

# LUISE KAISH: A LYRICAL ESSAY

GERRIT HENRY



Luise Kaish, *New York Heart*, 1986-87. *Mixed media on canvas*, 55 x 33 3/4".  
*Courtesy Staempfli Gallery.*



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**Luise Kaish's art is of the stuff and impression of New York City, but it is also of the soul of the City.**

**E**xhausted from alternating lack and abundance of sleep due to three concurrent deadlines, I called Luise Kaish to determine whether or not I could get an extension on this article. In a moment of critical candor, I blurted out, "I'm scared." "Oh," said Luise, quietly, urgently. "I'm scared every time I stand in front of an empty canvas." We both laughed, but it's only partly a laughing matter. In a way, all modern art entails the condition of being afraid—being afraid of facing the void (or empty canvas or blank sheet of paper) and its possible consequent annihilation—the very void incurred by 20th-century nihilism and its attendant, ubiquitous anxieties, recently heightened by fin-de-siècle decadence. More simply put, we are afraid of having to start all over again every time we start out. Yet new art is by definition about new beginnings, which may never—we fear and hope—end.

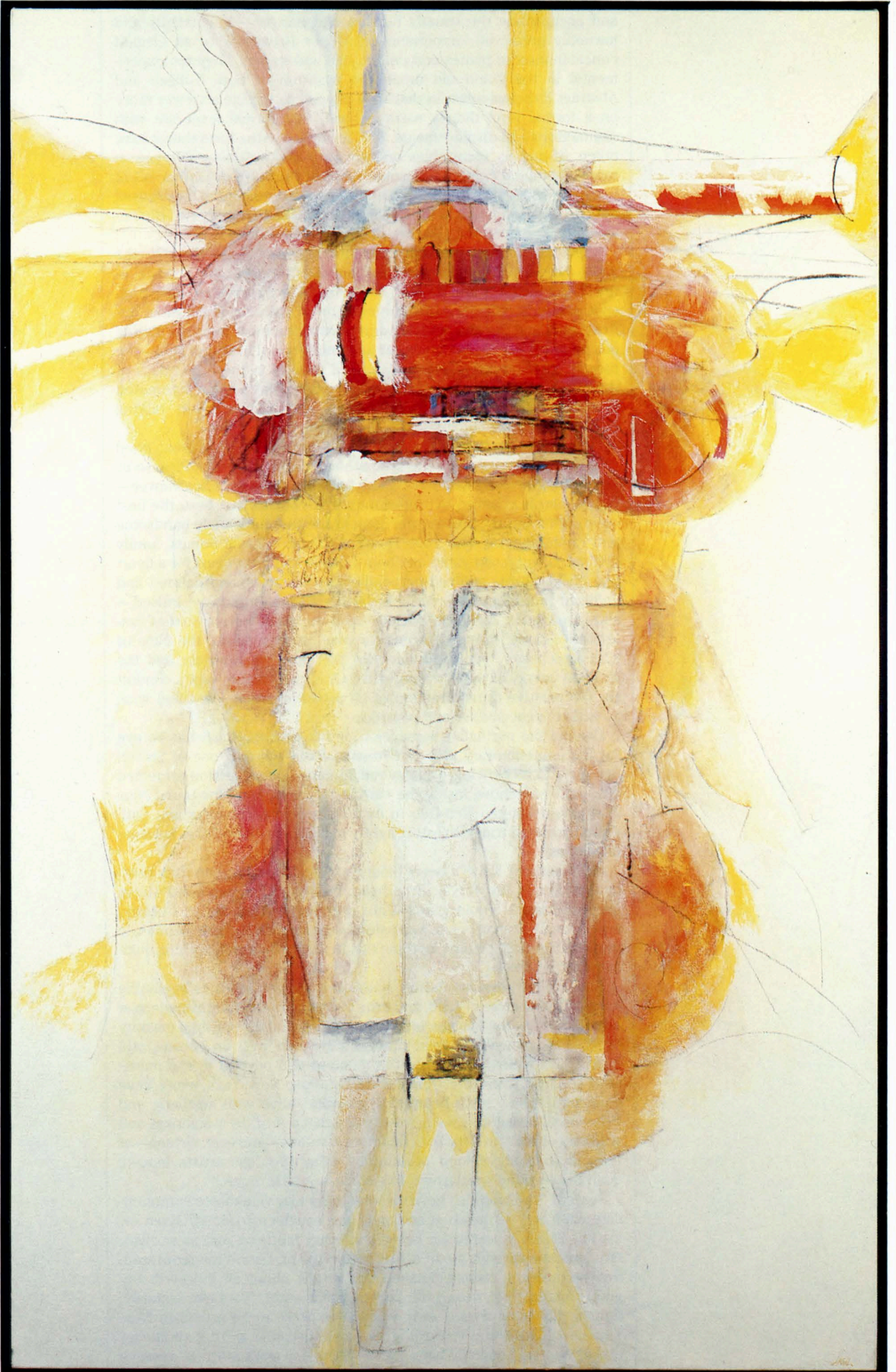
In her new series of paintings, loosely titled "New York," Luise Kaish's metaphor for angst of the post-Existential sort is the Broadway of New York's Upper West Side. Here, bums and Barbara Cook coexist, cops and Kevin Bacon, street people and doormen, butchers and Chinese laundrers, multitudinous Chinese restaurants, and some absurdly pricey new bôites; it is a various, dangerous, and lively scene exacerbated by the recent influx of Yuppies and their architectural trademark, the half-empty condo, into an otherwise wild and wooly community. Part Jewish, Hispanic, black and gay, the Upper West Side is, in a way, the spiritual home of all Manhattanites. With the possible exception of the Yuppies, Westsiders are in it for the long run, tortuous as that might be from the looks of life on the benches in the traffic aisles. "Do it the hard way," wrote Broadway lyricist Lorenz Hart, "and it's easy sailing . . ." New York City's Upper West Side: microcosm of "The Human Experiment," late 20th-century style.

Kaish's new paintings are 1) microcosmic and 2) experimental, as



Luise Kaish, *New York*, 1986-87.  
*Mixed media on canvas*, 48 x 48". *Courtesy Staempfli Gallery.*

Luise Kaish, Like a  
Crowned Head, 1987.  
Mixed media on  
canvas, 66½ x 42".  
Courtesy Staempfli  
Gallery.



well. The paintings are microcosmic because they manage to reduce and encapsulate the usually hurried and harried—or hurriedly and harriedly perceived—experience of Upper Broadway to an elegant concatenation of planes and colors, line and design. They are experimental in the grand old modernist tradition of both Cubism and Abstract Expressionism in that they happen to engage a viewer more on a formal level than a narrative one, that formal level rife with disjunctions and displacements. This formalism—the form things have taken, of and by themselves on canvas, without direct reference to representational content—is reminiscent of Picasso's or Hofmann's in its on-the-spot visual explication of the daft illusions behind illusionism, the one dimension that is the final fine-arts fate of ordinary two-dimensionality, and even the (aesthetically) imaginary three.

Kaish has learned, perhaps from long experience—in the '60s, she was a heroic sculptor in bronze of works often on Judaic themes, in the '70s, a sculptor and painter, in the mid-'80s the creator of rip-and-spot painterly collages—that the medium of painting is the most difficult one, and, for the contemporary artist, the most heroic. Painting in a postillusionistic age taxes not just intellect and heart but soul—the painter, like the poet, is an endangered species in these late days of the '80s, a species that should no longer exist, what with an automaton President, idiot's-delight video games, and computer-run talking elevators and technology unfettered *en generale*.

Despite all this, Kaish is an assured and assuring artist of great, good energies and liberal aesthetic sympathies. It's just that, like Picasso or de Kooning or even Eric Fischl, she takes chances with her viewer—happy, heroic chances that uncannily work out for the best, the best to work for and the best to see. Look at the simultaneously handsome and rambunctious *New York Heart*, a "figure," Kaish admits, zanily disfigured with corrugated cardboard house and inset heart for a heart and chest, purple and red perpendiculars for arms, and painted and collaged pictorial chaos for a body. It's Upper Broadway, indeed—stupid, complex, raffish, dignified—as if the artist were a kind of "automatic painter" tranced through a wise, dotty medium the likes of Elsa Lanchester, operating between the sensitive aesthete and the feckless energy of the city around her. Or it's as if Kaish were a conduit for the positive transformation of all urban injustice, want and woe, an artistic peacemaker and provider.

Despite the particular homages to her forebears, Kaish has an eye for the contemporary. *Like a Crowned Head* reminds one of Steven Spielberg in its glowing, orangey-red, humanoidal projection projected onto and, somehow, inside the canvas. A purple-and blue-toned *New York* could out-geo Neo-Geo in its quasigeometric borders and multihued orb-with-triangle resting lightly on light cream and blue horizontal stripes.

But I suspect Kaish's heart belongs more to modernism than post-modernism. In the acrylic *Broadway*, the figure has exploded—from sheer vitality, I would guess—into seemingly hundreds of Cubist-toned, small, brown, ocher, and pale blue geometric and semigeometric units. In the large picture, nothing fits. In the melting pot, nothing quite gets melted down.

And, by her own admission, with each picture Kaish is beginning anew. This is heroic in itself, and in its revival of both a fading modernist visual insanity that has not yet lost its validity and the spiritual insanity of "The Human Experiment" caught alive and well on canvas, still kickin' and kinky. Kaish is of the moment and beyond it; she paints as if to say, "Even after nuclear devastation, New York won't have changed a whit." It's a heartening message, alive with aesthetic and even moral possibilities—the possibility that out of the wackiness and wildness of living in New York might arise values—and even virtues—of life and art, qualities long forgotten by today's younger artists, indeed, qualities seemingly outgrown like some vestigial organ.

Scared? Who wouldn't be, with something very valuable to communicate, and only so much space and time in which to do it? Even *on* canvas, Kaish is scared for her gift at every moment; just as at every moment, she saves it by an act of heroic talent. I'm no longer scared, for the moment, having finished this article about an indescribably good painter. Now we're both heroes, Luise and I, fears momentarily, temporarily behind us. I only wish there were more artists in New York as difficult and rewarding as Kaish, because writing about her makes me feel soulishly better, and seeing her work starts to remove God's everlasting curse. □