

RAY KASS

Recent Paintings

May 27-July 5, 1987

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An exhibition organized by
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Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

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Front Cover: *Metropolis: Convergence of Rivers*, 1986

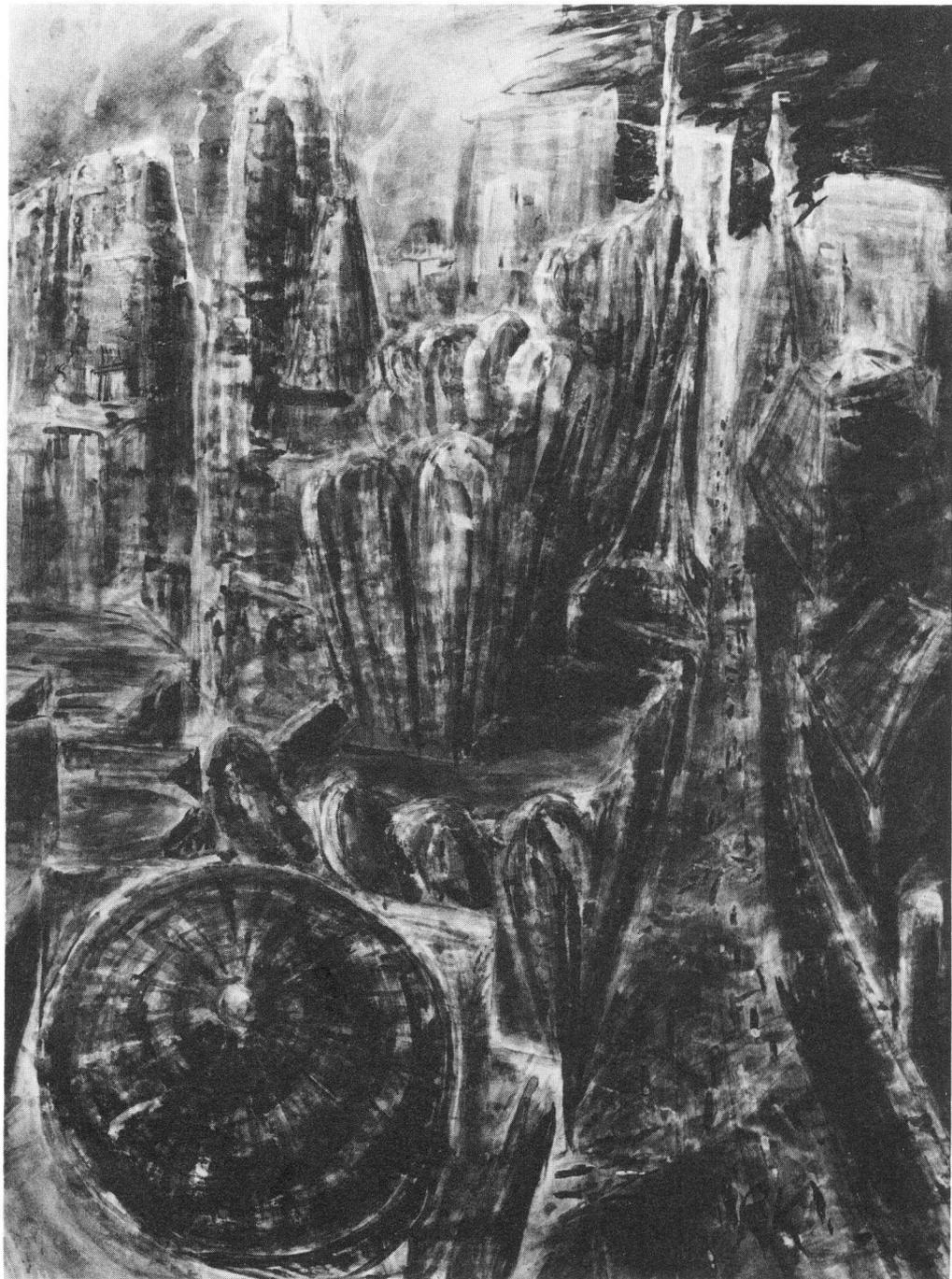
Monumentality is rarely associated either with watercolor or paper. Ray Kass employs both on a scale usually found in immense paintings. In his unconventional treatment of an otherwise ordinary subject, Kass freely transposes the formal, structural elements of the urban environment into abstract, symbolic terms. The result is a poetic transformation of specific personal forms and compositional concerns developed over Kass's twenty-year career that comment on broader formal and philosophical issues.

Rendered from an expansive aerial perspective, Kass's urban vistas reverberate with the pulse and raucous energy of the city. Vibrant, riotous colors rippling thick and thin across the paper and a kinetic, rhythmic sweep of movement make the works come alive with the implied effects of natural elements. The paintings are not merely descriptive but simultaneously strike visual and aural chords that have equivalents in the motion of water over rocks, sounds of musical crescendos, and the wind.

Variable surface textures and the shifting play of translucent veils of light over a complex formal structure create expressionistic cascades of color and shape. All these abstract elements merge, dissolve, and transform, creating a visual and mesmerizing dynamism. The

watercolor medium perfectly suits Kass's intentions to express the transformational aspect of life at all levels—observed or perceived, objective or subjective. Like his ideas, watercolor blends and dissolves, moving across the paper in varying cadences. Beeswax seals the surface, blending edges so that forms lose peripheral distinction or assume broad similarity across the surface of a work. Open-ended and expansive, the visual parameters of the paintings simulate the effect of scanning the horizon, of extending one's vision far beyond the frame of the painting. Nebulous images shift between recognition and intriguing ambiguity.

Kass has developed a unique watercolor technique to express his ideas. Washes are applied with wide, gestural brushstrokes, building layers of pigment on the paper surface. Overlaying the results with beeswax adds mercurial, rippling textures that accentuate the already rich color. This approach accounts for the luminous glow radiating from volatile surfaces and for the evanescent quality of the work. Kass's unusual treatment of both subject and medium sets these works apart from any traditional expectation of the term "cityscape." Despite thematic affiliations with earlier modernist traditions of urban realism, Kass's approach is a singular distillation that has little to do with literal pictorialism.



Reversing the usual progression from realism to abstraction, Kass creates non-pictorial works first, then semi-realistic scenes that relay his fascination with the natural world and its ever-changing variety of light, form, and texture. "I am not a realistic painter in the conventional sense," he states. "My paintings bear little resemblance to reality; they address reality rather than representing it literally."*

The works are aligned primarily with cubism, expressionism, and abstraction. Kass acknowledges these traditions by taking a boldly subjective, allusive approach and by using expressive color, broad gesture, and a cubistic fragmentation of color and forms. Visually, though not philosophically, his work even recalls some of the energy of Futurist painting. Kass's blend of divergent stylistic approaches fortifies his unconventional approach. Fusing counterposing poles—realist/abstract, objective/subjective, cityscape/landscape, and formal/conceptual traditions—with an innate romanticism, Kass creates a stylistic synthesis that is markedly his own.

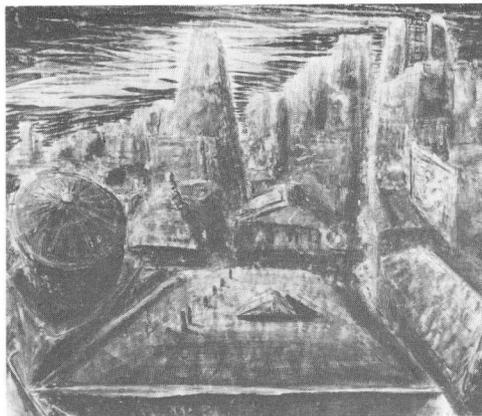
The development of his work over the last twenty years, from his early concern with pure abstraction, toward a more representational treatment of landscape first, then the urban landscape, demonstrates his unusual blend of contrasting traditions. His stylistic progression also explains what Kass sees as his "location in a fragmented tradition."

He began his career painting in oil. Among his important early influences were several non-objective Washington Color School painters, such as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, whose works were made known to him by George Bireline, who, as a visiting artist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, made a significant impression on Kass, his student. Bireline's panoramic color field abstractions, thinly built-up in long, horizontal bands of color, were, to Kass, a uniquely personalized expression of a then widely practiced method of painting. Both Bireline's work and his role as Kass's mentor left indelible marks. The energy and dynamism of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, also influenced his development. Abstraction, however, did not accommodate his artistic intentions, nor his temperament. He sought to find something deeper to inform the abstraction.

Kass's search for an alternate, more authentic means of self-expression led to an exploration of landscape painting. His move to northern California in the late 1960s and his subsequent association with Morris Graves and the master watercolorist Keith Crown accelerated this direction in his work. Both Graves and Crown were principal sources of inspiration, encouraging his nascent involvement with landscape and significantly influencing the unconventional watercolor technique he developed.

Crown introduced Kass to watercolor. Graves recommended that he seal his works with beeswax to avoid framing the

*All quotations are derived from an interview with the artist in his studio on December 17, 1986 and subsequent visits and telephone conversations.



large-scale works. Graves also influenced Kass's use of symbolic images as manifestations of other realities. Although Kass insists that his work does not share Graves's deeply felt spiritualism, he has molded Graves's precepts to suit his own purposes, and thereby has participated in Graves's philosophical approach, using the meditative act of painting to arrive at a unique vision.

Rather than working with oils in the studio, Kass began painting watercolors on the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean north of San Francisco. Here, he developed the expansive overhead perspective so characteristic of his current work. He explored his first principal subjects, rocks and waves, and adopted a romantic approach to painting that more comfortably accommodated his fascination with natural phenomena and certain constants that recur. This approach became a key factor in his mature works. "It was a respite from all the very formal, abstract painting," he says. "I loved working with watercolor. It was a way of working

outdoors on a very large scale without being restrained." In particular, he was drawn to rock formations and the mutations they endure—the effects of light on our perception of their form and color, the molding and softening wrought by water, and their permanence in spite of these changes. Watercolor perfectly suited his expressive needs as it mimicked what he observed.

Kass refers to his recent work as "environmental paintings," and as "dialogues with the natural world." His intention is "to paint the city as if it were part of the natural world." Although the recent works loosely describe Manhattan by maintaining a few landmark references (Kass invents both buildings and locations to suit his formal needs), "they have a lot to do with Blacksburg and the Appalachian Mountains." Manhattan becomes a vehicle for transmitting his fascination with forms that recur in nature. The result is an unconventional, unexpected, seemingly contradictory synthesis of polarities: Kass's cityscapes are simultaneously landscapes, dialogues that he describes with open, organic forms actually observed in nature. Repetitive symbols emerge as his unique vocabulary of forms, "an embodiment of light, texture, and shape generated from a deep contact with the natural environment" that have become the central subject and the principal compositional devices on which the works are built. These forms (symbols) originate in a specific place but recur to him in other geographic locations as "a new expression responding to a dissimilar environment." As Kass has stated:

nuance, masterfully handling the medium and composition to summon forth effectively a rich vocabulary of potent images.

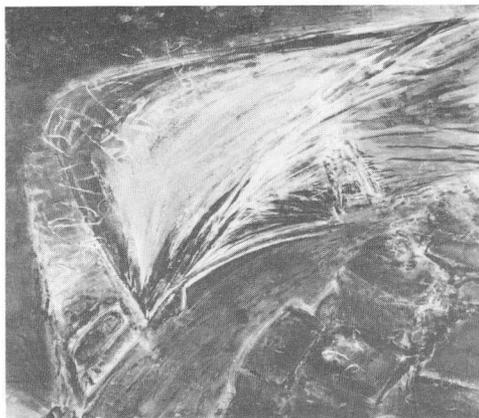
Kass's unconventional approach challenges the viewer to look beyond initial impressions to a complex of ideas. The artist's vision reveals a holistic world in which fugitive elements assume ever-changing forms. Nothing is static; nothing can be distinctly defined. These paintings are, simultaneously, visible manifestations of outer perception and interior states of mind, an intriguing synthesis of the structural constants that can be observed in nature and applied as symbols for expressing conceptual truths.

Margo A. Crutchfield

Biography

Ray Kass was born in 1944 and grew up on Long Island. He began painting as a teenager following a junior high school-class trip in 1958 to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he was particularly influenced by the works of certain Abstract Expressionists. His father had a sign- and truck-painting shop in Brooklyn, and Kass thus had a wide array of commercial and painting materials available for experimentation. His early paintings were abstractions made with oil, mixed media, and collage on plywood, cardboard, or the roll ends of fabric wallpaper. Occasionally he used canvas.

Growing up near Manhattan on the coastal south shore of Long Island, Kass became involved with the inland water-



*Looking West, Hudson
River near Canal Street, 1985*

ways, Jamaica Bay, and particularly, the sand-bar community of Broad Channel. The coastal environment greatly influenced his earliest work. Kass says, "I believe now that the urban and suburban context in which I was introduced to this more 'natural' aspect of the world, both literally and through my early interest in art, comprises much of the developmental impetus of my ongoing work."

During the last twenty years, Kass has traveled extensively and worked in some of America's most beautiful environments—coastal northern California, the southwestern deserts, New Hampshire's White Mountains, the Maine coast, and since 1976, the Appalachian Mountains.

Ray Kass received his B.A. and M.F.A. (1969) in painting, with a minor in twentieth-century art history and criticism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He divides his time between his home and studio in Christiansburg, Virginia, Blacksburg, where he teaches at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and New York, where he also maintains a studio.

The direction that my work may go is not consciously planned but occurs purely visually through a process of rediscovery of the personal form. A curiously attractive shape that I may define in an aimless sketch may next be noticed in the matrix of a stone and then seen again as a shadow among trees, or a reflection on water . . . even in a face. The thing seen acquires a visual meaning and metaphor in this way and opens the act of painting to new experience.

An example is the recurrent wave shape that has appeared in his work. The wave's expressive character changes with the locale, from the coast of Maine to the Appalachian Mountains. The wave incorporates all the transformational associations Kass sees in philosophical concepts while simultaneously functioning as a major compositional device in paintings such as *Metropolis: Convergence of Rivers* (1986). Other "metaphors" are images of cascades, rocks, and cylindrical shapes. These surface in the midst of the current Manhattan cityscapes to perform as leitmotifs that encapsulate his message.

Similarly, rock-like forms, particularly in paintings such as *Looking West, Hudson River Near Canal Street* (1985) or, again, *Metropolis: Convergence of Rivers* are arranged like building blocks or mosaics. Small components are arrayed to form a more recognizable and dominant image. This somewhat rigid compositional technique is reinforced by the structural symmetry of geometric shapes jutting from the center of the



Sunrise, New York City and Hudson River Looking North, 1985

painting and by the symmetrical division of the picture plane horizontally and vertically. Faceted planes reminiscent of structuralist and cubist conventions, along with the compositional structures mentioned above account for the dynamism so typical of his work.

In describing the influence of the environment upon his work, Kass has remarked:

My recent paintings use the urban environments of Roanoke, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and New York City,



and are derived from rural sources, particularly from my experience painting in the Appalachian Mountains of southwest Virginia. Pictorial elements of these panoramas are "made up" and painted with attention to an illusion of layers and textures rather than descriptive realism. Symmetrical panoramic illusionism somehow serves to "scale" the abstract man-made elements into imaginative proportion with my sense of the "big picture," in which abstraction is a kind of demonstration of transformational variations.

Transformation lies at the heart of Kass's work, illustrating what he sees as the essence of reality. His preoccupation with the interchangeability of elements can be seen in his fascination with the translucent, fugitive qualities of light, the mercurial energy of water as it changes form—cascade, wave, ocean—and the fluid nature of wind and sound. All these properties can be translated into abstract ideas. Kass wants to render these invisible, fleeting phenomena, aspiring "to paint the land as if it were the ocean, or to paint the city as a waterfall." He attains his goal with poetic grace and

Selected Group Exhibitions

1986

Monumental Space Variations: One Penn Plaza, New York City

1983

Painting in the South, 1680–1980: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (subsequently traveled in 1984 and 1985 to the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama; National Academy of Design, New York; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana).

1981

Over the Blue Ridge: Roanoke Museum of Art, Roanoke, Virginia

1980

Boston College Gallery, Newton, Massachusetts

1979

Gallery Worth Avenue, Palm Beach, Florida
Allan Stone Gallery, New York City (annual shows since 1977)

1975

Allan Stone Gallery, New York City

1974

Contemporary Landscapes: Brockton Art Center, Brockton, Massachusetts
Landscape: Boston Visual Arts Union Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts

1972

Allan Stone Gallery, New York City

1971

Allan Stone Gallery, New York City

1968

Irene B. Leach Exhibition, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia

1967

Awards Winners Exhibition: North Carolina State Museum, Raleigh

1966

North Carolina Artist's Annual Exhibition: North Carolina State Museum, Raleigh

Piedmont Annual Exhibit: Charlotte, North Carolina

Columbia Museum Student Exhibit: Columbia, South Carolina

National Student Exhibition: State University of New York at New Paltz

Selected Honors, Awards, and Grants

1984

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship, Richmond

1981

National Endowment for the Arts, individual artist's grant

1973

Blanche E. Colman Foundation Award, Boston, Massachusetts

1968

Irene B. Leach Exhibition, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia

1967

North Carolina Artist's Annual: North Carolina State Museum, Raleigh

1966

Columbia Museum Student Exhibit: Columbia, South Carolina

Selected Collections

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

North Carolina National Bank, Charlotte

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Griffin Art Center, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York

Tufts University Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Andover Academy, Andover, Massachusetts

Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts

Bocour Collection, Aquatec Color Company, New York

Best Products Company, Inc., Richmond, Virginia

Owens-Corning Fiberglass, Toledo, Ohio

Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts, Roanoke, Virginia

NYNEX, New York City

Checklist

All works are lent by the artist. Dimensions are in centimeters, then inches. Height precedes width.

1. **Metropolis: Convergence of Rivers**
1986
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper
288.7 × 511.0 (115½ × 204¾)
2. **Barrymore, Hell's Kitchen**
1986
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper,
mounted on canvas
151.8 × 175.0 (60¾ × 70)
Collection of NYNEX, New York
3. **St. George and the Public Theater**
1986
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper,
mounted on canvas
170.0 × 175.0 (68 × 70)
4. **Metropolitan Life**
1986
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper,
mounted on canvas
175.6 × 127.5 (70¼ × 51)
5. **Sunrise: New York City and Hudson River
Looking North**
1985
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper
180.0 × 515.0 (72 × 206)
6. **Sunrise: New York City and Hudson River
Looking South**
1985
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper
250.0 × 520.0 (100 × 208)
7. **Looking West, Hudson River near Canal Street**
1985
Watercolor and beeswax on rag paper,
mounted on canvas
175.0 × 202.5 (70 × 81)

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 1987**
Boston College Gallery, Newton, Massachusetts
- 1986**
Pelican Theatre, New York City
Allan Stone Gallery, New York City (also exhibited
in 1981, 1977, 1975, 1972)
- 1985**
University of Missouri Gallery, Columbia
- 1984**
Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts, Roanoke, Virginia
Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1982**
Portsmouth Fine Art Center, Portsmouth, Virginia
- 1980**
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art,
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
- 1979**
Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1977**
Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts, Roanoke, Virginia
- 1976**
Sunne Savage Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts
(also exhibited in 1975, 1973)
- 1974**
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Andover
Academy, Andover, Massachusetts
- 1972**
Boston City Hall, Boston, Massachusetts
- 1970**
Humbolt State University, Arcata, California
- 1969**
Chapel Hill Art Gallery, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

*New York City and
Hudson River Looking
North, 1984*

Watercolor and
beeswax on rag paper,
mounted on canvas
155.6 × 148.7 cm.
(62¹/₄ × 59¹/₂ in.). Not
in the exhibition.



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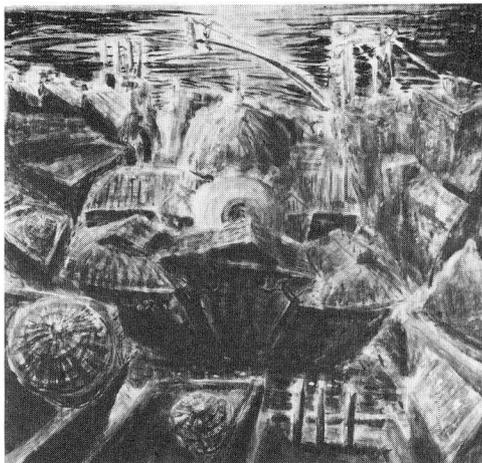
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*Saint George and the Public
Theater, 1986*
