



TODAY'S
MASTERS

BY PETER TRIPPI

MORTON KAISH AT 90: STILL RELISHING NATURE

It's always cause for celebration when great art is exhibited, especially when it was made by a senior master whose work is not seen often enough. Such is the case with a show this autumn highlighting 30 works made by Morton Kaish (b. 1927) over the past three decades. As its title suggests, *Morton Kaish: Spring Rising, Landscape Paintings & Prints* focuses primarily on nature and flowers, though the artist is even better known for compelling close-ups of architectural forms, including the weathered barns, doors, and flags of his *America* series. After its successful presentation last spring at the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), *Spring Rising* is set to hang at New York City's National Arts Club October 2–27.

A DISTINCTIVE PATH

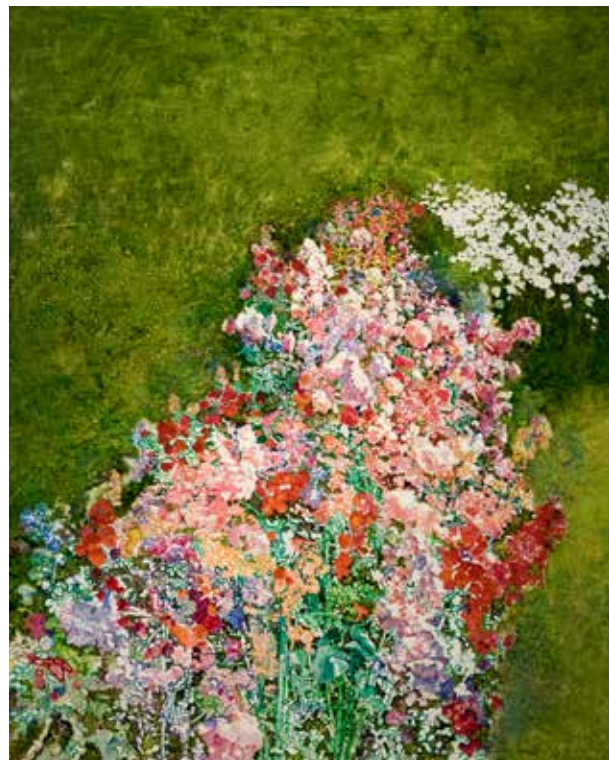
Kaish has pursued a remarkable career in art, one still very much underway. Born in New Jersey, he earned his B.F.A. at Syracuse University in the late 1940s, an extraordinary moment at that institution and indeed at many art schools nationwide. During his first two years at Syracuse, Kaish followed a traditional curriculum, including perspective, cast drawing, anatomy, and other time-tested techniques. The summer after his sophomore year, however, the entire art faculty was dismissed, so Kaish's final two years focused on more experimental modernist modes, including abstraction.



Chilmark, 2001, acrylic and oil on linen, 48 x 60 in., collection of Dr. Craig Schuman



(LEFT) *The Irish Chair with Passion Flower*, 2015, acrylic and oil on linen, 48 x 52 in., collection of Claire Holt and Paul Weber ■
 (BELOW) *Summer Garden*, New York, 1981, acrylic and oil on linen, 60 x 48 in., Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH



Without having sought such a contrast, Kaish actually got the best of both worlds, leaving Syracuse confident that, in his own words, “beauty could be married to design, form, and concept.”

In 1948, while they were still students, Kaish married the modernist sculptor Luise Clayborn Meyers (1925–2013). The talented couple spent two years in Rochester saving their earnings from advertising jobs, finally accumulating enough to live in Europe for a year. There they explored the great museums, and Morton studied briefly at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris and Florence’s Istituto Statale d’Arte. Though they returned to New York City, Rome drew them back for a two-and-a-half-year stay; Morton began etching and studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti. Back in New York again, he earned a living in advertising while garnering increasingly positive notices through shows at the galleries operated by George Staempfli, Hollis Taggart, and Irving Luntz. In 1970, Luise won a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome, where the couple enjoyed another three years. They spent the next

Hollyhock Cantata, 1983, acrylic on board, 36 x 36 in.

Cherrybuds, 1998, acrylic on linen, 48 x 44 in.

40 years working in their spacious Manhattan studio until Luise passed away in 2013. In the meantime, Morton was elected by his peers to the National Academy of Design, and shaped many younger careers through his teaching at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Art Students League, and other institutions.

Kaish's bifurcated training at Syracuse University partly explains his deft melding of boldly abstracted and realistically delineated forms. Knitting these impulses together are his superb management of light, vigorous brushwork, and the emotional intensity of his coloring. "I try to surround myself with buoyant, optimistic color," Kaish explains. "We artists sit here with a palette filled with color. For heaven's sake, let's use it!" Results, rather than technical purity, are what matter most: Kaish uses oils, acrylics, and sometimes a combination of both to obtain the effects he is seeking.

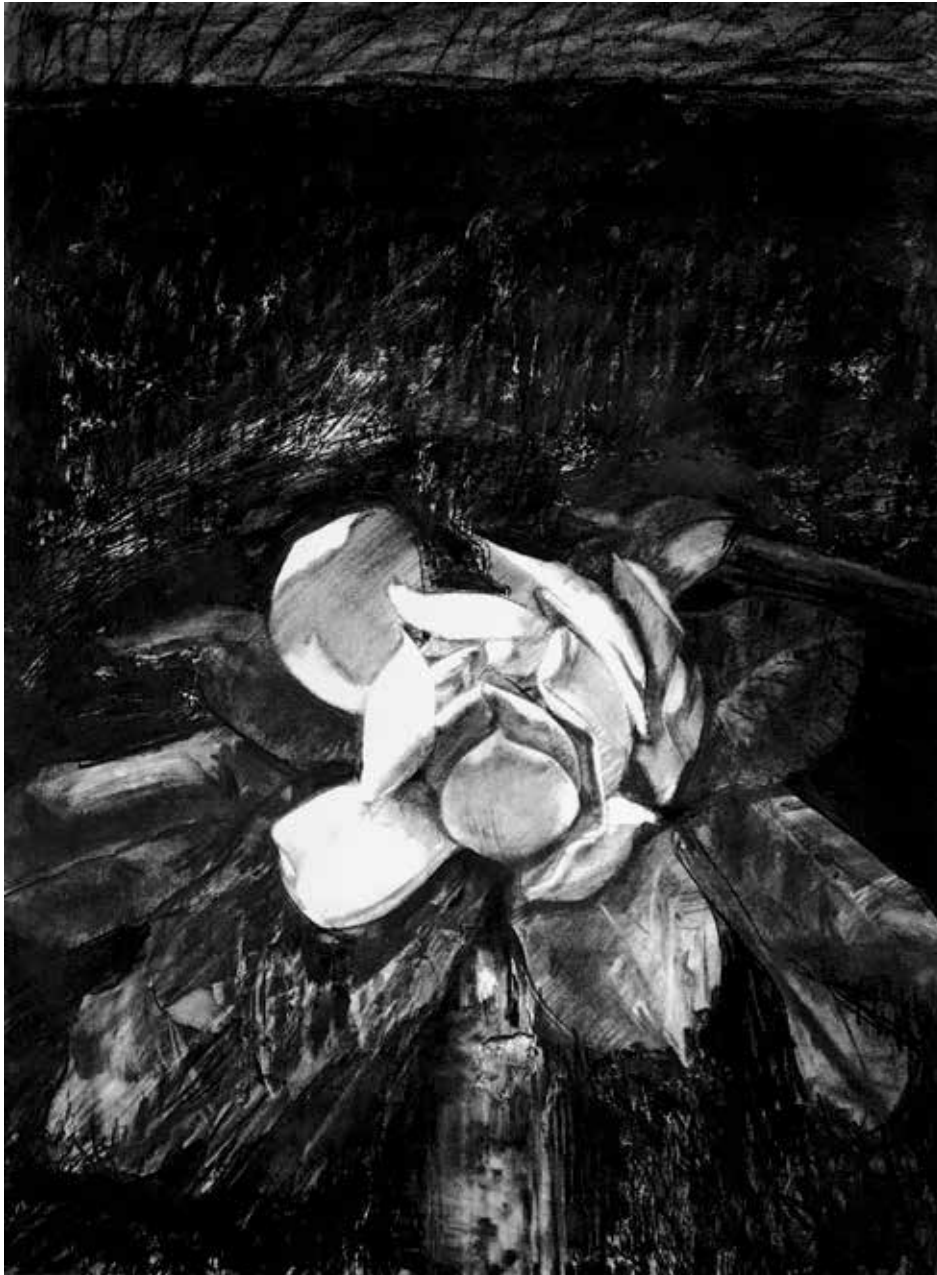
For Kaish, landscape serves as a point of departure, not as a motif to be recorded precisely. Like Whistler, he believes that "painting from nature should be done in the studio," so most of his scenery emerges from memory and imagination. Kaish is particularly partial to the meeting of sea and sky, an abstract fascination that began during his honeymoon on Cape Cod almost 70 years ago.

Kaish has not been painting flowers quite that long. In 1979, he and Luise visited Ireland's rural County Donegal, hoping "to paint the emerald landscape, but it rained day after day! So I ran out, picked wild flowers, put them on a wonderful old chair," and the rest is history. Kaish has used that Irish chair ever since (see page XX), and has pursued every possible avenue related to



(ABOVE) *Arrival I* (from *The Butterfly Trilogy*), 2017, acrylic on linen, 36 x 36 in. ■
(RIGHT) *Love Knot, Iris Bound*, 2004, monotype and collograph on rag paper, 12 x 10 in.





Awakening (from *The Magnolia Trilogy*), 2016, photogravure etching on rag paper, 29 x 22 in.

flowers. Seldom are they arranged neatly in vases; more often we are confronted by unruly, brilliantly colored cascades of them— be they in gardens, meadows, or growing wild by the sea. These visions flow from Kaish’s unique imagination, yet we cannot help recalling the equally ethereal flowered landscapes of Vienna’s Gustav Klimt, nor the proto-psychedelic garden paintings of the otherwise prim New England impressionist Childe Hassam.

As with his scenes of buildings, flags, and other geometric forms, close-ups appear regularly in Kaish’s images of plant life. In 1998, for instance, he began a series of works related to cherry trees, zooming in variously on their buds, stems, and other parts, sometimes blowing these details up as high as four feet (see page XX). This in-our-face approach carries over to Kaish’s printmaking practice, which includes photogravure etching, collagraph, and monotype. In *Love Knot*, *Iris Bound*, for example, the flower loses any connection to the adjective “pretty,” morphing instead into a symbol of strength and explosive vitality within the print’s expressive mark-making. Several years ago, Kaish made a series of three drawings depicting lovely white magnolia blooms. Last year,

he revisited them by making etchings with guidance from the master printer Lothar Osterburg; the results (illustrated at left) are notably more intense, even ominous, in their darkened power.

LOOKING FORWARD

Readers may recall an article in the April 2017 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur* highlighting artists like Glenna Goodacre who have planned their own legacies intelligently. Mentioned in that piece was the Kaish Family Art Project, which Morton’s daughter, Melissa, established with him in 2015 to preserve, promote, and exhibit the works of Luise and of Morton himself. This initiative offers a handsome website about the couple’s achievements, as well as an open invitation to collectors, scholars, and enthusiasts to get in touch on almost any matter. The project’s motto is “Past, Present, Future,” a sensible way to encompass Luise’s art as well as pieces Morton has yet to create. Indeed, the image from *The Butterfly Trilogy* illustrated here (*Arrival I*) was made just a few weeks ago, a reminder that turning 90 need not slow a passionate artist down. ●

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