



▲ *Still Life*, 8-23-2014; water media, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper coated with beeswax mounted on panel and framed in recessed white maple; 32 x 58 ½ inches; courtesy of the artist

RAY KASS

Ray Kass, a prominent Virginia artist with a long record of national and international exhibitions, is well known not only for the quality and breadth of his art but as a pivotal, even catalytic figure in this region. Over the years Kass has stood out as an exemplary artist, here and in the art world beyond, as well as a distinguished art professor at Virginia Tech. Among his many accomplishments was establishing and directing the Mountain Lake Symposium and Workshop programs, through which he brought art-world luminaries to this region—including Clement Greenberg, Donald B. Kuspit, Howard Finster, and John Cage¹, among others—and influenced generations of artists in Virginia and the Southeast. One of Kass' recent and especially remarkable projects took place this past fall in Halberstadt, Germany, where he was invited to direct 17 performances of *STEPS: A Composition for a Painting*, a theatre piece on which he collaborated with John Cage in his Christiansburg, Virginia studio in 1989. The occasion was marked by the unprecedented publication of *STEPS*, the first theatre piece published by Edition Peters Group, the oldest and most esteemed music publisher in Europe.

This exhibition at the Moss Art Center highlights exemplary work from Kass' prolific career ranging from his large-scale, multi-panel *Polyptych* paintings (1989-2006) to his most recent *Still Lives* (2015-2018). Among the key works in the exhibition is the monumental 60-panel, 8-by-30-foot-long painting in the permanent collection of the Nevada Art Museum collection, *Broad Channel: Vorticella*, 1991, seen in Virginia for the first time in more than 20 years.

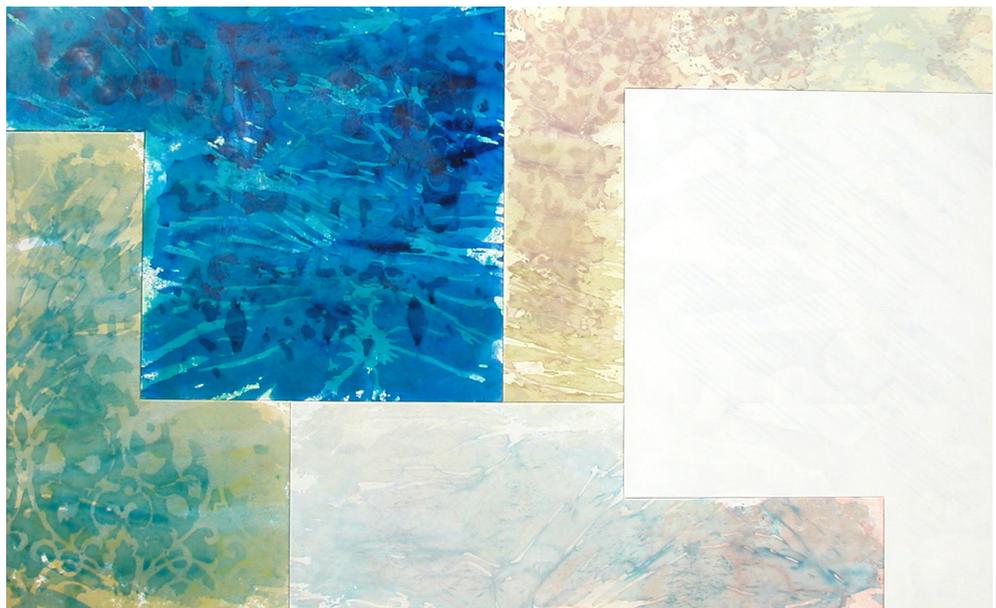
Raised in the seaside town of Baldwin on the south shore of Long Island, New York, Kass went to college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, worked in Manhattan for the legendary gallerist Allan Stone, taught at California's Humboldt State University, and lived on the rugged Northern California seacoast. He then moved to an artist's commune in New Hampshire and subsequently to a cavernous studio in Boston's thriving art community at South Station before arriving at Virginia Tech as a visiting artist in 1976 and establishing a permanent residence in Virginia, while also maintaining a studio in New York City. Throughout his evolution as an artist, a consistent and ongoing interest in landscape and the essence of the natural world has fueled his work, at first in panoramic watercolor vistas of the Maine coast and the Virginian Appalachian mountains and valleys and then in rooftop cityscapes of New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Richmond and Roanoke, Virginia, followed by

his rendering of landscapes into seemingly fluid and at times even translucent, non-representational imagery. Nature, and in particular rivulets, rivers, light, and movement, have been essential undercurrents informing Kass' work, much of which begin outdoors with drawings and plein-air paintings that then evolve into abstract, often enigmatic and/or elusive but consistently evocative renditions of place.

Featured in the Ruth C. Horton Gallery are prime examples of Kass' magnificent *Polyptychs*, an extensive series of over 100 multiple-panel paintings that emerge as a response to landscape, in many cases to specific sites. *Wilson Creek*, 1989, refers to the rivulet that crosses the road near Kass' home in Virginia's Ellett Valley; *Broad Channel: Vorticella*, 1991, refers to a small community in Jamaica Bay near Manhattan, which was often visited by Kass and his family during his childhood. In the late 1980s Kass began creating the polyptych paintings during the years that he worked with John Cage at the Mountain Lake Workshop program. In these works, Kass' longtime preference of working with watercolor and paper takes on impressive scale and architectural form in composite multi-panel structures. What is also notable is that he began experimenting with unorthodox materials and techniques, using the elements of smoke, fire, and water in creating his art. In a unique and certainly unprecedented process Kass created the polyptychs using water media on rag paper, the surfaces of which were then coated with shaved beeswax and mounted on primed wood panels. Kass began smoking paper over a straw fire to provide Cage with new painting experiences, which resulted in using smoke in creating abstract designs on paper, a process that Kass continued to explore in his own work. Cage was certainly an important influence in the development of Kass' work at this stage, though the exchange was mutual and they cross-pollinated their practices. It was Kass who encouraged Cage to paint and facilitated that process for him. Cage's use of chance operations filtered to some extent into Kass' polyptych paintings at that time, in that the selection and placement of drawings incorporated into the work was often left to the *I Ching* and chance determination. Another current of influence in Kass' work was Cage's interest in "panelization" as a compositional strategy—a means of adapting painting to the methods Cage used in composing his music, a strategy influential in the development of Kass' multi-panel polyptych structures.

On view in the Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor is a selection of the artist's mesmerizing *Tondo Polyptych* paintings from 2004-2006. Featuring the circular tondo or mandala form, Kass created these luminous, multi-panel paintings by randomly applying thin layers of watercolor with stencils and fabric scrims on smoked paper sealed with beeswax. Building on Kass' longtime interest in Zen and eastern philosophies, these works, though ambiguous, venture towards mystical and spiritual dimensions, an area of exploration that Kass had initially delved into when he worked with artist Morris Graves and organized the exhibition of his work for the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., in 1983. In another body of work, the *Plein Air: "Smoke," "Water," and Oil & Pigment* paintings (2000-2011), Kass uses a solution of mica powder suspended in water media on wrinkled, distressed, watermarked, or stained rag paper. He then applies transparent oil emulsion to the uneven surfaces, and only then, by rubbing and dusting the surface with powder pigments, do shapes and forms emerge. In these entrancing works what Kass seems to capture is nature as transient and ephemeral or shifting realities as vaporous and ultimately intangible. In *Winter Cauliflower* (2009), for example, a swirling energy of gorgeous greens and blues emerges out of an ethereal background almost as if a catalyst in the process of gestation, transformation, or imminent implosion.

In his most recent body of work in the exhibition, his *Still Life*, *Topo*, and *Pieces* paintings



▲ *Travertine Polyptych-Sand & Scrims*, 10-2003; water media on rag paper; 5 panels, 39 3/4 x 67 1/2 inches overall



▲ *Topo*, 7-01-2013; water media and mica on rag paper; 39 x 71 inches

(2015-2018), Kass returns to using stencils with his signature process of layering of water media, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper. He cuts stencils out of sheets of plastic, with forms based on fragments of sycamore bark picked up on walks near his home to use as templates to generate abstract shapes. In a process of experimenting with overlaying these stencils on paper, shapes emerge and coalesce into intense red or muted earth-toned landmasses or continents, floating un-tethered in indeterminate spaces.

Landscape has always served as a point of departure for Kass; an aesthetic and philosophical inquiry into the essence of nature, and its key element—transformation—and into what ultimately is transient and unknowable. That Kass has consistently continued to pursue this in ever-evolving bodies of accomplished works of art is a tribute to his remarkable creative energies and outstanding talent.

—Margo Ann Crutchfield
Curator at Large

¹ John Cage (1912-1992) As one of the leading figures of the 20th-century avant-garde, John Cage was an influential composer, music theorist, writer, and artist who revolutionized approaches to creativity with his use of chance, indeterminacy, and unconventional methods and instrumentation. He is also known for his innovative collaborations with artists (including Allan Kaprow, George Segal, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ray Kass) and for breaking down boundaries between artistic disciplines.

About the Artist

Born 1944, in Rockville Centre, New York

Kass holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy (1967) and a master of fine arts in painting with a minor in 20th-century art history and criticism (1969) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Kass' work has been exhibited in 40 one-person exhibitions and more than 50 group exhibitions and is in the collections of numerous public institutions and private collections. He is represented by Reynolds Gallery in Richmond, Virginia and Gravey/Simon: ART ACCESS in New York City. For more information, please visit raykass.com.

Works in the Exhibition

Except where noted, all works are coated with beeswax, mounted on primed panel, framed in recessed white maple, and are courtesy of the artist.

Notation, 09-04-2017

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
34 x 58 inches

On the Edge, 2015

Water media, smoke, and mica on rag paper
40 x 68 inches

Topo, Sirocco, 2015

Water media, smoke, and mica on rag paper
33 x 57 inches

Still Life—Two Buddhas, 7-01-2015

Water media and mica on rag paper
31 ¾ x 37 inches

Topo, 12-01-2014

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and pigment on rag paper
39 x 68 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

Still Life, 11-14-2014

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
40 x 56 inches

Still Life, 8-23-2014

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
32 x 58 ½ inches

Topo, 7-01-2013

Water media and mica on rag paper
39 x 71 inches

Pieces, 5-22-2012

Water media, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
24 x 24 inches

Pieces, 8-20-2012

Water media, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper,
framed in recessed white maple
31 5/8 x 40 inches

Hotei, 2010

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
40 ½ x 58 ¾ inches

Winter Cauliflower, 2009

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
42 ½ x 68 inches

Hedgehog, 2009

Water media, mica, oil emulsion, and dry pigment on rag paper
39 ½ x 58 ¼ inches

Tondo Polyptych paintings, 2004-2006

Water media and smoke on rag paper
Selection of 30 of the smaller-scaled works, dimensions variable

Eddy—Maury River, 2003

Water media, smoke, and mica on rag paper
42 x 66 inches
Capital One Financial Corporation, Corporate Collection,
Richmond, Virginia

Travertine Polyptych—Sand & Scrims, 10-2003

Water media on rag paper
5 panels, 39 ¾ x 67 ½ inches overall

Borrowed View: Periplus (Bathometric Polyptych), Nov.-Dec, 2000

Watercolor and smoke on paper
36 x 72 inches

Borrowed View (Imperial Residence), 1998

Watercolor on rag paper
8 panels; 88 x 100 inches overall

Borrowed View (Silver Screen Polyptych), 1995

Water media on rag paper
11 panels; 76 X 73 inches overall

Borrowed View (Peddler Hills), 1994-95

Watercolor and smoke on rag paper
9 panels, 31 X 24.5 inches overall

Muscarella Polyptych, 1993

Watercolor on rag paper
17 panels; 145 x 127 inches overall
Collection of Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Farmville,
Virginia

Broad Channel: Vorticella Polyptych, 1991

Watercolor on rag paper
60 panels mounted on primed wood
98 x 360 inches (8.1 x 30 feet)
Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art
Gift of Howard Risatti in memory of James Risatti

Wilson Creek Tryptych, 1989

Water media on rag paper mounted on canvas
3 panels; 70 x 80 inches overall



▲ *Eddy-Maury River*, 2003; water media, smoke, and mica on rag paper; 42 x 66 inches; Capital One Financial Corporation, Corporate Collection, Richmond, Virginia

Acknowledgements

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ON THE COVER:

Borrowed View (Chatwin Polyptych), 1994-1995; watercolor and smoke on rag paper; 9 panels, 55 x 57 inches overall

Concurrent Exhibitions

Ray Kass: *Silk and Water*
Perspective Gallery, Squires Student Center
January 16–March 3, 2018

Primary Elements: Foundational Works by Ray Kass
Armory Gallery, 203 Draper Road, Blacksburg
January 18–February 16, 2018

Moss Arts Center Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday, 10 AM–5:30 PM
Saturday, 10 AM–4 PM
Admission free

To schedule a tour or class visit, contact megh79@vt.edu.



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