

MICHAEL KESSLER

ANCIENT CURRENTS

I wrote about Michael Kessler's "auspicious debut" at Jack Tilton Gallery in 1985, when the artist had just turned 30. At the time, he was living "in rural Pennsylvania, and his highly evocative abstractions [evolved] from his constant contact with nature." A lot of years have passed since then, but Kessler has continued pursuing his original vision of nature as a constantly transforming, material and spiritual presence. What has changed is the locale (he has studios in New Mexico and Utah), his abandoning of a luminous, often crepuscular palette for a subdued one full of earth tones, switching from oil to acrylic, and from forgoing brushes in favor of trowels, skimmers, invented tools, and occasionally the brush. By making these changes, he found ways to open himself up to other possibilities, including chance and ceding his early desire for control.

Whatever the motivation, it became another way to acknowledge nature's unpredictability. Kessler did something few artists do: he reinvented himself in pursuit of his engagement with nature. All of this enabled him to have an ever-deepening engagement with the microscopic and macroscopic, the visible and invisible world we inhabit. A meticulous painter at the outset of his career, he found ways to open himself up to other possibilities.

In *Doublemoons*, he uses less than a dozen vertical strips to divide the stained green surface into discrete areas, inviting viewers to look as well as see into the painting. Can we comprehend nature in its totality, Kessler seems to be asking in this and other paintings? Are the black-and-white strips trees or something man-made? What about the circular forms we see in the muted, stained green ground? In *Greentrunk*, Kessler divides the vertical painting vertically and horizontally. The divisions underscore our inability to see nature in all its intricate complexity. The asymmetrical divisions recall architecture, the mapping of land into plots, counties, and states – ways we organize our understanding of the world. Materially speaking, the thick, looping trails of poured acrylic recall rains and floods, erosion and the changing landscape, reminding us that stability is an illusion, and that change is not necessarily orderly.

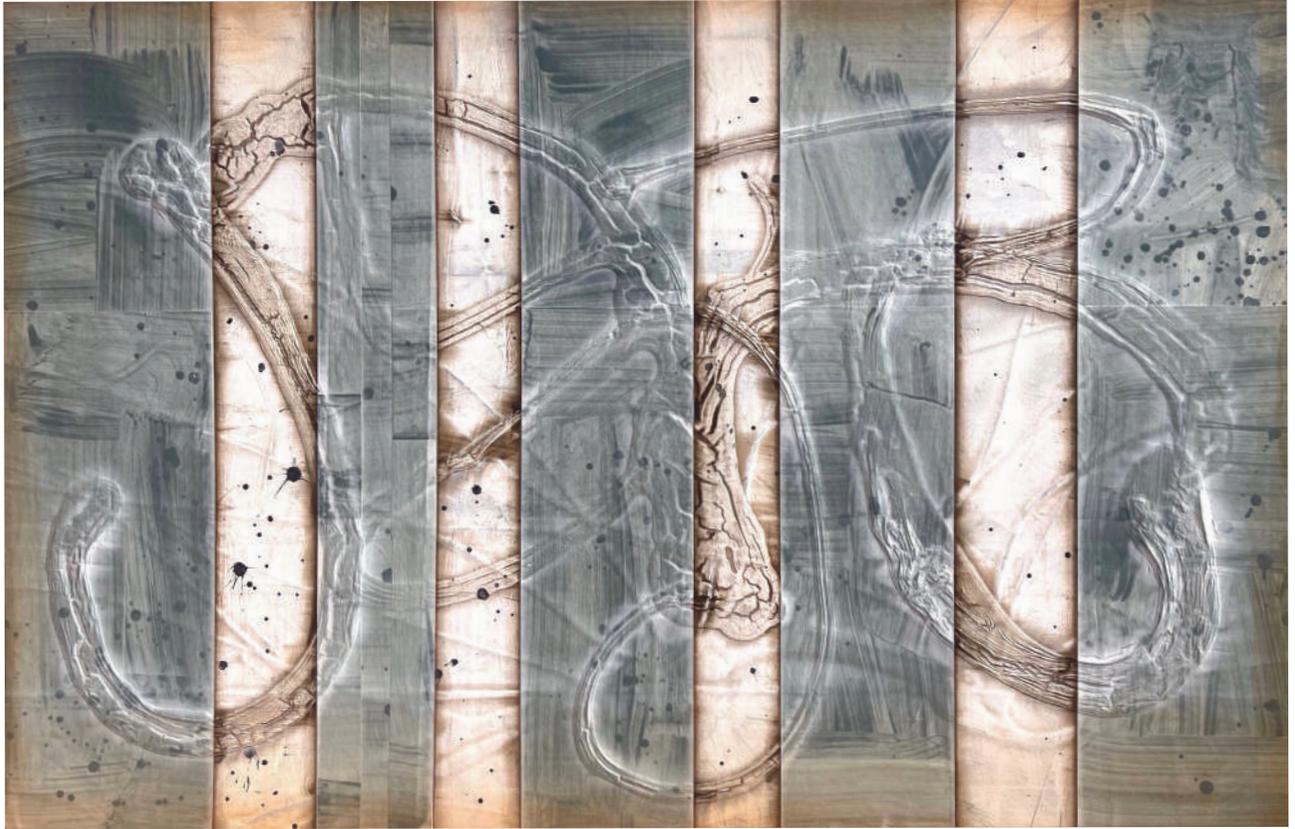
The harsh, austere beauty of the landscapes Kessler knows well is his subject matter. As much as he imposes order on his paintings with his use of wood strips and precise compositional divisions, he knows that nature cannot be contained. That tension between the desire for man-made order and the recognition that nature, however still and sedentary it might appear, cannot be tamed or controlled, is just one of the experiences viewers have while reflecting upon Kessler's work. He knows there is far more to the world than surfaces and resemblances. More importantly, he knows that each vision is not final.

John Yau

RECEPTION: SATURDAY, AUGUST 3rd 6 - 9 PM

EXHIBITION DATES: AUGUST 1st - SEPTEMBER 21st, 2024

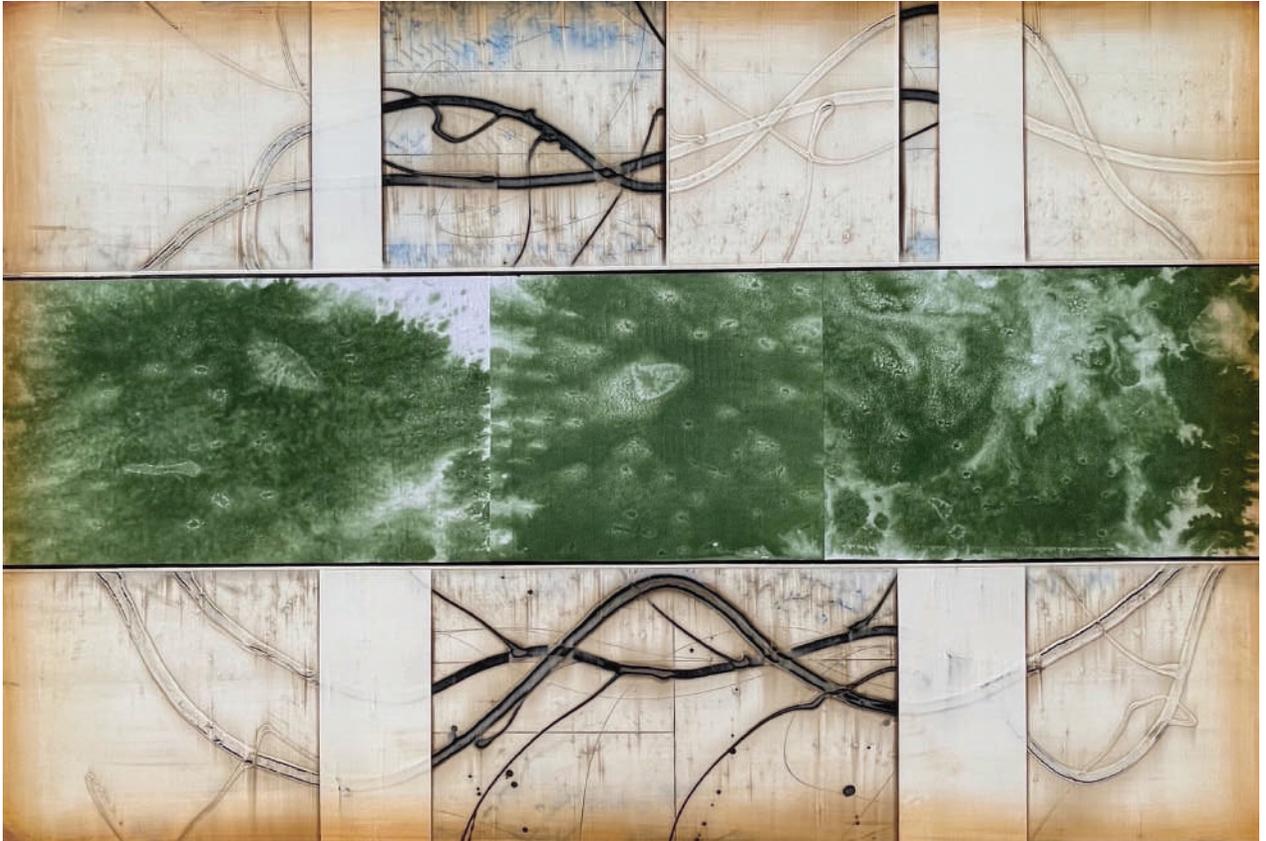
Front Cover: *Singtree V*, acrylic on panel, 60" x 80"



Sagebands III, acrylic on panel, 40" x 60"



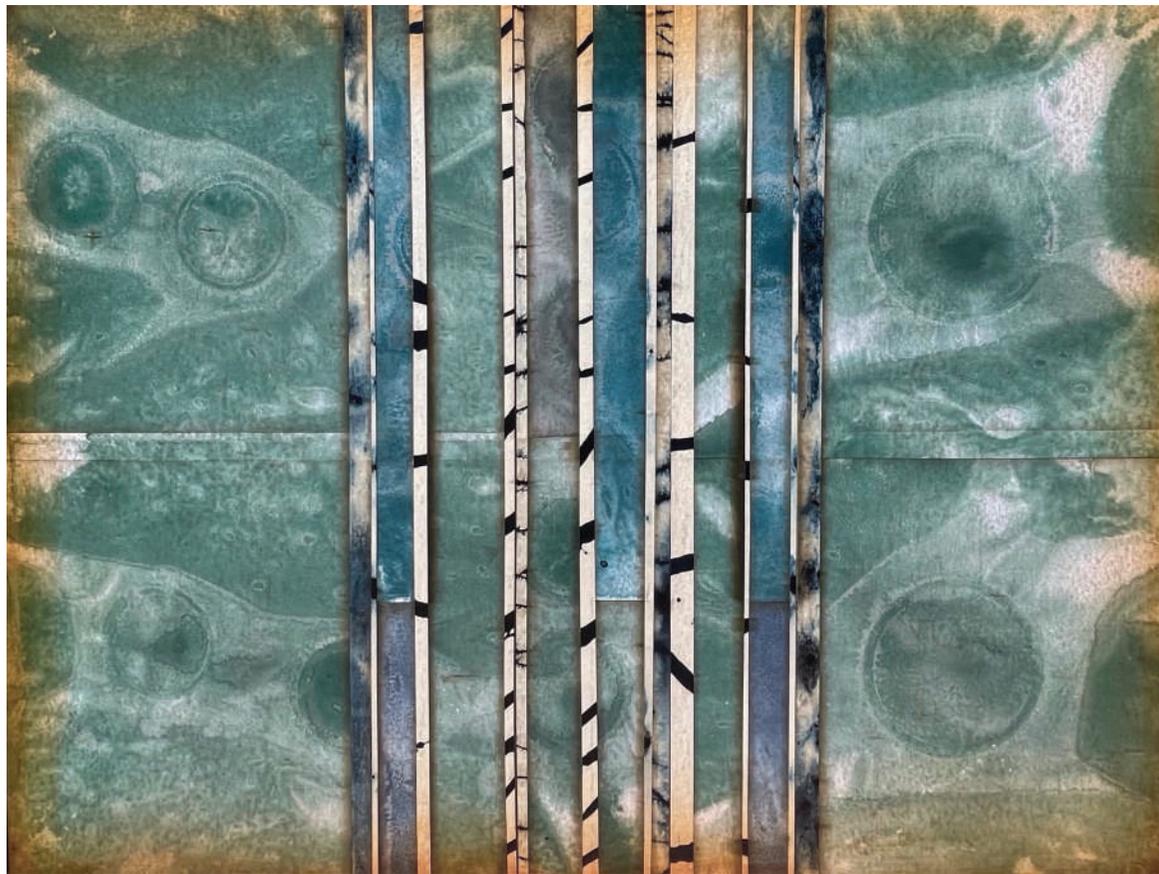
Spring ield II, acrylic on panel, 48" x 60"



Greentrunk, acrylic on panel, 40" x 60"



Bluebirchers, acrylic on panel, 48" x 60"



Doublemoons, acrylic on panel, 36" x 48"

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Olivegrove, acrylic on panel, 48" x 60"

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