

Michael Kessler > Reviews and Essays

MICHAEL KESSLER: THE SENSE(S) OF ABSTRACTION (Exhibition Catalogue Essay for Callan Contemporary, New Orleans - 2013)

By Peter Frank

Beneath their pearlescent skin, Michael Kessler's paintings breathe – breathe, you might think, like the flora whose limbs and trunks course through his compositions; but, no, they breathe more as music breathes. To be sure, the spine, visual and spiritual, of Kessler's painting is that of the natural – the botanical – world. But the sense of structure that pervades his paintings maintains an elaborate, patterned density all its own, one you start to hear as you see it. Intricately contrapuntal partitions, multiphonic overlays, shifting sequences of dark and light, large and small, flatness and texture, color and grisaille predominate in particular in his newest work. In their flow and punctuation, these latest paintings are veritable scores for hearing – or soundings for seeing.

Although he acknowledges their musical nature, Kessler does not produce these tableaux in response to any musical stimulus, specific composition or general formula. Indeed, until recently his own commentary and others' has stressed the natural – the "organic" – factors giving the work its swooping, crackling linear presence. The lyricism infusing Kessler's painting resides, in fact, in its myriad branches and veins, factors that do not contribute to the paintings' melodic or harmonic quality but flavor it with a nuance that determines timbre. You might say they constitute the instrumental – that is, optical – inflection here. But, to re-emphasize, such visual-sonic equivalence is no more impulse of the artist than it is the fancy of the viewer.

One may be on more secure ground identifying Kessler's structure as architectural. The off-beat recurrence of geometric forms framing and interrupting the persistent, underlying treelike forms and images can certainly be likened to eccentric arrangements of windows in the façades of modernist buildings: Le Corbusier and Niemeyer would recognize Kessler's sense of order as a recapitulation of their own. In many paintings the trees and branches appear framed by these apertures. But, goes the aphorism, architecture is frozen music, and there is a flow to these paintings' disposition that urges the eye to travel, to see all the visual incident as at least potentially in flux. Deliberately or not, Kessler may have determined the moment at which architecture's solidity gives way to music's fluidity.

All that said, note should be made as well of the mood – the tone – set in these paintings. It is a shifting tone, one that doesn't simply set organic intricacy against the geometric pacing of a built environment, but builds on the animated superposition of these two sets of elements, on the contrast and the continuity that maintain between them. Certain of the newer paintings can seem brittle, dry and wintry, while others radiate an earthy warmth. They evoke weather and flavor, age and scent.

Metaphorically, at least, these paintings appeal to all five senses. You can taste them with your ears.

Michael Kessler invites such synesthetic hyperbole through a process of deformation. He restricts his vocabulary to certain subjects and certain forms, then breaks down these forms and subjects by running them into and through one another. In musical terms, it is a formidable polyphony – a polyphony felt with an immediacy that transcends, or more to the point breaks through, metaphoric equivalency. You do hear them with your eyes.

ARTnews, November 2005

Michael Kessler at Nuart, Santa Fe, page 191

by Richard Speer

Few painters wax more poetically about the ongoing duel between Apollonian order and Dionysian chaos than Michael Kessler. In these abstract paintings (all 2005) Kessler continued his well-honed superimposition of squares and rectangles atop luxuriantly layered organic backgrounds, shot through with arcing spurts of acrylics, varnishes, and gesso. Depending on the interplay of materials, some works finish glossy, others waxy; some layers recede into muted planes, while others sear forth as if barely containing some preternatural incandescence.

It is an unlikely updating of Hans Hofmann, this skillfully modulated push-and-pull between the polar drives to surmount nature and to surrender to it, rather like ancient ruins, toppled and overgrown with vines. Kessler's ruins are his immaculate geometries, cancer-eaten by lichen like tendrils that spread across and penetrate into the thickly built-up paint. There is something poignant in this.

Chromatically, Kessler has long enjoyed the alchemy between black and red. Jewel-like works such as *Kalliexult* in the interplay of onyx and ruby tones. But recently the artist has ventured into thrilling greens—grading *Alder* from chartreuse to kelly to forest—and blues—using *Narita* and *Fishpond* as springboards for exploring cerulean and ultramarine, navy and midnight.

Kessler seems to feed off his colors saturation; when he departs from it, as in the less exhilarating *ecru etudes*, he loses his bearings. It is as if he senses that in the great battle his work chronicles, nature always wins; the best humanity can do is live—and paint—with intensity.

Philadelphia Weekly, 2004

Michael Kessler's New Work at Schmidt/Dean Gallery, Philadelphia

by Roberta Fallon

Michael Kessler's new acrylic paintings at Schmidt-Dean have remarkable charm. Hard-edged imagery (stripes, rectangles and grids) tempered by soft, loopy lines, the works have saturated color and sexy surface textures, and they appeal on several levels. References to geometry and grids suggest the discipline of science or carpentry. Squares suggest windows, dark bars could be spirit levels, and several works have maplike qualities. Regulus, for example, looks like the surface of the moon seen from a great distance--only gridded over as if it's being surveyed.

But Kessler's not painting floor plans, nor is he really making maps. His multilayered works evoke mirages and are more spiritual than material. Like hard-edged pieces by Hans Hoffman, the large works on panel--with musical names like Kumari and Tagar--allude to doors of perception as much as to real doors. You might think of Russian suprematist Kasimir Malevich when looking at Kessler's squares within squares. But the artist's floating apparitions are more in keeping with the spiritual questing of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.

Because of their beautiful surfaces, colors and wonderful sense of space, the works are like an old flannel shirt--comfortable and homey. In fact, cloth may also be a reference. Kessler, who used to live in Kutztown and was one of Schmidt-Dean's first exhibiting artists, now lives in the Southwest, where things like Navajo rugs may seep into his work. Gallery director Chris Schmidt sees those references in some of Kessler's red and black paintings.

Kessler experiments with his paint techniques and likes to work outside, says Schmidt. "He lets the elements do their thing ... sometimes he pours water on [the painting] and lets it puddle and dry," he says. That would explain the rippling topography of some of the surfaces, which are reminiscent of rivers and mountain ranges.

But the artist isn't the first to play with the elements in a painting. Sigmar Polke experimented in the 1980s with embedding crushed rock and metal dust in resin on a canvas and letting the surface age and change. Kessler's play is less alchemical than Polke's, but the impulse to incorporate the elements into a painting is the same.

These 2004 works, with their straight-forward shapes hovering over wide-open backgrounds, seem worlds apart from contemporary East Coast art-making. This isn't Southwest regional painting, but it still made me think about regional distinctions and whether we'll lose them at some point in the rush to globalize taste. That would be a shame.

"Michael Kessler: New Paintings" Through July. Schmidt-Dean Gallery, 1710 Sansom St. 215.569.9433. www.schmidtdean.com

Willamette Week, 2003

Portland, Or.

by Richard Speer

Michael Kessler's New Work at BUTTERS GALLERY

Michael Kessler is not a trompe l'oeil painter, but he could be. The Santa Fean's geometric abstractions at Butters look as if they were fashioned from exotic woods-mahogany layered atop stained oak, with inlays of teak-but there's no wood here, only acrylic paint. Kessler gets the tricky effect by trowelling, pouring, or squirting gesso onto his canvases, building up layers of texture and pulling various tools through the quick-drying mess, allowing the materials to mix and colors to seep into one another. "Wood is a big influence on my work," he said at his First-Thursdays opening, a tall fellow with a long beard, long hair, and a well-tailored charcoal suit. "In my painting I'm going for a synthesis of the natural elements, such as the look of wood, and the geometric elements." Kessler's rectangles and squares float in asymmetric compositions. The color palette, generally earth-toned ochres and browns-rises from earth to sky in the work *Incremental*, a study in shades of blue. One is tempted to draw parallels between these colors and those of Northern New Mexico, where the artist has lived for the past eight years, but the intense saturation suggests not so much the sand and tumbleweed of the high desert as the spongy, rotted undergrowth of Northern California's coastal redwood forests. (Kessler hiked the Columbia River Gorge the morning of the show opening and returned agush over the splendors of moss, waterfalls, and old growth. "I took my shoes off," he confesses, "and squished the mud between my toes.") In the painting *Thatch*, Kessler collages pieces of notebook paper, placing vertical lines closely together in an incongruous evocation of the UPC bar code. The show's standout piece, *Deuterium*, unites simplicity and complexity in rectangular planks in impossibly rich browns. Yellow lines at right angles oppose one another in jaunty rhythm throughout the painting, bespeaking their genesis from both nature and the human hand.

The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2002

Edward J. Sozanski - INQUIRER ART CRITIC

March 29, 2002 **Section:**

Variations on a theme of favorite artists In the galleries: Intriguing homages gentle geometry magic "fireballs" electricity.

Taming the grid. **Michael Kessler's** newest abstract paintings at Schmidt/Dean Gallery exhibit a refinement of the scraped-pigment technique that produces a small wonder.

Kessler's paintings tend to be grid-based, but his delicate layering of acrylic pigments and use of fringed bars soften their rectilinear structure to the point where one almost doesn't notice it. The geometry, in the form of stripes, bands and even a checkerboard, doesn't disappear, but under **Kessler's** hand it acquires a gentle, poetic quality, which is unusual in this kind of painting. His gentle palette, dominated by warm colors such as red, sienna and brown, contributes significantly to this effect. When he combines these

hues with white and black, he achieves a luscious, if improbable, amalgam of bright strength and subdued fragility.

Schmidt/Dean Gallery, 1710 Sansom St. 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Through April 13. 215-569-9433

The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

Sunday, December 1, 2002

Southwest Influences Pa. Native's Paintings

By **Kurt Shaw**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC

Sunday, December 1, 2002

After standing for a few minutes in a gallery full of paintings by Michael Kessler, it is easy to see why the artist, an eastern Pennsylvania native and onetime visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon University, packed up his paints and moved his family out to New Mexico nearly seven years ago. "Anything that affects your head positively affects your work," Kessler says from his home near Galisteo, N.M., southeast of Santa Fe. "Being here has been very good for my health and well being." Being here in Pittsburgh, standing in the middle of Kessler's current show of 32 recent paintings at Concept Art Gallery in Regent Square, is a lot like being there in New Mexico where the warm palette of the high desert contrasts with the overwhelmingly vast, cool blue sky. You'll find those same colors in these paintings. But Kessler is not a landscape painter. He is an abstract painter. And even though his paintings are purely abstract, they are full of the meditative qualities found in nature. And nature's influence is undeniable in his work. "The nature that is around me has been very influential," Kessler says. "The sky out here is gorgeous. You can see for a hundred miles in any direction."

In two large paintings — "Tracking" and "Collider" — Kessler has brought the sky down to earth with long streaks of transparent-blue color on large painted grounds of muddled whites. In two smaller untitled works to the left of those pieces, pools of blue color cling to the picture plane as if a frozen moment in which water is sheeting off of a windowpane. "These are both a stylistic and technical departure for him," gallery owner Sam Berkovitz says about Kessler. Berkovitz has represented the artist since giving him a solo show in 1994, when Kessler was a visiting professor of art at CMU.

Back then, Kessler's paintings were characterized by a multi-layered process that involved numerous skimmed and scraped layers of acrylic paint. A process that arose from a year spent abroad after receiving the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome in 1990.

In the earlier works, Kessler proved that less is more through thin layers of acrylic paint that he would laboriously skim and let dry. Repeating the process until, some 40 to 60 layers later, the underlying imperfections would build up until the whole surface became

a complete visual record of the process itself. But now the layers have gotten even thinner, and their numbers even higher. "He's no longer troweling the paint," Berkovitz says. "Now he is pooling it and manipulating it."

Each new painting now requires as many as 150 layers of watered-down acrylic paint to achieve the desired effects. Pools and thin washes of color that dry quickly in the Southwestern sun — the result of painting outdoors, which Kessler has done for years now. "Over the past six or seven years, the washes have intensified," Kessler says. They have now become a significant part of his process, with some of the earlier skimming processes only partially evident.

At the entrance to the second-floor gallery space, three paintings — "Datum," "Antares L" and "Antares R" — attest to this, but still signify considerable changes, not the least of which is Kessler's overall palette, which has moved from dark to light. In the main exhibition area, the work is more fluid. Even so, Kessler has not given up on the grid. Like his earlier works, these pieces still hold tight to geometry, metaphorically alluding to man's impact on nature. It is, after all, human nature to want to impose structure on nature, and these paintings still adhere to that. If they didn't, they would lack their inherent dichotomy, that juxtaposition of the geometric and the organic that give them their beautiful sting. As in three large works — "Inclination," "Function" and "Chondrule" — which are hung as if a triptych, where Kessler divides passages of blue and white into rectilinear forms as if mesas imposing their shadows on the desert sky.

Other works are even closer to the earth, holding to sepia washes and umber tones. Sometimes mimicking the strata of the earth itself, as in "Rift," which appears as if a sliver of the earth's crust has risen out of the ground to reveal the layers hidden beneath. Or, in the case of works such as "Eruption," "Stishovite" and "Spicules," which easily could be imagined as containing the intensity of color and texture found in the earth's core.

By now, abstract art is viewed as a tradition — a convention of art making like any other whose very processes are prone to result in passages that recall its past. And even though in Kessler's work there are echoes of abstract expressionism — Mark Rothko, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, something to which the artist readily admits — he still manages to maintain his position as one of the few abstract painters working today who are moving the genre forward.

Pasatiempo, 2002, Surface Matters, by Robert Nott

Surface Builder - [New Works by Michael Kessler at Nuart Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico](#)

Here's a good "what if" scenario for you. What if you were faced with a doorway into a multilevel world of color where you could, perhaps, unearth some answers about art or nature or life?

Santa fe artist Michael Kessler's acrylic-on-panel multi layered pieces suggest doorways to just such a place. There's only one catch- these doors have no handles. You have to find your own way in, and once you've entered, you may have to find your own way out. Even then you may not find the answers you are seeking.

"Appearances are deceptive, and anyone who is interested in the true nature of the universe knows that there are far more questions than answers." Kessler said , quoting from the artist's statement he had created. "The more we know, the more we know we don't know. I want my paintings to reflect both the desire to know and the futility of trying to know."

Judging by a look at the artist's current body of work, Kessler is succeeding. And Nuart Gallery 670 Canyon Road, is presenting some of Kessler's mysterious doors to nature with the exhibit Surface Builder. The show opens today, June 14, with a reception from 5 to 7 pm., and runs through July 2.

Nature plays a big role in Kessler's work and even acts as a collaborator in the creative process. He uses primarily earth tones in his work leading the viewer to see such natural elements as mountains, fog, rivers, and sky on the main surface.

But Kessler chose the title "Surface Builder" for a reason. He builds surfaces. Lots of them - upward of a 100. So if you take the time to really study one piece, you'll see past the veneer, that the works are like one of those models you studied in high school science where various levels of ground are peeling away, revealing shades of tone and nuance with each layer.

In short he's not really trying to capture the way nature looks literally but rather how it works, which despite any scientific analysis being done on the subject, is as challenging a goal as lassoing nebula in the sky.

"I'm building a surface, " Kessler explained. "And not so much an image. I see my work as a metaphor for nature - about wondering how it (nature) got that way, realizing that we may never find out.

"I'm interested in beauty, but not a superficial or superfluous beauty - something deeper."

Kessler uses custom-made hand tools, including trowels and skimmers to lay and push layers of paint across the canvases, canvases that sometimes are first covered with etchings, rubbings, or symbols of some kind.

Often he lays the pieces aside to dry, allowing the sun, the wind, and other natural elements to play a hand in shaping the final product. Sometimes this approach leads to interesting rivulets winding their way across his surfaces.

The canvases are stretched over panels, giving off the illusion of a hard surface. Sometimes Kessler's facades sport lines and paneled squares that do suggest a wooden door - but again one without a visible handle or knob to open it.

The Pennsylvania native began making art as a child. He said there was no doubt in his mind - or in his parents mind - that he would become an artist. He's been luckier than

most artists, for aside from a relatively brief period driving a school bus he's been able to eke out a living being creative.

He received a bachelor of fine arts degree from Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, which had a terrific visiting artist program he said, putting students in touch with well-known contemporary , art critics, and art writers, as well as an array of performing artists.

One such visitor was composer Philip Glass, who gave Kessler this piece of advice: "Don't try to put your work out there until you're in your late twenties. Take the time time to develop it first. I know it hard to be that patient, but it's necessary."

Kessler followed the advice. Painting five or six hours every day while driving a bus, and he has always been happy that he did. His postacademic work was modeled in the style of Andrew Wyeth, with an emphasis on realistic portraits and landscapes. This current series of abstract acrylic works is part of a progression that has evolved well over 20 years, he said.

He doesn't preplan his work, trusting his instincts to tell him what to do and where to go. He also doesn't dwell on lengthy explanations about what the work means. "It's like an improvisatory dance." he said of his work methods. "Like a series of sequential steps with each layer leading me to the next one. I compare it to feeling your way through a dark forest at night."

But isn't that a daunting prospect to face day after day?

"It is daunting." he replied. "But if you go through the forest at night enough times, eventually you get good at it."

Cleveland Free Times

MIND OVER MATTER

MICHAEL KESSLER'S SHIFTING STORMS

by **Douglas Max Utter**

Published May 23-29, 2001

Something mystical can develop in the relationship between painters and their materials. Like a difficult marriage, this exchange tends to be boundlessly frustrating and sublimely harmonious by turns. Those who rationalize the artistic process may find the drama pretentious or absurd; but there would be little in the way of fine art without mood swings and grandiosity, not to say delusion. If art isn't important enough to rate emotional intensity, why bother? There are better, and more obviously useful, ways of making a living.

Michael Kessler's subtle and oblique abstract paintings make a good case for the idea that art is worth doing. Though not overtly passionate, it seems especially clear in these strangely romantic works that the dynamics of compromise and passion can infuse paint with moments borrowed from the secret structure of love. Appearing subdued at first, they begin to crackle with energy on longer examination, gradually becoming downright

brazen in their overt, sensuous beauty.

Kessler's 20 works at Bonfoey (counting one leaning against a wall, and not including one in the basement or another hanging at the back of an adjacent office) cover a visual scale from micro to macro, in tones ranging between dawn and midnight. *Lens 9*, perched above the stairs, is one of the larger paint-on-panel works on display. Rich acrylic reds and glowing blacks are arranged in layered rectangles, hovering over a partially concealed ocher grid. That such a formally conceived composition seems more psychological than mathematical, more related to reverie than optics, is tribute to Kessler's patient and intuitive command of his medium.

Three small untitled paintings on a nearby wall are equally arresting. Each features a raised linear element that loops around and upward, stringlike, just above the surface of an underlying field of layered color. At the far end of the gallery, a very different small painting, also untitled, uses deep horizontal scars to generate another kind of linear activity, and a sense of dark urgency. Here the lines are scored roughly along the bottom half of the work, biting into a black-gray surface. Above this and to the right, a triangle outlined in red reaches to the top of the panel. A threatening red cloud roils nearby. We might be looking at a radiation storm in the Valley of Kings.

But few of Kessler's works are so dramatic. For the most part, his complex technique tends to seek a sense of archaeological depth and accretion. His surfaces are soft and smooth, as if waxed, emulating the effect of encaustic. The resulting sensual, touchable quality lends this artist's otherworldly hues and textures an intimate force that is as surprising as it is effective. The eye is encouraged to travel into the paintings as if downward, through the lens of a microscope or into the trench of a scientific excavation. Born in mining country in Hanover, Pennsylvania, and resident since 1996 in the fossil-laden vicinity of Santa Fe, N.M., Kessler comes by his sense of landscape and geology honestly. He has said he was influenced in his youth by the stark visions of painter Andrew Wyeth. The severely graceful lines and notable elegance of his compositions make that easy to believe. But if Kessler's paintings are in some sense landscapes, it is interesting to note how that form breaks apart and widens its associative range when wed to the sort of pure, material abstraction that Kessler practices. His landscape is no longer about the body or concerned with the proportion of daily life and movement to the sweep of the surrounding world. Although day and night and a quality of personal encounter are very much present, dimensions have shifted and the paintings glimpse the layout of the mind. They intuit ways in which knowledge penetrates hidden structures, alternately folding in upon itself and melting through to ever more mysterious terrain. The taut allusiveness of a painting like *Rising Floors*, for example, begins with imagery that plainly evokes microphotography and fossilized animal remains. But it could as easily be a synesthetic study in musical composition, almost audibly transcribing tonalities from one sense perception to another. Whether we're looking at John Cage or Shostakovich or Bach, a profound sense of order soaks outward through

Kessler's fugues and silences like a canon. Kessler achieves his effects by pouring and rubbing many washes and skims of acrylic paint over panels. Influenced by Richard Tuttle, with whom he has collaborated, he emphasizes the importance of gesture and the harmonious implications of a painter's movement: it is important to know where and how to begin. The logic of his approach, which gives equal weight to physical laws and singular events, suggests a dialectic that is at once strangely moving and visually compelling.

Kessler has not passed unnoticed on the national art scene. The recipient of the American Academy in Rome's 1990 Rome Prize in painting and a 1992 Pollock-Krasner award, his résumé makes heavy reading. Bonfoey is due a vote of thanks for bringing his paintings to Cleveland again, the first time since curator David Rubin showed his work at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art in 1993. Remembering that show, and notwithstanding the casually meditative nature of Kessler's work, there can be little doubt that his paintings would benefit from a more formal presentation.

After Nature II, Trevor Richardson – Curator, November , 1999
Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts Amherst

An Exhibition of Paintings by:

Gregory Amenoff

Bill Jensen

Michael Kessler

Rebecca Perdum

Katherine Porter

In contemplating this recent group of works by Michael Kessler, we are immediately struck by their subtlety of color and the richness of their textural dynamic. They tend, as in *High Desert Ivory I*, to be dominated by one or two hues that break apart under scrutiny into a finely balanced system of densities and weights, of closely - valued color harmonies and transitions.

The formal dynamics of Kessler's surfaces are extremely complex. They are haunted by a misty, illusionistic depth, conjured by the application of successive layers of translucent color-sepia, umber, and white, on top of a ground of heavily worked gestural marks. Each layer of color is applied with varying degrees of pressure in order to reveal, to a greater or lesser extent, the presence of the underlying surface structure – with each new layer serving as a kind of visual record of the means by which it was created. However, the flexing movement between field and mark, suggests more that a push – pull creation of pictorial depth, it also generates a lyric planar elasticity across the picture's surface, in which everything appears muted, beautifully modulated into the

texture of a soft-focus reverie.

The function of time is observed in the work through the gradual build-up of gestural marks and their incorporation within the layers of transparent color. These paintings are slow in coming into being and the viewer can read this slowness into their surfaces. What is also readable is Kessler's almost erotic relationship with the painting process. He is clearly enchanted with painting as an artifact of sensuality and elegance, to the extent that every daub or smear of paint evinces an attachment to the pleasures of the medium and with the sensations that color can convey. One can almost detect a Venetian aspect to Kessler's painting in terms of the delicacy of the artist's touch and in the floating quality of their pictorial space. The sense of time and willful sensuality in these works induce a contemplative, almost hypnotic feeling, that is less related to the urgencies of gestural expressionism and surrealist automatism, than it is to the inward fugitive mood of Symbolism, with its emphasis on shadowed, psychic space.

Art In America , July 1997

Michael Kessler at Schmidt/Dean (Philadelphia) , Littlejohn Contemporary (New York)
Michael Kessler's handling of surface texture is strikingly accomplished. The range of his visual effects wide indeed, from long languidly curving drip forms and pooling blobs, to squeegeed foliate forms delicate as branch corals, to complex tortoise-shell swirls of compelling visual depth. The works in Kessler's two recent shows owe much to this textural virtuosity. The Schmidt/Dean exhibition in Philadelphia showed Kessler's large acrylic-on-wood paintings while Littlejohn Contemporary displayed closely related, smaller works on paper.

Kessler's recent move to the Southwest hasn't had the expected effects on his work—lighter color, more open vistas, instead much of the work is dark-warm, and coppery, with a below-the-surface, geological ambience. And his multiple layering of visual events, often setting geometric structures against organic forms can become, in some works, dizzyingly baroque.

Architectonic devices have played an increasing role in Kessler's work. In *Firewall I and II* (all works 1996) , they are used to create a horizontal progression of window like openings , with satiny brown whorls peeking through a sky like blue surround. Here and in other works with densely packed squares floating in more open backgrounds (I *Ivory Tortoise*, and *African Bark I and II*, both acrylic on paper), I wondered if he'd been influenced by the flat window effects of computer graphics. In another pair of works , *African Geometry I and II* , the piling up of L-shaped geometric variations seems to get the upper hand over the free-form elements, as bark like striations are subsumed by the all-over plaid.

In *Fiery Tortoise I* all these elements come together. The painting's long, looping rootlike strands flow in and out of a central rectangle, maintaining their identity even as they shift from muted olive (outside) to brilliant orange (within the rectangle) and back

again. No longer polarized, flatness and depth are made to interweave and play against swirling , overlapping strands. This work , nearly 7 feet long, attains that epic bearing that I think of as Kessler's natural mode.

Here and in the much smaller Liquid Earth 7 (20"x 80") which makes simultaneous references to sky (bright four-pointed stars studding the canvas) to earth and to floating microscopic life , Kessler makes clear his continued devotion to nature as his muse. Indeed, his insistent sectioning off of works begins to offer itself as a way of experiencing different scales of perception, or orders of being-from microscopic to macrocosmic-juxtaposed, different, yet somehow kin to one another.

Miriam Seidel , Artist and Reviewer

ArtNet Magazine

<http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/ebony/kessler.html>

David Ebony's New York Top Ten

Michael Kessler at Littlejohn Contemporary , NYC

Apr. 2-May 3, 1997

This show of seven recent large and medium-size paintings on wood by Michael Kessler is a knockout. Kessler, who lives in New Mexico, attempts to pack into his paintings something of the powerful forces of the southwestern sun and wind. His carefully executed compositions of scraped and softly brushed pigment, incorporate interlocking geometric patterns inspired by native-American weaving.

Fencing is a large painting in which translucent red rectangles emerge from a subtly illusionistic space. A bright yellow painting titled, Surface Tension VII, is an homage to the blazing desert sun. In a tall, vertical work, Four Corners III, shades of bright red seep through a brown background, an ostensible ode to the earth. One of my favorites is Teal Fields I, in which brilliant red squares seem to be suspended over a liquid teal background. Kessler's paintings are among those rare works that manage to arrest the eye and mesmerize without the slightest sign of aggression.

Artnet Magazine

<http://www.artnet.com/home.html>

Forty to Fifty Layers, Victor M. Cassidy

1997

Michael Kessler had his fifth solo exhibition at Klein Art Works early in fall. Filtered Space -- the title of one piece in this powerful show -- is a good description of what we see in his paintings.

Working on a table, Kessler begins with wood panels that are custom-made for his use. He gessoes the raw surface, then makes a meandering gestural mark with paint in a squeeze bottle. Next he takes the piece outdoors, throws water and paint on it, scrapes the surface with a squeegee-like aluminum blade, and lets it dry. He lays down 40 to 50 layers of paint before he is done.

What we get is a deep-layered, luminously-colored surface, formally organized into vertical color blocks of varying width. Kessler's scraping process creates tremendous tension and continuous movement in the picture plane. The imagery suggests landscape, patterns in textiles, and much else.

A Capricious Artistic Journey Beginning With Paint

Pasatiempo, The New Mexican, Oct. 3, 1997

Balancing Opposites in the Process

By Kathleen McCloud

Michael Kessler's acrylic on board paintings undulate as if three dimensional forms were breathing under the thick surface of paint. Viewed from the side, the beveled edges reveal stratified layers of color - a timeline of the painting's evolution.

In the past 15 years, Kessler has moved from landscape-based abstraction to depicting an interior landscape, one created from memory, gesture and musings on the universe beyond the visible world. In his work, geography is revealed in both fluid and rock-solid forms.

"I think I am a synthesis, bringing disparate elements into a harmonious tension", said Kessler from his home south of Santa Fe. "The paintings are populated by gestures-organic and fluid in nature- balanced by geometric structure. There was a dogma

built around painting, that you were either into geometric or organic abstraction. It is important to me to balance opposites in my painting.

Kessler's latest series of paintings will be exhibited at Cline LewAllen Contemporary Art in his first solo show, opening with a reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. today, Oct. 3. In conjunction with his show is a solo exhibition of John Tinker's latest quirky, neo surrealist constructions of wood, plaster, Plexiglas and other materials. Tinker's bizarre works will be on view on the main floor of the gallery, Kessler's paintings will be upstairs.

It's hard to pigeonhole Kessler's work: He keeps changing it. There is a subtle tension in the balance between organic, sinewy, amorphous forms and geometric precision, like trying to split the hair between the wildness of nature and the orderly pattern at the core of living structures.

Working within the confines of rectangular board, Kessler initiates a painting with gesture- one in which paint is poured onto the surface, adhering to the laws of gravity and in compliance with his intuitive body movement.

"I take a lot of paintings outside and in one big event, pour the paint onto the collected surfaces. It is a very fluid, graceful movement, like Tai Chi. The original, capricious gestures sets the course for the painting," said Kessler.

After the initial paint-pouring, he begins applying what he refers to as the "skim coats"-of paint - up to 40 layers. These account for the eighth-inch- thick paint strata visible from the edge and the multi-dimensional visual effect of the painted surface.

In the early 1980's Kessler was working in oils and wax, tediously building up glazes and landscape-derived imagery in his paintings. Wax gave him the gauzy, obscured imagery he wanted, but it was a slow, picky process and tended to crack.

A pivotal point in his art career came in 1991, when Kessler spent a year painting in Rome as recipient of the prestigious Prix de Rome. There he shifted to acrylics and a subdued, earthy palette. "I never liked acrylic until I learned how to get a translucent film by mixing various mediums and gels. I had to learn how to paint quickly. Now I can't stand the picky, meticulous oil and wax process- I paint with trowels and skimmers and seldom use a brush. Magical things happen in milliseconds," he said.

"I learned the magic of delivering concise, precise gesture from Richard Tuttle," said Kessler, who collaborated with Tuttle on a painting in 1989 entitled Metastructures. "He understood the importance of gesture and was very ritualistic in delivering it. It is the opposite of mindlessly picking away at something."

Kessler grew up in Andrew Wyeth country, immersed in the landscape tradition of eastern Pennsylvania. As a kid, he would drool over art books of Wyeth's paintings. He attended Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, crediting its innovative art department (JAMES CARROLL) for bringing the New York art world to his doorstep. He worked as an artist in eastern Pennsylvania until two years ago, when he moved with his family to Santa Fe.

But he owes his career to his roots back East. "I wouldn't be an artist if not for Andrew Wyeth. I grew up in his pictures and my first paintings came out of his work. But I was set free when I didn't have to imitate what I saw. The whole universe is what I am interested in - not just what the retina sees," Kessler said.

Kessler's Subtle Paintings Reveal Depth, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Oct 11, 1996

By Joan Altabe,

You want to see real art? Go see Michael Kessler's paintings. What makes it real art? Let me count the ways: Art is invention; Kessler found a new way to tell us something. Art is a revelation; Kessler shows us the unseeable, our unconscious. Art is a great communicator; Kessler makes us feel what we know. Art is beautiful; Kessler transforms what we feel and makes it beautiful to look at.

What you see are free-floating amebic forms, sperm like, egg like made apparent through an ethereal haze, all of which are framed in hardedge rectangles that approximate windows.

Wait, there's more. His paint is thick, so the colors seem to glow from deep inside, as if from some unknown source. The colors are also textured - the unshapen parts scraped, sanded and sponged - so much so that the imagery can strike you as more complicated than it really is.

Did I say yet that subtlety marks every shape and color? Well, it does. Like nature itself, you can't decipher this work. You can only contemplate it.

Like Bach's harmonic innovations, Kessler's work is something to meditate.

Not that visual reality is gone completely from his pictures. Kessler's language of unconfined form sets the mind to wander unchained, and all manner of pictures come to mind.

As I said, I saw spermatozoa and ovum.

Kessler used to paint landscapes as the eye sees them. Now he paints symbols representing the forces behind nature, the other side of reason, that hard-to-see, easy-to-feel place between matter and metaphor.

This is nothing new for Kessler. In 1992 I said of his work that if eternity were seeable, it might look like his painting.

Although his colors are earthy, rooted to the physical world, they are smudged with the tones of half-night and veined with squiggles, micro-electronic-ish blips that could be short for the fleeting moments that make up forever.

This guy is good. See for yourself.

Elusive Nature , 1996 Cuenca Bienal of Painting, Quito and Guayaquil, Ecuador
Curated by David Rubin, Curator of Contemporary Art, Phoenix Art Museum Phoenix ,
Az.

Artists included in the exhibition :

Eva Bovenzi, Katherine Bowling , Michael Kessler Timothy McDowell , Joan Nelson ,
Andrew Young

Layering and scraping of paint is a procedure also favored by Michael Kessler, whose current preoccupation concerns the interaction of the natural environment with that constructed by humans. Raised in the woods of eastern Pennsylvania, Kessler has for several years made paintings of biomorphic images, abstract representations of organic life. In 1990, inspired by Italy's historic architectural legacy during a year spent there after being awarded the prize in painting by the American Academy in Rome, he added geometric structure to his vocabulary. Today, Kessler's paintings are populated by biomorphs mingled with geometric planes-personifying, respectively, natural and fabricated landscapes. As revealed in paintings such as Liquid Ivory // and Desert Pillars //, this affiliation is not necessarily a comfortable one. In both works, squirming organisms are shown compressed and contorted, trapped and imposed upon by architectural frameworks. Although this relationship calls attention to the rate at which nature continues to be threatened by urbanization, there is also in these works a determinist view point. As suggested by the cruciform positioning of the geometry and threads of glowing light that permeate these paintings, the interaction appears to be governed by a, divine, spiritual power.

David S. Rubin, Curator of Contemporary Art, Phoenix Art Museum

EL COMERCIO , Cuenca, Ecuador >English translation follows :

November 13, 1996

The U.S Room in the 5th Biennale

A Mystical Version of the Ecology by Roberto Aguilar

26 Works of six painters take up a room in the Museo de Arte Moderno. They all speak of the deteriorating environment and its relationship to man's nature.

It is the only salon that has a unified theme in the Bienal de Cuenca. The six painters were chosen by the curator David Rubin, of the Museum of Phoenix, look for new forms which express the most ancient artistic source: Nature. The title of the sample is "Elusive Nature". And its exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art.

The preoccupation with the deteriorating ecology is a constant (theme) in the 26 paintings of the Salon. But the artists don't approach the problem crudely. To the contrary, a mystical relation with nature is revealed that is reflected in the precision of the handiwork.

The interest in chaos of Timothy McDowell; the duality in the micro and macrocosm expressed in the work of Eva Bovenzi; the experimentation with decoloration and RESQUEBRAJAMIENTOS in the lyrical version of the deteriorating atmosphere that is posed by Joan Nelson; the contraposition (contrast?) in the organic figures and geometric patterns in the work of Michael Kessler; these forms are the expression perhaps of very philosophical and political problems in the ecology.

Rubin explains this vision: "the mysticism in the work of these painters is the result of a taking of the conscience of the role that nature plays. The understanding that the equilibrium of nature and the repercussions a better spirituality has for humanity."

Three of Rubin's choices are foreign. The first room, is dominated by the technical fields (dominions?), the solvency in the use of the materials. Then, anything can be argued, like the principle/beginning?, of the search of many contemporary artists: the preoccupation for the beauty and value of the aesthetic ?? Finally, the interest is ecological.

The title of the selection "Elusive Nature" speaks of a natural world that in the words of Rubin "is not within our range".

The curator notes a series of historical antecedents of the views gathered in the salon: "two artists who are indirect precursors to the ideas that are treated in this exposition. One is German of the 18th century, Caspar David Friedrich. He created (in the belief that) spirituality is in the things that surround us in nature, in the objects made by hand."

"Also Kandinsky inspired by the actual painters ESTADOUNIDENSES? The first abstract works were based on natural elements (mountains, rivers, forests) and revealed in the interrelationship of nature and the spiritual quality that lives in it. The difference in our exposition is the preoccupation with ecological problems and the abuses" finalizes Rubin.

, . . . BOCETOS of the sample participating in -----Eva Bovenzi, Katherine Bowling, Michael Kessler, Timothy McDowell, Joan Nelson and Andrew Young, are encountered in the Salon of Drawings in the Museum of History and Medicine. The selection precedes an introduction by ...Ballinger in which she refers to the geography of the U.S. and the traditions that the .-----."The artists of this group paint ---- poetically of nature utilizing different mediums and techniques."

The exhibition is seductive. The result inside the Biennial International of Painting for the -----has a unified theme.

Move to Santa Fe colors Michael Kessler's Paintings, By Myra Yellin Outwater
The Morning Call, Allentown , Pennsylvania , November 17th, 1996

SANTA FE, N.M. - Nature has always been a strong influence in the works of former Berks County resident Michael Kessler. And since moving here last winter, the sun, the desert, and the Southwestern winds have shaped his colors, his forms, and his technique.

His 15 new works at the Schmidt Dean Gallery in Philadelphia through Nov. 30 have an earthy tone as if kissed by the bright Santa Fe sun. Kessler's 3-by-7-foot panels show horizontal landscapes where windows of color burrow into the murky depths, revealing organic shapes that bring to mind brittle bones, dried leaves and the buried detritus of the past. Kessler says that he has felt an artistic rebirth in this land of sun, wind and sky. "Artists have always gone to sunny places," said Kessler. "The sun not only has an effect on your work, but on your mood. It's hard to be an artist, and artists often suffer from depression, but it's easier to work in a climate like this. Look at all the artists who have moved and worked here. Kessler, who grew up on a family farm near Gettysburg, Pa., moved to the Kutztown area in 1972. For the next 20 years he lived there, except for 1990, when he spent a year abroad after receiving the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome. During those years he created powerful, luminous vertical panels of color that would hang dramatically in space (One such work hangs in the stairway leading to the second floor of the Allentown Art Museum. Today, new colors have seeped into Kessler's works. Deep ochres, blood reds, rusty oranges, scorching yellows, cool dusky sepias and luminescent sandy beiges reflect the influence of the desert and the scrub lands that surround his new home. From his studio window and the roof of his one-story adobe house, Kessler can look out on miles of flat horizon and the vast blue cloudless Santa Fe sky. "My work has always been nature-based," said Kessler, who still thinks of himself as a survivor of the loss of his family farm. As a young boy, Kessler says he lived in almost rural isolation. But at the age of 12 the state condemned the land to build a lake and he and his family were uprooted from the ground on which they had lived for five generations. "Watching them build their dam was catastrophic for me," said Kessler. "Today the road where I sledded and walked to school now leads into a lake and comes out the other side. For years we would find some of our old rusted farm implements washed ashore. I would dream that I could take away all that water and bring back the farm. I had nightmares about the water swallowing up my home for years." That experience is both a part of his life and a recurrent theme in his work. Images of water are still some of the most frequent visual elements in Kessler's strongly evocative panels. Layers and layers of colors form pools and puddles on his highly textured surfaces, which are held together magically by a geometrical architecture of bands and stripes of strident colors. Kessler calls this layering "memory," and says that it is like the layering of the Earth. "The idea of stratification appeals to me because that is the way that our mind remembers." Kessler always has worked outside, but today the outdoors has become an extension of his studio. Kessler works on several panels simultaneously, stacking them up to dry in the

hot desert sun. "Before I moved to Santa Fe, I would pour all kinds of washes over my panels," said Kessler. "It was a very messy process. Now the sun and the wind can dry my layers in 10 minutes." Kessler has had great success marketing his work. Last month he came east for two openings, one at Schmidt/Dean and another at Little John Contemporary in New York City. He also is one of seven landscape artists who comprise the "Sky, Sea and Earth" show at Studio 600, Reading, which continues through Nov. 30. Last week a traveling exhibition, "Elusive Nature," opened in Quito, Ecuador. In the spring Kessler will travel to Ecuador as one of six artists chosen to represent the United States in an exhibition that will open in Phoenix, Ariz., this summer. While he shows his works more than 15 galleries throughout the United States, his main galleries are in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Santa Fe and Sweden. "I come from a family of entrepreneurs," said Kessler. "A farmer has to be a good business man in order to succeed. Business is in my genes." Kessler says he is one of a new generation of artists who believe in taking charge of their careers. "In the past artists have let one gallery owner manage their careers," said Kessler. "I won't let anyone dictate to me how to exhibit or sell my art." Kessler's hands-on management relies heavily on his computer. He emails his galleries and collectors. Not only does he store all his works on computer discs, but he prints out his own illustrated catalogs. "I can e-mail an image of my latest work to a gallery only minutes after I have finished it. My galleries and my collectors can see a new work immediately. It fascinates me the way a computer can compress time and space. Kessler has left a strong influence on the Lehigh Valley. In the late 1980's he taught at the Baum School of Art, creating a following who use his technique of layering gesso. "It wasn't my intention to spawn another Kessler," says Kessler. "I just wanted to show artists how to be innovative. An artist shouldn't think only in traditional ways. There are many different ways to paint a surface."

ART & ANTIQUES , N O V E M B E R , 1 9 9 5

Michael Kessler

The old and the new also blend together in the work of painter Michael Kessler, though in Kessler's case the ingredients are more like Old World basilicas and New Age transcendentalism. Kessler strives to conjure a sort of gauzy immateriality in his depiction of luminous fields of light, an effect achieved through the application and

erasure of up to as many as thirty layers of acrylic paint. A recipient of the Rome Prize in 1990, Kessler spent his year studying ancient religious frescoes, early Italian Renaissance painting, and the overall integration of Roman light, space, and architecture. The influence of the frescoes is apparent in the rich creams and faded carmines of his palette, and in their deliberately weathered texture (as in *Liquid Levels I*, above). Formally, Kessler's paintings find their voice through a dialogue between their grid like striped or rectangular architectures and the organic splotches that weave through them. These elements appear as either ethereal stains or stringy, looping filaments suggestive of DNA strands. The resulting interchange is subtly modulated into a harmonic, ambient beauty. At Klein Art Works, Chicago, through November 25.
George Melrod

Philadelphia Inquirer, Thursday, April 16, 1992

Michael Kessler at Schmidt/Dean Gallery. Philadelphia, Pa.

Of all the contemporary artists who use nature as a basis for abstraction, none does so with more refinement than Michael Kessler. He defines nature broadly, so that nowhere in his paintings do you see specific allusions to it like the ones that Terry Winters uses. Yet his work usually communicates a sense of a fundamental order that operates outside human control, or even observation.

In his latest paintings, on view at Schmidt/Dean Gallery, Kessler has added several new facets to his visual kit. A recent residency in Rome appears to have given him an appreciation of soft, warm Mediterranean colors, such as pomegranate red, salmon and ochre. In several of these 13 paintings, color rather than image carries most of the weight.

Kessler's attention to surface contributes considerably to a mood of ethereal beauty. The paintings are oil on panel, but Kessler appears to have applied the colors as glazes that dry to a thin satiny finish. This makes the colors delicate, like stains, but doesn't compromise their robustness. The most striking of these glazes is a filmy white one that resembles skim milk.

The motifs in Kessler's paintings are enigmatic, vaguely organic but always non-representational. In several paintings, contrasting passages have been demarcated by deep scoring of the surface so they read as inclusions. The new work shows Kessler becoming even more confident of his method and even more skilled in executing it.

Edward J. Sozanski

Transcendental Spaces, Michael Kessler, Allentown Art Museum 1992

Since 1980 critics have made much of Michael Kessler's status as an artist raised, educated and domiciled in rural Pennsylvania. This was felicitous given his highly original abstract paintings that drew inspiration from nature and the landscape. And by way of explanation, it made a story that paralleled the myth surrounding Albert Pinkham Ryder, the eccentric native visionary who is much admired by Kessler. However, in light of his current work, the earlier accounts of Kessler's creative life no longer seem germane.

In 1990 Kessler was awarded the prize in painting by the American Academy in Rome. For ninety-five years, the Academy has recognized accomplished American artists and scholars by subsidizing for a full year their work and residency at the Academy estate in Rome. The Academy presupposes that this experience will enrich an individual but does not presume to dictate the specifics of that experience or its rewards. Michael Kessler's reward was a set of ideas that engendered the series of paintings *Transcendental Spaces*.

The larger paintings in the series *Transcendental Spaces* reflect formal changes in Kessler's work that were arrived at directly. For instance, the 25 foot high ceilings in the Academy studio allowed Kessler to turn his then standard 8 x 4 foot panels on their sides and stack them three high. Less deliberate, however, are the ways in which this new format accommodated Kessler's experiences outside the studio.

In Italy, Kessler was intrigued by the site-specific nature of works of art previously known to him only through photographic reproductions. Much great painting and sculpture had been made to suit not a collector's wall but a spot circumscribed by stone and mortar. The frescos of Cimabue (c. 1240-1302) and Giotto (1266/67-1336) in the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi especially made clear to Kessler how a site might define the experience of a painting. Here, the painters' alliance with the architecture, as well as certain color passages in the frescos that had been altered by age, directed Kessler in a new exploration of color, space and architecture.

Kessler treats his new enlarged format not as a single uninterrupted surface but as a triptych. The seams of the three panels are crisply delineated and shapes that cross over them do not always realign. These seams, or internal edges, form an architectural framework that Kessler has extended even to single panels lacking real physical divisions. Imperfect geometric shapes hover above this substructure, sharing space with organic forms that recall Kessler's work from the 1980s. Unchanged is Kessler's process, which still includes deep layering of oil paints, long drying periods, successive scrapings and sandings, followed by a final and determinant session of working wet paint to reveal color and form below. To this, Kessler has added the technique of patching in smaller panels from behind through windows cut in the painted surface. Regarding the work of 13th- and 14th-century fresco painters, Kessler observes that their "effort seemed profoundly ambitious while simultaneously humble"-qualities rooted in the religious narrative and spiritual source of their art. Kessler seeks the

same measure for his paintings. His recent work begins to address how paintings might through scale and placement relate to site and to one another; an ambition tempered by his absorbent surfaces of vaporous color and chimerical forms. In the past, Kessler's metaphysical speculations were always about nature and frequently about science or sex. Kessler has, for the first time in these new paintings, accommodated imperfect geometries that describe the space man occupies in nature-albeit spiritually. In *Transcendental Spaces* Kessler has made a leap of faith, independent of doctrine, to explore the theme of ascension. SARAH ANNE McNEAR Associate Curator, Allentown Art Museum

Year In Italy Catapults Kessler's Work

Chicago Tribune, October 30, 1992

There is no escaping it: Living in Rome does something to you, especially so if you happen to be an artist. The latest exemplar is painter Michael Kessler, whose complex, exceedingly accomplished abstract paintings on wood panels can be seen at Klein Art Works through Nov. 29. A recipient of the Prix de Rome, he recently spent nearly a year in Italy and the experience catapulted his work to a new level.

Kessler sums it up by stating simply that "3,000 years of art history can blow you away." Particularly important for the artist were the encounters with pre- and early Renaissance painters such as Cimabue, 5th and 6th Century. frescoes from the catacombs, and the temples of Paestum. The latter were the impetus for the most significant compositional shift in his work-hard-edged geometric forms that provide a sturdy superstructure.

"These works are a milestone for me," Kessler said, "in the sense that it's the first time I've been able to use geometry-architectonic and rectilinear forms-in combination with the more amorphous or biomorphic forms I've used in the past. It anchors the work, and provides a framework for the gestures, but there's also a playfulness to it in the way that a geometric form can flip over or turn on its side." Most of these works can be hung vertically with either side on top, according to Kessler; the artist constructs each piece with the panel parallel to the floor on a platform.

Squares, rectangles and L-shapes, some with striped patterns, are fitted together in each painting, often outlined in a way that suggests relief or collage. An astonishing variety of textures are found within each work: fine streaks that play off the grain of the panel, polychromatic swirls and tendrils, drips and splatters. Big calligraphic marks wander over the surface, giving many paintings a slightly Asian flavor.

A good deal of chance plays into his method, as he actively experiments with materials and improvises (Kessler has analogized it to jazz, in fact). For instance, he splashed some drips of thinned white gesso onto a black painted section, where it dried

overnight into tiny crater-like shapes and shadowed serrations, both of which look quite photographic.

He is painting with acrylics rather than oils now, and Kessler noted that the rapid drying of acrylics makes it possible to build up 20 or 30 layers of paint and to work in series of up to 10 paintings simultaneously.

Kessler's color has shifted to and is now less acid and brash. Not unexpectedly, they have acquired a more antique tone like reddish brick or weathered bronze, in fine harmonies with Mediterranean blues and greens.

Kessler insists the new works are in some ways a consolidation, for in 1987 he executed a number of paintings "that are connected to these." It's sort of a mystical thing for me. I suppose, but those works were a kind of premonition of what I see in Rome. And once I was there, it just clicked.

A lot of artists told me that the Rome Prize was the kind of thing where you would experience all this stuff in Rome and then go home and put to use. But I immediately did a small piece, then a rather large body of work while in Rome, so there wasn't a major lag. The only aspect that's just now catching up is the architectonic forms coming in now.

Though quite obviously pushed in new directions by the ancient sources, Kessler continues the high tradition of modern abstract painting. One can see traces of Brice Marden and Sean Scully as well as Cimabui. This is certainly some of the best painting now on view in Chicago.

The gallery is at 400 N. Morgan St. David McCracken

Vital Forces

Nature in Contemporary Abstraction, June 29 - August 25, 1991

The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY.

GREGORY AMENOFF, PETER BROWN, PETAH COYNE, ELISA D'ARRIGO
WILLY HEEKS, MICHAEL KESSLER, JANIS PROVVISOR, MICHAEL TETHEROW,
ELLEN WIENER

Michael Kessler creates luminous paintings rich with the vigor of the artist's touch. Multiple layers of paint in brilliant, often startling colors, are sanded and scratched to reveal a complex inner world of light and life, suggestive of strange microbes or magnified tissues. The experience of living and working in rural Pennsylvania has allowed the artist a constant interface with the natural world, perhaps intensifying the romantic impulse in his works. Grasps, an intensely beautiful painting, glows with broad sweeps of purple and gold in large blob-like forms which seem suspended over a field of muted greens. Floating in an ambiguous space, they appear as if attempting to mix with other substances of different viscosities. These somewhat menacing shapes, at

once familiar and unknown, seem on the verge of bursting out of the darkened edges which contain them. Kessler's watercolors are more hands-off in their execution, as the artist drops dried pigment on to wet paper and allows the image to emerge from the direction in which the pigment is pulled. Kessler was a recent recipient of a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome, and has become interested in fresco painting, a not surprising development from someone so involved with the expressive potential of complex artistic processes.

Anna C. Noll, Curator

THE ART OF THE 1980s , SEPTEMBER, 1991- JANUARY 5, 1992

SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ELI BROAD FAMILY FOUNDATION
DUKE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ART

Kessler works outside the mainstream of urban art centers and stylistic trends, producing his abstract nature studies in rural Pennsylvania where he was born and raised. He remained near Kutztown University after receiving the B.F.A. degree there in 1978. Since 1980 he has exhibited regularly in New York, Boston, various Pennsylvania cities, and the West Coast, as well as internationally, in Switzerland, Sweden, and Denmark. Lately he has been working in Italy as the 1990 winner of the prestigious Rome Prize sponsored by the American Academy in Rome.

Kessler's spare biomorphic forms expose the essence of the natural world: "My interest is in the internal dynamics of nature; i.e. energy and growth, light and matter are woven together in my work. Nature is the model and transformation is my subject matter. " His intuitive romantic approach harks back to Turner, Friedrich, Kandinsky, Gorky, and Pollock, among others, as does his handling of paint, line, and surface. Evidence of physical manipulation - the many layers of pigment and varnish that have been scraped, sanded, and incised - animates the undulating forms and refers metaphorically to natural processes: "I am interested in painting nature's elements and exploring the processes of air fire, water, erosion, evolution, etc." Yet meaning is elusive. "I prefer symbols and forms that have a multiplicity of possible meanings. My works are kept open to interpretation and urge the viewer into an associative frame of mind."

Dr. Jill Meredith, Associate Curator, Duke University Museum of Art

ARTISTS INCLUDED IN THE EXHIBITION:

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT , KEITH HARING, JENNY HOLZER , ROSS BLECKNER ,
JONATHAN BOROFKY , MICHAEL KESSLER , CHERYL LAEMMLE , DAVID
BOWES , ANNETTE LEMIEUX , SUE COE , DAVID SALLE, LEON GOLUB , KENNY
SCHARF ,
PETER HALLEY, PETER SCHUYFF , CINDY SHERMAN , GARY STEPHAN ,

MEYER VAISMAN , DAVID WOJNAROWICZ , ROBERT YARBER , MICHELE ZALOPANY

Michael Kessler , Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY. September, 1990

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

Gerard Manley Hopkins, God's Grandeur

Although Michael Kessler is aware of what the romantic poet Hopkins called "man's smudge" upon the landscape, the artist prefers to focus his attention downward and inward. For Kessler, process becomes part of his art's content as he scrapes, burnishes and abrades the surfaces to reveal nature's "freshness deep down things"

In the course of the past twenty years, Kessler has evolved a two-part process for his paintings. He first coats the entire surface with a series of oil paint skins that vary in their "sandability," as he terms it. This labor intensive method embodies time as he waits for each layer to dry before going on. Periodically smoothed and rubbed, Kessler's paintings allude to habitual use, suggesting textures worn by attrition. A variety of gestural marks inhabit these nether realms that may or may not be unearthed by the happenstance of the second phase's stratigraphy.

Ninety-five percent of what we see is the result of a final "wet into wet" session, an intense sprint of creation in which Kessler permits the image to evolve as he uses the palette knife like a spade, delving below what is visible to reveal the artifacts of past intentions.

He enjoys working with wood as a support. Three years ago Kessler's paintings jumped scale from that of the hand-held plank to the body-sized panel. No longer bounded by his characteristic frames, the new works have rounded corners, as if to reinforce their existence as sculptural objects.

But for all their "thingness," Kessler's works align themselves within the sensual tradition of oil painting. He uses the viscous medium to probe the inner life of color, yielding beaming, light-shot passages as well as moody expanses of hues that evade the act of naming. In Kessler's most recent body of work, his imagery is attenuated-shapes may tunnel down from above, or drift up like sea grass. At times patterned filaments with no beginnings nor ends pulse from top to bottom in rhythmic intervals. In other instances, they pool and loop as if suspended in a dense liquid. Like glass-bottomed boats, his images often reveal the gestural record beneath the painting's surface.

Kessler's diverse titles reflect his broad interests and current reading. They allude to watery domains, developmental transformations and primitive societies. In the artist's words, "I'm painting the internal dynamics of nature, the energy, and the elements of the

soul in the natural world"

Judith Stein , Philadelphia, PA July 1990

Curator- Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

David S. Rubin , Curator of Contemporary Art , David S. Rubin

Exhibition at Klein Art Works , Chicago , IL.

The Paintings of Michael Kessler: Preserving Nature's Umbilical Chord

The organic inhabitants of the paintings of Michael Kessler appear a bit squirmy. Stretched or contorted, moving slowly and cautiously through confined spaces, and often wrestling one another for room to breathe, these carefully rendered biomorphs remain poised and graceful in the face of terror. Representative of all living organisms, their struggle is for survival. If they are to be triumphant, they must combat and overcome the toxins and pollutants that plague natural environments in the late twentieth century. A long time resident of the woods of Eastern Pennsylvania, Kessler has been studying and chronicling the evolution of nature for more than a decade. Once a realist landscape painter, he has in recent years forsaken literal description of the specific in favor of an abstract biomorphism that reveals more of the generic. Initially inspired by the organic linearity in the works of painters Bill Jensen and Gregory Amenoff and sculptor Martin Puryear, Kessler has developed a personal vocabulary of curvilinear biomorphs that, while not based on any natural prototypes, suggest the elemental structures and energy forces underlying all species of plant and animal life, which are today greatly threatened. Although not overtly political in intent, Kessler's paintings nevertheless reflect his keen sensitivity to nature and, accordingly, his reaction to her critically impaired condition. Kessler acknowledges, in fact, that the images in his paintings are largely subliminal. In spending a great deal of time outdoors, where much of the actual painting takes place, he internalizes the many shapes and moods of nature which then emerge from the unconscious during the painting process. In this regard, Kessler may be viewed as a descendent of the Abstract Expressionists and, in particular, as a compatriot of William Baziotes, who was raised in the very same region of Pennsylvania. In the 1940s, Baziotes and artists such as Matta, Motherwell, and Pollock experimented with the notion of 'direct automatism,' whereby the artists would make spontaneous drawings and paintings while keeping focused on a particular theme or topic, such as the hours of the day or the natural elements. Ultimately, Baziotes arrived at a vocabulary of sensuously curving biomorphs which he believed to be reflections of the psyche at the more enigmatic hours, such as midnight, dawn, or dusk. Alternating between unconscious mark making and conscious aesthetic decisions, Baziotes would develop a painting over long periods of time, carefully refining its surface until it seemed convincingly ephemeral and soft as human flesh.

By contrast, Kessler's working method is the reverse, as he will labor over the early stages of a painting for several weeks and then finish it off within a relatively short session of three or four hours. During the first phase, Kessler builds up skins of paint with a spatula and then carefully smooths out areas with an electric sander. In order to preserve certain segments, the point is treated with varnish. The final stage, in which the basis for a resultant image is actually determined, is the most truly automatic, as the artist paints wet into wet very quickly until arriving at the intuitively perceived moment of resolution.

While Kessler's stylistic relationship to Abstract Expressionism is most immediately evident in the closeness between his biomorphic syntax and that of Baziotes, comparisons may also be made with other artists of the 1940s-50s milieu. In Kessler's *Oceanic Starlings*, for example, vertical divisions recall the "zips" of Barnett Newman's visions of the sublime, with the major difference being that Kessler has replaced a purely abstract spiritual space with a microscopic view of crawling creatures. In *Primeval Excavations*, repeating vertical bands are reminiscent of similar configurations in Robert Motherwell's *Spanish Prison* series of the early 1940s; in place of a prisoner behind bars we now encounter a fragment of plant life that has become a specimen in a cage, displaced from its natural habitat.

Kessler has commented that the images in his recent paintings are "at times powerful and frightening." Indeed if Kessler's glimpses into the collective unconscious are accurate in their correlation to the time line of things material and living, then we are surely in for some difficult and unpredictable times. As the icy blues of *"Marauding Instinct"* and *Primeval Excavations*, and the heated oranges of *Ancestral Alliance* and *Volcanic Diagrams* seem to suggest, seasonal changes are reaching unparalleled extremes.

David S. Rubin , Curator of Contemporary Art , David S. Rubin
Exhibition at Klein Art Works , Chicago , Il.

INNER NATURES: Four Contemporary Painters, Santa Barbara Museum of Art
Nancy Doll , Curator of Twentieth Century Art

Gregory Amenoff, Brenda Goodman, Mary Hambleton, Michael Kessler

Michael Kessler finds the inspiration for his work in both the visible forms and invisible forces of nature. His work can broadly be seen within the tradition, and recent revival, of landscape painting in America. But more specifically, his artistic lineage is to be found within a Romantic inclination to identify with nature that includes such various proponents as Arthur Dove, Jackson Pollock, and Bill Jensen. Kessler's own approach

is an expressive one in which the painting process is a revelatory act which the viewer is invited to share. Just as one must lend time and a patiently observing eye truly to appreciate the depths of the natural world, so must one penetrate the sensuous color and surface of Kessler's paintings to plumb their full, if elusive, meaning.

Kessler has spent most of his life in the natural surroundings of rural Pennsylvania farm country. As a result of this long and intimate contact, both the literal details and underlying energies of nature seem imprinted on the artist's eye and mind, as well as on his emotional being. Kessler processes and transforms his subject through a powerful imagination, and his work reveals a close correspondence between external stimulus and internal response. *Helix-Patriarch* (1990) develops forms suggestive of gestating plant life into symbols of nature's power and authority. Similarly, the seedling-like form of *Primeval Alliance* (1990) is charged with the larger implication of sexual energy. Over the last decade, Kessler has progressively distilled his sources into paintings that now resound with an almost primordial intensity. In earlier works such as *Raisers* (1983, fig. 7), Kessler presented his observations more literally, and utilized the frames as an active pictorial element, with the colors and textures of the 'central image' spilling over onto them. As Kessler became increasingly encouraged by the ability of abstraction to collect and convey feelings, he turned to looser, more fluid forms, as in *Fixing the O-Zone* (1986, fig. 8). He also adopted the simpler, large-scale format of standardized 80"x 48" wooden door panels. Kessler has always preferred to work on wood because it can withstand the rigors of his painting technique. By rounding the corners of the wood panels, he can retain in the works a certain object-like quality without the constriction imposed upon the forms by the framing device.

A recurring theme in Kessler's work is its suggestion of continuous metamorphosis. Birth, death, regeneration, and decay—all are part of a cycle of physical growth that serves as a model for spiritual transformation.' Kessler's labor-intensive process parallels this theme. Calling upon visual ideas and experiences accumulated into sketchbooks or stored within his psyche, Kessler works on several paintings simultaneously. After developing them to various stages, he sets them aside for individual appraisal, and works each further as both the painting and his expressive mood dictate. Each work is built of dozens of layers of paint that are scraped into, wiped away, sanded, and layered again. Although the lengthy procedure is integral to Kessler's objective, it is the last few layers and final hours of improvisation that matter most. For him, "...the event of painting is exhilarating because of the mystery it holds "for the audience, the act of viewing becomes equally enlivening as the physical depths of a painting are discovered and the multiplicity of its meanings revealed. Kessler's final, spontaneous, 'wet-into-wet' layers of paint result in a visible luminosity that serves as a metaphor for revelation and understanding.

Kessler presents simultaneously an external, microscopic view of the world and an internal vision into the symbols of the collective unconscious. The similar forms of

Golden Crowned Ebb and Deftant Instinct (both 1990) could only result from the translation of empirically observed images by a more potent intuitive force. In traditional landscape painting, the viewer is placed within the scene and his or her presence is implied as an extension of the space of the composition. Kessler, instead, locates the viewer both inside and outside of nature, experiencing it as well as viewing it. In Scapular's Plumage (1990), the layered forms suggest a distance, as if land were viewed from the air; at the same time, the forms appear magnified, their cellular structure glimpsed. But Kessler is not interested in a too literal, or too sentimental, interpretation of his work. Instead, he explores the possibilities of paint and conjures from its material substance a very personal world, as much imagined and felt as seen, and one which is linked to a collective and universal realm.

Nancy Doll ,Curator of Twentieth Century Art

Art News, September 1990

MICHAEL KESSLER at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City

The artist Myron Stout once noted that although the predominance of abstraction in 20th-century painting might suggest a retreat from naturalism, in fact it meant a further, deeper engagement with it. One was aware of this quality when looking at the images in Michael Kessler's striking new paintings. Kessler has moved away from the suggestions of landscape that occupied him a few years ago toward an organic abstraction that hints at anatomical and vegetal life observed, so to say, beneath the skin. The forms suggest not only sinew and filament, but also molecular life-DNA strings and cells glowing with a peculiar microscopic radiance. Despite their quasi-scientific look, Kessler keeps a few of the forms subtly anthropomorphized-two attenuated droplike shapes, for example, meet in a kind of erotic clinch-so that a shifting play between "real" and "abstract" never tips decisively either way. The real naturalism here, however or at least the one we end up caring about most immediately-lies in the character of painting itself. Though brushstrokes are present as a barely perceptible low relief, Kessler's surfaces have been repeatedly painted, scraped, and sanded to a rich, buffed glow. The colors are the result of a similar layering, so that in one instance a soft blue lingers like a shadow behind a final skin of yellow-white; in another, purple and yellow are mixed and veined in patterns that suggest both magnified tissue and telescoped photographs of space. The effect in each case is of a complex, shifting interaction of light and darkness taking place just beyond sight. The animation that results is, ultimately, romantic, and one has the sense that Kessler's acute attention to pigment and color is a result of his interest in a natural world that is subject to uneasy turmoil and ripe with a kind of lurid, devouring beauty. Yet it is exactly the conceit Kessler sets up-in which he regards esthetic artifice and the natural process as essentially the same expressive thing-that gives his work its

meaning and edge.
Holland Carter

Arts Magazine, December 1990, Michael Kessler at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City
Michael Kessler's new work proves that less is more. Organic forms move across the surface with the force of nature, forming bridges and leaping across gulfs and fissures with fluid lines. His pared-down surfaces glow with color, yet underlying his biomorphic imagery is a deep concern with the beauty and plastic properties of materials, specifically, paint pulled over wood. Kessler's work grows out of the tradition of biomorphic surrealism. In some of his earlier works there are echoes of Pollock's Jungian paintings, like *Guardians of the Secret*, with their calligraphic surfaces and bordered images. Other earlier work resembles Arshile Gorky's biomorphic paintings of the '40s with their close-up views of microorganisms or plant organs floating in veils of color. Kessler's paintings of this type achieve their specific gravity through the use of complex, intertwined organic forms embedded in color fields. But something new is happening in his recent paintings at Tilton (and at simultaneous shows at Nina Freudenheim, Buffalo, and Klein Art Works, Chicago). Now he empties his fields so they become a theater for the performance of a single significant event. His organic forms, with their resemblance to algae, ectoplasm, or models of DNA, lose their residual timidity and become icons or signs like heraldic emblems on wooden shields, blazoning the continuing endurance of the natural realm. In *Alluvial* and *Metastructures I* Kessler perfectly balances warm and cool colors, In both, a single orange stroke lassos out of a turquoise form and trails off into a delicate tendril. This one dramatic action is placed on a glowing, whited-yellow field (a kind of light screen like a Japanese window). In Kessler's earlier work strands of protein like these were given mass through the multiplication of similar shapes. Here a single gesture hanging in mid-air dominates the field like a chord and its resonating echo. By eliminating the visual clutter and liberating the gesture from a field of similar biomorphic forms, Kessler proves the strength of a single moment In other works, like *Primeval Alliance* and *Scapulum's Plumage*, Kessler uses his organic forms to create the effect of ladders over a chasm or a contrapuntal couple's dance of autonomy and interdependence. In *Primeval Alliance* the similar forms trace a diagonal trajectory toward each other. At their juncture the forms pulse red and reach toward each other in a wave of union, bulging into globular forms as they meet. The red-toned background here is relatively serene, with only flashes of yellow suggesting intermittent electrical charges disturbing the field. In *Scapulum's Plumage* the central chasm is more marked. Here the similar but different forms trace a more laborious path toward each other with stops and starts like bends in a river or the course of true love. When these shapes finally meet, their swollen globular endings

tenderly nuzzle each other. In both cases two independent structures abut, forming semi-permanent-looking bridges. In neither case do the forms melt into each other, becoming one substance like the molten bronze or lava they at times resemble. Although wholly abstract, Kessler's use of color and placement of forms suggests an erotic conjugation. In an age where the use of explicit sexual imagery is under attack, Kessler's abstract substitutes may well save the day. Kessler's work asserts the primacy of the whole surface. The creamy texture of the paint, as he pulls and slides and scrapes it, calls attention to the physicality of his support. In his hands the material of the paint takes on new importance. He makes us aware of the emulsion of pigment and oil as a physical substance laid on a surface. He underscores that tangible quality by modulating the color as much through physical action after drying as the more usual technique of mixing colors and shading. Sections of his paintings reveal tiny semicircular lines scarring the surface into nets, like Jason's Golden Fleece. By abrading the paint he causes subtle alterations in his colors. These irregularities of surface serve the same purpose as the irregularly shaped and colored glass in Medieval stained-glass windows. Both serve to scatter and reflect light, like radio waves skipping over the landscape, to create a greater density and richness in color. We are increasingly moving toward a world where electronics and computers are superseding organic structures as a model/metaphor for human interaction and the poetry of the human spirit. Kessler's insistence on the viability of biological imagery proves that neither nature nor feasts of color are obsolete. (Jack Tilton, September 5-29)
Ann-Sargent Wooster

Artforum, November 1990

MICHAEL KESSLER at JACK TILTON GALLERY, New York City

For Michael Kessler, painting is both a symbolic expression and an affirmation of self. Since the early '80s nature has served as a source for his organic abstract vocabulary. The paintings in this recent show reveal a striking new clarity of vision. Working in a large vertical format on wooden supports, Kessler has succeeded in breathing a refreshing vitality into his images. The associations with landscape elements so prominent in the early work have become part of a broader visual vocabulary touching on complex visceral and psychological concerns. This was as much the case for *Helix Patriarch* (all works 1990), the most overtly landscapelike composition of the group, as for *Primeval Alliance* a work that depicts a suggestive bodylike cavity. With *Helix Patriarch* the shape-in-shape configuration dominating the composition brings to mind natural geological openings and depressions. Yet any associations with lakes, rivers, crevices, and gorges give way to a multitude of other associations. At this point the title kicks in, suggesting mathematical and genetic resonances. These disciplines represent fundamental vehicles with which to organize the universe: mathematics deals with the

description of abstract conditions and genetics is bound up with physical constructs. Primeval Alliance features a pouchlike shape with two linear extensions emanating from top and bottom that stretches the length of the canvas. This blue figure is shown against a textured luminous orange ground aglow with flickering streaks of white. Here the association with internal organs of the body, such as kidneys, provokes meditations on the endless capacity of the abstract field to nurture metaphorical discourse.

Ronny Cohen

ARTS Magazine, January 1989

Michael Kessler at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City

Michael Kessler's recent abstract paintings at Jack Tilton (October 4-29) also involve a dichotomous dialogue between formalist intention and control and naturalistic chance and gesture. There is a marked emphasis on opening up the picture plane in this body of work. Whereas the earlier work involved a more condensed layering of images that spilled onto the frame, these new works render a liquid environmental feeling to the poured forms- pouring which become hyper-real "figures" in their dialogue with the thinly veiled and sanded ground. The translucency of the forms in space relate to structured bodily properties-veins and watery organs beneath the skin.

There is an 'impending sense of movement and metamorphosis, a competition, in a sense, between a past and future moment in these microscopic renditions of a present forever jelled on the wooden plane. The sensual surface is akin to viewing a leaf backlit by sunlight, a network of veins outlined by the glowing color. The aquatic spaces and figures are certainly reminiscent of Pollock and are likewise void of brushwork. It looks to be an organic "process" which makes the work. In this sense, Kessler does not paint nature in its passive aspect; he's more like a conductor orchestrating the elements of its active process.

Peggy Cyphers

Michael Kessler's View of the World, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City, October 1988

"A picture is a fact", Ludwig Wittgenstein

As mainstream culture moves toward the next century it continues to drain the past of meaning, and mount the briefly valorized evidence on its walls, like trophies. The recent proliferation of new museums is society's taxonomic response to individuals. The role these structures play in our perception can be summed up like this. "Let's group things together according to their similarity rather than examine the differences or discover the reasons why individuals are irreversibly separated from one another. If we gather a wide enough array of similar things together, we will be able to prove our ability to tolerate and honor difference. The person who visits the museum will be unable to prove that we

are lying".

This kind of self-satisfied thinking proposes that the most an individual can achieve, is a demonstration of how he or she has been inscribed by the forces of mainstream culture. Unwilling to propose an alternative to this discourse of opinions, the art world chooses to honor artists whose work shifts a pattern of perception, but does not challenge the basis of its authority. One could say that the art world currently mimics mass culture's self-perpetuating forces. The result: a pleasing sense of order and balance is maintained, while a proper rippling effect is ensured. It is a world of opinions and social dialogue.

Instead of choosing to participate in mainstream culture and express yet another opinion, Michael Kessler is interested in the discovery of facts. Since 1980, when he began exhibiting in New York, he has developed into an artist whose work challenges the notion that we are bounded by the media and mass culture. In contrast to his contemporaries, Kessler addresses a nonhuman force, rather than acknowledges the existence of either society or another individual. Consequently his recent paintings embody a state of extreme isolation, while positing the possibility of a disquieting union between the individual and the inchoate forces of nature. Moreover, Kessler's unrefined eloquence (his sanded, gouged surfaces and luminous color) is directed towards painting (both as surface and practice) rather than the viewer.

Kessler's refusal to acknowledge the viewer is one of the things separating him from his Early American Modernist precursors. In contrast to Arthur Dove, who used geometry to structure his perceptions of nature, thus making it more palatable to his audience, Kessler doesn't anchor his compositions. The other difference is that Kessler doesn't translate the visible world into signs of presence or divinity. If anything, he has penetrated the world of appearance (the lakes, branches, and leaves that populated his earlier paintings) and entered the nonhumanized realm of microorganisms and astral bodies.

Kessler's paintings should be seen as striving against the long held notion that nature is a collection of things we see and experience. Nature is not even a place we inhabit, his paintings tell us. On the contrary, it is something we have no final control over, and its forces inhabit us all. Clearly, Kessler does not accept the opinion that there are insurmountable barriers separating us from the world. The only barrier he sees is the limit of the surface he paints.

These are the uncomfortable facts that Kessler faces each time he begins a painting. And yet, rather than tame these facts or avoid the feelings they must raise, Kessler has developed a painting practice that sustains his desire to address nature's forces. His forms evolve out of a process that includes sanding the surface, laying down thin washes of oil paint, and allowing paint to collect and puddle up in indentations. Forms are present in each of Kessler's paintings. For all their seductiveness and sensuality, it is never clear whether the forms are beneficent or malignant. Or to put it

in human terms, friendly or hostile. These forms maintain their autonomy in a world we can gaze at but never enter. They show us something about that place. In doing so, they make us recognize something about ourselves.

John Yau

NEW ART EXAMINER. APRIL, 1987, Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston

Michael Kessler's life and work refute the cliché that American artists must migrate to New York in order to develop their work and to have it well received. While connections between place and art are always multifaceted, inflected by fantasy, and increasingly diffused by our shared immersion in the media. Kessler's origins do correlate seductively with the content of his work.

Born (in 1954), raised, and still making art in rural Pennsylvania, Kessler's paintings are landscapes that appeal less to memories of things seen than to the continuing presence of what is touched, and to imaginings inchoate or tutored alike by history and walking the woods.

Kessler reflects that extensively developed American branch of the Romantic effort to symbolize and identify with nature. The Luminists, the Hudson River School, Albert Bierstadt, and Arthur Dove are Kessler's precursors in this impulse. Nineteenth-century exponents of nature's spirituality emphasized the expansive vista and light breaking through clouds as metaphors for revelation and all-encompassing unity. It was as if Frederick Church and Martin Heade asserted pictorially that nature's great secret was its transparency, a self-exposure whose unself-conscious grandeur induced awe and humility.

Kessler's painting too is concerned with luminosity, but one which suggests the inner light or aura of vitality itself. Mixing his pigments with wax which he works up, sands, scores, and overpaints. His paintings emit an all-over glow as well as concentrating, here and there, in epiphanies of radiance- for example, the arcing yellow lines in *Lake //* (1986) and the blazing white on prussian blue strokes of *Indian Rings* (1986) and *In Clouds* (1983).

In a quest for revelation's intensity Kessler has displaced sight with tactility, and inner vision. His paintings reflect our century's internalization of the sublime, our reclamation of spirituality for the psyche. But Kessler has traveled farther than his precursor Dove in recreating, through nonobjective means, the nominal power of the wunderkammer, those Renaissance art collections which complemented the authoritative public statements of the museums with work that was assertively uncanny. Where Dove is whimsical, and with his geometric emphases-both decorative and literate -referring to high art, the avant-garde, and connoisseurship.

Kessler's dominant pitch is a rough and brooding one that for all its craftsmanship seems ingenuously earnest. This tone is keyed by his palette, which is grounded in earth colors, greens, and white, and in the restless undulance, spirals, and turnings of his forms. It is this last quality that most distinguishes Kessler's concern with earth processes, with the dialectical vitality celebrated in pre-Socratic metaphysics. Kessler can be refined and decoratively abstract. But when he is, as in *The Edge of Night* and *Tools and Animals* (both 1987), he invokes not so much Dove as Klee. In earlier shows he painted his frames with patterns that undercut his work's dominant sincerity. But he has changed this practice and now the frames extend and amplify the mood and depth of the painting. Existing more radically within its own space, the integration of frame and canvas enhances the magical self-possession, the otherness and ultimate mystery of the work. Kessler's fascination with organic process links him to his contemporary Gregory Amenoff. But whereas Amenoff delights above all in texture and rich color, Kessler is more kinetic, rougher in his transitions, and more concerned with light. Amenoff's painting is lustrous where Kessler's is luminous. This quality, with his willingness to suggest landscape or figural outline makes Kessler a painter who affirms earth's fierce exuberance. Eugene Narrett

ARTS MAGAZINE, May, 1987

MICHAEL KESSLER: A PAINTER OF NATURE IN THE ERA OF POSTMODERNIST ART

DAVID CARRIER

Four decades ago Kenneth Clark, whose taste barely encompassed the early modernism of Henry Moore, expressed skepticism about the enduring viability of landscape painting. Since that genre of art "depends so much on the unconscious response of the whole being to the world which surrounds him," he argued, when "painters begin to pin up in their studios photographs of Romanesque carvings, negro masks and Catalan miniatures, a direct response to nature became extremely difficult." Is an unmediated access to nature, the sine qua non of landscape painters from Lorenzetti to Cezanne, conceivable once all art is about earlier art and all images derived from existing pictures?

In this postmodernist era his question is even more pressing. Cezanne's procedure, looking back and forth from landscape to canvas, "and then depositing each little load of paint in its determined place," anticipated the Abstract Expressionist ideal of the landscape of biomorphic forms reflecting the artist's inner journey and so "directing the viewer to an interior landscape." Turning away from nature as represented in an image to perceived nature as the starting point for exploration of the artist's inner feelings and fantasies, that ideal extended the tradition of landscape painting. Cezanne focused on

his response to Mont-Sainte-Victoire, Pollock, on his feelings about nature, and so they both used references to the external world to achieve the selfsame goal-self-expression. Today Pollock's world seems as distant from us as Cezanne's. Just as we cannot imagine an artist returning day after day to a motif to realize his sensations, so we cannot imagine a painter asserting: "I am nature." We do not believe in such a view of the self or in such unmediated self-expression. We perhaps don't even believe in nature. As William Gass writes: "Nature in the old sense does not matter. It does not exist. It's a lie of old poetry." Every recent major artist, wherever he or she lives, is essentially an urban person. Painters who do depict nature present it as if between quotation marks, underlining the apparent unreality of what they depict.

Yet nature exists, and Michael Kessler is a painter of nature. During the half-dozen years in which I have visited galleries extensively, there have been only three not-yet-established artists to create work that I fell in love with at first sight. Falling in love is exciting, but it is also an unreflective experience. What then was it about Kessler's work that I found so immediately attractive? I have no special interest in nature. My favorite place is that most unnatural urban site, Venice. So what attracted me to Kessler's work? In traditional landscapes, how orderly and well organized is nature. Constable, Caspar David Friedrich and even Van Gogh clearly distinguish foreground and distance; viewing their works, we see, but never are surrounded by nature. By contrast, Kessler places us within his scenes. His biomorphic forms, snaking lines and scraped and repainted colors seemingly abolish all distance between us and the implied landscape, which therefore can be read either as a representation of microscopic landscape elements or an abstraction derived from nature.

If Expressionist painting is defined by its expressive distortions of the human body, then Kessler is not an expressionist. The one element absent in his otherwise abundant repertoire of represented forms is the human figure. To my knowledge only one of Kessler's works shows a human figure to identify the scale of its landscape. If that figure does not reoccur in his art, that is because it pins down the meaning of his quasi-representational forms. Yet while the body is not directly shown in Kessler's work, it is everywhere present in the handling of his medium. I once made a never completed list of all his techniques: layering paint and sanding it smooth; scratching, scraping, repainting and cutting; drawing container shapes and encircling lines. This list defines his bodily presence in his art. In Chinese landscape painting "landscape is certainly the subject, but equally the subject is the work of the brush as extension of the painter's own body. If in Western painting this deictic showing of the artist's bodily presence is either repressed or reified by identifying the work as expressionist art, that merely reflects our parochial view of nature. For Kessler, who is no expressionist, the body is everywhere present in his art, not as a distorted depicted form, but as the manifest agent manipulating his paint. Traditional Western landscape painting is identified as an art of self-expression because we imagine the artist looking back and forth from

painting to landscape, communicating his feelings about that landscape from which he remains apart, expressing himself by scrutinizing what is nonself. Viewing the result, we participate in his creative activity, seeing Mont-Sainte-Victoire or Van Gogh's fields emerge from their brushstrokes. This clear dualism assumes what Kessler's art denies, that the artist exists apart from that landscape which he or she represents. Like the Chinese painter, his goal is to abolish the very distinction between self and nature. Kessler's earlier small-scale works can readily be read as surreal images, his heavily worked, massive wood frames underlining this visionary quality of the pictures. His recent, much larger works display smaller images, placing the viewer amidst enlarged natural forms which it is impossible to see from an aesthetic distance. This change also affects the role of Kessler's bodily presence in his art. Once underway, these physically larger works are more difficult to revise, and so the spontaneity, essential to the smaller panels, must now be tempered. And because these newer works provide wall-sized environments, the frame now becomes superfluous.

The very idea of Western landscape painting involves a Manichaeian opposition between that good world created by God and those manmade forces that destroy what is natural. So it was for the greatest historian of landscape, John Ruskin, and for an author Kessler cites as an important influence, Jose Arguelles. Arguelles' *The Transformative Vision* contrasts Raphael's *School of Athens*, "a humanist monument to the triumph of man's intellect over nature," to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* which presents the body as that "ground of being to which the intellect must cling." Bosch shows that the division between man and nature is the product of a mistaken view of nature; and since not he, but Raphael, represents the dominant European tradition, not surprisingly "nearly all of modern European nature painting has a nostalgic quality." But Kessler is not nostalgic, nor does he feel any especial affinity to the traditions of European landscape painting. Why, once again, do I call him a painter of nature? Nature is mindless, art the product of conscious control; nature is infinite, art finite; nature makes none of those quality distinctions art demands. So, even as he creates images miming the appearance and processes of nature, Kessler unavoidably separates himself from that nature which, as represented in his art, becomes alternatively beautiful and terrifying. The artist, Renaissance aestheticians asserted, is a second nature, working in self-conscious imitation of those processes that are everywhere manifest in nature. No ideal could be more distant from the dominant mythologies of contemporary art, with their stress on the separation of art from life and their assertion that all art, after all, is about other art. What nature stands for, then, in Kessler's work and life is a countermyth, a return to this Renaissance ideal. Raphael and Bosch are not so far apart as Arguelles asserts.

Within our art world Kessler thus is an eccentric figure, an extreme artist whose visionary art is initially frightening. We naturally associate visionary art with crazy outsiders-men or women whose loss of rationality puts them in touch with feelings we

cannot recognize or express. But since Kessler is a disciplined, uneccentric person, a worldly man in the good sense of the word, what does it mean to characterize his work as extreme art? The extreme artist, as I use that phrase, is he or she who possesses the self-confidence to keep a distance from the mainstream culture. Kessler's vision of the artist as second nature would count for nothing were it not expressed in strikingly original paintings. His working process, "which in my poor description appears too intellectual," thus teaches us something that we have forgotten, that representations of nature may be mirrors in which we view ourselves.

Sources: Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*; Robert C. Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*; Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*; Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting*; William Gass, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*; Meyer Schapiro, *COzanne*; John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*; John O. A. Argiello, *The Transformative Vision*; and the writings of the art historian Richard Schiff.

ARTFORUM , APRIL 1987

Michael Kessler , Barbara Krakow Gallery , Boston

Despite refined paint handling, and sophisticated technique, Michael Kessler's paintings speak of innocence- albeit indirectly. Emerging from the 19th-Century American landscape tradition, they suggest that nature may still act as the repository of the Divine. Kessler, 33 years old and urban educated, lives on a farm in the rural Pennsylvania of his birth. An isolated lifestyle has, perhaps, enabled him to bypass the apocalyptic cynicism and despair of so many of his contemporaries; however, his aspiration to a purer sensibility does not translate as naivete. In an era when popular culture has all but replaced the wilderness as esthetic source material, these paintings affirm the artist's ability to commune profoundly with the natural world.

On-site impressions of nature are filtered through Kessler's imaginative screen as fantastical landscape or allusory abstraction. Amoebalike shapes jostle abstract images of leaves, branches, bones, etc., conveying a sense of earth, air, water, vegetation, and organisms churning to dynamic internal rhythms. Although most of Kessler's paintings are not explicitly figurative, the viewer identifies viscerally with their imagery of primordial matter.

Following in the line of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, Kessler mines the depths and radiance of the unconscious, with formal allusions to biomorphism (Paul Klee, Andre Masson, Arshile Gorky) and Jackson Pollock's overallness . Many of the smaller works painted on board incorporate a wide frame as an integral element of the painted composition, implying that the organic/irrational world may be alluded to but not contained.

The most striking work in this show was the hallucinatory landscape *Lake 11*, 1986, executed in Kessler's most recent, larger (65-by-50-inch), unframed format. A traditional vista, complete with receding stream, dark riverbanks, and a luminous triangle of white sky echoed in the pyramid of water, is fronted by reedy tree trunks and suspended coiled branches. The moment is electrified, made sublime, by a horizontal golden band outlined in crimson, which whips around from the horizon to encircle the foreground trees. The alchemic force of the imagination transmutes nature, which is itself wondrous, into something dazzling, something that is also made; in other words, here is a reason to paint.

Kessler mixes wax into oil pigment, which he applies with a palette knife. Multiple layers are revealed through scraping, scratching, and sanding. Jewellike colors and incandescent surfaces form analogies to such phenomena as geological strata blossoming into lush flora, or the pearl imperceptibly maturing in the oyster.

One caveat we've all seen too many abstruse macrocosms of the microscopic-squiggly Rorschach-test organisms teeming in drops of pond water. In several works (*Splitter*, 1985, #2, 1986) Kessler veers dangerously close to such slippery kitsch, evoking unfortunate memories of '60s psychedelic album covers. More often, though, Kessler's integration of organicism, fantasy, and sheer physical beauty produces paintings capable of implying that the seemingly anachronistic is in fact vital. Paradise may not be completely lost., imbued with the poignancy and erudition of the artist's vision, the natural world displays an indomitable spirit.

NANCY STAPEN

Art in America, November 1987

Michael Kessler at Jack Tilton Gallery , New York City

Sea creatures come to mind when viewing Michael Kessler's latest abstractions, or perhaps viruses and amoebas seen through a microscope. In *Untitled*, 1986, worms with sharp teeth swim in an aquamarine liquid, while a stringy sheet of white moves in front of these vaguely phallic forms. The whole image seems to be slowly changing as we watch, biomorphic elements penetrating and interpenetrating in some murky process of cellular reproduction. Despite his propensity for weightless shapes, Kessler largely avoids slackness in his pictures through his tough handling of paint. He layers and scrapes his color with a palette knife and then covers the surface with a thick coat of shiny varnish.

Although Kessler is drawn to the kind of "sea changes" that inspired Pollock and, more explicitly, Stamos and Baziotis, he also claims the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside where he lives as a more earthly and earthy influence. Indeed, Kessler's tones-olive greens, golds, blacks and rusts-and even the snaking, roadlike bands of paint in a

picture like *Under the Red Sea*, 1987, bring to mind the colors and landscape forms of the farms he sees every day.

But perhaps a more salient connection with his Amish neighbors is to be found in Kessler's feel for the integrity of hand crafted things. For all their amorphous shapes, his paintings' emphasis on surface and texture is part of a concrete analysis of the problems and procedures of the oil medium. The occasional use of collage—a bit of sheet metal, for example, projecting from the surface of the horizontal mural that confronted the viewer upon entering the gallery—may be an attempt to place his art within the context of the beautifully ordinary that is a part of the Amish aesthetic. But Kessler's art isn't all high seriousness: there is a great deal of humor in these pictures that depict a world where armless, often fat-stomached monsters dance and cavort. It is precisely Kessler's talent for evoking a wide range of associations while remaining connected to the rigors of his craft and tradition that makes his paintings so strong. In these ambitious, fullscale abstractions (ranging in size from 52 by 64 to 72 by 115 inches), Kessler isn't fighting with the painters he seems to admire most—Miro, Gorky and the early Pollock—but is instead slowly building on their achievements, in that difficult process of finding a sense of place and a voice that are his own.

Jonathan Weinberg

Michael Kessler, *Paintings and Drawings 1982-86*,

Art Now Gallery, Gothenberg, Sweden

After The Fall

"I see the Past, Present & Future all at once Before me" William Blake

The story of mankind's banishment from the Garden of Eden can be read as a paradigm of our deepening alienation from nature. We are condemned to live in the world, but not be part of it. It is this estrangement that Michael Kessler has purposefully set out to address. His humane, ambitious quest for images capable of healing has resulted in one of the strongest bodies of work made by an artist of his generation.

Born in 1954, Kessler has spent much of his life in relative isolation in rural Pennsylvania. For him, the natural world, however mindless, forms the solid ground upon which the forces of his imagination can build. In contrast to nature's automatic cycles, the paintings are the product of a lengthy, highly analytical process in which the initial image passes through successive stages of an unpredictable metamorphosis. Among the driving forces instigating these metamorphoses is an obsessive concern with surface. The paintings reach completion through the artist's use of thin washes and impasto. He will sand the surface smooth, scratch through layers, burnish, scrape, and smear. A wide range of means is always at his disposal.

Kessler's radiant abstractions evolve out of constant reinvestigations of the possibilities inherent in the dialogue between paint and painted, actual and imagined. From the late 1970's to the early 1980's, the artist worked mostly on modest sized pieces of masonite. These paintings also incorporated a heavy wood frame as an integral part of the composition. In many of them, the images leaped from the masonite surface to the wooden frame, as if no barrier was strong enough to restrain their unruly growth. Combining both elegantly gouged frames and hard, jewel-like surfaces, the paintings were simultaneously objects (in the Johnsian sense) and windows (in the visionary sense). Formally, the compositions tended towards the symmetrical and overall. The images populating them could be divided into two groups; the telluric and motifs simultaneously resembling the disclosures of a laboratory slide and that of a telescope. Among their many sources were the intricate veins of leaves, the way spikes of light penetrate a tenebrous forest, entwined rivulets of mud and lava, rows of cilia, insect infested skeletons, a branch's gnarled surface reflected in a pool of rainwater, and endless decay and growth. In these paintings it was clear that a constant contact with nature had provided the artist with a seemingly inexhaustible set of analogues for both the act of painting and paint's materiality.

The recent paintings suggest that Kessler's ambition continues to grow at a remarkably rapid pace. He has not only become dissatisfied with working on a modest, more manageable scale, but he also wants to put more distance between the subjects of his paintings and the sources of their images. Now, instead of limiting the size of his paintings to the circumference of a prolonged gaze, he is scaling his work in relationship to the extreme limits of his physical gesture. Underlying this decision to change is an increasing desire to get more of himself, his growing repertoire of marks, into a painting. Conversely, it is also likely that the artist felt compelled to change, because of his evident mastery of drawing with charcoal on large sheets of paper.

Along with the change in scale, Kessler has started to relinquish his use of heavy wooden frames, masonite surfaces, and overall, symmetrical images to hold the paintings together. In contrast to his earlier work, the recent paintings, many of which are done in oil on canvas, combine a wide variety of imaginary structures within a wildly shifting space. Figures and grounds entwine, biting into each other with aggressive authority. Embedded within these complex, highly allusive images are their past, present, and future states. Each of the various states of becoming the work records is synonymous with acts of painting. Forms metamorphosize as they snake their way across the densely layered surfaces or burrow back into a space more cosmic than natural. At the same time, it is not unusual for a cell-like structure to suddenly transform into a plant-like presence and then shift into something rock-like and dense.

Derived from both observation and imagination, Kessler's images inhabit various worlds simultaneously. They refer to the invisible world we inhabit, while it inhabits us. The cellular and atomic structures that are the basis of all creation have been magnified

with greater and greater introspective clarity. The inward realm of the imagination has been connected to the deepest foundations of existence. Kessler continues to add to his already abundant repertoire of images, paint marks, and rich palette. He no longer tethers his compositions to an overall image. Having burst free, they spread across the physical surface and into the fictive space with compelling urgency. Their richly layered accretions simmer with volcanic heat. Both the variousness of nature and the links discovered by imagination's associative powers have been transformed into paint. Looping lines, smeared patches, luminous washes, viscosity and liquidity, deep space and sensual surface assert their identities within a single composition.

AWARDS IN THE VISUAL ARTS 5

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

13 April through 15 June, 1986, Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York

14 September through 18 October, 1986, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

12 December 1986 through 25 January 1987, Norton Gallery , West Palm Beach, Florida

Michael Kessler's sumptuously colored, painterly abstractions reveal a hand and eye raised on the multiple lessons of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, but possessing an entirely individual sense of color. The biomorphic and vegetal shapes that inhabit Kessler's paintings owe much to abstract surrealism, though they are far from the spatial illusionism of, say, Tanguy or Miro. Instead, Kessler achieves what sense of perspective and depth there is in his paintings through a close attention to the relative values of color. There are, properly speaking, no grounds in Kessler's paintings; areas of modulated color overlap and intersect with delineated forms that are just as likely to give the impression of flat transparency as they are to seem three-dimensional, like the frontal cucumber-green forms in *Interfusion*, which appear full-bodied only because of the blinding, light quality of the white patches behind them.

And yet there is a feeling here of being in a three-dimensional world that functions by different laws than ours; like the travelers inside the human body in *Fantastic Voyage*, it seems that the viewer of Kessler's paintings may have inadvertently stepped inside the cellular structure of some mysterious plant life. The leaf and podlike shapes in *Portal* seem to be fed by heart or lung-shaped roots encircled by a glowing wire of orangey red light; the two "pods" in the central portion of that painting, by virtue of their luminescent, contrasting hues (one is a streaked sunset glow while the other is a murky, night-sky color surrounded by a pinker orange) do read as portals onto another realm-this one of pure light, perhaps. This painting, like *Malevolent Landscape* and *The Nagual's Time*, has the look of a landsat-type, color enhanced photograph of cellular or molecular structures.

Over the last year Kessler's works have become looser, his forms more fluid. Correspondingly, there are fewer geometric elements in the paintings and the symmetry, whether geometric or biological in feel, that was a marked feature of 1984 pieces such as Raisers and Walk, has become quite muted-though it occasionally crops up, as in the pods of Portal or the heartlike chambers of The Nagual's Time. In the earlier works Kessler almost always extended the image out onto a painted frame, as if to suggest that the images' reality continued beyond the bounds of the visible, secretly permeating our own space. The most recent paintings, however, have simple wood frames.

Though Kessler's palette not changed greatly, it has moved toward the hot, red end of the spectrum; many of the paintings shown here glow like hot lava. Much of the drama of Malevolent Landscape lies in the contrast between the searing, molten yellows and reds and the interjection of passages worked in icy blues and whites or stone greens. Indeed, the malevolence of the landscapes Kessler offers us resides as much in color as in form or paint handling. Jamey Gambrell, contributing editor of Art in America

AWARDS IN THE VISUAL ARTS 5 JURY:

Kathy Halbreich Marti Mayo Martin Puryear

Director, List Visual Arts Center, M.I.T., Curator, Contemporary Arts Museum Artist,
Chicago, Illinois

Cambridge, Massachusetts Houston, Texas

Suzanne Delehanty Richard Koshalek

Director, Neuberger Museum, Director, The Museum of Contemporary Art
State University of New York at Purchase Los Angeles, California

ARTS MAGAZINE , March 1985 , pp. 120-121

EXOTICA: A DIFFERENT WORLD, Barry Schwabsky

"Exotica" , curated by John Yau.

The artists included were Don Cooper, Gordon Hart, Michael Kessler, Malcolm Morley, Archie Rand, Joseph Santore, Hunt Slonem, and Chihung Yang.

With Michael Kessler's paintings we find ourselves in the heart of the heart of the country, where the earthly and the unearthly become one. This kind of nature mysticism is not exactly new to American art (the recent exhibitions of Arthur Dove prove that), but Kessler takes up an exorbitant position in relation to this tradition by his desire to be inside rather than simply with the landscape. His somewhat finicky technique, which involves applying and sanding many levels of paint, does pay off in a brilliant luminosity

and a sense of the peeling away of levels of reality in search of some primal being; but it is unfortunate that Kessler feels compelled to mediate between the paintings and their surroundings by means of his elaborate painted frames, which by absorbing the jolt of confrontation between the world inside and outside the picture actually have the effect of sealing off the experience he has painted from our own. Kessler has not yet come to terms with the occurrence of rhetoric in his work.

Barry Schwabsky

ARTFORUM , Feb. 1985

MICHAEL KESSLER (at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City)

Michael Kessler's first solo exhibition in New York was an auspicious debut. One quibbles with certain aspects of his paintings, but his overall level of seriousness, accomplishment, and belief in the continuing possibilities of abstraction set him apart from most artists of his generation (he recently turned 30). The artist has spent much of his life in relative isolation in rural Pennsylvania, and his highly evocative abstractions evolve from his constant contact with nature.

Kessler works in oil on modest-sized pieces of masonite. All the paintings here also incorporate a heavily worked wood frame as an integral part of the composition; sometimes the device succeeds wonderfully, as when snakelike forms seem to leap from the painting onto the frame, but elsewhere it seems like an unnecessary mannerism. Kessler's paintings can be divided into two groups: in one, telluric images and motifs simultaneously resemble the disclosures of a laboratory slide and those of a telescope; in the other, one has the feeling one is experiencing nature—a swamps dense vegetation and patterning of light and shadow—rather than just viewing it. This feeling is reinforced by the sensual surfaces of the works. The veining of leaves, the way light penetrates a forest, rivulets of mud and lava, a branch's gnarled surface, and endless decay and growth are some of the sources of both groups.

The colors are like dawn; they are luminous to the point of being pleasantly excruciating. At the same time, it is not unusual to find a painting with a surface ranging from the impastoed to the scarred, scratched, burnished, or stained. Here, then, is a young artist with a metaphysical vision evolving out of Heraclitus; both see the world as a continuum undergoing relentless metamorphosis. Kessler expresses his inward vision by tapping into the metaphorical possibilities inherent in paint's materiality.

In the smaller, squarer paintings the images tend to be emblematic. I was reminded of the shape of leaves, the chambers of the heart, and cellular structure; a metaphoric current connects all three. The larger, more recent paintings are both less emblematic and symmetrical in composition, which suggests that Kessler is moving on, trying to enlarge his approach. What comes next promises to be even more powerful than these

already strong paintings.

JOHN YAU , POET and ART WRITER

NEW WORK: NEW YORK /OUTSIDE NEW YORK

THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, New York, New York, June 2-July 15, 1984

Michael Byron Yee Jan Bao Myrel Chemick

Roger Boyce Moira Dryer Julie Bozzi

Paulus Musters Michael Kessler Laura Newman

Kay Miller Jan Staller Susan Whyne

Stephen Whisler Robert Yarber

More often than not, the landscape in landscape painting has been rendered with the implied presence of the beholder as an extension of the point of view presented. With the advent of plain air painting during the mid-nineteenth century, the immediacy of the scene depicted brought an increasingly nostalgic attitude toward a vanishing landscape. The artist was communing with the raw, as yet untouched, power of the natural source, a virginal place wherein he could partake of a pure vitality that existed apart from the newly industrialized world.

The Russian avant-garde painter Wassily Kandinsky, in his earliest excursions into abstract art, used the landscape as a point of departure for his ground-breaking works around 1910, concurrent with the publication of his influential essay, "On the Spiritual in Art." Today, Michael Kessler is making paintings that continue this legacy of searching for a fusion of natural laws and spiritual aspirations. Like Kandinsky's, Kessler's format is modest while his vision is expansive. The artist's yearning to synthesize the landscape within his imagination has yielded a strong and consistent body of work that verges on non-objective painting, but deliberately pulls back from that brink to incorporate the many empirical observations he makes during quiet hours spent in the woods. It is then and there that Kessler takes notice of how light and natural forms intermingle to create a realm that corresponds with hallucinatory or dream-like states of mind.

Although he works from memory, Kessler's discerning eye makes plausible the abstract within the domain of concrete imagery. His exuberant color, often pushed to extremes, is tempered by the strength of the lines and forms containing them. The treatment of the frame as an active pictorial element serves two ends. It compresses and restrains the dynamic energy of the central painting while it brackets and mollifies the intensity of form and luminosity of the color.

The effect is similar to seeing a stained glass window in a dark church before the eye adjusts to the lack of ambient light. In fact, the effect is closer to catching a glimpse of the mind's eye, for Kessler's vision is a channel for an elusive goal: capturing the essence of growth and change at the core of life, for which nature is the model.

Ned Rifkin, Director

High Museum of Art , Atlanta, Georgia

Arts Magazine, Summer ,1984

MICHAEL KESSLER , at Jack Tilton Gallery, New York City 3-28, 1984)

Encompassing the broad tradition of Blakelock, Ryder, Dove and Burchfield, Michael Kessler's landscape paintings disclose a visionary interpretation of nature. His particular fascination is the perpetual cycles of evolution (growth and decay, freezing and thawing, the transition of day to night) and their effects on the microcosm sustained within his native Pennsylvania woodland. Kessler observes intimate details of these processes and renders them on a magnified scale so that the line and shape become abstract. In this manner, the rhythmic repetitions of parallel tree trunks, flower petals, veins in a leaf, and earth's strata metaphorically illustrate recondite universal order.

Color is also used symbolically and is closely related to Kessler's painting technique.

Layer upon layer of rich hues are applied to panels and then scraped, incised, and burnished to create an eroded yet smooth surface of compressed shards of color. This method (similarly employed by Bill Jensen) asserts that in these paintings as in nature, the visible is merely a by-product of complex internal dynamics. The nearly symmetrical composition of Kessler's works obliges color to direct our reading of imagery. In Raisers forms resembling succulent leaves unfold from an icy-green pool, their tips reflecting the fiery rays which emanate from above. Contorted tendrils rising from the center of this plant glow with orange-red heat as they pass through and eventually target the unseen source of these rays. The progression of cool to warm tones connotes the chain of photosynthesis and growth.

Each of Kessler's landscapes is inset in a wide painted frame, the uppermost layer striated or "finger painted" to reveal mottled base colors. Although individual frame treatment corresponds to the painting's content and mood, they collectively infer an aura of reverence for these mystic images.

By RON WARREN

PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS BY MICHAEL KESSLER

Nov,1983 - Jan 8, 1984

Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery, Niagara University, Niagara Falls, NY

While looking at Michael Kessler's paintings, one must decide what aspect of his work to contemplate first; the precious, jewel-like surface which extends over the frame, incorporated by the artist as an integral part of the composition; the beauty of the color scheme, subdued at times, but always luxuriously rich; or the harmoniously balanced composition which ties all the elements into an organized unit. Mainly, however, one has to penetrate the appealing surface and reach into a depth of hidden meanings which forms the real core of the artist's endeavors. Seemingly non-objective, or abstract, Kessler's work is based, in fact, on very real observations that have been transformed by the unabashed imagination of the artist's mind.

Landscape has been a traditional source of imagery for American artists and, it would seem, is currently being revived. Whether realistically depicted, or as an inspiration for more abstract imagery, landscape painting is witnessing a comeback. In a country where nature's forces influence people to an unprecedented degree, this is hardly a surprising fact. Michael Kessler is a landscape painter in the best American tradition. Born and raised on a farm in Pennsylvania, observation of nature was given to him by birth. He has not missed a single opportunity to draw from this inspiration and learn from nature's endless treasures.

Although Kessler's paintings do not describe nature in turmoil or in a state of destruction, neither are they joyous paintings. They depict images of calm waters with vegetation creating concealed meanders, interwoven branches creating mysterious shadows, or life unseen but omnipresent. With details frequently magnified to the point of abstraction, the microcosmos becomes a macrocosmos, which allows us to explore all the meditative feelings of our own imagination. Kessler's work therefore should also be viewed as visual poetry written in metaphors of colors and shapes rather than words. In order to realize all the richness of meaning and execution, each painting must be looked at numerous times and carefully considered.

Every painting essentially begins with the selection and contemplation of a location endowed with a special atmosphere which elicits the artist's response. The first step is to make a sketch of the site into an indispensable notebook which serves Kessler as an image or idea bank. It contains not only drawings of interesting locations, but extensive notes, verbal descriptions of observed places and poems. The artist's interest in poetry is evident from both these notes and the titles assigned to particular paintings.

After "editing" images, the artist selects those which are most relevant to his ideas. Kessler uses panels for his pictures because they are better suited to withstand the elaborate process of the artist's technique. Painting is begun with the application of colors and shapes as they will basically appear in the final composition. The final shape of the works, however, can never be truly foreseen at this initial stage. Numerous paintings are begun at the same time and then put aside so that the artist may contemplate each work independently, begin new paintings, or gather more information into his sketchbook.

After a period of time, numerous works are chosen to be reworked. The selection process is as unpredictable as most of the events comprising our lives. It is based mainly on the expressive use of color and/or shape in a particular painting which, at a certain moment, corresponds closely with the artist's own mood. In a lengthy process, layers of paint are added over the original surface, one after another. Technical brilliance is a necessity - otherwise the layers of paint would work almost as enemies, and result in the destruction of an elaborately conceived work.

Kessler, therefore, is a painter's painter, whose recognition of old masters and their ability to create gems of painting is best expressed by his admiration for the work of Vermeer. The frames are as elaborately created as the paintings themselves. Always conceived as integral parts of the work, the frames respond to and complement the composition of the paintings in very much the same way that medieval painters conceived their frames to complement their works.

The titles are mostly descriptive and are determined either in the process of the work or upon its completion, but never beforehand. The title *Reacher's Branches*, 1983 (Cat. no. 30, Pl. 3), for example, certainly evokes the mood of the painting. The upward movement of the composition grows and reaches for the upper center from where the light emanates and brightens the whole pictorial surface. Every element in this work is striving and reaching toward the life giving light with great energy and vigorous movement. Growing from the darker, densely overgrown area, the "branches" are swaying while they reach higher and higher, ultimately disappearing in the very center of the light source.

In *Entangled Passage*, 1983 (Cat. no. 23, Pl. 4), the artist used an equally descriptive title. A passage progresses from the background, narrow and distant, and changes into a wide opening in the middle foreground, covered with golden and white triangles. Both soft and aggressive at the same time, this particular piece displays more of the warm color scale than most of Kessler's paintings. The reds, golds and yellows together emanate an aura of warmth. The black passage with the white ornament, however, brings a forbidding element into play. Evocative of danger, confusion arises whether it is a safe passage after all.

In *Swamp*, 1982 (Cat. no. 31, Pl. 5), color does not believe the possible danger as it did in the previous painting. The cold blue and green dominate the whole piece. This mood is further accentuated by the energetic strokes of orange evenly dispersed throughout the composition. The silver color of the frame underscores the feeling of coldness and loneliness.

Indian Summer, 1982 (Cat. no. 20, Pl. 6), is quite a different matter. It is enlivened by golden stratification in both in the painting and on the frame. It is vibrant with the colors and beauty characteristic of this particular time of the year. The large central shape could be read as a leaf undergoing its Fall transformation or as the shape of a seed which contains future life. Kessler's imagery is frequently suggestive of such

connections and its mysterious ambiguity is the artist's trademark.

Kessler's paintings originate from the artist's impressions of what he has seen and remembered and continue through an editing process into a visual statement, transformed through the freewheeling imagery of the artist's mind. Invested emotions profoundly alter the original scene, so that Kessler's descriptions of places could easily be branded as "emotive landscapes".

It must be noted that Kessler does not draw the subject of his paintings entirely from his surroundings. He depends equally on visions of landscapes created solely in his own mind and independent of any outside impulses. The special fusion of "real images," based the observation of tangible environments, and those created as pure fantasies or "mindscapes", brings dramatic ambiguity into Kessler's oeuvre.

Within the overall context of present American painting, Michael Kessler is unquestionably an exponent of current interest in landscape painting. His approach to this genre, however, is truly independent and his solutions most innovative. We can delve into his fantasy landscapes and not only contemplate the richness of the artist's imagination but uncover precious information hidden in our own unconscious which is freed by the artist's daring fantasy. Thus, Kessler leads us toward a new understanding of ourselves and of the world around us - the prime characteristic of a true artist.

Charlotta Kotik

Curator of Contemporary Art, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York