



PHOTO BY OLGA DAY

*Luise Kaish in her studio with BROADWAY BABY (mixed media on canvas, 1984)*

## *A View Of Her Own Artist Luise Kaish*

BY LINDA MANDEVILLE

**O**n an afternoon in early October a ritual familiar to New York City's art world is enacted at the Staempfli Gallery, at Madison Avenue and 77th Street. Invitees press into the room. Some cluster in small circles in the center, talking and sipping wine. Others move along the edges peering at collages with enigmatic titles: *Lover's House*, *Broadway Baby*, *Portal*, *Glacier Bay*. Except for the *Glacier Bay* series, with its muted shades of blues and grays, the collages are colorful. Whimsical, energetic, luminous blues, reds, and yellows defy autumn's dying message from outside the gallery windows. The artist of the show, Luise Kaish, a petite woman with a clear, resonant voice and a hearty laugh, warmly wel-



comes her guests at this, the opening of her third show at Staempfli Gallery.

Kaish chairs the division of painting and sculpture of the School of the Arts, a position she has held since 1980. She brings to it more than thirty years of creativity in both painting and sculpture. As an undergraduate at Syracuse University she studied painting. After college she spent a year in Mexico, concentrating first on painting and graphics and then on sculpture. She returned to Syracuse to study sculpture under Ivan Mestrovic and received the M.F.A. degree in 1951.

Her portfolio suggests radical shifts in her work. Religious themes are prominent in her sculptures of the 1950s and 1960s. In the seventies she turned to canvas—layering, scarring, even burning it—attacking it as a sculptor would to give it three-dimensionality. In the eighties her work has become more painterly. Squares, rectangles, triangles, and shifting horizontal planes are distinguished by color as well as by abrasions of the surface.

"The world of the artist," she has said, "is in the adventure, in the surprises of constant exploration—of pushing to beyond, to whatever may be beyond." The disciplinary shifts have been part of her adventure.

Kaish stresses the continuity in her work. No matter the medium, she says, "what you see in terms of texture and structure and the agitation of the surface is still present. I respond to tactile experiences. They are necessary for me in creating something. The pleasure I get from manipulating materials and using my hands is very important."

Continuity is also evident in her preoccupation with the spiritual and cultural aspects of art. Art, she says, "influences the way we think, the way we regard our culture, the way we regard our place in our culture. Art can be used to elevate and coalesce or fragment and disintegrate. That's part of the reason why in my early sculpture I was drawn to the unifying force in religious themes. In the Psalms you find an exquisite, infinite beauty and expression of ideas that anybody can relate to."

In her early works Kaish depicted the



**ARK OF REVELATION (Moses and the Tablets) 1961–64**  
14' × 15' Bronze

*On eighteen panels the artist has rendered scenes of revelation from the Old Testament. The largest panel, above, is that of Moses bracing himself to receive the Tablets of the Law.*

**EZEKIEL AND THE ANGEL 1957**  
29" × 29" Bronze

*This sculpture captures the heroic isolation of the prophet.*



Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. Many of her figures—Abraham, Joshua, Jeremiah—are posed, arms outstretched, amidst, under, or atop a sculpted mass. They stand in a precarious world, dependent on God's power alone to save them from the abyss. Despite their vulnerability, the figures convey a dignity that seems to come from questioning life's meaning and seeking God's answer. Kaish has written of her sculpture *Ezekiel and the Angel*: "For me art is re-creation. It is the putting into form and substance of the visions of the soul and the spirit and the mind of man. It transcends the visual, and in the poetry of creation expresses the striving of man after God, his desire to form a continuous pattern of identification with the source of all being."

**D**uring the 1960s Kaish was given two ambitious commissions: in 1961 to sculpt the *Ark of Revelation* for the Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, and in 1967 to sculpt the *Ark Doors* for Temple Beth Shalom in Wilmington, Delaware. She approached both projects with the attitude that permeates much of her work: how to make a traditional statement in a new way.

The Rochester ark, which took three years to complete, was revolutionary in its incorporation of Biblical figures linked to themes of revelation, the most powerful being that of Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law. The Wilmington commission is not figurative, but it is also, says Kaish, "outside the fold of traditionally accepted religious iconography. I used the Decalogue, embedding it in the *Ein Sof*—the unending light."

"Ein Sof," a term from the Zohar, a thirteenth-century cabbalistic text, refers to the First Cause, or God. According to Avram Kampf in *The Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century* (a book on Jewish religious art, including that of Luise Kaish), "this great light contains the potential energy and plan of all the physical and intellectual world—the entire plan of the universe." Kaish has set



H.H.H. #2 1983 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

Mixed media on canvas

The artist's rendering of the Hudson River ice floes from her tenth-floor studio view.



PHOTO BY OLITA DAY

**CABBALISTIC SPHERE**

1974 39" d

Polished aluminum

Triangles, squares, and circles form a dynamic geometry for the reflection and refraction of light.

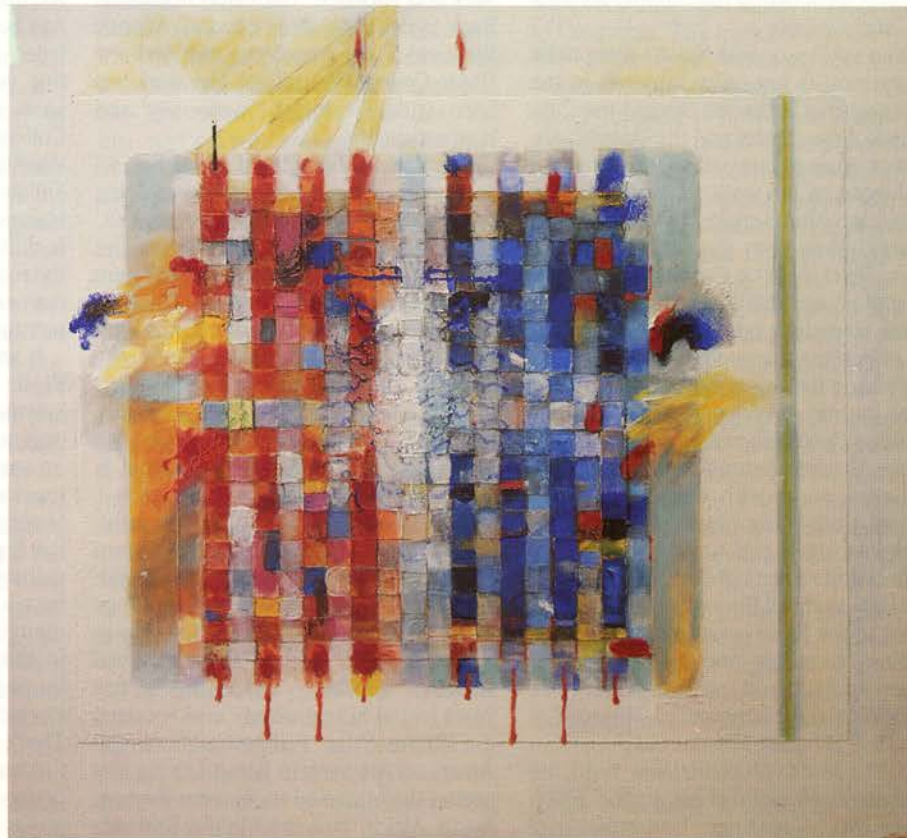


**LOVER'S HOUSE I**

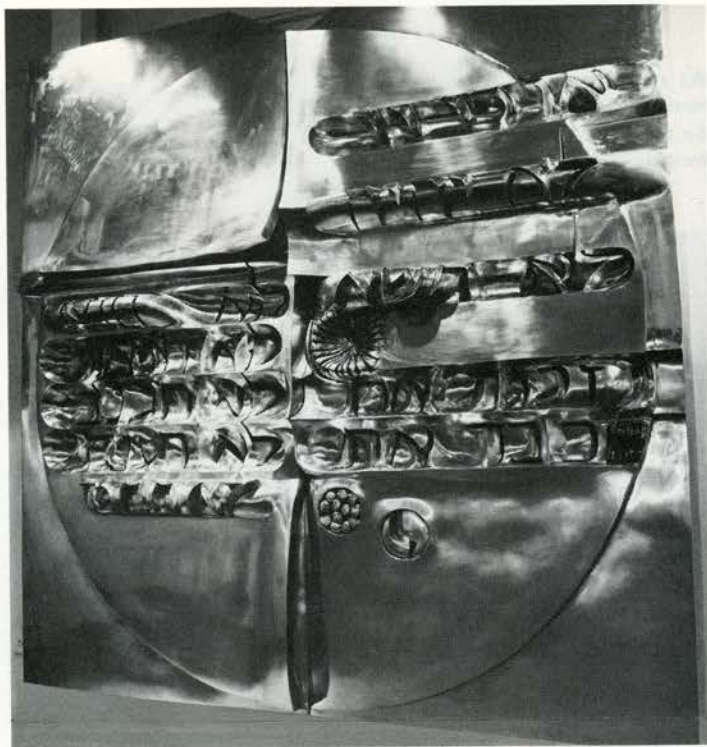
1983-84 28" x 30"

Mixed media on canvas

Whimsicality and luminosity combine to create this fantasy house with its triangular roof, stilts, and wings.







**ARK DOORS 1967-68**

84" x 84"

Polished bronze

*Juxtaposed in the sphere are the letters of the Decalogue and signs of the Cabbala. The linear grooves are symbols of the Sefiroth—the divine manifestation—seen as emanations of light. The twelve small circular mounds within the larger circle symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel.*

the Hebrew characters of the Ten Commandments inside a sphere, rather than in the traditional tablets. Within the sphere, designating the infinite, are cabalistic symbols.

The ark doors were Kaish's first public expression of her private interest in the mystical that extended beyond the Cabbala to Aztec poetry and the Upanishads. These sources are still very much an influence on her work: "I think imagination, intuition, creativity, come from places other than the pragmatic," she says. Texts like the Cabbala are "at the root of all imagination—that capacity to sense something beyond the obvious and to search for that something."

Making the ark doors led Kaish on a new journey that resulted in sculptures entitled *Cabbalistic Sphere, In the Beginning, Voyage*. Among these pieces are spheres—some with movable sections—and undulating polished aluminum, stainless steel, and bronze shapes that reflect and refract light or provide a path for light to travel through. Her exhibited work in the 1970s became more abstract.

Her sculptures and collages are in many public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Jewish Museum (New York), the Minnesota Museum of Art, Export Khleb (Moscow), Container Corporation of

America (Chicago), Continental Grain Co. (New York), General Mills Corporation (Minneapolis), Syracuse University, the Vera and Albert A. List Collection, First Bank System, Inc. (Minneapolis), Atlantic Richfield (Los Angeles), and Hebrew Union College (Jerusalem). Her work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally.

Kaish says of her early work, "I haven't been so art-smart. At the time I was doing the work called religious it was very 'out.' That was in the fifties and sixties. The figure was out. My feeling is that in future times when you look back you'll see a world of abstraction and minimalism, and Luise Kaish sticking out like a sore thumb. I admire the prophets, who always had the strength to speak independently with their own voices. Creativity for me is questioning the premises of what is happening around me."

**K**aish and her artist-husband, Morton Kaish, are inveterate travelers. They returned to Italy in 1970 (having lived there for a few years in the fifties) when Luise received the Rome Prize Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome. During that period they traveled in Western Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, ac-

companied by their daughter Melissa, who is now a twenty-three-year-old Harvard graduate student working for an architectural firm in Hong Kong. Kaish has been invited to give lectures at colleges, galleries, and conferences across this country and abroad. The Kaishes were artists in residence at Dartmouth College in 1974 and at the University of Washington in 1979. As a MacDowell Fellow, Luise again spent time in New Hampshire in 1975. As she points out, it is difficult to take a sculpture studio on the road. When traveling she has satisfied her creative urges by sketching and painting.

It was at the MacDowell Colony that Kaish began a collage series she calls *Burntworks*. Since she was to be there for only a short time, she decided to work on some ink line drawings, but became frustrated. "One day," she says, "I started tearing them up and throwing them in the fire. I thought, this will be the great catharsis. I will destroy all my work and have a wonderful time of it. When I threw them in the fireplace I became interested in the shapes they were making. So I immediately got a bucket of water and started putting out all the fires I had lit. That's how my *Burntworks* started."

After retrieving the strips of canvas, she began layering them—using them as a sculptor would. She added new ink lines



**"Expressing yourself, the capacity to communicate ideas at a very high level, and the time to reflect are what universities are about."**

to advance the illusion of three-dimensionality. Then she added color. This was after a trip to California. "We were in Marin County and were constantly seeing these fantastic sunsets over the Pacific. Fabulous red sunsets and blue skies. I started using more color, and when I came back I just kept using more and more color. I went wild, and I just loved it," says Kaish.

Some of the burntwork canvases, carrying various titles, were exhibited in the fall of 1981 at a solo show at Staempfli Gallery. In the catalogue introduction, Kaish dispelled any idea that this work was a radical departure from what had come before: "For me, working on canvas, as a sculptor, has always been like encountering a 'stop here' sign. It's vertical, impenetrable, a wall. I want to punch a hole in it—to see the light fall, sense the space. I want to create a window, a space for one's visual imagination to move, through and into. By using the burnt canvas I was able to join my imagination with the physical needs of a sculptor: to deal at first hand with a tactile material. I build, layer, tear, and rebuild my canvas reliefs, at times contemplatively, at times in a frenzy of energy."

The original line drawings, which she continued working on, also led to the *Glacier Bay* series in her most recent exhibition. A composer friend, after seeing the drawings, urged her to visit Alaska, saying that her work resembled the arctic landscape from the air. The Kaishes followed up on the friend's suggestion in 1980.

They rented a plane in Juneau and hired a pilot to fly them over the Brady Ice Fields in Glacier Bay National Monument. "We got into this tiny plane," says Kaish, "and flew between the mountains. We flew one hundred feet over the terrain—up a glacier and over an ice field, down another glacier, up down, up down, for hours at a time. The only living creatures we saw were the seals looking up at us from the ice floes. I was profoundly moved by the vastness of the landscape, the marks in the earth, the colors of the ice field—grays and whites—and the pools reflecting the sky. There's a wonderful range of color, form,

and space amid unparalleled solitude."

She also drew inspiration for the series, a testimony to her conviction that "white is my favorite color," from her tenth-floor studio view of the Hudson River. "The Hudson is a glacier bed," she says. "One reason I like living in Manhattan is that I think of myself as being on top of a mountain. We're on the mountaintops here in Manhattan, and the glacier bed is at the bottom of the Hudson River. Down at the river's edge in the winter when the river freezes, you can see the ice breaking up, crunching against the shores of the Hudson. We can see from the upstairs windows the tides moving giant ice floes, as well as the sunsets. The Hudson River is compelling; it's primordial."

**I**f Kaish looked west to Alaska and the Hudson River for the *Glacier Bay* series, she looked one block east for her *Broadway Baby* collages. "They're people," she says of the abstract canvases. "They're based on characters—Broadway characters. They're the people you see walking up and down the street in their fantastic outfits. The color is derived from that. You just can't get wild enough." The whimsy of *Broadway Babies* is repeated in the collages entitled *Lover's House*.

One of them is a grid of tiny squares splashed with bright, glimmering colors—an impressionistic Mondrian. Literalness is cloaked in abstraction. The grid simultaneously rests on spindly stilts and hangs from a triangular roof. The splashes of color on each side, Kaish says, "are wings. It's about to take off. What you see is a fantasy house. I wanted the *Lover's House* collages to be personages just the way *Broadway Babies* are." In the center of the grid is a luminous white crossbar. Kaish points to the structural similarities between *Cabbalistic Sphere* and *Lover's House*. Both consist of geometric shapes designed so that light will pass through their centers.

The influences on Kaish's work are many. Some reviewers point to J.M.W. Turner. She speaks of the Cabbala, Alaska, California, and the Hudson River, and more generally of nature, conceding that she is a pantheist. "I'm very happy

alone in nature, just as I am in my studio. I don't need a lot of people around me."

Yet she is a teacher and administrator, which she enjoys. "I think teaching is a wonderful experience if you can ignite the imagination of the students." She is firm in her belief that the Columbia program kindles many artistic fires. "In its structure the division offers the solitude and privacy and intellectual stimulation necessary for the creative person. Our graduate students have individual studios in Prentis Hall. At the same time, the program offers the companionship of talented peers." Visiting artists come to campus regularly to discuss their work and offer critiques. Through Kaish's leadership the interaction between painters and sculptors is being strengthened so that students can work in and discuss both media. Thirty-eight students are currently enrolled in the two-year M.F.A. program; over six hundred undergraduates are enrolled in division courses. "The same thing that brings students to New York City," says Kaish, "brings them to Columbia. The high energy, the creative environment—scholarly and artistic—the stimulation of peers. There's a tendency to think that because artists are using metal or paint to express their concepts, they are not using their minds. This is a fallacy. Expressing yourself, the capacity to communicate ideas at a very high level, and the time to reflect are what universities are about." This exchange, she believes, is as important to the artist as it is to the scholar.

An essential component of the Columbia program is its location in New York City, where "a renaissance is occurring in the visual arts. There's a ferment of creativity here. New York is the absolute crown, the epitome of artistic expression and effort today. There's a community of artists here; the program is a microcosm of that.

"Imagination is running rampant in New York," she says. And each artist is trying to create something special. "Who's to know where it's going. I will follow my own path, as usual." □

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