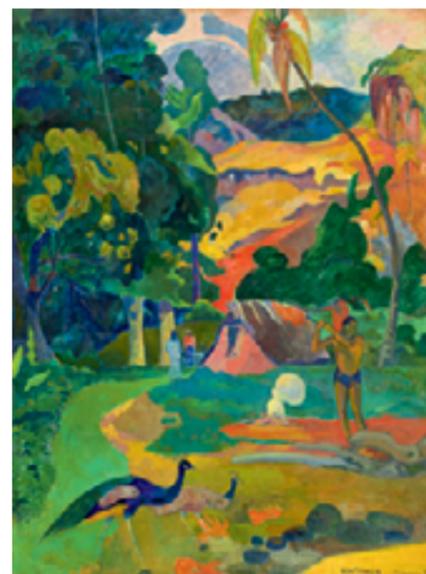
6. Hofmann as quoted in Elaine De Kooning, "Hans Hofmann Paints a Picture," *ArtNews*, November 19, 2012. Available at: <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/hans-hofmann-paints-a-picture-2125/>

While Kahn's early landscapes demonstrate a commitment to the muted colors and luminosity Monet employed in his paintings, Kahn's abstract landscapes of 1980s and 1990s reveal a radically different palette. After a major Bonnard retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1948, Kahn looked to the Postimpressionist artist, and especially to his late work, as a source of inspiration. As Kahn explained, Bonnard "liked the idea of taking a color to an extreme position."⁸ Take, for instance, Bonnard's painting *Paysage de Cannet* (1943), within which the French artist experiments with the ornamental and aesthetic potential of color and applies paint as a patchwork of broken, textured brushworks. The picture is composed of innumerable contrasting, often unnaturalistic colors encompassing blue trees, yellow grass, and so on. The intoxicating color combinations of the late works of Bonnard, who was himself inspired by the Fauves—Henri Matisse and André Derain—are akin to Kahn's striking juxtapositions of the bubble-gum-like colors that one encounters in his abstract landscapes of the 1980s and 1990s.

Each of the vibrant landscapes from this period is reduced to a series of mostly horizontal or diagonal bands of bright colors, often in stark contrast with one another. Each composition verges on total abstraction. Often, the only indication that the viewer is looking at a landscape is the title of the work, e.g., *Edged Meadow*, *Pond's Edge*, and so on. Only a few of them have a clear reference to nature. *Penobscot Bay III*, painted in 1990, is one such example. While the colors are unnaturalistic (the water is purple and brown), there is a clear horizon line, a delineated foreground in green, and a tiny land mass in yellow to the left. *South Pond in Sunlight* (1985) also refers more accurately to nature insofar as there is a clear greenish foreground, a blue-pink middle ground, a yellow-green tree line, and a pale pink sky.

7. Kahn as quoted in Lucinda Franks, "Unlocking the Unconscious," *ArtNews*, December 2001.

8. "'To Do Rothko Again, After Nature': Wolf Kahn in Conversation with David Cohen," *artcritical*, April 18, 2020.



Paul Gauguin, *Matamoe*, 1892
Oil on canvas
45 ³/₈ x 33 ⁷/₈ inches, 115 x 86 cm
The Pushkin State Museum of
Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia



Mark Rothko, *No. 7*, 1951
Oil on canvas
94 ³/₄ x 54 ⁵/₈ inches, 240.7 x 138.7 cm
Private Collection © 1998 Kate
Rothko Prizel & Christopher
Rothko / Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York

For the most part, however, the landscapes from this period are entirely abstract. *Last Light Along the River* (1990) is a large painting comprised of three colors—bright green, lemon yellow, and light gray. There is no indication in the painting as to where the “river” of the title is located. It is an un-space, as is the case with many others in the series. *Evening Confrontation* (AKA *Evening Experience*) (1989) is a composition made up of three triangles—one green, one brown, and one light pink—arranged on diagonals. Knowing that Kahn principally paints landscapes, one must assume, despite its ambiguous title, that this is a scenic composition, but it’s not evident when one views the painting. One of the more stunning works in the series is *Evening Melancholia* (1990). In it, Kahn organizes the abstract landscape into flat, diagonal, colored planes: evergreen for the foreground, brown for the middle ground, bright blue for a (possible) tree line, and magenta pink and light gray for the sky. The bright, saturated colors and the rhythmic relationship between the colored planes result in an extraordinary composition. *Magenta Reflected* (1996) is equally astonishing. Pale green, magenta, yellow, and gray horizontals are fused together in dazzling combination.



Wolf Kahn, *Venice in the Autumn*, 1958
Oil on canvas
48 x 56 inches, 121.9 x 142.2 cm
Wolf Kahn Foundation, Brattleboro, VT



Wolf Kahn, *Into a Clearing*, 1960
Oil on canvas
61 ³/₄ x 53 ¹/₂ inches, 156.8 x 135.9 cm
Private Collection, Haverford, PA

In these four paintings, as with the others throughout the series, Kahn uses unmodulated color and simplified forms, much like the undulating flat colored planes found in Paul Gauguin’s landscape forms, as in his *Matamoe* (1892). Like Gauguin’s, Kahn’s colors in this series do not fade with distance as the rules of atmospheric perspective suggest they should. Their undiminished intensity makes the scenes appear flat and decorative, as if they are simply colors arranged in patterns on the surface of the canvas. As Kahn explained: “If I have pictorial depth it’s a fault because I really would like the painting to appear flat. I want everything to come back to the surface.” He added, “To me it’s all marks on a surface.”⁹ The flat surfaces encountered in this series deny the illusion of depth. Like Mark Rothko’s color fields, Kahn’s landscapes from the 1990s engage with, and ultimately undermine, the post-Renaissance conception of a painting being like a window.¹⁰ Any indication of spatial depth is negated by color and paint application, which emphasize the flat surface of the canvas and fail to create a convincing illusionistic scene. We never forget that we are looking at a painting and not out a window.

9. Ibid.

10. Kahn’s reverence for Rothko was revealed when he stated, “I’ve said on some occasions, with a certain amount of snideness, that my aim is to do Rothko again, after nature (paraphrasing what Cézanne said about himself and Poussin).” Ibid.



Wolf Kahn, *The Gradual Meeting of Wet and Dry II*, 2000
Oil on canvas
52 x 66 inches, 132.1 x 167.6cm
Private Collection, Rougemont, NC

8

Kahn chose to evade representational imagery in this series, but this was not his first foray into near-total abstraction. Throughout the 1950s to 1960s, Kahn experimented with pure abstraction. His *Venice in the Autumn* (1958), an entirely pale-gray canvas, is an example. His painting *Into a Clearing* (1960) is spatially ambiguous, insofar as it is a bramble of expressionistic brushstrokes in an all-over composition with no subject matter. In the early 2000s, Kahn produced another series of abstract landscapes, including *The Gradual Meeting of Wet and Dry II* (2000), a canvas of modulated royal blue paint interrupted only by a green-orange triangle in the bottom right. In 2003, he produced *All in White*, an all-over composition of rapid-fire staccato brushstrokes in multiple colors reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings—another landscape, albeit abstracted. But what ultimately differentiates the abstract landscapes from the 1950s, the 1960s, and the early 2000s from the landscapes of the 1980s and 1990s are the tangy contrasts of color and the flat, decorative color fields that look like interlocking puzzle pieces. These abstract landscapes are unlike any others in his oeuvre, and they are nothing short of magnificent. ■



Wolf Kahn, *All in White*, 2003
Oil on canvas
36 x 52 inches, 91.4 x 132.1 cm
Private Collection, Greenwich, CT

9

Maura Reilly, PhD, is the Director of the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. She is the former Executive Director of the National Academy of Design and the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. She has published several books, including *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, which was named a “Top Ten Art Book” by *The New York Times* in 2018. She received her Masters and PhD in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.