



INTRODUCTION

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Laise Kaish at the opening of her exhibition, American Academy in Rome, 1972

Luise Kaish was a major figure in American art of the mid- to late twentieth century. Over the course of her seven-decade-long career, Kaish produced an immense body of work in multiple mediums—including stone, bronze, stainless steel, collage, and acrylic—and in styles ranging from abstract to representational. She explored a wide range of subjects, from small- and large-scale biblical works to painterly collages and landscape paintings. She is widely known for her monumental commissions, epic, ambitious works using techniques like casting and welding that had historically been associated only with male artists. From the early 1950s until her death in 2013, Kaish exhibited regularly in museums and galleries, to great acclaim. She was one of few women to receive the most coveted artist awards of her day and her art was collected by the most important museums in the United States. She was also an educator. At a time when few women artists were getting hired in prominent art faculty positions, in 1980 Kaish was appointed chair of the Division of Painting and Sculpture at Columbia University in order to rebuild the department—a position she held until 1986.

Kaish was highly recognized in her heyday and lauded by all of the major American art critics. Irving Sandler praised the expanse of her sculptural works as representative of “the awesomeness of the breadth of God”; Robert M. Coates described her reliefs in bronze as possessing a “sweeping energy that parallels the turbulence of Turner in painting”; John Canaday described Kaish as “a rarity” whose sculpture had attained “a sense of power and authority leavened with a poetic innocence,” and whose stylistic sources—Meštrović, Baskin, Pomodoro—though recognizable, were not imitative and avoided traditional clichés; and Harold Rosenberg singled out her work in a group show in 1967 as one of the “masterpieces,” alongside George Segal, Elaine de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Ben Shahn, and Red Grooms.¹

A retrospective exhibition in 1973 at the Jewish Museum, which included work produced over two decades, further solidified Kaish’s career as an artist of great importance. A contemporary review noted that the exhibition demonstrated her “continuing search for the sacred” and that “it is this spiritual sense which distinguishes her work from other sculptors of her generation.”² At a time when post-minimalism and conceptual art were at their height, Kaish’s interest in biblical themes and the sacred set her apart from the art world’s reigning aesthetics. Yet curator Avram Kampf argued that her abstract works, which “derive from her deep mystical inclinations,” were wholly contemporary insofar as they explored “untold regions and stages of an internal universe.”³

Despite the fact that religion, spirituality, and the sacred have been vital wellsprings of Western art for two millennia, during Kaish’s lifetime these subjects were decidedly out of fashion. This is not the case today, as the overthrowing of formalism and its narrow definition of modernism are bringing these subjects back into play. Thus, in order to contextualize Kaish’s work fully, it is necessary to situate her within the context of an alternative

modernism—one that posits a parallel history to formalism in which artists use abstraction to express spiritual explorations.

Charlene Spretnak’s groundbreaking book *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art* is critical to a rethinking of conventional histories that emphasize the formalist underpinnings of the emergence of abstraction in twentieth-century art.⁴ Spretnak posits that spirituality, as seen in the works of Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi, Mark Rothko, Louise Nevelson, and others, was the driving force of modernism. This is a history that was largely suppressed by mid-century critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg and is only recently gaining widespread recognition. It is within this context that Kaish’s work gains renewed relevance. Eleanor Heartney’s essay in this volume, “An Art of the Spirit,” provides the context for Kaish’s devotion to the spiritual in art, arguing that she moved from an exploration of themes from Jewish scripture to more mystical and abstract expressions based on her interest in Kabbalah, pantheism, and space exploration.

Kaish’s early biography is fascinating. She received a bachelor and a master’s degree in fine arts from Syracuse University, traveled extensively and internationally, studied art history with Diego Rivera and painting with Alfredo Zalce in Mexico City, sang with the Mexican national chorus, and rode with the Mexican Olympic riding team. In her essay “Becoming Luise Kaish, Sculptor of Spirit,” Gail Levin examines Kaish’s extraordinary biography of the 1940s–60s, including her childhood, religious upbringing, graduate years, marriage, first sculpture commission, and European travels, as well as her early monumental sculptural commissions, for which she partnered with leading architects. She underscores the gender bias in the art world at that time, and situates Kaish as one of a few women sculptors of her generation to gain professional success despite the odds, alongside Ruth Asawa, Jackie Ferrara, Yayoi Kusama, and Beverly Pepper. Public commissions by women artists were largely unheard of in Kaish’s day, and her works serve as early reminders of monumental sculptural achievement by women in a male-dominated field.

Samuel Gruber explores Kaish’s biography through the perspective of her religious art, from her biblical bronzes to her commissions, with special attention paid to the artist’s ability to move from figurative to abstract to cerebral, based on the needs of each commission. He situates Kaish’s work in relation to pre–World War II Jewish American sculptors such as William Zorach and Nathan Rapoport. Gruber delves into Kaish’s role as a thinker as well as a sculptor, highlighting the key religious texts she consumed in preparation, which ranged from a close reading of the Bible and Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*, and later the mystical text of the Zohar and writings on Jewish mysticism by Gershom Scholem. Gruber examines Kaish’s commission for Temple B’rith Kodesh at length, presenting it as an important work in the context of synagogue history: first, because the commission was granted to a woman, which was unprecedented at that time, and second, because the commission represented human figures, which Gruber describes as “an exciting shock.”⁵

In his essay “Voyages of Discovery,” Daniel Belasco also examines Kaish’s monumental bronze sculptures, which the artist produced between 1951 and 1976. Focusing on the religious commissions, Belasco describes how Kaish resolved technical challenges associated with large-scale sculptures, analyzing their production processes, materials used, and sensitivity to site as key indicators of her artistic brilliance as a sculptor. Belasco also offers a detailed history of the commissions themselves: how they came about, how decisions on content were made, and how Kaish ultimately produced them, collaborating with fabricators, riggers, shippers, installers, and architects.

While working on her large-scale sculptural commissions, Kaish continued throughout the late 1950s and 1960s to produce smaller sculptures that packed a dramatic punch, often with religious themes. She exhibited forty-six cast or welded bronzes, for instance, at her first solo show at the Sculpture Center in New York in 1958—a show that was favorably received by such major art critics as Dore Ashton, Irving Sandler, and Robert Dash, with the latter highlighting the “sudden sense of epiphany and the blistering pain of revelation that infused the works.”⁹⁸ She was also simultaneously exhibiting her work in group shows at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Sculptors Guild, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Sculpture Center, as well as the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and other national venues. During this period, Kaish produced a series of desert-themed welded abstractions inspired by travels through the American West, and a series of welded figures, including a variety of animals and girls at play. In 1967, she produced her first overtly political work, *Equation*, for the important *Protest and Hope: An Exhibition of Contemporary American Art* at the New School for Social Research that featured works in response to the social turbulence of the 1960s.

In the late seventies, Kaish turned to the medium of collage, and she began layering, scarring, tearing, and burning her canvases—attacking them as a sculptor would to give them three-dimensionality. Norman Kleeblatt, in his essay “Abstraction/Frustration/Transformation,” focuses on a specific group of works from the 1970s known as the “burnt-works,” tracing their origins and examining the formal and structural aspects of their creation. Kleeblatt connects Kaish’s approach to the processes of assemblage and especially “femmage,” which were being exhibited, articulated, and codified in the 1960s and 1970s. He also examines her approach in terms of destructive impulses in the practice of postwar American artists in general, and the kabbalistic concept of creation by destruction, which was being popularized for intellectual consumption through the writings of Gershom Scholem.

By the mid-1980s, Kaish was producing rip-and-spot painterly collages. About her collages, Kaish explained, “I re-entered painting through the medium of collage which enabled me to still work tactically with materials on a two-dimensional surface while satisfying some of my craving for color as an expressive experience.”⁹⁹ In a review of her 1981 exhibition of collages at Staempfli Gallery in New York, Roger Lipsey describes how the new works



Fig. 1 Luise Kaish, *Storm Sitka No. 1*, 1980, mixed media on canvas, 8 × 9 ½ in. (20.3 × 24.1 cm)

revealed “a sculptor’s sensibility in its architectonic structure of overlapping planes, ambiguous spaces, and sensitivity to the mass of thin canvas stripping.”⁹⁸ As Kaish said at the time, “I build, layer, tear, and rebuild my canvas reliefs, at times contemplatively, at times in a frenzy of energy.”⁹⁹ This shift in Kaish’s practice represents a movement from her minimalism aesthetic of the early to mid-1970s towards an increasingly painterly post-minimalist style in which the hand of the artist is everywhere apparent (Fig. 1).

Kaish continued producing experimental paintings into the late 1980s, exhibiting many of them in her 1988 solo show *New Paintings* at Staempfli Gallery. Reviewing the exhibition for *Arts Magazine*, critic Gerrit Henry described the works as “simultaneously handsome and rambunctious.”¹⁰ He isolated one work as a particular favorite: *New York Heart* (1986–87), which he described as a “zaniily disfigured figure” with a corrugated cardboard house and inset heart with purple and red perpendiculars for arms—“a painted and collaged pictorial



Fig. 2 Luise Kaish, *New York Heart*, 1986-87, mixed media on canvas, 55 x 33 ¼ in. (139.7 x 85.7 cm)



Fig. 3 Luise Kaish, *Blossom Allée*, circa 1993-98, oil on linen, 16 x 22 in. (40.6 x 55.9 cm)

chaos for a body" (Fig. 2).¹¹ Other compositions from this period were quasi-geometric, like *New York Blue* (1985-87), a multihued orb-with-triangle resting lightly on little cream and horizontal blue stripes—a composition Henry argued "could out-geo Neo-Geo."¹²

Roger Lipsey's essay in this volume, "Place and Journey: The Later Art of Luise Kaish," explores Kaish's painterly production of the 1980s, with special attention paid to her series of paintings and collages titled *Lovers Houses* (1983-90) and *Portals* (mid-1980s), which reveal her preference at the time for contrasting colors, asymmetry, and architectonic elements. Lipsey describes how Kaish donned the sensibility of the modernist tradition that she had studied during her travels, comparing her work to the French group Les Nabis and such artists as Kasimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, and Robert Rauschenberg. Yet, despite Kaish's nods to these great modernist masters, her works were altogether her own,

“masterful rather than imitative.” As a maker of icons, Kaish developed her own visual language, filling her paintings with “energy, inventiveness, vitality, celebration.” Kaish’s works invite us to linger, Lipsey argues.

In the 1990s, until her death in 2013, Kaish moved away from abstraction, producing innumerable painted landscapes. These works are remarkable in that Kaish began utilizing ultra-bright, Fauve-like colors for the first time in her long career. She was inspired by the high skies over the Hudson River, the Long Island Hamptons, and southern Florida. Her favorite point of inspiration at this time was an off-the-path secluded grove of very old flowering trees in Central Park, a place she called her “allée,” where she returned again and again (Fig. 3). Kaish presented the land- and skyscape paintings in a solo exhibition at the Century Association in New York in 1998, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s at the National Academy of Design, where she was a member.

Throughout her career, Kaish was an exceptional chronicler of her creative process. Toward the end of her life, she summed up her thoughts on art:

“Who knoweth the spirit of man?” In this search, and with the fundamental earth, the artist strives after the spirit. In the series of shapes and forms he creates, he expresses his feelings towards his fellow man and the world he knows. Form without content is a pleasing diversion. Man has many faces and many cultures and in his innate drive to express himself and to re-create, his art has taken on many different aspects. When stripped of the superficial, the timely aspect, the great art of all ages remains to us as a monumental entity, the soaring of man’s contention with the finite, his search for the infinite, his identification with God.¹³

Like Nicolas Poussin before her, Kaish aimed to “paint the passions.” She did just that during her extraordinarily prolific and celebrated career. She will be remembered for her immense talent, highly individual point of view, pursuit of the sublime, keen execution, and passion for life, which, despite the tides of changing tastes, will remain forever significant.

Endnotes

1. Irving Sandler, “Luise Kaish,” *Art News* 57 (April 1958); Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries: Whither, Whither?” *The New Yorker*, December 19, 1964, 152–55; John Canaday, “10 Studio Exhibitions Are Summarized,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1968; Harold Rosenberg, “Art of Bad Conscience,” *Artworks and Packages* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969).
2. “Kaish Exhibit Opens at Jewish Museum,” review of the exhibition *Luise Kaish Sculpture* at the Jewish Museum, New York, unknown publication, c. October 1973, clipping, Luise Kaish archives, New York.
3. Avram Kampf, “Introduction,” *Luise Kaish Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1973), 5.
4. Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
5. Samuel Gruber, *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003), 124.
6. Robert Dash, “Luise Kaish,” *Arts Magazine* 32, no. 7 (April 1958): 63.
7. “Luise Writings,” Luise Kaish archives.
8. Roger Lipsey, “Luise Kaish’s Small Worlds,” *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 3 (November 1981): 160.
9. *Luise Kaish: Recent Collages*, exh. cat. (New York: Staempfli Gallery, 1981).
10. Gerrit Henry, “Luise Kaish: A Lyrical Essay,” *Arts Magazine* 62, no. 7 (March 1988): 88.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Luise Kaish, preparatory notes for *Luise Kaish*, exh. cat. (New York: Sculpture Center, 1958), Luise Kaish archives.