

The Arts

Landscapes with glamour

Tobi Kahn shows why he's been called an heir to the Romantic landscape tradition.

By Victoria Donohue
INQUIRER ART CRITIC

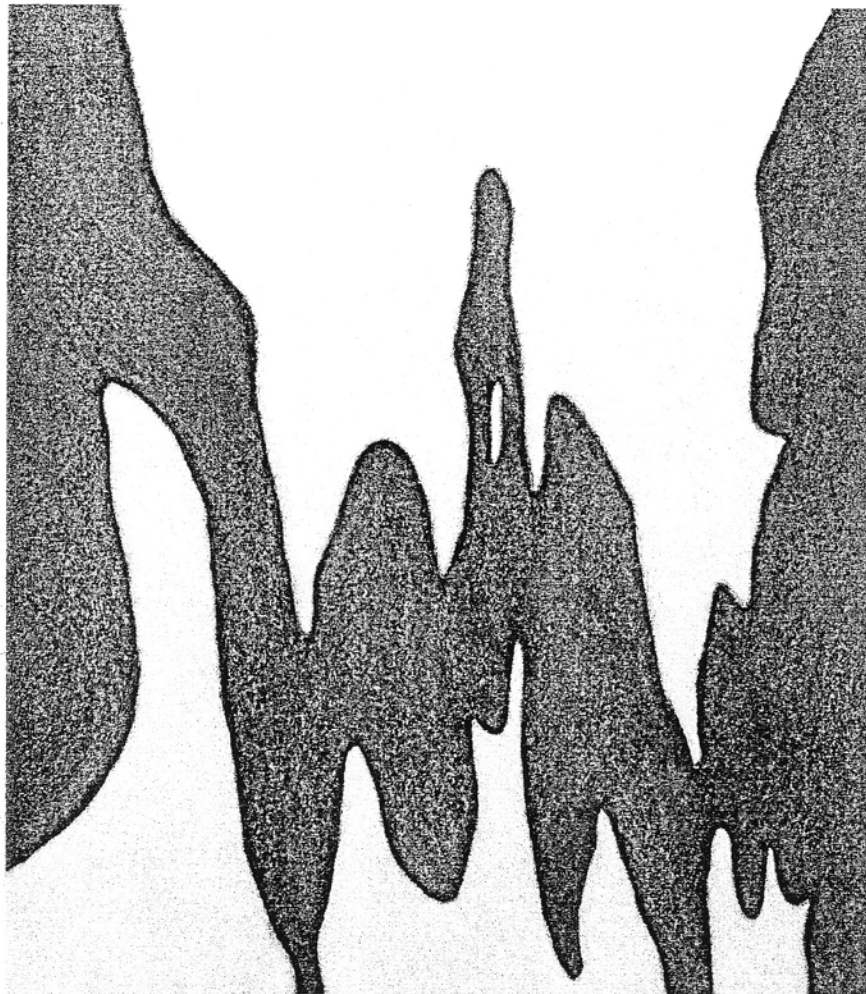
Just when it seemed that abstract painting had become shopworn, Tobi Kahn breathed new life into it by exploring the largely uncharted territory of abstract-landscape. As a young artist he showed himself in command of the paint medium and its possibilities, though he also worked in other media.

Today, at 50, in his painting show at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts in Wilmington, this native New Yorker demonstrates why he has repeatedly been called an heir to the Romantic American landscape painting tradition and, in that connection, one who follows a spiritual path in his art.

For nourishment Kahn calls upon metaphors, correspondence, and quotations from present-day discoveries in science such as cloning, and also takes his cues from satellite and other aerial photography as well as from microbiology, and geometrical and geological phenomena. Not that you would be aware of any of this at first glance in his current traveling show, which originated at Wichita State University's Ulrich Museum of Art. And not that you would quickly link him to an American Romantic landscapist of the Far West — say, Thomas Moran, who had roots in Philadelphia.

Yet look closely and you soon realize Kahn's recent work, covering slightly more than a decade, is perfectly balanced between extremes of abstract and representational. Highly associative images some of these are, suggesting aerial views of land formations and mountains or waterways against sky. Such work shares an affinity to ritual and a dependence on strong, simple imagery.

That imagery gives a unifying thread to the show, as does the marvelously rich tonal modulation of very subtle, almost flat colors that are achieved by an obviously laborious technique involving many layers of acrylic paint. And although this artist has had significant national recognition, still a kind of underdog glamour gives a special edge to this display. And glamorous these paintings are — handsome, mystical rather than religious, having an uneasy mixture of authority and idiosyncrasy — and sometimes just a bit



"Azce," by Tobi Kahn, is a 1997 acrylic on wood painting on exhibit at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts in Wilmington. The exhibit runs through June 18.

beyond human reach.

To another issue of abstraction — that of finding an expressive center to replace the discarded presence of people in his work — Kahn has found a solution only slightly less exalted. And this is where his closeness to the Romantic landscape tradition comes in.

For Kahn's paintings are populated by taut, jagged, abbreviated shapes filled out by fluctuating degrees of weight and spacial placement and always bound by bold yet shadowy contours. Thus by indirect means, Kahn manages to work up a kind of "sublime," because, having cleansed these abstractions of representational tags and decorative impulses, he then induces the viewer's memory to enter a metaphysical realm through this "passageway" he has opened.

Another reminder of old-time landscapists here is that, even though there's something decidedly modern about Kahn's tranquil abstract landscapes, the intended effect is one of idyllic nature seen

in an otherworldly light. And his paintings' most appealing quality here is their preciousness, achieved by the very tedious paint-application technique.

Yet equally important is the sense of mystery conveyed by these panoramic views either reduced in scale or magnified that have become consistently beatific. It's as though Kahn reacted to the free-wheeling neo-expressionism of our day by returning to a style that is almost academic in effect, and to themes that are reassuringly distant from both city life and the bedrock of tradition.

The whole of his approach here is a kind of play on the traditional flatness of the picture surface. In this way, Kahn's work, with its heavy coating of cool and warm earth and nature tones and semblance of brilliant natural light, never leaves the vocabulary of abstraction. Instead Kahn makes the delicate "tightrope balance" between it and the representation of reality a thing to behold in awed silence.

Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, 200 South Madison St. on the riverfront, Wilmington. Kahn to June 18, Schimmel to July 2. Tuesdays, Thursdays & Fridays 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Wednesdays 10-8, Saturdays 10-5, Sundays 1-5. Kahn will give a free public talk at 7 p.m. Thursday. 302-656-6466.

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