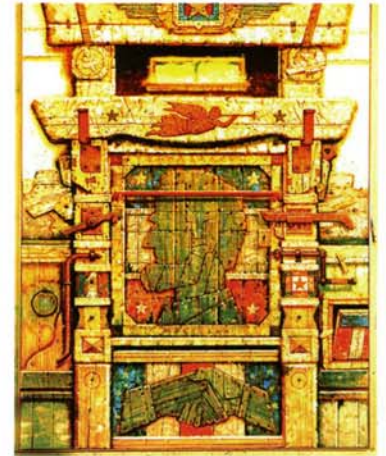




All paintings in this article by Morton Kaish

Left: *The Irish Chair with Wildflowers*, 2008. Acrylic and oil on linen, 44 x 48 in.

Below: *America Series: Battle Hymn*, 2005. Acrylic on linen, 78 x 66 in.



To Savor It All

An Interview with Morton Kaish

Ira Goldberg: Let's talk about your beginnings. You didn't attend the League as a student, but you taught at the League.

Morton Kaish: I was born across the river, in New Jersey. I left at sixteen to study art at Syracuse University, chosen as the most disciplined environment I could find. The department was straight out of the school of Munich and was about mastery of the powers of perspective, portrait drawing, figure drawing, anatomy, composition. Cast drawing was among the major undertakings of my first two years. However, things took an odd turn along the way, which, I suppose, comes under the heading of "winning by losing."

After my second year, in the late 1940s, an academic revolution took place. Unbeknownst to the students, the entire faculty was swept out over the summer. They were succeeded by the Chicago Art Institute crowd whose orientation—design, color, shape, concept—was entirely different. I arrived back in September to see all of those beloved casts being removed from the building on their way to destruction. Starting my second two years seemed a

dismal prospect. As it turned out, when played against the first two years of an unrelenting, hard core discipline, it was an extraordinary experience. That was the material with which I emerged, youthfully determined that truth and beauty could be married to design, form, and concept.

IG: It sounds as though you took the core structure of late nineteenth-century academic training and brought it into a mid-twentieth century mode of expression.

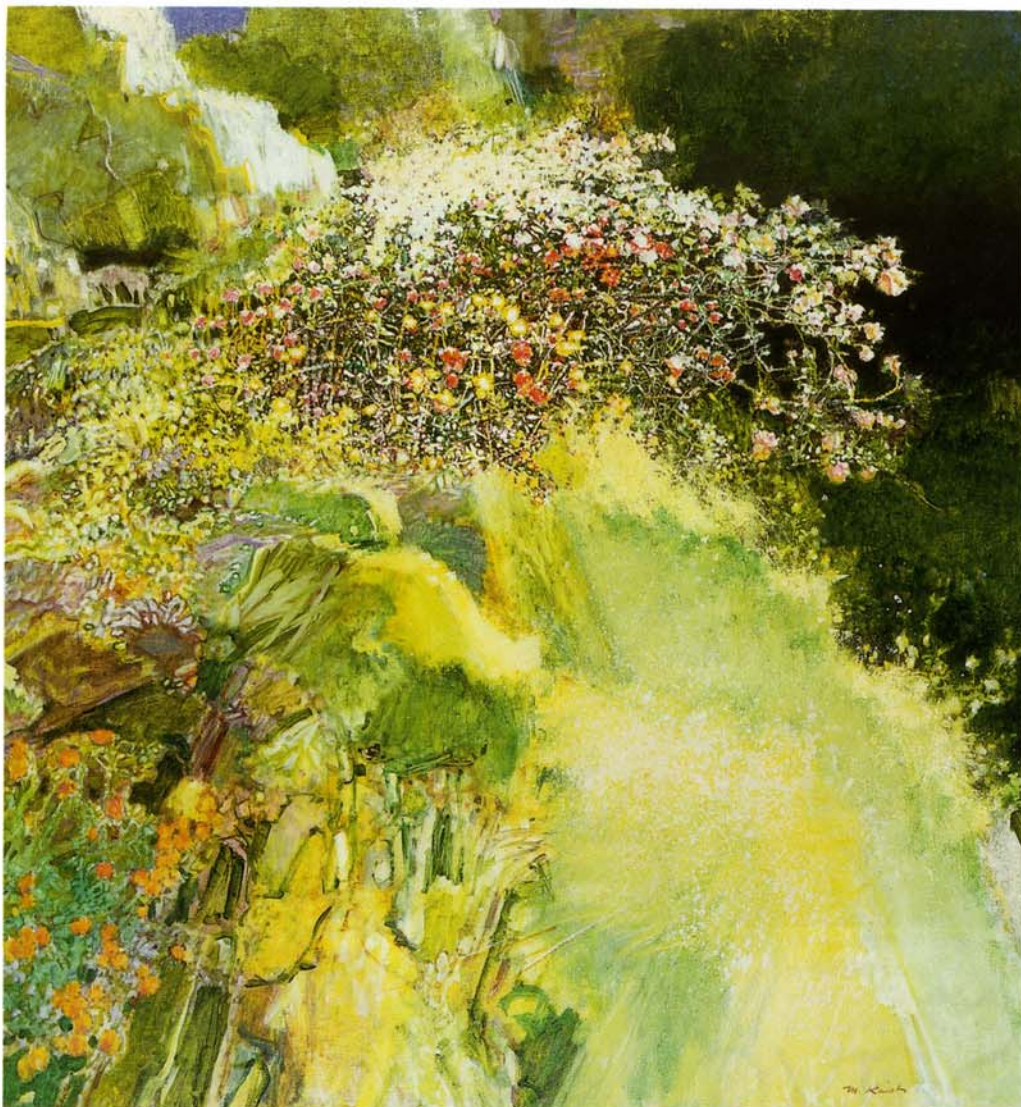
MK: I think what characterized my experiences were the extremes. They created a turmoil early on that made me rethink my life as an artist in a way which might not have come until many years later. Thrust into this, without my permission, without my asking, and even without my knowledge, was the kind of experience that made me step

IG: You graduated with a bachelor's degree from Syracuse. Then what?

MK: I met and married my wife Luise while we were

students. We were determined to travel, study, and work, in Europe. Taking advertising jobs in Rochester, we lived on one salary, saved the other and after two years we embarked in 1952 for Paris. Luise had just been awarded a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant.

Post-war Europe was very grim, very grey, very bleak. It was early winter when we arrived. I enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, which was a gathering point for American painters in Paris. It had Art Students League-like overtones, and it was a wonderful place to be at that moment. We were living in a hotel for 400 francs a night, the equivalent of a dollar a day. That winter we both came down with the flu—and we were cold. There was no heat anywhere. As the Paris winter wore on, we decided to seek the sun and started south. Moving through Switzerland, we eventually made our way to northern Italy. Still cold. Heading south we got as far as Florence and found friends coming north from Sicily trying to escape the cold. We settled in at the old Pensione Annalena, winter shelter for a gifted and eccentric batch of artists and writers. I



enrolled in the Istituto d'Arte, kept warm painting and pushing lithographic stones through their giant presses.

IG: What was dark about the city? Can you describe what that felt like?

MK: For one thing, Florence had been occupied by the German army. In their retreat they had blown up all of the bridges across the Arno except the Ponte Vecchio. The buildings adjacent to that legendary bridge had been destroyed leaving it literally a sea of rubble; you could see almost all the way to the Pitti Palace. The people were very poor. Everyone wore black. The children wore black.

There was a sense, as always with the Italians, that being an artist was a wonderful and miraculous thing and hence having artists as visitors was a welcome and wonderful thing. In those years the presence of the Communist Party was evident everywhere. Posters hailing the coming of a new order were plastered on every wall. The men on the street, the women on the street, the children on the street, all went out of their way to speak to us of America, of the cousins they had in New Haven, of how pleased they were to have us in Florence. Yet, daily in the streets we were greeted by Communist manifestos urging us to go home. We stayed through the winter and then had an opportunity

to go south, to Rome and Naples, vowing to return.

IG: How long did you stay in Europe?

MK: Our first stay lasted a little over a year. We explored the sites and museums of England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain returning home from Le Havre. We returned to Rome as a destination of choice and love in 1955 following visits to Greece and Egypt. We found a seventh floor walk-up apartment. Luise was doing welded sculpture at the time. We asked the landlady about working there with oxygen and acetylene tanks (the word in Italian is *bombole*), and she said she'd be delighted to have us. We spent two happy years in our studios there.

At the foot of our building in Piazza Scanderbeg was the Istituto Calcografico, which printed all the etchings and engravings in the centuries old collections of the Italian government. I began etching, bringing my plates downstairs to be printed. Luise was welding, in the apartment. I was learning my printmaking from books and the chaps downstairs while running off to the American library to read Mayer and the rest.

I soon became involved with a gallery in the Via Margutta where I met the bright and engaging Emiliano Sorini, who later came to the States and printed for many major

New York artists and collectors. A technical virtuoso, Sorini helped me enormously. And I was painting at the Accademia delle Belle Arti and drawing at the Circolo Artistico. Some two and a half years later after traveling through Austria, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and back through France we headed home.

IG: Your family was here in New York?

MK: Luise's father was traveling in Europe and lent us his apartment in Murray Hill. One day we saw an ad in the *Sunday Times* for a loft on MacDougal Street in the Village. We ran down and rented it on the spot. MacDougal Street on a Sunday morning was an old Italian neighborhood filled with first generation working people, craftsmen, and laborers living in tiny rent-controlled apartments. It seemed ideal, like taking the Italian experience and moving it overnight to MacDougal Street. What we didn't know was that the street by night was a different planet. It had become the epicenter of the hip universe. The Beat world was gaining profile, recognition, and momentum. The coffee shops on a Sunday morning were sleepy, quiet little places where people breakfasted on croissants and lattes; by evening they turned into teeming "poetry scenes" where the "flower children" came to seek adventure.

IG: This was the late 1950s?

MK: It was 1959. People would converge from the boroughs, from New Jersey, from Connecticut. Everybody was young. Everybody was high. Everybody ostensibly was coming to listen to new ideas and to experience new experiences.

We looked on in total amazement. It was a time of immense turbulence. The confluence of people was astonishing. The Cedar Bar was still going full strength a few blocks away. Hans Hofmann's school was on Eighth Street. Larry Rivers' studio was around the corner, and we popped in there with friends. It had been a former movie studio with vast ceilings and spaces. A little lost there initially, he eventually started painting some very large things. Gregory Corso, the poet laureate of the Beats for the moment, was in regular attendance. Mary Travers of Peter, Paul & Mary would stroll by with her kid. Mounted cops tried to maintain order on Saturday nights. It was a close-knit and colorful scene. But it was wild.

Eventually, our loft became too difficult to deal with because it was over the Rienzi Coffee Shop, one of the renowned gathering places of the era. The Rienzi had been started by a group of artists who'd met in Paris and created this place when they came back. Two of them bought out the others and made a great commercial success of it. But they lived on the other side of the clock, getting underway around 11 in the evening and running until 4 in the morning. They also closed the shop without putting their food away. So, after closing time, there were the rats. The huge speaker system—attached to their ceiling, our floor, kept us awake until about four. And then the rats came out, racing under the floor and through the walls. By that time, we had a young child. Although the place had an eighteen-foot high skylight, a 2500 foot studio, attached to another 1500 foot studio, we decided it was time to move on.

IG: What kind of work were you doing in that studio?

MK: It turned out to be a very productive time. I decided that what I was doing might particularly relate to one or

**Opposite page: *Wild Roses*, 1985. Oil on linen, 72 x 66 in.
Photo: Steven Tucker.**

Right: *View from the Studio*, Florence, 2008. Acrylic on linen, 52 x 48 in.

two galleries. I also had a kind of a revelatory moment quite by accident when my mother sent me an article on whole grain bread from *Reader's Digest*. On the back was a reprint from a work by the philosopher William James. At that point I was wondering how in the world I was going to carry through on the idea of being an artist in New York while doing advertising work all day to stay afloat. By bedtime, totally exhausted.

Then along came this James piece, "The Illusory Nature of the Fatigue Barrier." In it he argues that we all know the experience of total exhaustion, but that, given a certain set of circumstances, we have the capacity to move past that into new pools of energy. It seemed somewhat far-fetched. But when you're desperate, you'll try anything.

James believed that motivation was the key, that you must set forth with purpose, which meant to begin. So, I painted a big sign above my easel, and it read, "Begin." James reasoned that you have the same number of hours between 8 p.m. and midnight as you do between 8 am and noon, if you could just access them.

The way to access that energy was to confront your task, to start with minutiae: sharpening pencils, taking out brushes, squeezing paint tubes. Surprisingly a moment would come when you find yourself reaching for the brush, leaving behind the fatigue and exhaustion. And he was right.

I was ready to devote three years to creating a body of work. And I had by that time merged the sensibilities about wanting to work—as always—in the figurative tradition, and, living in the alternate moment of the abstract expressionists, a kind of freedom to deal with other issues and subjects. I came down very solidly between them. I'd come home after these long workdays and have dinner. My wife Luise was very supportive. Afterward, I dragged myself into the studio. Yet by midnight, I had to force myself to stop. That went on for three years, bit by bit putting together my group of paintings. The only person who ever saw them was a young curator from the Museum of Modern Art. The museum was putting together an exhibition called *Young American Artists*. The curator came to the studio and told me he really wanted to include a "romantic" painter in the show. I was very pleased but a little hesitant since I had those paintings stockpiled for my belated entry into the New York gallery world. About three weeks later, Dorothy Miller, then head curator at the Modern, called. She was very nice in breaking some difficult news to me. "We loved your paintings and we'd want to have them in the show," she said, "but unfortunately, our cutoff for young American artists is thirty-five." I was thirty-six.

IG: Slightly older than a young American.

MK: The Modern returned the paintings to me. By then I had probably had eight or nine others that I really liked. It was all progressing very slowly. Once I had ten, I made slides of them and set out into the New York gallery world of 1961, which at the time was centered along Madison Avenue and on 57th Street. For some years I'd kept one particular gallery in mind that showed paintings to which



I felt great affinity. They were showing Californians like David Park and Elmer Bischoff and William Wiley as well as Europeans Max Bill and Paul Delvaux. It was an impressive roster.

IG: What was the name of the gallery?

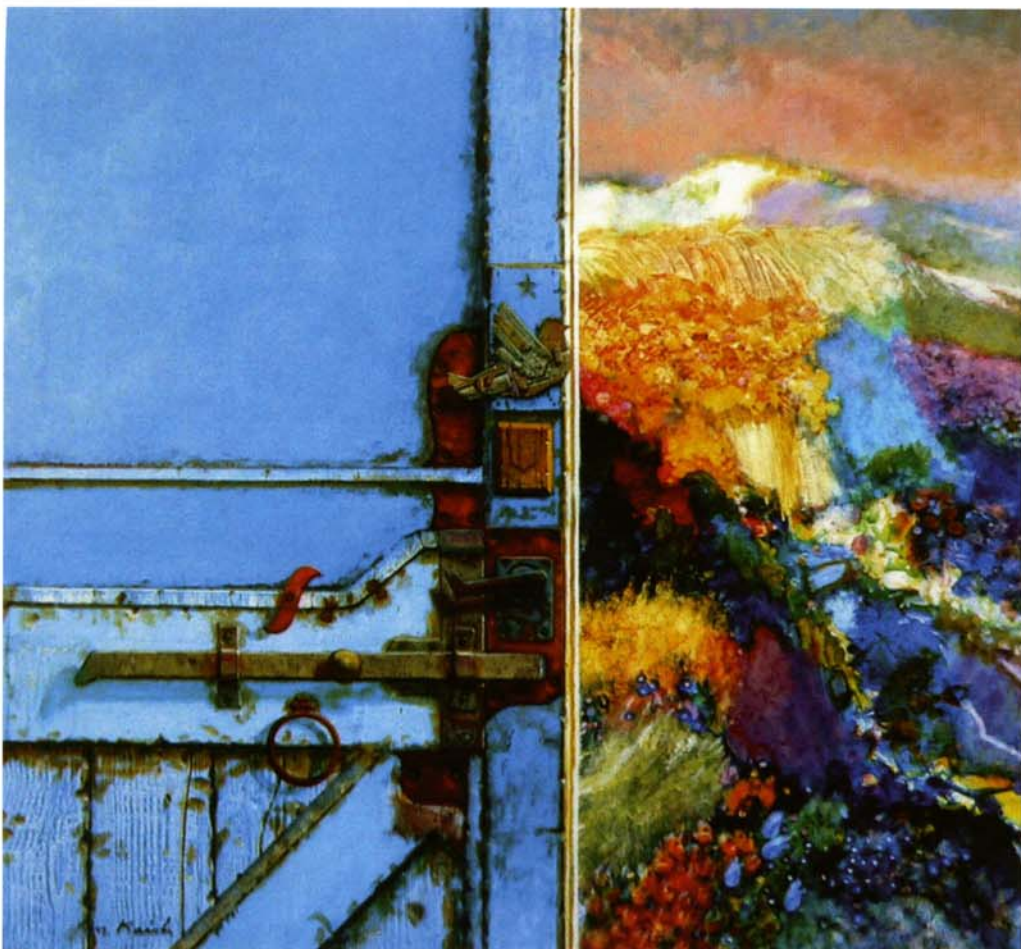
MK: It was the Staempfli Gallery. I gathered my slides and made a date with the worldly and sophisticated director, Phillip Bruno. He was somewhat skeptical. I was completely unknown, fresh off the pavement. Anyway, he began going through the slides, asking me about the work's scale and medium. He took them in to George Staempfli, who came out and asked me to send a couple of paintings to the gallery, just to see what would happen. That began a twenty-two-year association. They were a remarkably supportive group and became close friends. Actually I've been most fortunate in my gallery associations, working with dealers Hollis Taggart in New York and more recently Irving Luntz in Palm Beach who have been vitally involved, particularly in the ongoing "America Series" paintings.

Then, in 1970, Luise was awarded the Rome Prize fellowship, by the American Academy in Rome. At that time, New York, as you know, was in turmoil. We'd moved to our upper West Side experiment—where we're sitting

now. The experiment was to move from a Village loft that looked like the first act of *La Bohème* to this upper West Side apartment. Reconfiguring it, we turned dining, living, and bedrooms into studios and the maid's quarters into a workshop. It was an experiment that has worked out well. But New York at that time was in a fortress mentality. It was a time of fierce and divisive demonstrations. Columbia was ablaze with dissidents. When the word came of the Rome Prize award for Luise, we were ready to leave New York for a while. And to return to Italy.

IG: You had your daughter with you at that time.

MK: By then she was in school. That created an interesting situation for us. The American Academy in Rome had been pretty much of an all-boys club. Children still made "too much noise." So we lived down in the Centro of old Rome, in an extraordinary apartment belonging to the American artist, Sarai Sherman. Luise commuted to work in a thirty-foot studio at the American Academy on the Gianicolo hill, which interestingly had once been that of her former teacher, Ivan Mestrovic. Our daughter, Melissa, went off by bus to the American School in Rome. And I worked in the studio at Via Monte Giordano about fifty meters from the Piazza Navona.



IG: Did you continue your advertising work in Italy?

MK: A break came when we left for Rome in an offer to do some work every six months, which I was to send back. It became a bit of an ordeal because until you've tried to mail a package at the Italian post office...

IG: This was before the days of Federal Express.

MK: Definitely. And it was wild. I'd set out at eight o'clock in the morning for the main post office with my envelope of stuff and tell Luise that with luck I'd be back by four in the afternoon. The wonderful thing about the Romans is that they are free spirits. Still, it tends to manifest itself a little negatively at the Posta Centrale where there is no such thing as a line. There is only a window and a vast funnel of humanity converging on it. Many of them are elder ladies with huge parcels and very sharp elbows aided by canes and crutches. That work did help financially. The Academy provided a hugely supportive environment for the artist, but since we had to arrange for our own shelter, I had to work.

At a certain point we moved to on to an unusual place, which was known as the Soap Factory, across the street from the infamous Regina Coeli prison. A group of American artists had taken the space and under the guidance of Paul Suttman, created some of the most beautiful studios. Suttman was traveling to California and working on his country house in Umbria. So we arranged to rent his place. The Soap Factory sheltered a diverse group of artists including Jack Zajac, Robert Baxter, Herzl Emmanuel,

I'm hopeful about the pluralistic moment that we're experiencing, however disconcerting. So many things are OK right now.

Stan Galli, Gil Franklin—a dedicated lot producing powerful work in an inspiring environment. Luise and I were invited to mount a joint exhibition at the U.S. Information Service, which attracted surprising attention and good press. And the American Academy offered me a studio in their giardino.

IG: That sojourn to Rome lasted how long?

MK: About three years. Luise was executing a major sculpture commission and at the end of that second year was offered the opportunity to stay on to complete it. I had sent work back to New York for two exhibitions at Staempfli Gallery, flying back for the openings. It was exhilarating to touch down in New York, wonderful to get back to Italy.

During those trips back, I was offered teaching posi-

tions, mostly at out-of-town colleges in the Midwest and California. My standard reply was, "Thanks, but no thanks." I didn't want to leave New York. I also wasn't sure that it was what I wanted to do, for unlike almost everyone I knew in the art world, I had not gone directly into teaching upon my own graduation. After three years in Rome, however, I had begun to feel a little differently. I started teaching at the New School and then at FIT. But for me, the jewel in the crown was coming to the League. I'd been hesitant about approaching the League. That roster of distinguished faculty names, many of which I had grown up with and admired, was a bit intimidating. But after my next show opened in New York, I had a bright fresh catalogue and with a pocket full of slides, I walked into the League.

IG: What year was this?

MK: It was 1974. In the office I saw Stewart Klonis sitting at his desk, the *Wall Street Journal* spread out in front of him. Across the way under a giant mountain of papers was Rosina Florio. The models and students were streaming in and out. It seemed the perfect place.

Stewart was immediately responsive to my work. "We have a spot," he said. There was an opening for a Saturday class, in the DuMond studio. "It will be yours," he said, "for three years, and at the end of that time, and if there's nobody there, you'll leave."

IG: I imagine that if you were teaching in the DuMond studio that he'd have expected more than a handful of people.

MK: Stewart said, "It may not be easy for you because your work is so far removed from the artist who has been teaching this class. The late Richard Seyffert has been a respected and very popular instructor. Chances are, it may be very difficult to maintain continuity with that group. But I don't want you to do anything but what you do." He was very generous, and forthcoming. He usually spoke sparingly, and he said, "I think you should do this. When can you begin?" By then I was logging twenty-one hours of teaching in three schools. Learning my new craft. Flying up and down the IRT.

The League became one of the great experiences of my life. Almost every artist I knew or those I encountered among the expatriate group had studied there. For me it represented a sort of "city on a hill" and there I was.

IG: How did your class develop?

MK: It was the classic League mix, although I didn't know it at the time. There were the stars. There were the neophytes. There were the young ones. There were the crybabies. And, surprisingly, there was almost no turnover from the old class.

I began with a few premises, which I presented to them directly. "I know there has been a kind of commitment to earth tones and realistic rendering, and I don't want you to give up any of that. But my feeling is that we are sitting here with a palette filled with color. For heaven's sake, let's use it. Let's find a way to use it. I don't want you to feel that you have to leave anything behind." We did some really marvelous things, just staggering to me. Many of my Saturday students were about ten years older than I was, had been stars in art school, had gone on to marriages and mortgages and advertising jobs, but felt stuck. They would come in on

Opposite page: *Summer's End*, 1995. Acrylic and oil on linen. 44 x 48 in.

At right: *Two Brides Exchanging Confidences*, 2007. Acrylic on linen, 28 x 30 in.

Saturdays and their lives would open up. They were filled with all of these skills and frustrations that were released and focused in coming to that studio. It created a tremendous energy and enthusiasm within the group.

IG: That's a very important trait of the League. How did this teaching experience compare with others?

MK: I would say it is difficult to draw comparisons with the world of academia. At FIT, which is a great part of the SUNY system, a syllabus is laid out week by week. There are grades and meetings. We developed some very powerful results from those young people. Still, one deals with a bureaucracy on a daily basis, and learns to work with it successfully. There is seldom the sense of the League's openness. The New School had a different student body, fewer young people, more task-oriented. Teaching there was always enjoyable but without the electricity that one experiences at the League.

IG: In your role as artist and as teacher, have things changed, or have times changed?

MK: I'm a glass is half-full guy. I'm also a survivor of "the figure-is-dead" moment. It is hard to imagine now the power that idea once had. These guys were painting full blast. They were throwing paint at the wall, hanging it up, putting it out there, and getting things written about it. And their manifesto was essentially that the figure is dead. They hadn't moved to some esoteric medium. The medium was the same, but the message was very different.

It gets back to the things one does "because of" versus the things we do "in spite of." Sometimes in spite of can be much stronger. Back then, I got up every day and fought my private war against these guys. When I was living in Rome, I had a conversation with Phillip Guston, who'd come there emotionally battered after his recent exhibition. Critics had savaged his new cartoon-oriented work—a jarring departure from his lyrical abstract compositions. In great part he was again working with the figure. He said to me something which has been widely quoted, "When you begin a painting, the room is full of the presence of other people—other artists, other influences—and one by one they leave, until at the end you are there all by yourself." It was only in a PBS interview years later that I heard him add: "Then at the end, you must leave too." Put simply, you do what you do and then you let go of it.

My feeling is that these struggles are constant. With the battle for photography long concluded, probably the next will involve digital media. Tension and resistance will persist. I'm hopeful about the pluralistic moment that we're experiencing, however disconcerting. So many things are OK right now; I feel far more comfortable in this environment than I did in the figure-is-dead environment. Though, for thousands of years the intent of art was really to create and communicate pleasure or awe. And so much of the art today is to create, in effect, lack of pleasure—pain or upset.



IG: Why do you think that is?

MK: Mainly, I suppose, it's become an attention-getting tactic. A seductive one. A very successful one.

IG: How much has teaching influenced your progress as an artist?

MK: When he was asked about his prodigious early output, playwright Arthur Miller explained (and I paraphrase), "When you're young, you feel as an artist that you can change the world with your art. I love the feeling that I get from young artists that they can change the world. Who knows, maybe they will."

I get a lot of satisfaction from play. I've always tried to get students to try something new. So if I force them, I should too. That's the extent of it.

IG: One last thing. Where is your relationship now with your art? Do you have any horizons now that you're hoping to reach?

MK: I suppose we never forget our first loves. I'm drawn more than ever to the subjects that have moved me over the years—the figure, landscape, interiors, flowers—and, yes, America. I still feel that if we have all those wonderful colors on our palette, let's use them. Perhaps what is different these days is that I give myself permission to linger a bit longer, to approach inspiration as well as problem solving

with a little extra time for thought and exploration. And to savor it all.

During those turbulent times in the 60s, two thoughts were constantly in mind. One was the quote from Matthew Arnold who reminded us more than a century ago:

Let us be true to one another...
For we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

And then there were the words of Symbolist poet Paul Valéry:

"Let us imagine that the sight of things which surround us is not familiar...and that we obtain only by a miracle our knowledge of the day, of human beings, of the heavens and of the sun. What would we say about these revelations ... what would we say of this complete and solid world—if it only appeared very occasionally?"

Those two visions came together very early in my work and have driven just about everything since. What I try to do is to see something as though it were being revealed for the very first time, mindful that I might not see it again for a very long time.

IG: That sums it up beautifully.