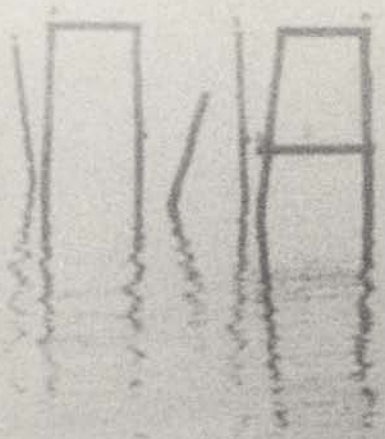


Michael Kahn

1936 - 2007

PAINTINGS

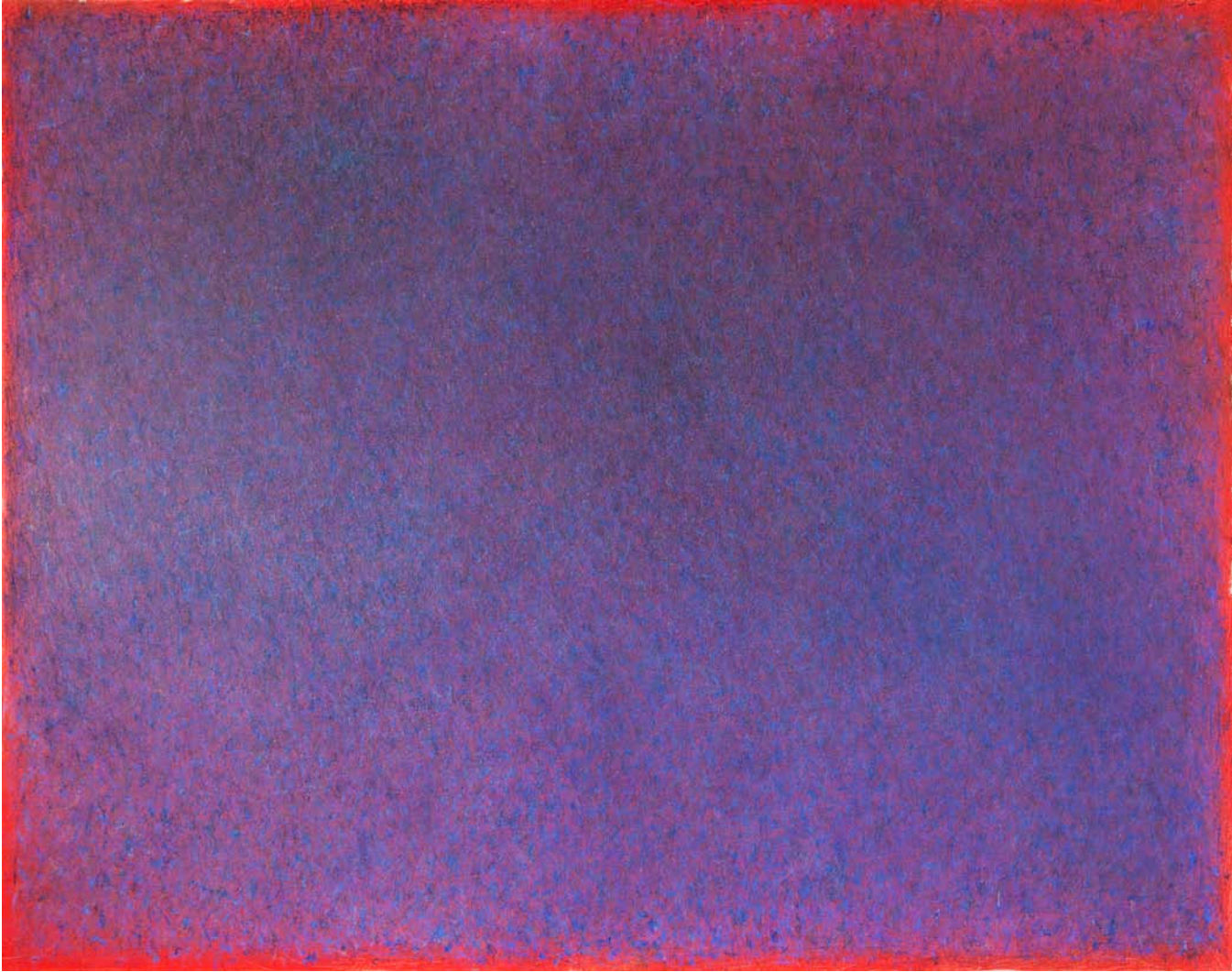


Michael Kahn

1936 - 2007

PAINTINGS

"Field painting", 2005, oil on canvas, 96" x 96", Eliphante, Cornville, AZ



"The Artist needs but a roof, a crust of bread, and his easel, and all the rest God gives him in abundance. He must live to paint and not paint to live"

Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847–1917)

Michael Kahn: (1936-2007)

"Music of the Spheres"

A house called Eliphante is featured in a fascinating survey of idiosyncratic, intriguing dwellings, strewn across the U.S., all designed and built by "unforgettable artisans...home-dwellers yearning to be free".¹ It is clear that the writers chose this highly eccentric, kaleidoscopic house, composed, one is tempted to say "orchestrated", by the artist Michael Kahn, as the introduction to their entire book chiefly because the place is, far and away, the most incomparable among the thirteen houses in their survey.²

Much more an art installation than a mere residence, in any conventional sense, the Arizona desert shelter that artist Kahn, and his wife, Leda Livant, fabricated from driftwood, salvaged glass, ferro-cement and diverse found materials came to resemble, forcefully, though not intentionally, the fantastical, convoluted creations of Barcelona's great Art nouveau architect, Antonio Gaudi. Eliphante might bring to mind the German Dada artist, Kurt Schwitters, and his legendary "Merzbau," destroyed alas in 1943, which was a veritable "walk-in collage," or environmental-scaled "assemblage," cobbled together from scavenged materials.

For decades, eccentric Eliphante also housed, in a makeshift, chronologically organized gallery, a retrospective exhibition of Kahn's paintings, from the '60s through the '90s, i.e. almost until his death. It is as though one suddenly encountered an orderly painting exhibition installed in the depths of a coral reef. Kahn dubbed it his Pipedreams Gallery.

For an outsider art critic, an encounter with Michael Kahn's work from a scant few decades seems somehow inextricable from the presumably overwhelming impact of the artist's Eliphante milieu. The artist would alas remain effectively "undiscovered," moreover, not unlike all too many artists too proud, or willful, to interact with any art galleries who might have promoted them and their enterprise. Michael Kahn categorically chose to "live to paint and not paint to live."

Today, that "gallery" of unsung work is safely housed and cataloged in a house in Santa Fe. This publication, the first of Kahn's entire career as an artist, has been conceived to bring his considerable gifts to the attention of the sort of public the artist - regrettably - eschewed in his lifetime. We are confident the images will admirably attest to his lusty, renegade talent.



Stained Glass Wall, 1979 by Michael Kahn Eliphante, Cornville, Arizona

Freshly completing his bachelor's at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1958, the young Michael Kahn took a spontaneous trip to New Orleans, a place that has often cast its artistic spell over countless visitors. For Kahn, that visit proved fateful, for an encounter with an open-air artist there galvanized the artist in him, for the first time. He would not stop painting for the next 49 years; as his widow has said, thenceforth "Art always showed him the way."

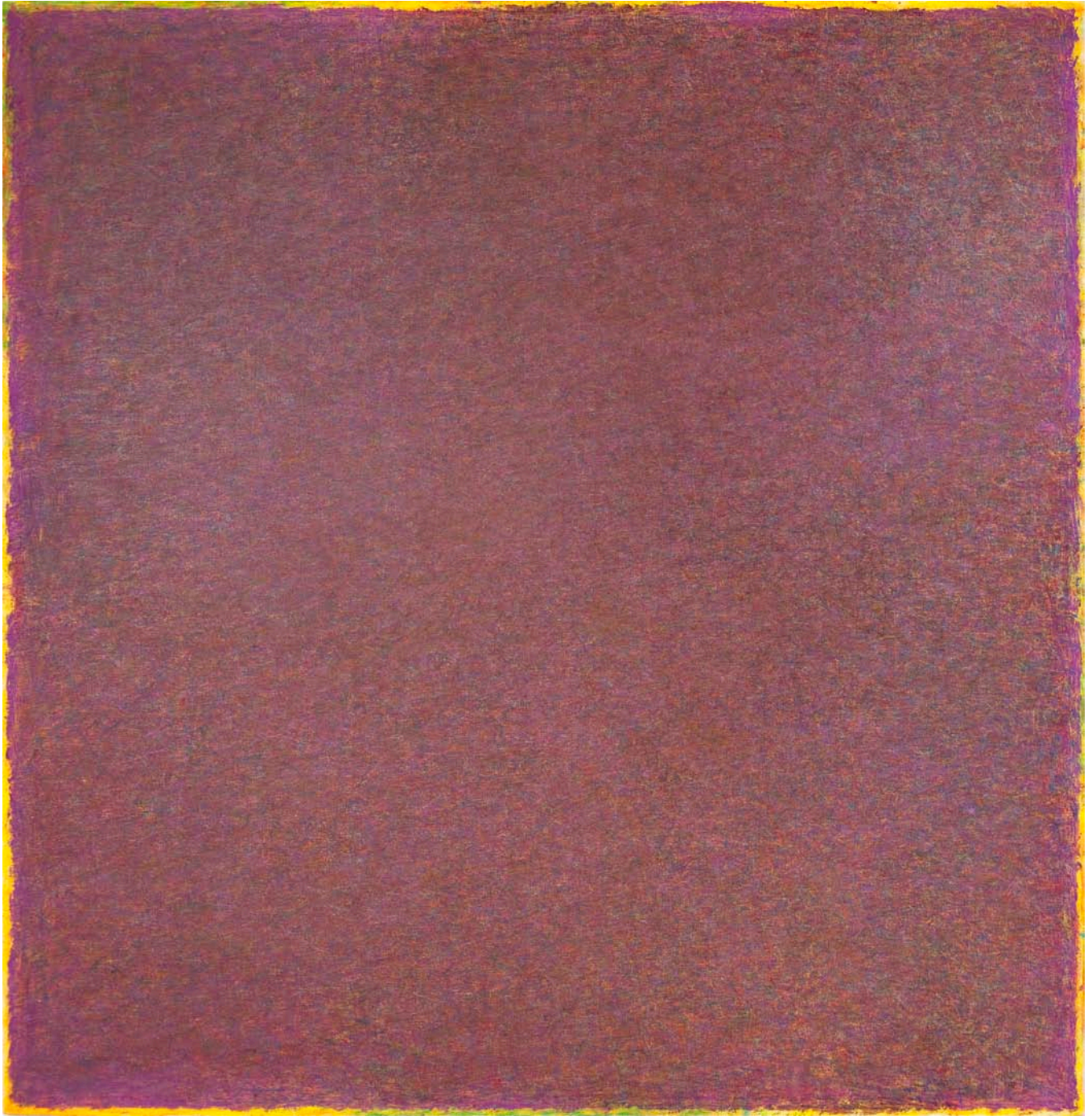
That very autumn, Kahn took the leap into the premier art teaching environment of those days, enrolling first at New York's Art Students League and, then, for a brief time at the city's National Academy of Design. Not too much is known of his instruction in those years, but we do know that Kahn studied with one of the leading American Impressionist leaning painters, Frank Mason, as well as with the portraitist, Ivan Olinsky.

For a spell, Kahn was dedicated to working in a vaguely "Impressionist" manner, as is evident in works like "Central Park," of that period. The young artist's commitment to the Impressionist mode was at the outset apparently so profound that Mike felt compelled to join with other artists in the early 60s, in picketing the Museum of Modern Art, protesting its championing of nonobjective and abstract art. "Central Park," with its hazy echoes of J. Alden Weir or Willard Metcalf, would indeed be a far cry from the tumult and ferocity of the Abstract Expressionism, which was, at that very time, co-opting all critical approbation in New York.

It is provocative to remember that "Ab Ex" was not the only art phenomenon that had taken New York by storm in the '50s. Another possible influence that may have intrigued Michael Kahn might have been all the excitement, in the years '55-'59, surrounding the rediscovery of the grand, late paintings of the preeminent Impressionist, Claude Monet.

In those years, a fire destroyed MoMA's large Monet landscapes and, in an effort to recoup the loss, the museum then purchased their spectacular "Water Lilies" triptych of Monet. Many saw in these swirling, atmospheric compositions, with their wild, gestural freedom, the impulse towards abstraction. Might Kahn have also seen and thought about those works as dramatic formulations of impressionism excitingly engaging with the non-objectivism he had previously protested?

Kahn soon made a predictable "Impressionist's" pilgrimage to the painting mecca of Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he garnered more technique studying with Henry Hensche, who taught how to capture landscape in the envelope of light and atmosphere exalted by all the Impressionists, European as well as American. At this time, Kahn met his first wife Debbie, who was a potter, and through her he learned to be both bold and proficient in the area of hand-built ceramics. This skill would be apparent influence on the progress and development of his painting thereafter.



"Field painting", 2007, oil on canvas, 84" x 76", Eliphante, Cornville, AZ

Kahn's "Red Dunes," from the Provincetown years, shows his skill at capturing the salt-air lighting of the dunescape there. We can almost hear the muffled sound of surf just over the hill. Two of the artist's "Self-Portraits," of that period, likewise recall the introspection and idyllic tone of many classic Impressionism portraits. Additionally, and provocatively, the figure of the artist appears almost to be slipping out of sight, retreating from the light into shadow, as though fleeing the viewer's gaze.

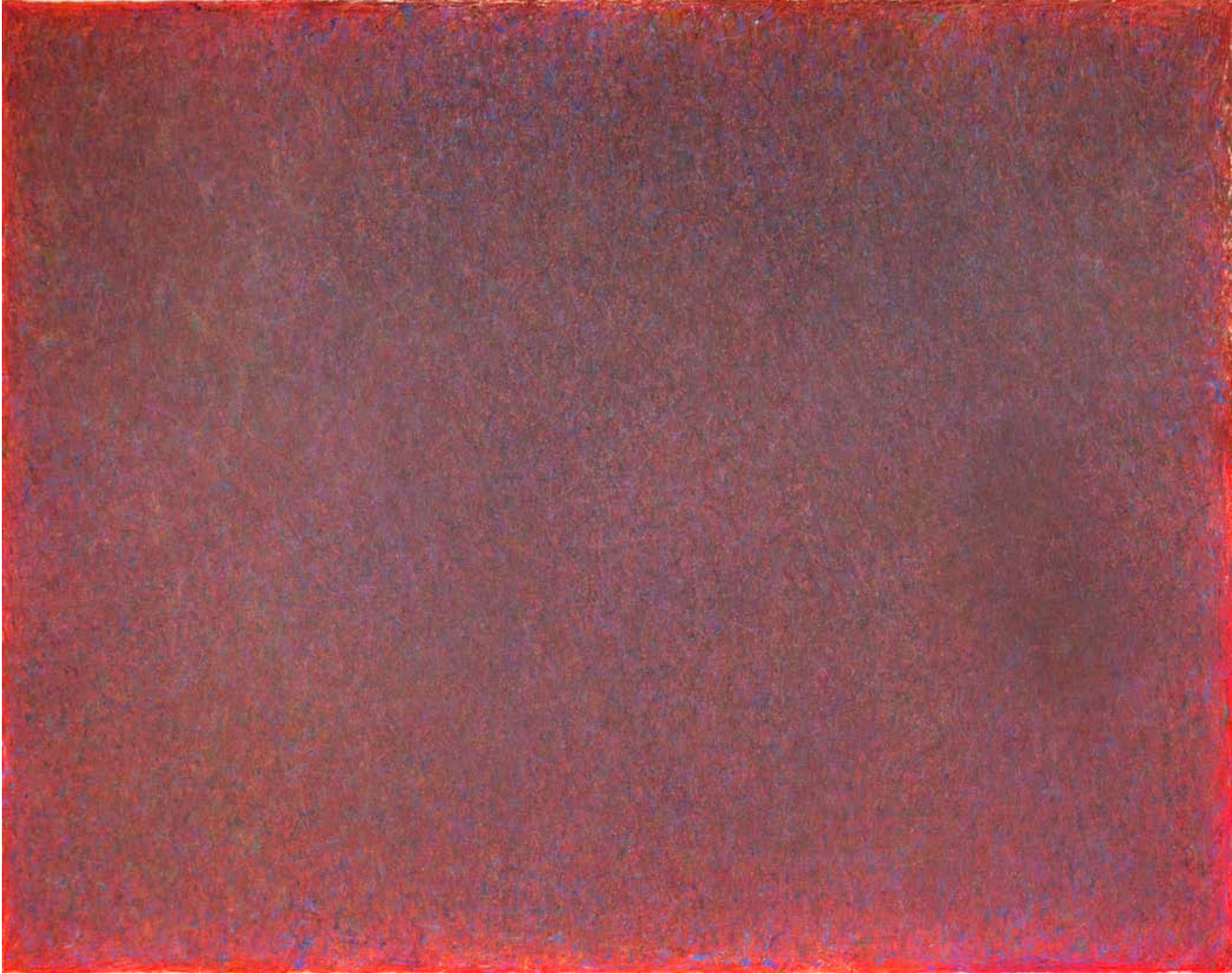
In the latter '60s in Provincetown, Kahn's work began to change. As he quite uncharacteristically wrote down, "while I was working on a large figure drawing, I began to feel as if my hand was being pulled by a magnet, the work developing in opposition to my conscious intent, turning into abstraction."

That compulsive turn to abstraction is abundantly evident in his work during the later 1960's as the tumbling nude figures devolve, from image to image, into what was to become a kind of "signature" abstract compositional trope, i.e. a whirling maelstrom of light and color. Other canvases that followed on the heels of that breakthrough moment show the artist very confidently translating his motif into a recurrent, circular vortex of splintered light and color. (*See pages 42 and 44.)

From then on, as Kahn said, "rather than intention, control, and seeking result, there was freedom, exploration and discovery, often with techniques and methods previously untried..." He went on: "After the beginning stage (covering the canvas), the expression of energy changed; I would become receptive ...to respond to the painting...telling me what to do." Such a compulsive method would henceforth, in the '70s and beyond, be the fulcrum of Kahn's artistic output.

It was in those days that the pioneer gallerist, Betty Parsons, strongly reacted to the new work by Kahn, remarking she could use "five more like this". These were, unfortunately, fatal words for Michael Kahn - he declined her offer, saying he could not repeat or have his work dictated. It is in passing up such shining hours that Kahn would determine the future course of his solitudinous career. True to his profound "bohemianism" (i.e. as the dictionary tells us, "living an unconventional lifestyle"), Kahn's latter career was in great part hermetic, that is, until a somewhat fateful, final "retrospective" show, in 1991, at Northern Arizona University.

That exhibition, cryptically entitled, by Kahn, "An Artist Never Learns How to..." an environmental installation of his paintings, involving undulating, Mylar walls and the like, was abruptly shut down when the artist refused to adhere to the fire exit signage legally required in the galleries. Among many things many an artist "never learns how to" is to bend to such exigencies.



"Field painting", 2006, oil on canvas, 84"x 72", Eliphante, Cornville, AZ

Thus, through the '70s and into the '80s, after their move to Northern Arizona, Kahn - variously influenced, as Livant says, by things like Esalen, Krishnamurti, Zen, and quantum physics, - danced with the brush, constantly painted with unbound energy and intense focus, and was always positive and upbeat. As Livant emphasizes, "music played a prominent role": Kahn would paint to the diverse soundtracks of Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations, Keith Jarrett's jazz, and Beethoven's late quartets.

To the trained eye, it is clear that Kahn's work in those years, up to his death, was indubitably impelled by the example of Jackson Pollock. That is, from "Ancramdale" (1973) (see page 28) onwards, Kahn's practice was to "dance" around the canvas - all paintings were painted turning the canvas, i.e. there was no true up or down, as he put it. Such an obsessive dance by Jackson Pollock was famously recorded, in fact. Unfortunately, no such performance by Kahn was captured!

Looking at Kahn's late works, which were surfaces of dense and heavily worked impastos (see page 14) which evoked clouds of stardust or the texture of the earth itself, we can perhaps see what the great art patroness, and friend and acquaintance of Kahn, Flora Biddle had to say to the artist, about a work she and her husband, Sydney, had hung in their home.

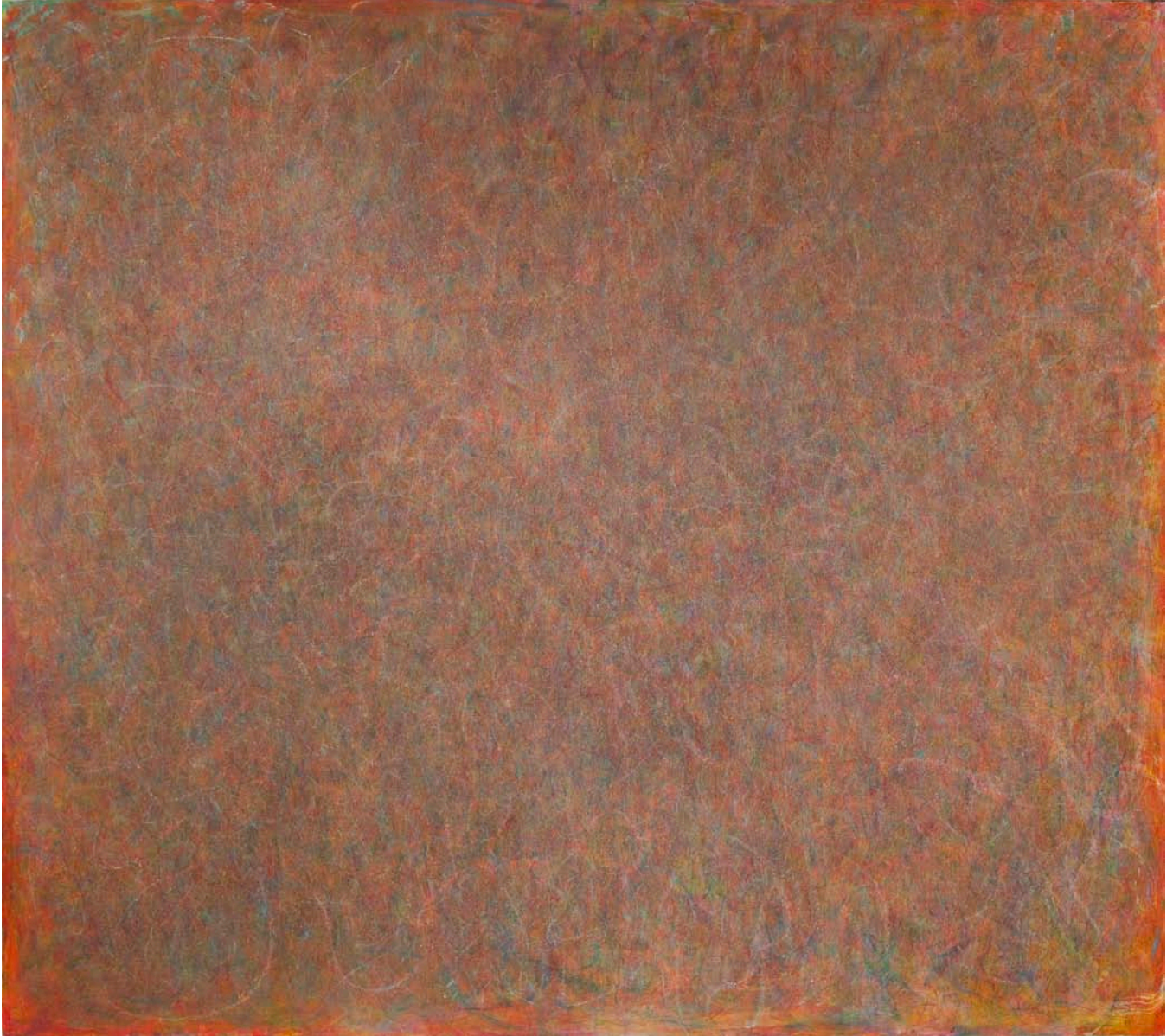
"Your painting glows on our wall and makes us feel more alive, more aware. Sometimes its surface glitters with magical energy, sometimes we see dark pathways of life and death within the spinning universe of colors, and sometimes a microscopic life of atoms and electrons appears and we can almost hear "the music of the spheres".³ It remains that that "music of the spheres" may perhaps now, after his death, be made known to a larger audience. Such is the goal of this undertaking.

Jan E. Adlmann
Santa Fe 2011

¹. Whitsit, Steven Paul and Tina Skinner, *Handmade Houses*, Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Arglen, Pa 2008

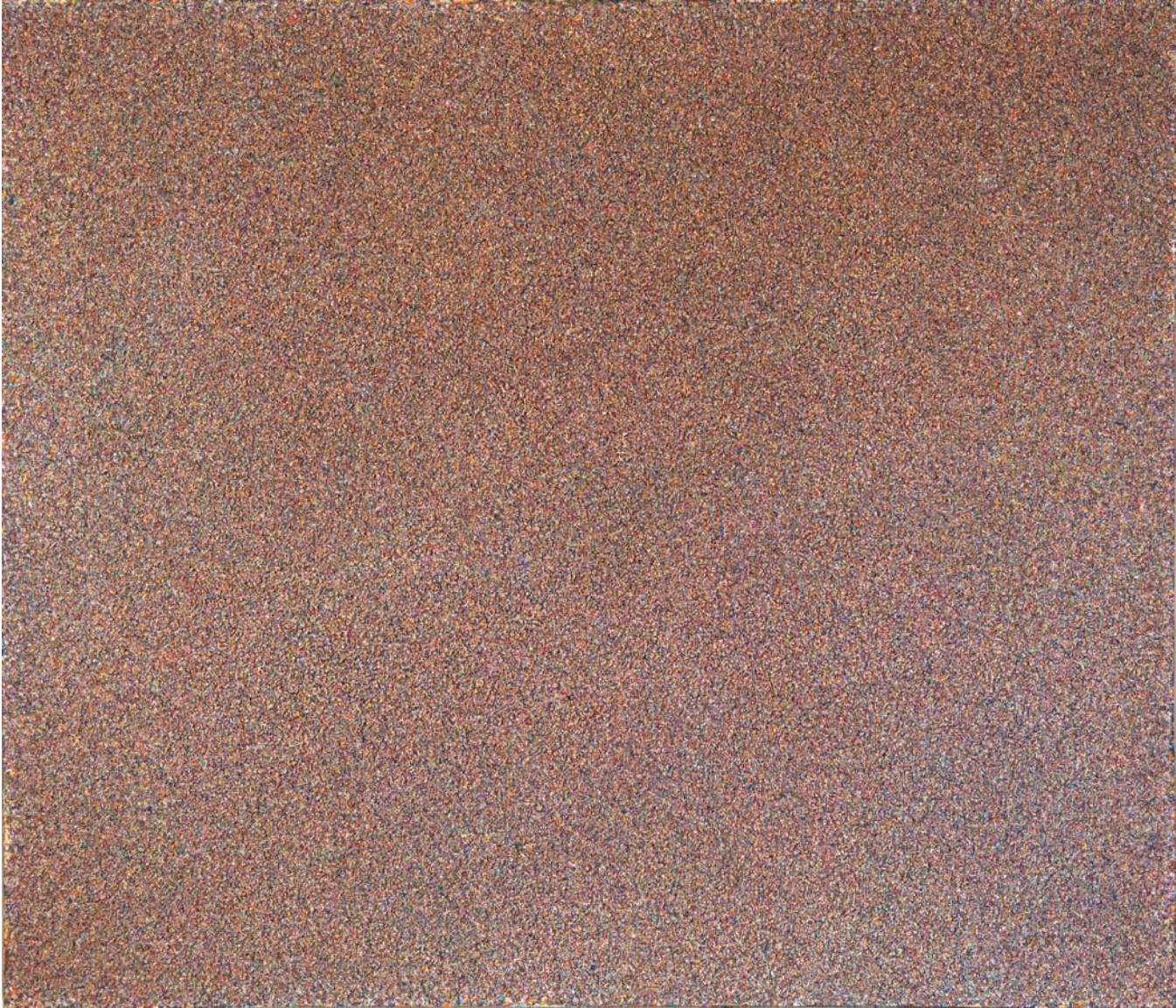
². At the time of this writing, the "Eliphante" house has again appeared in the art press as a result of its inclusion in still another book, *Artists' Handmade Houses*, Michael Gotkin/ Don Freeman, Abrams Publishers, New York, 2011

³. Autograph letter, dated October '90, to "Dear Michael," in collection of the widow, Leda Livant, Santa Fe, NM.



"Glory of the Morning", 2004, oil & mixed media on canvas, 66"x 70", Eliphante, Cornville, AZ

"Field Painting", 1980, oil on canvas, 72" x 84", Eliphante, Cornville, AZ

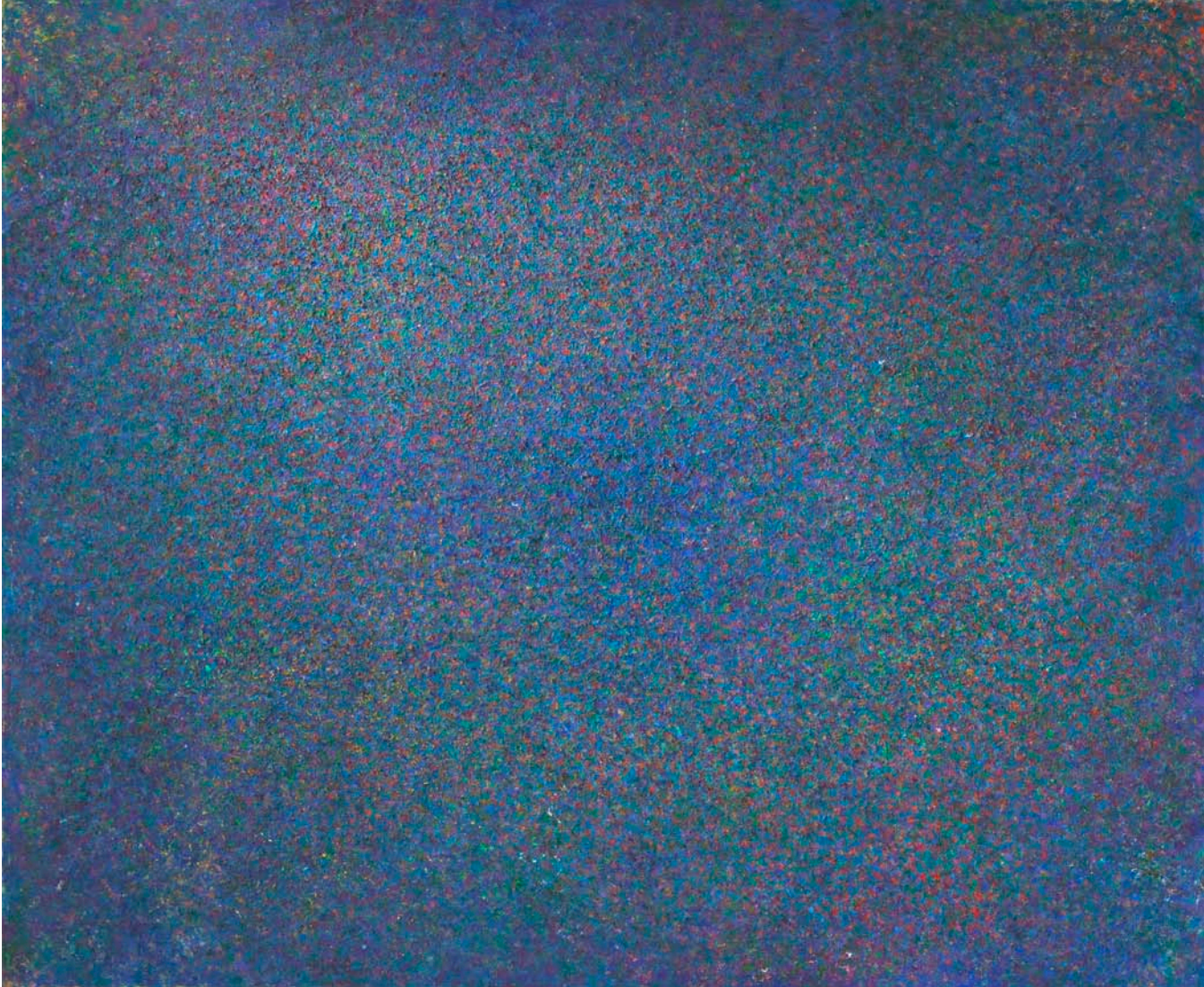




Sculpture – "Untitled", 1979, Wood, 64" x 16" x 14", Sedona, AZ



"Meditation", 1975, oil on canvas, 50" x 61", Provincetown, MA



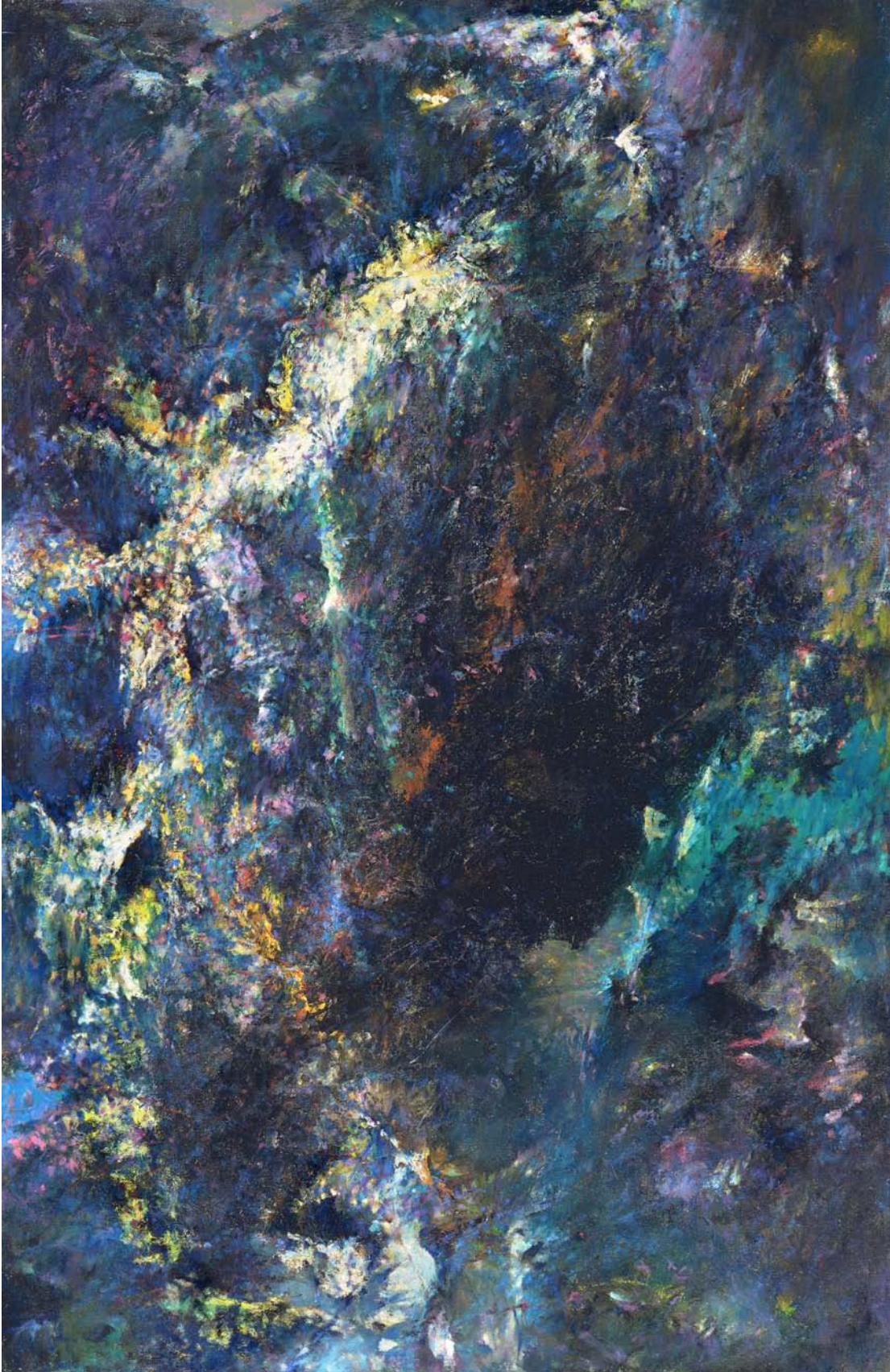
"Breakthrough", 1975, oil on canvas, 36" x 50", Santa Fe, NM



"Tri Colors", 1974, oil on board, 28" x 58", Provincetown, MA



"Black", 1973- 1974, oil on canvas, 51" x 38", Provincetown, MA



"White", 1973-1974, oil on canvas, 82" x 94", Provincetown, MA



"Ancramdale", 1973, 52" x 60", oil on canvas, Ancramdale, NY



"Masked Ball", 1972, oil on canvas, 72" x 72", Provincetown, MA



"Wings", 1971, oil on canvas, 78" x 78", Provincetown, MA



"Winter", 1970, oil on canvas, 66"x 60", Provincetown, MA



"Cave", 1970, oil on Canvas, 66" x 72", Provincetown, MA



Michael Kahn Chronology

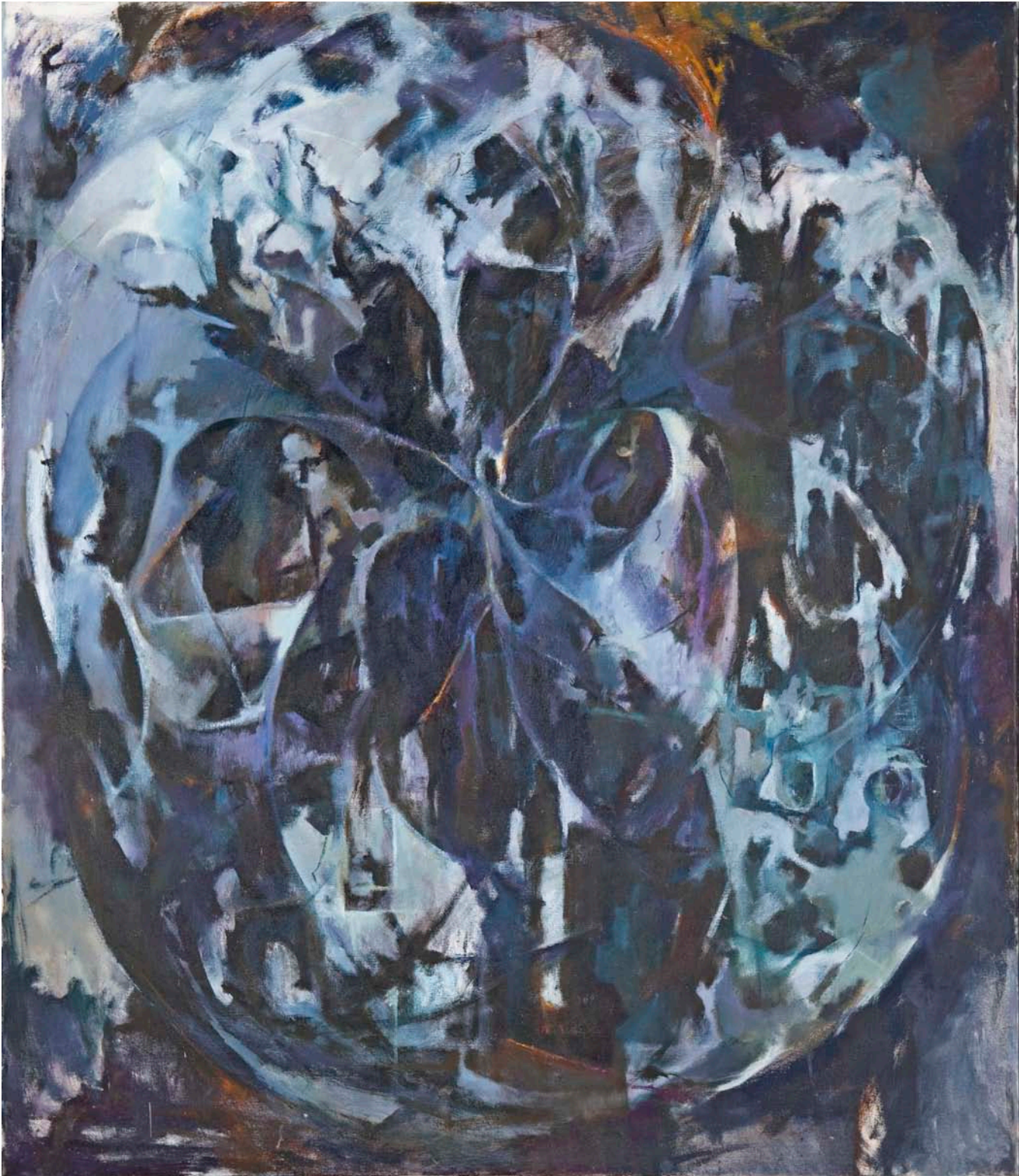
Born March 30th, 1936, San Francisco, California

- 1954 -1958 BA degree, University of Southern California, Santa Barbara
- 1958 Street Artist, New Orleans, Louisiana
- 1960 -1961 Art Students League, New York, New York-teachers: Frank Mason, Ivan Olinsky
- 1961- 1963 National Academy of Design, New York, New York -recipient, E. Mooney Award
- 1960 -1963 Cape School of Art, Provincetown, Massachusetts – teacher: Henry Hensche
- 1962 Marriage to Deborah
- 1963 Move to Provincetown – open The Kiln pottery shop
- 1964 Becomes Life Time Member of The Provincetown Beachcombers
- 1963-1969 Juried shows, San Francisco Bi-Annual, de Young Museum & Richmond Annual
- 1965-1969 Corwith Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1965-1969 Fitzgerald & Forley Wren Gallery, New York, New York
- 1966 Karilon Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1968-1970 Fellowships, Fine Arts Workshop, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1970 Meets Leda and remain partners for next 37 years
- 1971 Provincetown Art Association and Museum
- 1974 Group Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1975-1976 Travels to Greece and Southern France to paint
- 1977 Leda and Mike leave Provincetown, move to Sedona, Arizona
- 1979 Begin creation of Eliphante, 3-acre sculptural installation in Cornville, Arizona
- 1981-2007 Ongoing Showings and continuing expansions of Eliphante
- 1991 31 year Retrospective Installation, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff
- 1993 Red Rock Gallery, Sedona, Arizona
- 1994 Art in Public Spaces, Sedona, Arizona
- 1995 Northern Arizona University Art Gallery
- 1996 Trammel Crow Art Center, Dallas, Texas
- 1996 Gardens For Humanity, Sedona, Arizona
- 1997 Sullivan Center for Creative Arts, Prescott, Arizona
- 2001 Lanning Gallery, Sedona, Arizona
- 2004 Living Spaces Gallery, Cornville, Arizona
- 2004-2007 Continuous Painting of Large Color Field Canvases
- Michael Kahn dies, December 21st, 2007, Cornville Arizona, Age 71

Piano Wall, 1980, by Michael Kahn, Eliphante, Cornville, AZ



"Untitled", 1969, 72"x 66", oil on canvas, Provincetown, MA



"Untitled", 1968, 50" x 63", oil on canvas, Provincetown, MA



AWARDS

- 1964 E. Mooney Award, National Academy of Design, New York City, NY
- 1968 - 1970 Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1986 Gottlieb Foundation Grant
- 1998 SOS, Smithsonian, Washington DC
- 2000 - 2004 New York Community Trust

PUBLICATIONS & FILMS

- 1999 Faces of Arizona
- 2000- 2001 Sedona Magazine
- 2004 Home Work - Hand Built Homes, *Shelter Publications*
- 2006 Cinemage Productions Art Film
- 2006 Arizona Republic
- 2008 The New York Times, Front Page, Living Section
- 2008 Arizona Highways, Documentary Film for Television
- 2009 Northern Arizona Mountain Living Magazine
- 2009 Handmade Houses, *Schiffer Publications*
- 2011 Artists Handmade Houses, *Abrams Press*



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