



Constance Kheel, Artist

The More You Study Her Paintings, the More You See

by Carol St.Sauveur Ferris

There are those who have a difficult time understanding and appreciating abstract art. In fact, you often hear them say, "I could do that." Well, no, you probably can't. Not unless you've gone through years of learning the fundamentals like scale, perspective, color, mediums, abstraction, realism, and everything in between. These are the essentials in every artist's toolbox regardless of their personal style, and when creating, their work utilizes every bit of that tool box and more.

Every abstract artist begins their work with intention and through their own very personal process, creates works of art that express that intention. The finished piece is left for us to

study, interpret, understand, and hopefully appreciate. And perhaps, come away better for it. Connie Kheel is an abstract artist whose process is both inventive and creative on its own and whose results leave you with much to contemplate and appreciate the longer you spend time with it.

Kheel was born in New York City and was one of six children. She admits to being artistic for as long as she can remember and in love with horses. That love of horses inspired her creativity and not surprisingly became her primary subject matter in all her drawings and paintings right up until college. Then, at Bennington College,



Kheel was introduced to a completely new way of painting, and life changed.

Bennington's fine art curriculum included figurative drawing and abstract art unlike anything she had done before. Kheel happily took as many classes as possible to immerse herself in abstract art; yet she initially declared English as her major, a more traditional course of study, but quickly realized that painting was her true calling and switched over to art.



Tendrils Series #8, 35" X 47" Acrylic on Canvas



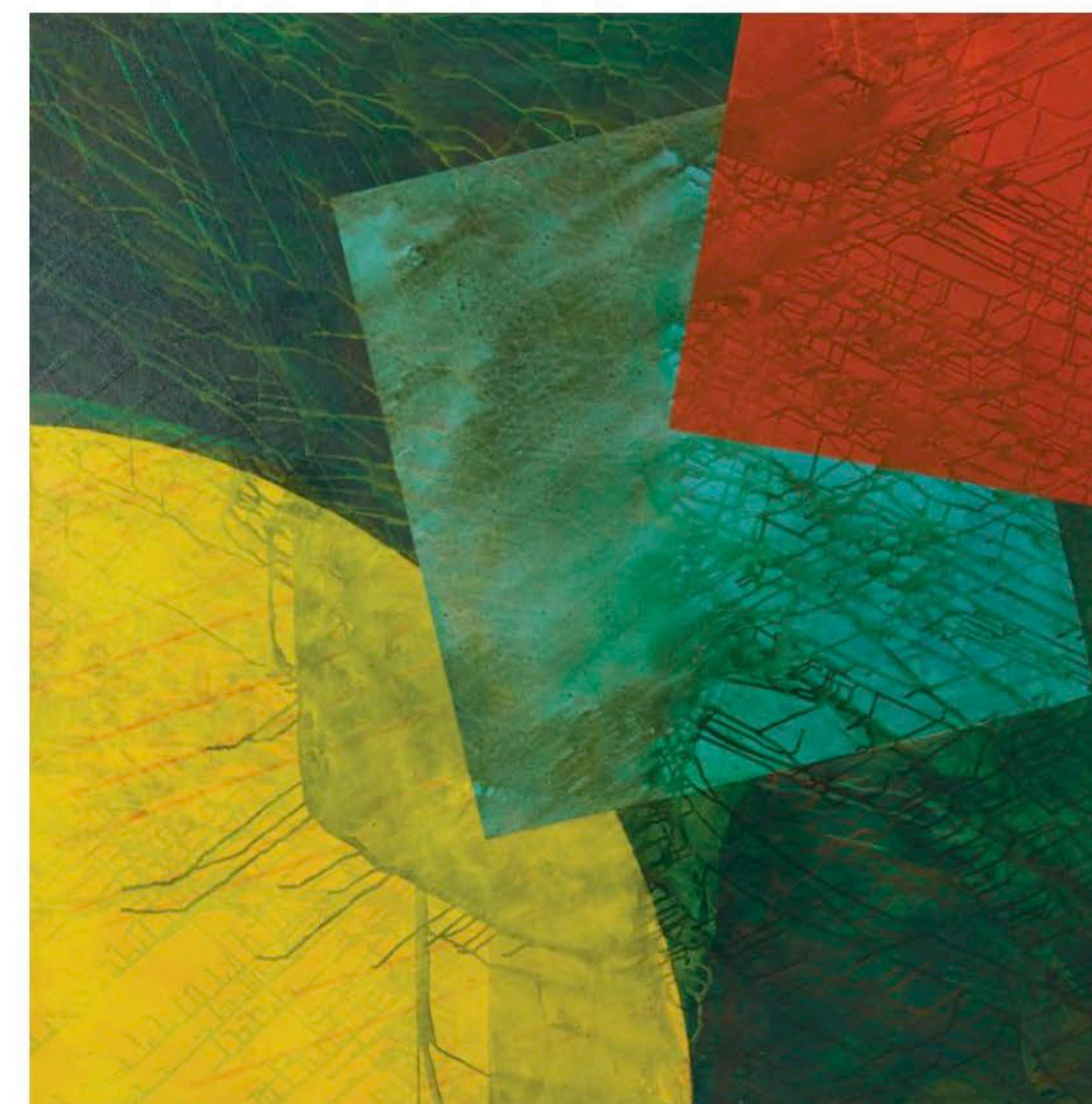
Her deep dive into abstraction came about because of an instructor's suggestion that she and her classmates pick an artist to study and then imitate everything that the artist did. Kheel chose Franz Kline, an American abstract expressionist who painted large black and white abstracts and was known as an action painter because of his brushstrokes and the way he used the canvas. She absolutely loved all of his work and painting in that style. But more than that, the creativity and sheer physicality of the process energized Kheel, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that abstract painting was going to be her life's work.

Upon graduation in 1967 with a BA in art and sculpture, Kheel followed her heart and moved to Germany with her future husband for several years. There, she promptly got a studio and continued to explore abstract painting and honing her style. But it wasn't until they returned stateside that she pursued it in earnest. In 1970 a beautiful farm in Northern Rensselaer County, New York, not far from the Bennington countryside that inspired her during her college years, became home, and it has been ever since.



A Breeze from Buskirk, 48" X 60", Acrylic on Canvas

A magnificent piece of property, Kheel's new homestead included several outbuildings and a barn. A perfect barn for her studio. She renovated that barn to include white walls that rise high up to the roof line, exposed beams, and clerestory windows on one side. Together these elements provide unimpeded and sacred studio space for her creative energy while the business side of being an artist has its own space



Bedding Planes, 54" X 54", Acrylic on Canvas

in a lovely loft office overlooking the studio below. The layout, look, and feel are perfect.

Her incredible studio notwithstanding, Kheel is surrounded by beauty everywhere she looks. She gets to drive in the countryside to see and absorb the ever-changing textures, colors, and movement found in nature. She loves the old buildings that dot the landscape as well. This quintessential, bucolic setting consistently informs her work.

"It's hard to explain how nature and historic structures influence my paintings but there's no doubt that they are my inspiration."

Kheel's process is incredibly time-consuming at every turn, so patience and commitment to her vision are key. Between the basic logistics of planning and ordering supplies, waiting for deliveries, preparing and setting up the canvases, then actually creating the pieces, it can take up to a year to complete one series. But the results have always been worth it and energize her to move on to creating the next one.

Her individual canvases are typically large in scale, measuring approximately 54" x 54" with some measuring up to 102" x 108". Their sizes, combined with her available studio floor space,

dictate how many pieces will be in a particular series. There can be as few as eight and as many as twenty as a result.

Once the supplies are on the premises, Kheel cuts, stretches, and attaches each canvas onto wood frames then places them on the floor that she covers with plastic. An assortment of buckets filled

with gorgeous hues of acrylic paint stand by. And because acrylic is a solid-bodied paint, she thins it out with water and medium so it will pour easily. Then the creative process is ready to begin.

There are no drawings or layouts done in advance nor prepping of the canvas itself. Kheel grabs a bucket of paint, pours a small amount on a canvas and spreads the paint to cover it completely. She does this for each one using a different color every time.

"I alternate between painting shapes or pouring paint on each canvas. One day painting shapes, the next pouring paint. This goes on for months."

Incredibly, this deliberate process means she will pour and spread more than 30 thin layers of paint

on each canvas creating unique textures and patterns. Kheel accomplishes this by tilting the canvas from side to side. Some large pieces

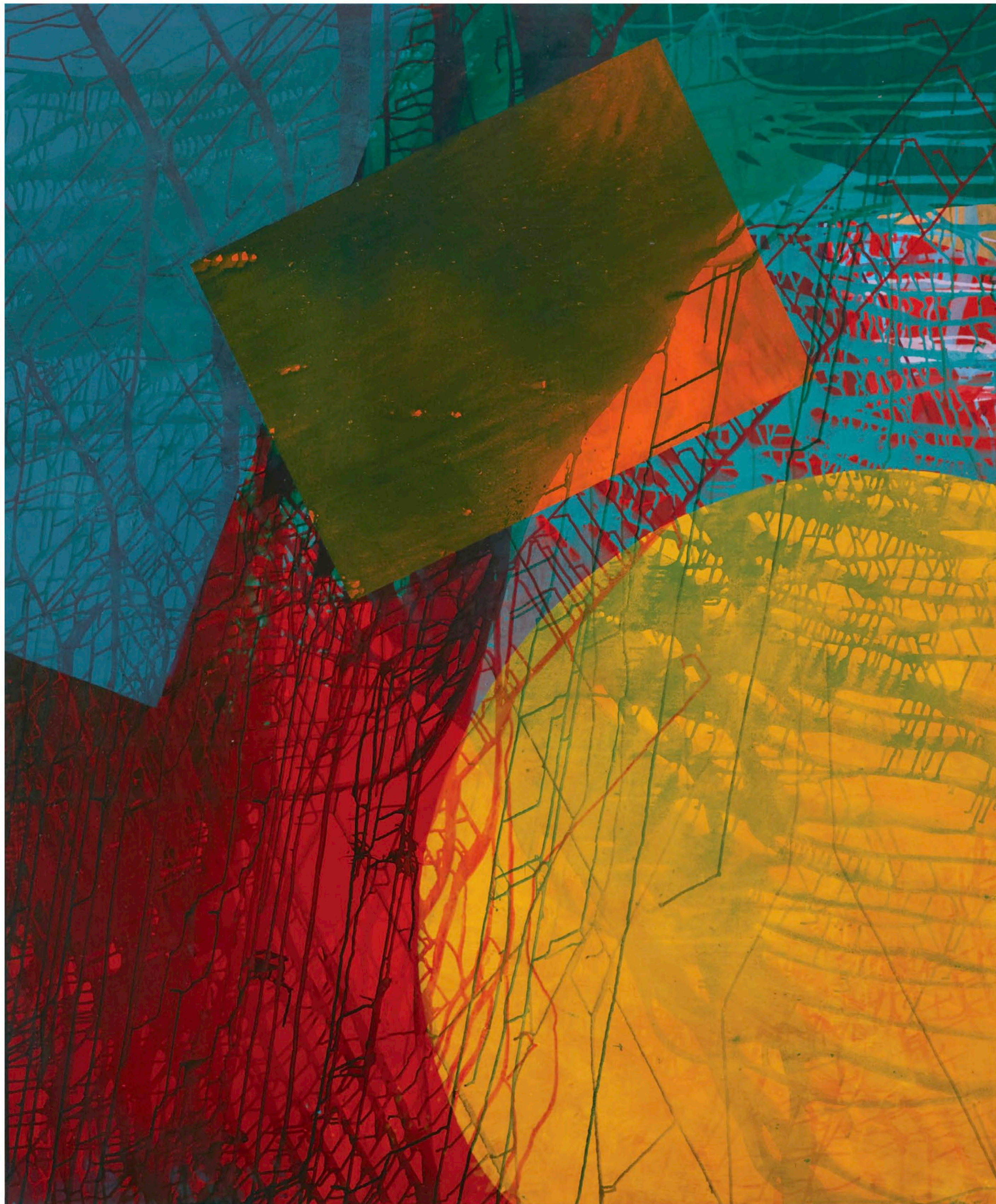


require much more support for the tilting process so Kheel hoists the canvas onto a unique easel that she designed and engineered for herself. It enables her to manipulate it much more easily.

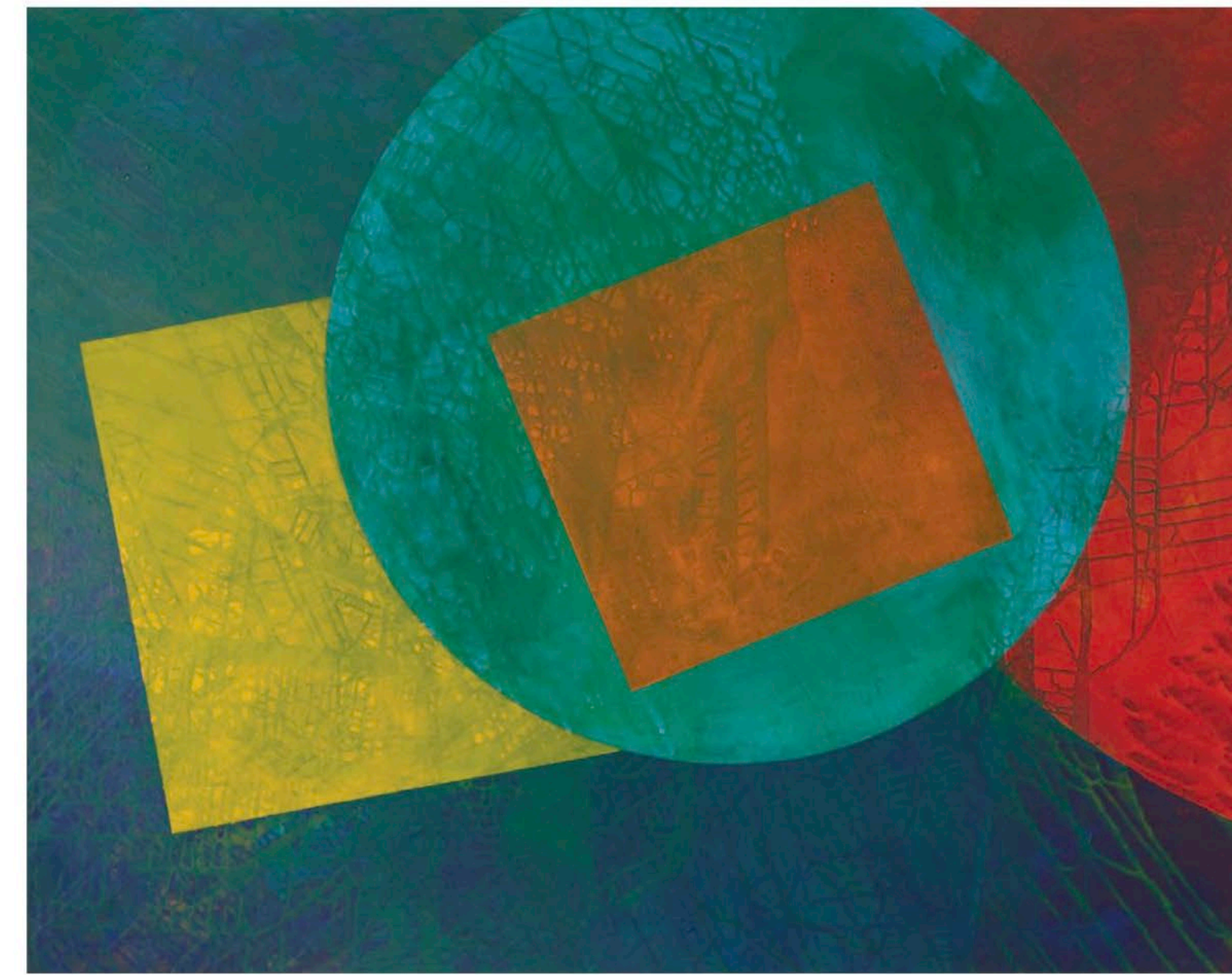
"I'd say that it is like a very heavy-duty easel that is made to hold paintings that measure four to six feet. The parts include the stand and a large piece of plywood against which paintings can sit. The innovative design feature is that the plywood is attached to the stand in such a way that it can be rotated like an upright Lazy Susan. In theory, I could rotate my painting 180 degrees, but that's only in theory. In fact, I can only rotate them about 45 degrees left or right."

She will also remove the painting and turn it completely upside down then reposition it back onto the easel. It's a very messy, time-consuming, and laborious process that requires some real muscle to do. Fortunately, her days of horseback riding developed the strength and endurance to manage the physical challenges.

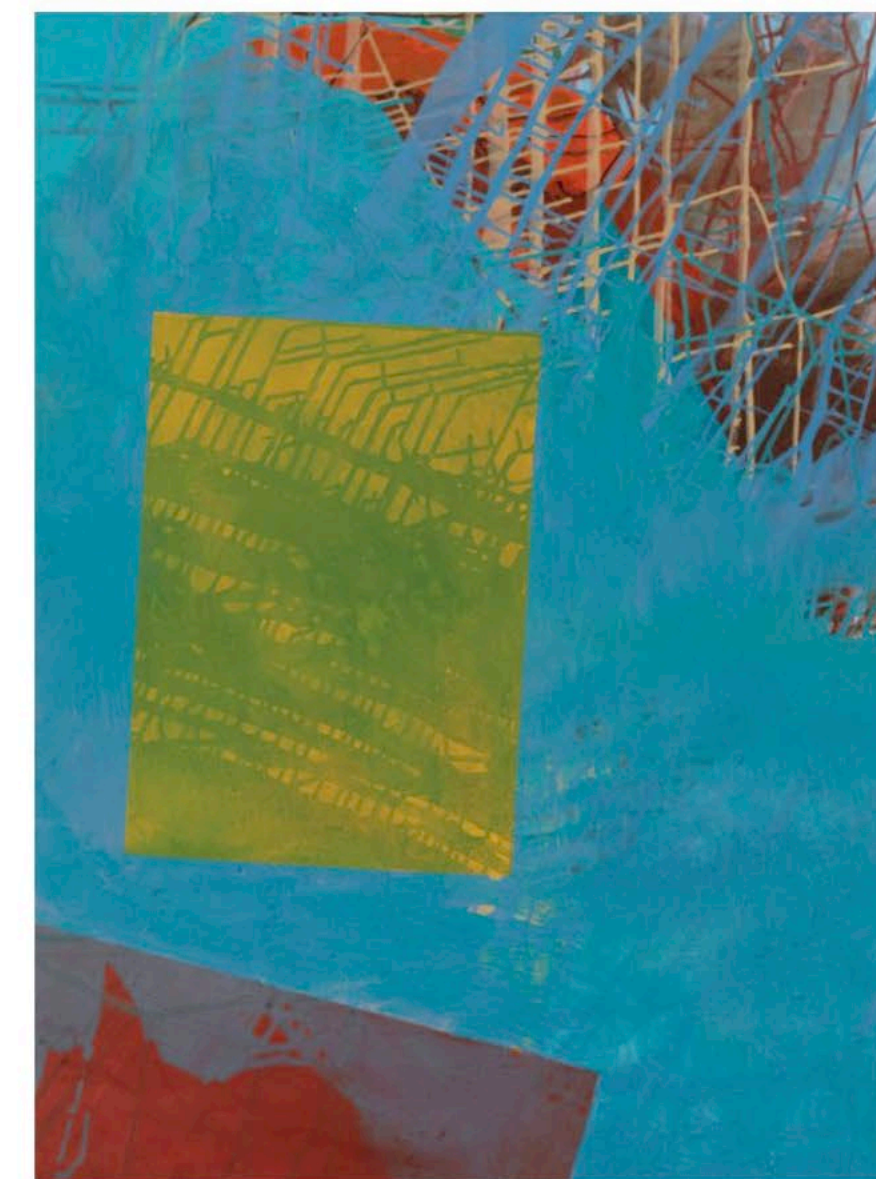




A Breeze from Buskirk, 48" X 60", Acrylic on Canvas



Intelligence, 48" X 60", Acrylic on Canvas



Tendrils Series #2, 37" X 34", Acrylic on Paper

Kheel will work on her canvasses no more than three to five hours a day. The results from brushed and poured color and shapes will lead her to each successive step. But while the mechanics are always the same as she moves along through the series, Kheel's process is fluid allowing for unplanned colors and textures that may take a piece in a different direction.

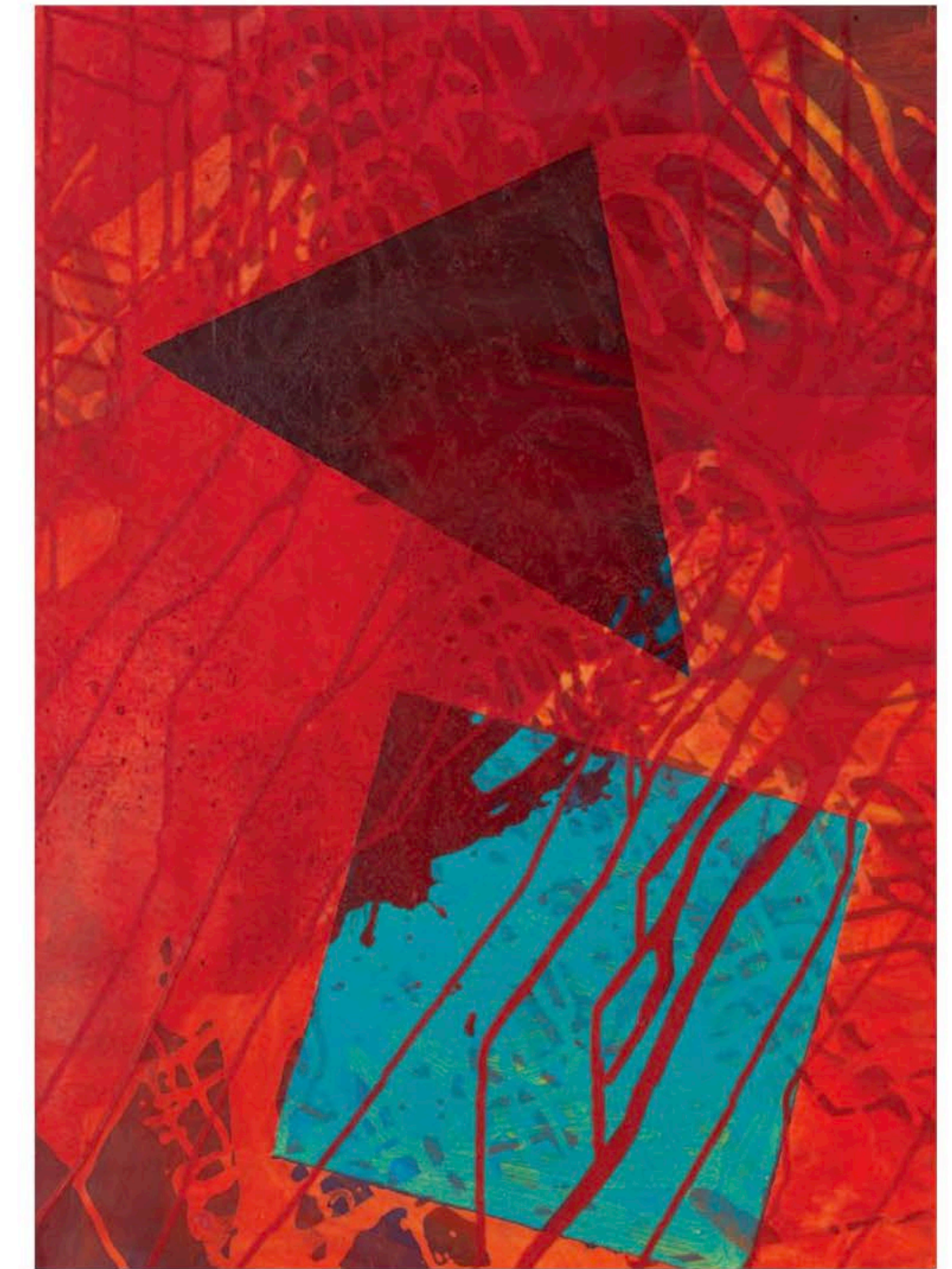
When asked if she has a preconceived idea of what a painting will look like, be it colors, shapes, or textures, she answers no. She has no idea at the beginning so she just gets started. But Kheel does know that she does not want

the color palette to be the same from piece to piece so she tries to push each one in a different direction.

"Each painting develops its own history of shapes and colors. But the size of the paintings (all being the same size for each group I'm working on), influences the imagery. So, in that way, they do relate to each other. By the time I've decided that a painting is finished, I will have applied well over 30 layers of paint waiting to be brushed into geometric shapes, or poured, tipped, and coaxed into thin layers across each canvas."

Besides her exceptionally large abstract pieces on canvas, Kheel paints smaller abstracts on canvas and paper as well. The extensive process is the same and the results are equally unique. Rounding out her body of work is a pastel series on paper that is a bit of a departure from her paintings, both in color and texture, but equally nuanced and filled with movement. It's called the Susie Series and is one of a kind. Kheel also works in other creative mediums including photography and architectural restoration but always finds herself coming back to painting.

Kheel's resume speaks to how much her work is appreciated and in demand. She was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship grant and her work has hung in more than thirty solo and group exhibitions. Many pieces hang in both public and private collections across the continental United States and beyond as well.



Reflection Series #27, 16 1/2" X 13 1/2", Acrylic on paper

Now in her 70s, she shows no signs of stopping and according to Kheel, this is one of the best of times for her creative pursuits because there are no family responsibilities anymore. Painting is now more than ever an essential part of her life to which she always looks forward.

"Painting does nourish me, and I am compelled to do it. The creative process is a necessity in my life."

An exhibition of her work will open soon at The Laffer Gallery in Schuylerville, New York on May 13th and run through June 18th. You can also view more of her paintings by visiting www.constancekheel.com.

