

Kessler landscapes energetic, enigmatic

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SARASOTA — Michael Kessler's paintings present the viewer with interpretations of the open, warm, brown horizontal views and pale cream skies of the American Southwest.

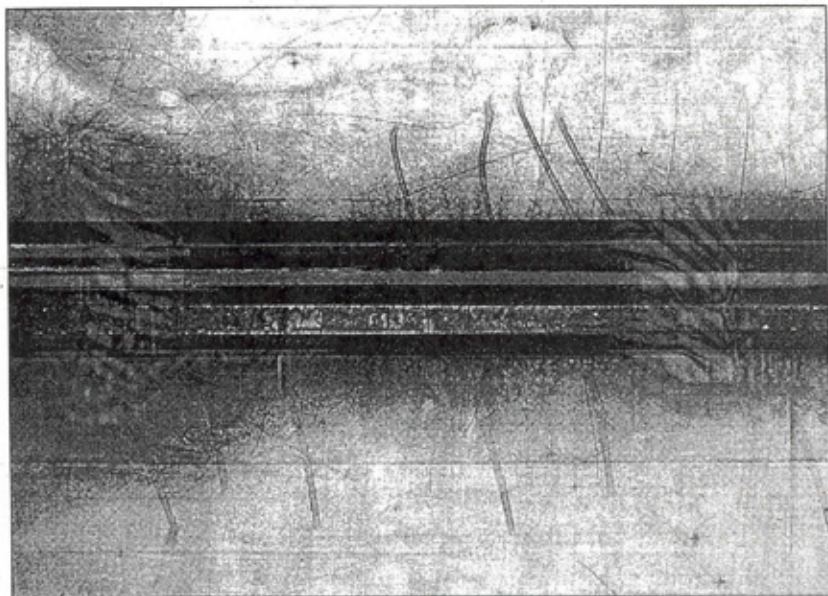
Paintings that allude to the romantic and heroic 19th century American epic landscape tradition, as well as to the mid-20th century tradition of geometric abstraction — where the totality of effect was reduced to a single image — is an approach embodied in the large canvases of color-field painters.

Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art in Sarasota currently is showcasing Kessler's work in an exhibit, "Landscapes — Part I," that represents the first of a series of shows to feature landscape prints and paintings by artists from all over the country working in styles from abstraction to realism.

Born in 1954 in Hanover, Pa., Kessler graduated from Kutztown University and won the prestigious Rome Prize at the American Academy of Rome in 1990. He currently lives in Santa Fe, N.M., with his wife and two children.

"My interest is in the natural dynamics of nature; i.e. energy and growth, light and matter are woven together in my work. Nature is the model and transformation is my subject matter," Kessler said in an artist's statement. "I prefer symbols and forms that have a multiplicity of possible meanings. My works are kept open to interpretation and urge the viewer into an associative frame of mind."

Landscape painting has served the American psyche as a transformative vision of man's earthbound reality reaching up to the divine since the genre was introduced by the



COURTESY PHOTO

"Thyme," by Michael Kessler, an acrylic on panel.

Hudson River School landscape painters of the early 19th century.

To this day the essential philosophical attitude behind American landscape painting has not changed. It is an attitude that represents observable facts (trees, mountains) as symbols of the metaphysical — such as the Promised Land.

Kessler's paintings invoke and utilize both the Romantic response to nature — one that eulogizes the sublime, awe-inspiring vista — and the Classical response to landscape — which is lyrical and domesticated.

Kessler allows the romance of accidental drips and stains — suggesting an untamed nature — to be framed and ordered by horizontal bars that express the poetics of untrammeled order found in Classicism.

TICKETS

Distant Horizons — The Paintings of Michael Kessler

Continue on view through May 8 at Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art/Mira Mar Gallery, 1284 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Call 366-2093 or access www.miramaramart@aol.com.

"Thyme," an acrylic on panel, clearly demonstrates Kessler's process: Four black horizontal bands of equal thickness and density divide the painting in three. The bands are at the center with open areas of cream-brown above and below.

Designed accident allows

for the run-off of brown and blue paint stains and drips to serve as tree trunks and/or bushes that spread above and below the bands.

Kessler's paintings succeed because he has found a midpoint between austere abstraction and the elegiac tradition of the meditative landscape. His paintings are self-referential as pure form, and are discursive as vistas.

They provide yet another example of a tendency of many contemporary painters to incorporate the older traditions of landscape painting into that of contemporary abstraction without loss to energy or poetic integrity. Kessler, as a representative of this approach to landscape painting, is among the most accomplished.