

An Interview with Artist Michael Kessler  
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Michael Kessler was born in Hanover, Pennsylvania. He received a B.F.A. from Kutztown University, Kutztown, Pennsylvania in 1978. His awards include the Rome Prize for Painting, American Academy in Rome in 1990, and a Pollock/Krasner Award in Painting in 1992. Kessler's work has been widely exhibited in the US and abroad, and has been featured in over 70 solo exhibitions since 1983. His paintings are widely collected and appear in over 20 museum collections in the US, including the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA. Kessler lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Julie Karabenick: Your work has been referred to as nature-based abstraction.

Michael Kessler: Nature provides the basis upon which my work exists. Thirty-five years ago, I began by painting landscapes, but through prolonged and careful observation, it was the inner dynamics of the natural world that grasped my attention.

Questions of how and why nature looked the way it did began to drive my work. I wanted to peel away the surface so that I could better understand its inner workings. I began to sensitize myself to the processes that were responsible for the appearance of the natural world—like sedimentation and erosion. Gradually, my painting process took on the characteristics of these natural processes. Nature is my model and transformation is my subject matter.

JK: So process has always been a very central concern for you.

MK: I've often said that I created the process and the process created

the images that became my paintings. The significance of this is that my process is more important to me than the physical paintings. It is a very elaborate process capable of producing diverse works in a wide range. It involves the application of many layers and skins. A sandwich of information is built up to reveal the passage of time and its own creation. Structures both organic and geometric are laid down under and between translucent skins of paint.

For me, the act of painting is meditative and ritualistic. As I am working, I enter a peaceful, quiet and harmonious place. After a while, it seems like I'm moving in slow motion.

JK: And you adopt a very experimental approach to process.

MK: I love working with materials in innovative and experimental ways. There are no rules I follow in this regard. If something occurs to me, I do it and if things turn out well, then it is incorporated into my process. The results of this approach are extremely varied and open-ended, keeping many avenues open to explore. This was my intent from the beginning. I never wanted to paint myself into a corner. I resist labels and boxes and constraints of any kind. I live for the surprise of discovery. My process is organic like evolution in Nature.

JK: So you don't do preliminary planning or sketching?

MK: Never—I want to improvise as I go along. The paintings evolve in a call-and-response kind of way. This is important to me so that the work has a kind of mind of its own. For me, painting is a mysterious journey of discovery. It really keeps me on edge and very curious, fresh and alive. My work feeds me—it's not merely a product of my imagination, but a stimulus as well.

JK: Over the years, you've developed a variety of painting tools.

MK: I have invented tools to suit my needs, including several different kinds of skimmers and trowels. I do have favorite methods of application. Perhaps my most favorite is to take up a trowel full of color and lay it down with great deliberation under the full pressure of my arm. Another favorite is to take my 52" aluminum skimmer and pull

translucent color across the surface, varying the pressure slightly as I move along the panel.

I often use masking tape and masking paper to exclude areas from these applications. Sometimes I bend the masking tape into gently curved edges.

Gestural marks are also an important element in the vocabulary that I employ. They provide a contrast in form and structure to the more geometric divisions achieved by the banding/stripping action. Balance is always sought as I carefully orchestrate these somewhat disparate elements as the work develops.

A very important consideration for me is how it feels to perform a certain painting operation. Troweling on a band of paint just really feels right. That procedure is very much what I am about in the same way that flinging drops of paint was what Jackson Pollock was about or pouring cups of color was what Morris Louis was about, and so on. I am in some ways an action painter who uses a new action that produces geometrically structured paintings. That is just what comes naturally to me.

JK: We can trace your strong sense of connection to the land to your boyhood days.

MK: I grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania. On a farm you are intimately aware of the connectedness of everything and the organic process is evident in all you see and do. It all makes perfect sense—nothing is wasted and the endless cycle of life and death is clearly manifest. There, I developed a consciousness keenly aware of the power of Nature. On a farm, even when you do everything in your power to produce positive results, things can turn out disastrously. The weather is beyond your control and so in that picture, the "I" is humbled.

JK: And from an early age, you spent a lot of time drawing.

MK: My father dragged us to church a lot and I hated it with a passion.

My way of coping was to draw, so I drew and drew and drew. I discovered this ability at a very early age and my family reinforced it. As a result, I always thought of myself as an artist.

When I was fourteen, I had a girlfriend who lived in a grand house in the city. Her father was a doctor who collected art and had wonderful coffee table books laying around. One day, I happened to pick up one on Andrew Wyeth and, to my astonishment, the poetry I'd felt growing up on the farm was beautifully present in his work. It was a weird sense of déjà vu—as if he'd been there on the farm with me all the time. I was deeply moved and began painting pictures kind of like his.

JK: And at seventeen, you went off to college to study art.

MK: In 1972, I began studying art at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. I brought with me the Wyeth thing that I had down pat. Most of my instructors were impressed, but one was not. James Carroll challenged me and shook my world. He made me curious about other art. I was confused and began to research contemporary art in an obsessive way. On one of my many trips to the library, I discovered the paintings of Brice Marden. That was like lightning striking. I felt totally aligned with Marden's sensual Minimalism. The drips at the bottom of his paintings implied all kinds of infrastructures and the waxy skins covered them almost all up. Cognitively, I made a quantum leap from Wyeth to Marden nearly overnight. I was eighteen.

My interest in Marden led me to the rest of the Minimalists. As I dug deeper, I discovered Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. It really made sense. And there were the Russian Constructivists doing that austere and wonderful thing nearly 100 years earlier. I was blown out by the ineffable beauty of Malevich's graphite squares. It was mystical and meditative and purely sublime. I felt it deeply.

JK: In 1977, you were accepted to the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, so you lived for a year in New York City and there met a painter who became very important to you.

MK: I met Bill Jensen who was unknown back then, but had a strong presence among several groups of young artists living in NYC at that time. Bill was passionate about American abstraction that grew out of Ryder, Dove, Hartley and the entire Stieglitz group from the 30s. Here was a set of ideas and sensibilities that I could deeply relate to since Nature was a central component. Bill's works were small and unpretentious, but filled with light and intensity of feeling. He'd learned many lessons from Dove and Hartley in particular, but the work was steeped in Minimalism and Post Minimalism and informed by some mysterious mystical awareness. Bill opened up a whole new universe of potential for me.

JK: After the year in New York City, you moved back to Kutztown, finished college, and supported your studio practice by driving a school bus.

MK: In 1979, I began making drawings using charcoal and gesso. In the simple line drawing on the left, I was just finding a movement that felt right—a back-and-forth, saw-toothed, spiraling set of movements. In the next work, tissue and skin were applied. It was exciting to discover that the image could be found gradually by working both additively and subtractively. The charcoal was put down with great deliberation and the gesso was brushed on to edit down or white out areas. The images were largely emblematic—they felt like geometric forms related to the spiral, convoluted and undulating in a kind of curved space.

This process became my new approach to finding images—a kind of automatic drawing where images emerged in a kind of mysterious way. They were powerful journeys into unknown territory, a way for me to visualize the hidden aspects of all I saw around me in the natural world.

JK: And this way of working—proceeding intuitively and growing your images through a gradual additive/subtractive process—would remain with you to this day.

MK: This has remained my approach for over thirty years. I always feel my way through in an intuitive manner. I try to leave behind traces on

my path of discovery and reveal my improvisatory process to the viewer. This approach charges the work with energy and integrity.

JK: During the early 1980s, you would produce paintings based on the charcoal and gesso works.

MK: I wanted to generate a large group of paintings all of which shared the same format—a wood panel constructed from Masonite measuring 16" x 20" contained by a wide 4" redwood frame. I worked on this body of work for the next several years. I would arrange the panels on a large wall and each day would introduce elements that often migrated from panel to panel. Often the paintings were scraped down with a razor blade or sanded down with sandpaper or steel wool in that additive/subtractive application.

I wanted no planning or preconceptions to enter in—this was a journey of discovery with a great deal of experimentation and improvisation. To keep a fresh perspective, I would view the works in a mirror or rotate them around and around on the wall. I loved the uncertainty and surprises that occurred on a daily basis. It felt like a whole universe was unfolding and evolving right before my eyes. I felt the collective consciousness emerge and time and space dissolve.

JK: And with these works, you began to exhibit in New York City.

MK: My work did well there during the 80s. These paintings were shown by Jack Tilton who had taken over Betty Parson's space on 57th. I would go on to have four more solo exhibitions with Tilton over the seven years we worked together, and also exhibited in London and Sweden during this time.

JK: Your paintings from the next few years were larger in scale, compositionally more complex and far less serene.

MK: In looking back on this period, I'd describe these works as somewhat fear-based. They kind of made your hair stand on end. They were very complex and active works with no real restful areas. The colors were saturated and intense and the forms were often pointed and aggressive. The compositions were convoluted and twisted and

the grid was not yet a prominent aspect. They were agitated works and NYC audiences seemed to go for them. Critics wrote about them a lot. But they reflected the uncertainty and self-doubt I was struggling with at that time.

JK: Your subsequent work feels more open, less dark and agitated.

MK: In 1987, things took a dramatic turn. I moved to the pine forests near Crystal Cave, Pennsylvania. I'd always wanted to live in the woods. It was splendid and I was happy there. My large studio had a wall of glass on the south side that opened out to the forest. My work became more friendly and the space more atmospheric. The forms became more rounded and the colors softened a bit.

I was very involved with the removal of paint, using steel wool and sandpaper. Scale continued to expand outward. I felt very much in tune with Nature and no longer cut off from my source as I had from 1978 to 1986 when I had lived next to a tannery on Main Street in Fleetwood, PA where the surroundings were the antithesis of my needs.

JK: And you were about to embark on an adventure that would have a profound impact on your work.

MK: In 1990, I received the Rome Prize—a year-long fellowship at the American Academy in Rome where I had a studio overlooking the Roman Forum. This was a wonderful year filled with journeys to many archaeological sites and visits to the studios of some of my favorite contemporary Italian artists. Everywhere I looked, there were time-worn walls heavily layered with a patina of decades. The frescoes of Cimabue in Assisi and the frescoes at Pompeii were powerful influences. My works doubled and tripled in size, reaching monumental dimensions of 12 by 8 feet. I wanted to fill the space from floor to ceiling.

JK: We can feel that fresco-like quality in the large work you produced when you returned to the US.

MK: I returned from my year in Rome to a completely changed New York art world. It was just after the First Gulf War and the United States was in a deep recession. Everyone seemed depressed and unmotivated. To boot, Jack Tilton's gallery had closed. The entire deck had been reshuffled and here I was pumped up and eager to do a large project. Fortunately the curator of the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania came to me with a proposal to do a large site-specific exhibition based upon my experiences in Italy. The project snowballed into a traveling exhibition with lots of publicity and events.

JK: In 1993, you were invited to be an artist in residence at Carnegie Mellon. As your work continued, we can see the grid becoming more important.

MK: I invited the grid into my visual vocabulary, but it would have to be a slightly eccentric or imperfect form of the grid. I was not at all interested in producing predictable paintings. This reflects my determination to keep my work involved with irrational and intuitive ways of knowing the world. I had always had a mistrust for things too rational. I wanted to produce paintings that reflected a complete human consciousness, not some narrow slice of it.

JK: And you'd switched to acrylics.

MK: One reason I had been using oils was that they could be removed with sandpaper and steel wool; however, I was developing carpal tunnel syndrome due to the sanding machines I was using. In 1992, I began adding alkyd gel to my oils as a drying agent, and I realized I was essentially working in acrylic. With acrylics, I moved to a trowel-based application, scraping and removing paint while it was still wet, thus eliminating the need for sandpaper and steel wool. This sped up my process dramatically and removed the considerable health hazards associated with sanding.

JK: And, although your techniques for applying paint were evolving, you continued to approach finding forms in an exploratory manner that dates to your work of the late 70s.

MK: Once again I was activating the surface and then editing down that field of information. However, here my preferred method of editing down used gesso applied with a trowel in a banded form. The banding provided a beautiful contrast to the amorphous, atmospheric and biomorphic zones, balancing those elements and keeping them somewhat restrained.

There is also the idea that by juxtaposing different and even opposing types of elements, the inherent nature of those aspects becomes all the more noticeable. Simply stated, black looks even more black next to white. So I began to swing back and forth between opposites, and transitions and movements between these elements became orchestrated in a very careful way. Now it was about degrees of warmth and percentages of translucency. Looking at the paintings was about reading these transitions and pondering the multiple associations.

JK: And, as you've observed, your process of building form has similarities to processes at work in Nature.

MK: As the work unfolds, it oscillates from integrated states to disintegrated states and back again. In this way, visual information is flipped over and reconstituted, resulting in degrees of integration. This is what happens in Nature and, as a result, my work looks like Nature produced it. That is why I say my work depicts the inner dynamics of Nature. In the end, what you see is a very reduced picture of the events that took place in that space. That is how I want them to appear—as if they are just the tip of the iceberg. All this and so much more—implied infinity.

JK: In 1995, you moved to Santa Fe where you live today.

MK: I can't think of a more conducive environment in which to live and produce my work. The New Mexico skies are the clearest in the country and at 7000 feet, we are surrounded by mountains some of which are as far away as 200 miles. It's such a stark contrast to the closed-in environments I came from back East. The expansiveness really sets my

mind free. Overcast skies are extremely rare. The architecture is earth-colored stucco with rounded edges so buildings appear to have grown out of the ground. The cultural life in Santa Fe has nearly as much to offer as any big city and the art market here is very strong.

JK: As we continue to look at your work from the 90s, we can see you exploring flatness as well as intimations of a deeper space.

MK: To the issue of space and depth I bring the same attitude I do to all other formal concerns—and that is freedom. Greenberg's pronouncements about flatness and declaration of the death of illusionistic space is just so much dogma. I reject all dogmatic utterances. My work abides by its own criteria. I enjoy placing all matters on a continuum—when I'm confronted by a choice between two things, I usually take aspects of both as well as that which lies between them. Everything is inextricably linked and contains its opposite anyway.

JK: How would you characterize your use of color?

MK: I have always been especially drawn to gradations. Here again, it is the transitions, transformations, and mutations that I am sensitive to in my work. My paintings depict the processes of color degradation and transformation in action.

Take white for example. There is pure white as it comes from the jar and then there are various states of dirty white all the way to a very corrupt white. I enjoy watching colors degrade and then return to purity. My paintings depict this process in action. To me, this is a way to make the painting breathe and it also suggests the passage of time.

JK: Over the years, you seem to have favored particular colors and color combinations.

MK: Seventeen years ago when I returned from my year in Italy, I brought with me a color combination that has been an obsession ever since—the color scheme of red, black/sepia, and white/tan. I think I

must have seen this mix of colors everywhere I went in Italy and, in fact, as far back in history as one goes, art often makes use of these colors.

Even if you go as far back as the cave paintings, I think these particular colors are easy to find and extract from natural material. Interestingly enough, these colors are also the official symbols of alchemy. I've made literally thousands of paintings with this combination and still it seems I have not exhausted the possibilities.

JK: You also use very rich golds.

MK: The gold works began in 1995 just after I moved to Santa Fe. I was outside painting a lot and one day I troweled on a nice clean yellow field and just before it dried, I poured on a wash of purple. Wherever the wash remained, it neutralized the bright yellow so I was left with a very beautiful, natural-looking, almost chemical-based infusion once both layers dried.

That's how it goes with my color discoveries. It's very much about discovering certain properties and then exploiting them in a series of paintings.

JK: You refer to yourself as a Romantic.

MK: Philosophically I think when we achieve self-actualization and the deep fulfillment that accompanies it, then we will be happy and healthy individuals. We will be positive thinkers and confidently resist cynicism, bigotry, and hatred. Fear will not rule our lives and many negative aspects of our psyches will retreat. This positive momentum will carry us towards greater awareness, clarity, and enlightenment. This is what I mean by Romanticism.

Personally, I have always been very optimistic, opting to view the glass as half full. Keeping a positive perspective on life requires a lot of head work and maintenance, especially in this age of doubt. I am reminded of Louis Armstrong's famous song, "It's a Beautiful World," and that, in the face of all that is truly ugly and painful, it remains possible to see beauty.

JK: And you're also a remarkably prolific artist. Do you credit this to your strong work ethic?

MK: While it's true that I have good work habits and that I'm usually in the studio, the real key to my productivity is that I'm doing exactly what I love to do. It was very obvious from an early age that making art was my forte. I've had the distinct pleasure of spending my entire life developing these natural abilities. To me this is the very definition of happiness and fulfillment. There really is nowhere I'd rather be than in the studio making art.