

The Very Idea!



ART OF BRIAN KAVANAGH

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American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

Curated by Howard N. Fox and Rosemary Macchiavelli DeRosa

Assisted by Kevin A. Mahoney



FOREWORD

There was a flourishing art world in Washington, DC, from the mid-1970s into the 1990s. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden opened its doors in a city already blessed with wonderful museums, providing more jobs for artists and their cohort as registrars, preparators, designers, educators, public relations and promotions specialists, curators, and guards. The newly-constructed subway system made downtown spaces, abandoned during the 1968 riots, suddenly accessible to commercial galleries, not-for-profit venues



An illustration of the artist with one of his earlier works, that appeared in *Washingtonian Magazine*, November 1981.

like the Washington Project for the Arts, and artists looking for large, inexpensive space to make work and grow their public. Inexpensive space and museum jobs meant artists could choose to ignore what was fashionable, follow their own muse, create an audience, and enrich our lives.

Enter artist Brian Kavanagh and curator Howard Fox. They both worked at the Hirshhorn and became fast friends. In *The Very Ideal Art of Brian Kavanagh*, Fox shows us Washington through the lens of Kavanagh's art from 1975 until the '90s when downtown spaces were no longer affordable for artists. Kavanagh stopped painting, and Fox moved West to become the curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Kavanagh's paintings and Fox's essay reveal a city very different from the one we associate with the Washington Color School, and the commercial and critical acclaim surrounding it. There is a surreal, conceptual side of Washington that Fox chronicles beautifully. I am so grateful for the thoughtful history he lays out for the viewer. It could only be told by an artworld insider and sensitive observer, and it is an invaluable addition to our understanding of where we've been and how we got here. I am also thankful for the support and endless cooperation given by Kavanagh's wife Rosemary DeRosa.

— Jack Rasmussen
C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director,
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center

Opposite: Brian Kavanagh, *Details*, 1987. Oil on canvas with canvas collage, framed: 48 ¾ x 73 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Jesuitical Painting*, 1992. Oil on fiberboard/plywood in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Courtesy of Denise Arnot.

The Very Idea! Art of Brian Kavanagh

Howard N. Fox

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Brian Kavanagh was a painter working diligently from 1975 until the late 1990s in Washington, DC. He had several solo and group exhibitions in DC, Baltimore, and New York, and was a “regular” on the Washington art circuit. In the 20-odd years he was active, he created one of the most personal—indeed, idiomatic—bodies of paintings and prints at a time when the capital city, typically perceived as a bastion of the historical European and American art filling its expansive museums, was quickly emerging as a center for modern and contemporary art, as well, notably with the prevalence of the Washington Color School. A simplified (and simplistic) view of the modern avant-garde envisions much of the history of 20th-century art as a progression of revolutionary movements, one succeeding the other, each with its chief practitioners, lesser luminaries, and a cohort of supporters and detractors.

A note from the author: Brian Kavanagh was a colleague, a close friend, and an occasional drinking buddy—a good, single-malt, peaty, Islay scotch by the glass, or two, was our choice—for many of the nearly four decades I knew him and his wife Rosemary DeRosa. This exhibition, while not a memorial, is posthumous; and this essay, while not a eulogy, is a personal reflection and a remembrance of Brian’s creative life as a painter in Washington for more than two decades, after which he put away his brushes and palette and spent most of his days reading, listening to music, visiting museums, and socializing.

Kavanagh’s creative development was a curious one. As an Art History major at Hunter College in the early 1970s, following three years in the United States Marine Corps, he took some studio-art classes. But as an artist he was largely self-taught; and as a reader with a near-scholarly acumen for the history of ideas and modern literature, he was likewise an autodidact. It is characteristic that he pursued his interests both passionately and independently, all but eschewing academic training and art-world norms. This habit influenced the development of his art as it became more and more sui generis, peculiar to itself, over the years.

Commencing his artistic pursuit during the Washington Color School’s success, Kavanagh chose to work apart. The present exhibition brings together for the first time a core sample of his art.

Setting the Stage: Early Works, Mid-1970s to About 1980

Kavanagh's oeuvre falls into roughly three periods. His earliest works, such as two untitled paintings (figs. 1, 2, not included in this exhibition) were clearly experimental, composed mostly of hard-edged rectilinear zones of subtle coloration in flat planar arrangements. These "novice" reflect both his esteem for modern nonrepresentational abstraction and his awareness of color field painting, as originated in the 1950s and '60s by abstract expressionists, including Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and others. Their art, in turn, reflected a formal lineage that stretches back to Piet Mondrian and even earlier to Kazimir Malevich, and assorted early modernists who also incorporated colored geometric shapes and had an emphatic respect for the flatness of the picture plane.

Progressing to somewhat more complex works, from 1975 to about 1979, Kavanagh established his basic formal and conceptual vocabulary—the elements that would later evolve into increasingly more complicated and allusive signification. His paintings seemed vague and exploratory, as if he were probing the elements of pictorial representation—a marked departure from his earliest

non-objective field abstractions. Two works from 1977, *Just a Cheap Old Camera* (pg. 31) and *For Rose Syzygy* (pg. 30), introduce a motif that would appear numerous times in his oeuvre: a color chart, or pigment palette.

Just a Cheap Old Camera is a square painting divided into quadrants of thin "washes" of oil paint, punctuated in the lower left by a streaking arc of disks in the seven elemental colors. The enigmatic title may specifically refer to a camera, or may evoke the darkened room of the camera obscura used by numerous old masters to aid in tracing images of the real world onto their canvases. Or, more

generally, it may connote the role of visible light in revealing the material world to the eye and also to the mind's eye—that is the imagination, which sees and conceptualizes the external world, ascribing meaning to it.

For Rose, Syzygy, likewise, is roughly divided into quadrants. Reading clockwise from the upper left, the number "2" appears on a white color field; the second quadrant displays the familiar seven-color chart, rendered here as a horizontal band of colored rectangles, with the stenciled word "TWO," while a red egg shape straddles the two upper quadrants; the third quadrant shows



Fig. 1. Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, 1975.
Oil on fiberboard, 42 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 24 in.
Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.
Photo: K. Mahoney.



Fig. 2. Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, (1979–1981).
Oil, mixed media on paper, 32 x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.
Photo: K. Mahoney.

the spectral color sequence, rendered now as an arc of egg-shaped disks; and the fourth quadrant features a nearly translucent painting of a rose. The meanings embedded in this painting are manifold. “Syzygy” is an astronomical term derived from the Greek word for “union,” indicating the alignment of the Earth and other celestial bodies, as the sun and moon, during an eclipse. A secondary meaning is the relationship of any two entities, either alike or opposite. The title, then, embraces the concept of the correspondence of separate entities—just as the visual content of the composition does. The fact that Kavanagh’s wife is named Rosemary, whom he called Rose, suggests that the painting also had a biographical meaning to him.

Whatever these paintings may mean to Kavanagh, or his viewers, this much is clear: they involve far more than what we see on the canvas, and their content penetrates beyond their visual presence. Arcane as they are, these two early works put forward a prototype that he would deploy in all the works that ensued, permeated as they are with perplexing titles, Latin and Greek words and references, ambiguous images, and a recurring iconography that reads almost like a private language. Yet, as obscurant as they

may seem, these works are also forever alluring, suggestive, provocative, and often revelatory. They just require a goodly quotient of curiosity, patience, open-mindedness, and some trust from the viewer. Anybody seeking ready interpretations will likely be unfulfilled, for Kavanagh never declares, he intimates.

A 1978–79 triptych (pg. 34), based on the Greek myth of Iphis and Ianthe, launched Kavanagh into an expanded realm of iconography. It is possible that he first encountered the story, as told by Ovid in his “Metamorphoses” (bk. 9.666–797), when he studied Latin. The tale is a love story with a happy, if miraculous, ending about two beautiful youths, Iphis and Ianthe. Iphis was born a female but, for many complicated reasons, was raised by her mother as a boy. At age 13, Iphis was betrothed to Ianthe, a young woman of remarkable beauty, and the two fell deeply in love. Iphis, despairing that this marriage of such “monstrous love” could only be doomed, was saved by the Egyptian goddess Isis, who miraculously transformed Iphis into a male.

In recent years this ancient myth has generated much gender-based commentary, but Kavanagh’s interest seems more to have been in the theme of physical and psychological transformation than sexuality, per se.

Indeed, transformation became a prevailing theme throughout his art. He situates his narrative (if we can call it that) not in the plot of the mythical story but in a dream of Ianthe’s—presumably of her consuming love of Iphis.

In the first canvas of this triptych, *Asking Will Ianthe Awake*, a dusky purple background is dominated by the central image of an architectural floor plan of a room, while the lower portion presents a white horizontal zone with two arrays of color samples in square grids of colored circles. The painting’s very title and imagery—a dream state, an architectural diagram, and a color graph—suggest everything is in a moment of potential reification. In the second panel, *Being Told Ianthe Will Awake*, the dim purple background has become a more luminous pale violet hue (the name Ianthe derives from the Greek word meaning “violet flower”), while the floor plan has evolved to suggest the presence of a window through which a patch of light streams, and the twin color grids have transmogrified as well: the colored circles have turned dark and are flanked by two radiant white squares displaying smears of brilliant pastel shades, like painters’ palettes. The final panel in this narrative progression, *Embroidering Ianthe’s Sleep*, reveals a three-dimensional depiction

of a completed room with an open window on the right wall that looks out into a lush landscape beyond; an abstract painting of multicolored overlapping squares hangs on the back wall; and a door opens into a second brightly lit room in the background. Above this tableau hovers the painting's stenciled title along with color bars and swatches that "embroider" the scene.

Regardless of whether the viewer is familiar with the story of *lanthe* and *lphis*, the triptych itself infers a narrative—an obscure one to be sure—beginning with an initial vague architectural notion about an enclosing space; then evolving into a clearer sketch of a room with fleeting glimpses of its features; and graduating finally into a picture, rendered in vanishing-point perspective, of a "real" room with interior and exterior views into other rooms and the world beyond. The trilogy suggests an allegory of a painter's or an architect's creative process, ignited first by an idea, and ultimately enlisting the tools of the trade to realize a concrete entity situated in the "real" world. The triptych itself is *about* the very metamorphosis of the artwork as it develops from an inchoate idea in the artist's imagination to a fleshed-out thing with its own material presence.

Heart of the Matter: Middle Works, 1980s

By 1989 or '90, Kavanagh was in full command of his formal "Lexicon" (as he formally termed it in an unpublished statement of February 4, 1981), regularly deploying the chosen symbols, motifs, and themes announced in his early works, replete with puzzling inscriptions and endlessly ruminative titles.

The color charts and pigment palettes of his early works abide in the middle works, but with an amplified romance with color and light. By now he was a genuine tonalist, working in many nuanced shades of a very restricted palette in any given work. He often created nearly vaporous washes that seeped directly into the canvas surface, essentially like stain painting. Within those washy stains were many subtle gestures—smears, erasures, aqueous scumbles, scratches, and faint geometric diagrams—that abounded like ghost images, as if he were thinking and re-thinking every painted move, pondering their presence.

His compositions became stridently complex, switching freely between two- and three-dimensional space in a single work. Typically in his mature paintings, the pictorial space is as malleable as putty, twisting

and cavorting so that the viewer's vantage point is forever shifting. No logical system of representation governs these restless compositions. This visual dance plays out quite prominently in the diagrammatic floor plans familiar from the early works, but now even more contorted in the depictions of rooms, windows, portals, columns, archways, and arcades that appear in these later works. Collectively, such architectural elements are forms of plane geometry projected into three dimensions.

His introduction of text, usually stenciled words and free-floating geometric shapes, now became frequent conceptual elements in his art. These textual inklings and glimmerings, which radiate throughout his oeuvre with their references to art, philosophy, and literature, don't declare eternal truths or state even simple facts so much as they prompt the viewer's open-ended ideation. To "read" a Kavanagh painting is to tussle with his intelligence.

Among these middle works, two are exemplary. *On the First Spiritualist Myth—I.E.—Geometry Kills Man A False Start for P.H.* (1979–80, fig. 3) is fragmented into several disparate visual "episodes." Its title is abstruse, to say the least, but the "first spiritualist myth" connotes a search for causes



Fig. 3. Brian Kavanagh, *On the 1st Spiritualist Myth – I.E. – Geometry Kills Man A False Start: for P. H.*, 1980–1982. Oil on canvas, framed: 40 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 61 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.

and explanations that transcend whatever we know of the daily world empirically. Geometry is among the earliest efforts across various world cultures to comprehend spatial order on the earth (the very word derives from the ancient Greek words “geo,” meaning the earth, and “metria,” meaning measure). The “P.H.” of the title are the initials of Kavanagh’s close friend Peter Harholdt. The remainder of Kavanagh’s title remains a conundrum, but the painting reveals itself as a sort of meditation on knowing and ordering.

The left side of the painting shows a shelf full of various-sized books, suggesting a library covering many humanistic subjects. Beneath the shelf is what appears to be a painting of an idyllic landscape under a dramatic night sky; it is an archetypal symbol for

the natural world. Situated directly beneath the books and the painting is an aerial view of a work surface that might well be a painter’s worktable.

The right-hand area of the painting presents a Kavanagh-esque room, rendered as a receding space with classical archways and a window framing a landscape. Within the room we see what appears to be a wooden framework over which a blank canvas might be stretched and, propped on an easel, a painting of a room that is highly reminiscent of the rooms in his earlier works. Mysteriously, two pairs of eyeglasses float in a white, house-like shape in the upper right. There is no “plot” to this curious painting; it is more like a still life, pregnant with suggestive meanings, and a meditation on the workings of the mind.

Endgame: Late Works

Kavanagh’s late paintings, from about 1991 to 1996, comprise a discrete body of work within his oeuvre, in large measure because their subjects are more definite than in his earlier output: these works are about mortality. And although the theme is more familiar (if often uncomfortably so) to most people, the paintings retain the wonder and mystery that characterized the early and middle works.

Where his previous art seemed to betoken ideas beyond the boundary of the “picture”—images that, as if impelled by some centrifugal force, yearned to trespass their pictorial confines—the late works featured very recognizable containers: including eggs, urns, boxes, books, and, most evocatively, skulls. Moreover, all of these small-scale paintings, each measuring less than two feet on a side, are cradled in intricate frames of contoured stained wood, painstakingly constructed by Kavanagh, that patently contain the very containers they depict; and these depictions draw overtly upon classical tropes, such as pillars, plinths, arches, and altar-like tables, all eliciting an aura of ceremony.

Untitled (Urn) (ca. 1991–92, pg. 47) pictures a classical urn, convincingly rendered as a three-dimensional form, centered on a



Fig. 4. Brian Kavanagh, *Columbarium*, 1993. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid frame, frame: 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Private Collection.

jade-green table or sill, and a slate-gray sky in the deep background. It is a somber painting, all in ocher, umber, and stony gray with an underpainting of subdued earth tones, save for a strip of dark ultramarine at the top of the picture, like a luminous midnight-blue sky. The essential composition of urn-and-sky is reprised in the more explicitly titled *Memento Mori* (1992, pg. 49). A more complex work in this late series is *Columbarium* (1993, fig. 4), which shows a stately arrangement of nine, semicircular, half-domed niches in a stone wall; a columbarium is a sepulchral vault with recess for the placement of funerary urns. The spatial composition of these paintings is emphatically frontal, with the shallow space of the stony objects pushed up to the extreme foreground that yields, at the top, to an evocation of a dark yet strangely luminous infinite cosmic space beyond.

Kavanagh was, clearly, a humanist throughout his art; indeed, his enduring subject matter was classical Western civilization, the Enlightenment values of educated reason, freewill, and ideality, and the testimony of his profound respect for any human's thoughtful, creative response to life. Curiously—oddly and remarkably—Kavanagh incorporates very few depictions of human

beings in any of his works. With one notable exception: among his late works stands out a portrait of the Florentine early Renaissance poet, Dante Alighieri. Kavanagh's portrait is a direct quotation of Sandro Botticelli's homage (circa. 1495) to the author of "La Divina Commedia," an opus that abides today as the supreme literary vision of the Catholic cosmology, narrating Dante's imagined spiritual journey through *Limbo* (the realm of the unbaptized, thence through *Inferno*, then *Purgatorio* and on to *Paradiso*). For all of the ideation and erudition that Kavanagh invests in his art, his Jesuit education, and its emphasis on the arts as a fundamental precept of Catholic religiosity, clearly shines through in his personal homage to Dante. Brian's only other overt references to human corporeal existence are the several human skulls—bodily detritus—that appear in the late paintings.

A hushed, timeless aura pervades these pictures, which are unwaveringly anterior and symmetrical in composition. Indeed, sometimes geometry itself is the subject. *Untitled* (Orb on a Pedestal) (ca. 1992, pg. 50) presents a sphere held aloft on a neoclassical pedestal, resting on a flat surface that might be an altar. The ceremonially placed orb is

surrounded by an endless sky beyond. And in *Untitled* (c. 1992, fig. 5), a puzzling irregular polyhedron holds the foreground—the shape is plainly not a predictable one like a pyramid or a cube—while a glowing infinite space extends forever in the distance.

Light is a recurring metaphor for that spirit, and it suffuses virtually all of Brian's paintings, a twilight-like glow that seems to originate in an unseen or extraterrestrial source and shines in even the haziest of his background washes, radiating, especially in his last paintings, from far horizons and skies. For Kavanagh, light seems to have implied a primal, original, and endless energy that pervades the physical universe. Religionists affirm this infinite force as the Creation; scientists recognize it as the Big Bang; Kavanagh sought and painted the light.

These late paintings echo a sentiment expressed in a card he presented to his wife Rosemary for her birthday at about the same time he was painting these haunting pictures. The printed image on the front of the card is an etching titled *Meadow Stile* (1970) by the British artist Robin Tanner. On the back, Brian inscribed a personal message: "Note the sunlight at the end of the meadow, it is where we are bound."

The more recognizable the images in these later works are, the more incomprehensible they are. The containers that encase future life (eggs), past and present life (books), and nullified life (skulls) are, themselves, surrounded by a benign infinitude. Are we to value the containers and what they contain as a measure of existence? Are we to think of the space beyond them as signifying a "place" after death, or as an endless void? Kavanagh gives us no answers. Even the perfectness of the sphere is as enigmatic as the oddity of an irregular polyhedron. Both the ideality of the sphere and the vague unintelligibility of the polyhedron inspire a curiosity in us as we try to comprehend their true nature—that is, if whatever each of us vaguely thinks of as "perfection" or "non-perfection" augurs any "truth" at all, beyond our indistinct notions. As Hamlet pondered, "...there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." *Thinking* makes it so. And yet such symbols exert an undeniable attractive power in our thoughts, even if we cannot genuinely articulate their meaning. In some hard to fathom way, Kavanagh's sphere and the irregular polyhedron are extreme distillations of all that he embodied in his art, start to finish.



Fig. 5. Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, c. 1992. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized wood frame, frame: 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Fig. 6. Kenneth Noland, *Cycle*, 1960. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 inches. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Gift of Gifford and Joann Phillips, 2009. 2009.001.0001 Art © Estate of Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Any reproduction of the digitized form of this image shall not be made without the written consent of the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.



Fig. 7. Morris Louis, *Point of Tranquility*, 1959–1960. Magna on canvas, 101 3/4 x 135 3/4 inches (258.2 x 344.9 cm). Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. 1959–1960 © 2024 Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), rights administered by Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York, All Rights Reserved.

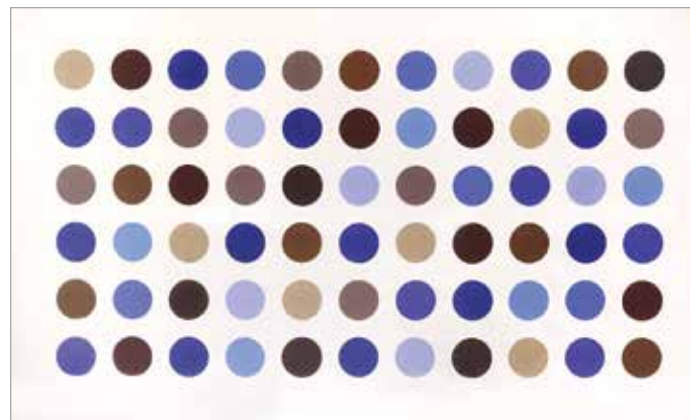


Fig. 8. Thomas Downing (1928–1985), *Grid #6*, n.d. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 103 inches. American University Museum Collection. Gift of Hortensia Anillo, 2014.43.1.

In the Lions' Den: Kavanagh and the Washington Color School

Kavanagh, as we have seen, began his artistic career in the mid-1970s, at about the same time when the Washington Color School had become the predominant art movement in the capital area. Its stature was registered not only by its critical, curatorial, and academic acclaim, but also by its commercial success among gallerists and collectors. And its achievements were highly regarded beyond Washington, garnering significant national and international exposure.

Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis are generally credited as the two “founding members” of the “school.” In 1965, Gerald Nordland, director of the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, organized the storied exhibition *Washington Color Painters*, which included works by Noland and Louis, as well as like-minded painters Gene Davis, Tom Downing, Howard Mehring, and Paul Reed, conferring upon the small group considerable recognition and influence as a movement. Its adherents generally espoused non-referential abstract forms, geometrically structured

compositions, highly saturated colors, and almost always a non-gestural, very spare application of paint that virtually merged with the canvas to produce so-called “stain paintings” (see figs. 6, 7, 8).

Influential as the WCS was, its theoretical underpinning, as promulgated by the art critic Clement Greenberg, is what galvanized the art world. Greenberg praised the WCS for aspiring to painting works that were “purely visual.”¹¹ In a critique of Greenberg’s aesthetic theories, Caroline A. Jones quotes his pronouncement that late-modern abstraction had

attained the state in which “[t]he human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone.”² For Greenberg and his acolytes, the attainment of “pure opticality” was the fulfillment of an ideal inherent in the very germ of abstraction. Greenberg was a formidable, articulate, and influential intellect. It is ironic that in his modernist ethos to shed art of its archaisms and obsolete ideals, Greenberg would advocate so adroitly for such a rarefied anti-intellectualism in art.

“Of course, ‘purity’ is an unattainable ideal,” he acknowledged, “[b]ut this does not diminish the crucial importance of ‘purity’ or concrete ‘abstractness’ as an orientation and aim.”³ He further argued that patently visual abstract art offered the viewer the “purest, least diluted, most immediate” experience⁴ and “can teach us, by example, how valuable so much in life can be made without being invested with ulterior meanings.”⁵

Perhaps what Greenberg meant by “ulterior meanings”—those outside the boundaries of the “strictly visual entity”—are echoed in Frank Stella’s famous (also infamous) reflection that many viewers “want to retain the ‘old values’ in painting—the ‘humanistic’ values that they always find on the canvas. My

painting,” he declared by contrast, “is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there.... If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion.... What you see is what you see.”⁶

How strikingly different from Clement Greenberg’s postulates and Frank Stella’s declaration is Kavanagh’s statement that “I am very much concerned with extra-formal modes—with ideas, the thought processes, and speculations on the nature of objective ‘reality.’”⁷ What could be more opposite to pure opticality than pure ideation? Visually alluring as Kavanagh’s richly hued paintings and their enigmatic images are, his art is positively bookish and cerebral in his intent. Kavanagh makes an unabashedly dualistic appeal to both the eye and the mind’s eye. Any true Greenbergian would have been scandalized. The very *idea*!

With regard to the WCS, Kavanagh was no rebel, nor an iconoclast. Perhaps he saw himself as the loyal opposition—attentive, respectful, and admiring of his celebrated colleagues. In an unpublished note from the

1980s he stated “[w]hile continuing to work I have been loath to show my work in area group shows of late because of a lack of connectedness to the current scene.” He was simply a non-participant, a non-believer, a daring independent residing in the lions’ den of the Washington Color School. And like the lions in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, the lions pretty much left him alone.

Another Lions’ Den

Plainly, Kavanagh was a misfit amid the hegemony of the Washington Color School. The WCS cohort were certainly the big rainmakers in and around DC at the time. But they were hardly the full artworld climate, and, to be sure, Kavanagh was not the only painter who saw himself apart from the WCS. As Jack Rasmussen observes in his landmark study of DC painters of the period, *The Long Sixties*,⁸ many artists found themselves alienated from the pure abstraction of that movement and ignored its values as much as the WCS would discount theirs. During the late 1960s and well into the ‘70s, the anti-Vietnam War movement and the countercultural revolutions that roiled the United States and Europe were irrelevant to the art produced by the WCS.

Indeed, some felt hamstrung by the WCS's strictures. In DC, the Studio Art departments of Howard University, American University, the Corcoran School of Art, and other academic institutions became centers of alternative cultural impulses. Artists such as Allen "Big Al" Carter, Franklin White, David Driskell, and the collective AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) juxtaposed abstract and figurative imagery in their art that depicted, celebrated, and often railed against the realities of Black culture within (and outside of) American society. There is a strong case to be made for the political subtext of the late Sam Gilliam's art, an African American who had strong affinities with the WCS; but it has also been widely observed that his art largely avoided overt political commentary, and it was deemed as not "relevant" to the political events of the day.

Other local artists likewise distanced themselves from the WCS and its coterie. Numerous figurative painters and others whose art was distinctly narrative, psychological, or surrealistic created work (and enjoyed thriving careers for it) that had almost nothing in common with the formalist covenants of the WCS. Lisa Brotman, a

co-founder of the satirically named Washington Color Pencil School, commented that its formation "was truly a rebellious act. Color painting was conceptually not enough for us. I think our work had a sense of escapism, fantasy, and social commentary as a result of events in the sixties and seventies."⁹ And there was an energetic contingent of noted figurative painters, among them Joseph Shannon, Manon Cleary, Alan Feltus, Sidney Lawrence, and Carol Brown Goldberg.

Alternate Routes

We have seen that Kavanagh worked independently, if not outright indifferently, from the Washington Color School; moreover, he shared few artistic inspirations with the figurative, abstract, surrealist, and political painters who surrounded him during the 1970s and mid-'80s. Observed within that context, Kavanagh seems to be nearly a loner, a painter whose art is *sui generis*. Yet it is legitimate to ask whether he had affinities with any other artists in the DC art world. Here the answer is speculative at best. For even though Kavanagh was a committed painter, he seems to have had the deepest kinships with conceptual artists.

Conceptual art, as its name suggests, is driven essentially by ideas and less by form, style, medium, or technique. Words, numbers, information systems (such as graphs and grids), and basic geometric forms—all of which make repeated appearances in Kavanagh's paintings—are its stock-in-trade. And although many conceptual artists made three-dimensional works—installation art and earth art were notable innovations related to conceptualism, and performance art was a close cousin as well—few conceptualists would refer to themselves primarily as sculptors in any traditional use of the term. Fewer still would call themselves painters.

Kavanagh's interests seem more in sync with three Washington sculptors whose art, always intensely present in its sheer physical presence, embodied complex ideas and the very process of thinking itself: Yuriko Yamaguchi, Jim Sanborn, and Yuri Schwebler. Yamaguchi's art is a meditation on progenitive forms of plant and animal life as manifestations of a cosmic life force; Sanborn's art engages unseen physical forces, such as gravity and magnetism, and language games; Schwebler's installations respond to the architecture or the natural world surrounding them, to evoke a pervasive geometric and

metaphysical order. Kavanagh's art and their art invite mutual comparison.

Since making her earliest sculptures in the late 1970s, Yuriko Yamaguchi has embarked on an exploration of what she describes as a life force endlessly metamorphosing from atoms to animals to human societies. Her earlier works, such as *Metamorphosis #107*, 2004 (fig. 9), were often wall-bound arrays of biomorphic shapes, fashioned from such natural materials as clay, wood, plaster, or plant fibers. Later works, many of which are increments of her ongoing *Web* series (fig. 10), were vast amorphous nebulae suspended through entire galleries, sometimes trailing from room to room. They are composed of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of shapes in various materials including paper, abaca flax, and resins, all connected by steel wires and, in some recent pieces, optic fibers that glow, as if forming a boundless neural network, connecting every individual part to every other as if it were a limitless intelligence.

Jim Sanborn's art engages unseen physical forces, such as gravity and the Earth's magnetic field, to give form to his works. *Lightning and Other Earthly Forces*, 1981–82 [reconstructed in 1984 and retitled *Invisible Forces*] (fig. 11), is composed of sandstone,



Clockwise, from top left:
Fig. 9. Yuriko Yamaguchi, *Metamorphosis #107*, 2004. Wood, dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian.

Fig. 10. Yuriko Yamaguchi, *Web #5*, 2003. Abaca (Manila hemp), flax paper pulp, steel wire, 21 x 8 x 8 ft. Installation view at Numark Gallery, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian.

Fig. 11. Jim Sanborn, *Lightning and Other Earthly Forces*, 1981–82, reconstructed 1984. Sandstone, lodestone, and compass points, 84 x 120 x 168 in. Studio installation, Washington, DC, 1984. Photo: Jim Sanborn.



iron (in its form as lodestones, or natural magnets), and prefabricated steel compass points. It must also be acknowledged that lightning played a key role in its creation, for although the overall configuration of the work is static, it owes its form and the “behavior” of the compass points to the actual, ongoing attraction of the lodestones, whose magnetic force was in turn provided by lightning strikes eons ago. To appreciate the conceptual complexity of this visually straightforward composition, the viewer must enlist a knowledge of geophysics that has nothing to do with art per se. Looking is not sufficient to behold the work; ideation is essential.

In formation of Sanborn’s later art, language, mathematics, and the history of ideas are fundamental. For example, his cryptographic project *Kryptos*, 1990, (fig. 12), commissioned for the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia, is perhaps the world’s most renowned public encryption. Its material composition is characteristically Sanborn: granite, quartz, lodestone, copper, and water. But its extra-formal content—its notoriously confounding encoded text—remains only partially solved to date.¹⁰ Like his earlier works whose form was generated by gravity and magnetism, the artistic

integrity of *Kryptos* and his other coded structures depend utterly on factors—what Greenberg described as “ulterior” aspects—extraneous to the inherent form of the art object.

Yuri Schwebler had a fascination with mathematics and architecture. His hard-edge geometric sculptures and site-specific installations resemble minimal art in their austere lines and planes, and in the use of industrial materials like steel beams and glass arranged in basic geometric shapes. His two most notable works created in Washington were his 1974 *Pyramid* installation (fig. 13) in the atrium of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and, shortly after, his *Washington Monument Sundial Project* (fig. 14). For the Corcoran, Schwebler engaged the symmetrical architecture of the museum’s neoclassical atrium, whose stone- and glass-inlaid floor was exactly congruent with the crossbeams and skylights some 40 feet above. He suspended brass plumb bobs on gold-colored cords from the ceiling’s crossbeams to precisely define the placement of eight small pyramids he constructed at the intersections of the floor designs on the north end of the atrium, and three much larger ones on the thick, load-bearing, glass, floor panels directly beneath the skylights of the south end. Each of the eleven pyramids



Fig. 12. Jim Sanborn, *Kryptos*, 1989. Granite, quartz, lodestone, copper, encoded text, and water, 12 x 20 x 10 ft. Permanent installation at courtyard plaza, Central Intelligence Agency, Langley, VA.



Fig. 13. Yuri Schwebler *Pyramids*, 1974. Sand, plywood, brass plumb bobs. Installation inside the atrium of the Corcoran. Image courtesy Yuri Schwebler Archive, Salem, NY.

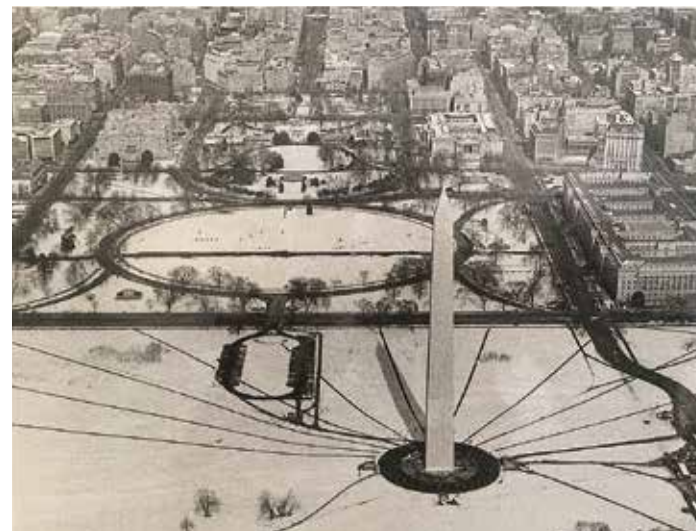


Fig. 14. Yuri Schwebler, aerial view of *Sundial*, 1974. Snow, Washington Monument, and shadow. Temporary installation on the National Mall, Washington, DC. Courtesy of Ben Forgey. Photo: John Bowden.

was a replica of the Great Pyramid at Giza. This installation created an approximation of Euclidean perfection and evoked correspondences between the material world and a purely Platonic ideal. As critic Lynda Roscoe Hartigan aptly described it, *Pyramid* provokes an intellectual “fascination with the play of [what] ‘is’ and ‘is not.’”¹¹

Schwebler’s second major project in DC, a giant sundial on the National Mall with the Washington Monument functioning as the gnomon, was conceived of in 1971, approved by the National Park Service in 1972, and finally realized in 1974 (a month following the opening of the Corcoran installation) after a heavy snowfall enabled accurate hour

markers to be plowed into the snow. Like the *Pyramid* project, the *Sundial* operated in tandem with the actual world, and both projects comprised an elaborate metaphor tracing the evolution of a concept into a concrete thing, and a transmutation of that thing back into a web of ideas.

Like Kavanagh, Yamaguchi, Sanborn, and Schwebler each fuse an art object's material reality with a thought process to "complete" its significance as art. They entail allusions to a nebulous but very real, or even idealized, comprehension of the world, enlisting the mindset that inheres in each viewer. Their artworks surely display very formidable and assertive physical forms. But the full experience and meaning of those artworks, their *human* significance, takes place beyond the retina, in the amorphous and hazy climes of the imagination—in what Henry James described in his 1884 manifesto *The Art of Fiction* as "the very atmosphere of the mind" and its ceaseless drive "to guess the unseen from the seen."

Deeper Roots

Kavanagh was enamored of learning as a pure pursuit, which is to say not education for some pragmatic purpose, as engineering or medical research, but learning as an end in itself—the quest for knowledge as a personal virtue akin to a moral value. He was fascinated by Denis Diderot (1713–84), the French Enlightenment philosopher and man of letters, who co-founded, edited,

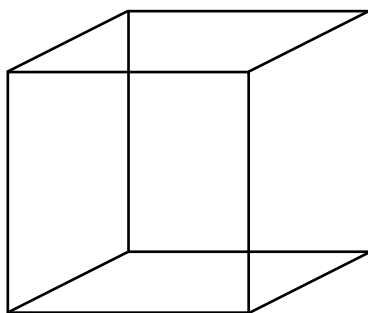
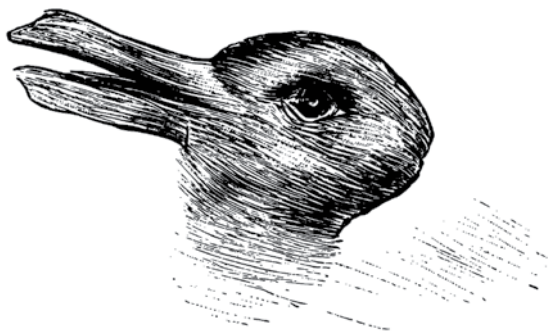
and wrote thousands of the entries of the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (*Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*). Published erratically between 1751 and 1772, the *Encyclopédie* was a monumental 28-volume compendium of nearly 72,000 articles that aspired to bring together "each and every branch of human knowledge" into a single organon of rationalist thought. It was surely the most ambitious publication of the Enlightenment, and Kavanagh saw it as an inquest into the extent—and the limits—of human comprehension of the world; these same abstract concerns are deeply embedded in the substrate of his art.

Kavanagh was captivated by the example of Diderot's ambitions, but his reading of the Austrian-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was equally formative. Wittgenstein's work was a lifelong meditation on knowing—that is, the experience of what we perceive as facts, certainties, and, in a word, truth. What interested Kavanagh most about Wittgenstein was this modern philosopher's exploration of how language shapes our perception of the world, and how experience informs our understanding of words,

concepts, and what we know—or what we believe that we know.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953, Wittgenstein had argued that language was one of the most indefinite creations of human consciousness, and that even the simplest words are dependent not on some immutable reality, but on a myriad of vague connotations that brew endlessly with other concepts in our consciousness. We fathom the meaning of words only through other words, whose meanings we plumb from yet other words. Our comprehension of ideas, Wittgenstein suggests, is equally complicated; and no matter how precise our thoughts are, such "knowledge," as we are wont to call it, is enmeshed in the webwork of our protean perceptions.

Wittgenstein studied visual as well as verbal perception and found it to be similarly inexact. Perhaps the most famous example he examined is the illusion (fig. 15), which originally appeared in the German magazine *Blätter* on October 23, 1892—a drawing that can be perceived either as a duck or a rabbit. It is a visual pun with no correct interpretation. A comparable optical illusion is the two-dimensional cube diagram, (the so-called Necker Cube, first published in



From top: Fig. 15. *Kaninchen und Ente* (Rabbit and Duck). Unattributed drawing from the 23 October 1892 issue of the German periodical *Fliegende Blätter*. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit%E2%80%93duck_illusion

Fig. 16. Necker cube illusion.

1832 by Swiss crystallographer Louis Albert Necker)¹² that alternately appears to project forward or recede backward into three-dimensional space (fig. 16). In each case, what you see is what *you* see at any given moment; and what you see is also what you *do not* see. It intrigued Kavanagh that *seeing* is not merely optical but is a cognitive activity as well.

The meaning of any purposeful communication, Wittgenstein argued, is tied to the context of its usage, the intent of its use, and the perception of the receiver. The significance of even a single word depends on how it is intended by the speaker, just as it is for the listener; and the intended meaning and the received meaning may be very fluid. Amid such inexactitude, and contrary to our fondest wishes, *mis*-understanding may be the norm in everyday communication. If for much of his philosophical life Wittgenstein wrestled with the problems of communication and with the hope of overcoming them through precise language, at the end of his career, and near death, he believed the quest to have been a vanity.

What Kavanagh “got” from his reading of Wittgenstein was an understanding of the uncertain meaning of all that we know or believe to be true. But for him such uncertainty

did not necessarily render a thoughtful person’s intellectual, and perhaps spiritual, life vain. It might as readily be accepted as a liberating force—liberating from the tyranny of “facts” and the blind faith that (mis)guides us through our daily lives. If he never decisively rejected the Jesuit catechism of his youthful education, he set it aside as he came to ascertain the incompleteness of any “absolute” truth. He disdained “received opinion” and “preconceived wisdom” and “blind faith.” As a matter of intellectual integrity, he asserted an independence and cerebral restlessness in his life and his art.

Kavanagh often seemed to be staging an inner conversation with Wittgenstein in paintings that were virtually haunted by ambiguity in the form of “phantom” images, pentimenti, erasures, diagrams, and stenciled words that migrated from one painting to the next. Individually and collectively, these elements of his painterly language evoke, but never outrightly declare, ideas, ideals, and possibly even realities that may, or may not, exist beyond the paintings, prints, and drawings. Such pregnant ambiguity stirred him immeasurably more than the optical purity and the instantaneous “completeness” of the productions of the Washington Color School.



Fig. 17. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–1923. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 9 ft. 1 ¼ in. x 70 in. x 3 ¾ in. (277.5 x 177.8 x 8.6 cm.). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952, © Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2023.

The through line of Kavanagh's artistic life entailed questioning the meaning that each work proffers to the viewer. Writing a diaristic note to himself, Kavanagh commented that "[e]ach painting begins and ends with an idea (rarely the same). In between exists desire. The desire to make something, to understand something, to acknowledge, to translate, to transmute. When I use a representation of a thing, I do not use it as a symbol. People can (and usually do) assign meanings to things that are at wide variance to the intended use. I intend no direct transfer of information. Rather I want the viewer to look at the work as a thought process."¹³

Whereas Diderot and Wittgenstein were intellectual mentors to Kavanagh, Marcel Duchamp was an art-world hero to him. There is universal agreement today that Duchamp, working in the early decades of the 20th century, was the progenitor of conceptual art of the 1960s. Kavanagh frequently mentioned Duchamp even in his most casual conversations.

Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–23 (fig. 17) is his most notorious opus, created sporadically over a period of eight years. Probably more has been written about *The*

Large Glass than any other early modern work of art. Virtually nobody can agree on a definitive meaning of this antic, accretion of images of machines, geometric diagrams, and studio dust, all arrayed on two vertical cracked glass panels. And this is just as Duchamp would have it: his own compilation of accompanying notes, titled *The Green Box*, reads as a delirium, full of contradictory declarations that only serve to confound.

Kavanagh, writing another diaristic note,¹⁴ quoted a letter Duchamp wrote to his friend, the painter and Dadaist Jean Crotti: "... I do not believe in painting, in itself. A picture is not made by the painter but by those who look at it and grant it their favors; in other words there does not exist a painter who knows himself or what he is doing.... That which you see in it is what makes its worth or lack of it." Reflecting on this, Kavanagh wrote, "My painting might be seen to be a dialogue (an Argument) with history—art history, cultural history, literary history, social history.... I am very much concerned with extra-formal modes—with ideas, the thought processes, and speculations on the nature of objective 'reality.'" And then, as if responding directly to Duchamp, he answered, "What you see is what you get"—his emphasis truly meaning "What *you* see

is what *you* get,” or, as if he were responding directly to Frank Stella, “What *you* see is what *you* see.”

Kavanagh’s statement—if not precisely opposed to Stella’s “what you see is what you see”—certainly posits an opposite position to the notion of pure opticality as an ultimate value in visual art. This was not merely unorthodox for one working “inside the Beltway” of the Washington Color School; in their terms—in Greenbergian terms—that position was verging on heresy or anathema.

Fathoming the Unfathomable

So what does Kavanagh’s art hold out to most viewers who may not have a Jesuit education or a mindset steeped in philosophy and art history? What does it say to those of us not familiar with lanthe, Wittgenstein’s word games, or Duchamp’s aesthetic anarchy? Perhaps his offering to the viewer is the intellectual wonder it provokes. He rouses our desire to *ask* about things.

In fact, there is no logical, linear explanation of Kavanagh’s content. His art will always remain nearly indecipherable; there is no riddle to be decrypted, no arcane message to be revealed. He was innately averse

to issuing proclamations about a credo to live by. His oeuvre comes together as an ongoing meditation on the limits of knowledge—and not just an individual’s learning or erudition, but the very act of *knowing*—and our assessment of how, or even whether, we can ascribe “Truth” to whatever it is we may believe or disbelieve.

Kavanagh was transfixed by what we might call the alchemy of the mind and its insistent habit of flitting from thought to thought. This habit inspires the transformation of merely apparent data about the world into ideas; and the act of creating “something” out of almost “nothing.” Paint pushed around on a canvas indeed can be “purely optical,” but it also can prompt us to believe in meanings that are not really “there” except in the eye and the mind of the beholder.

With Kavanagh’s interest in mutability, perhaps even a sort of transubstantiation, there may be religious undercurrents in his art. Whether he intended it or not, his art mirrors the underlying Christian belief that the Word (God the Father) was made Flesh (incarnate in Jesus), and the Flesh was spiritually resurrected back into the Word (the Holy Spirit). In some sublimated corner of Brian’s psyche, his art echoes this Catholic fundament of a

triune divinity. While he kept faith with no organized religion, a sure quality of religiosity penetrated his entire creative life. To Brian, making his art was a kind of deeply personal if altogether secular sacrament, somewhat analogous to the Word made Flesh.

Kavanagh’s art is not about revelation. According to his wife, Rosemary DeRosa, “Brian was always consumed by and in mystery.” So, if the viewer experiences a sense of anxiety at not being able to understand the meanings behind the images, then Kavanagh has successfully conveyed the fundamental impulse of his creative process, a yearning for Truth, absent of confirmation.

Kavanagh infers that no area of thought, no Truth—especially ideas that we receive through a culture of authoritarian instruction—is beyond the activity of a working intelligence. It is possible to regard his art as an endless enticement to quest after an unattainable goal, something like an intellectual game of “cat and mouse.” But this would lead only to frustration. A better response is to read it as an ode to the desire to fathom the unfathomable.

Kavanagh did not revolt against centuries of artistic tradition, as the earliest avant-gardists had done; but his achievement was surely

divergent and independent—very much *other* in the contemporaneous art milieu where he lived and worked, and where he saw himself continuing a modernist tradition of expanding the realm of artistic possibility. He conceived his art to penetrate beyond the sense of sight into the deeper space of thought. And to think that he was making these sacramental paintings at the very moment and in the very place that “pure opticality” was promulgated by his illustrious compeers as the apotheosis of the modernist impulse in art. It seemed so contrarian—the very *idea!*—and it was. In retrospect, Brian Kavanagh emerges as an abstract painter who dared to tread into the nascent realm of conceptual art.

An afterword from the author:

In the late 1990s Brian Kavanagh gradually withdrew from making art. It must be noted that he was not ailing, nor, in his early 50s, was he too old to work, nor had he been diagnosed with a disabling disease when he suspended his studio practice. Perhaps he felt that he had completed an inner artistic journey, from which he retired himself, moving on to other intellectual pursuits. While he was gradually spending less time in his studio, numerous close friends, myself included, wondered why he was retreating from the pursuit he so loved.

Always a voracious reader, Brian spent much of his time with book in hand, occasionally with a scotch whisky in the other. When not in his favorite easy chair, he much enjoyed going on walks, visiting museums, and socializing. He also adopted what his wife Rosemary describes as “a consuming interest in ship modelling,”¹⁵ as he embarked on a hobby of building intricate, highly accurate models of historical ships and pursuing a newfound interest in nautical history. He collected maps and atlases from several historical eras, and he gravitated to numerous books by the

British author Patrick O’Brian, whose series of novels on the naval history of the Napoleonic Wars were of particular interest.

*His close friends wondered if he was abandoning art (we all hoped not), or simply taking a leave of absence (odd, but sort of understandable). When fellow artist George Singley urged him to get back to his art, Brian replied, almost wistfully, “Well, I’ve been thinking about it and making some notes....” But it never really happened; like Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, he preferred not to. Rosemary refers to a handwritten poetic inscription found on one of Brian’s prints, *De Rerum Natura*:*

*He turned and was surprised
that his drink again had no ice
he was sure that amidst reading
& note taking he had added ice
Had he not
or had more time passed
than Brian had allowed for
“you better watch out”
she said
menacingly.
or had his destiny
simply forked, as it
does sometimes, at
night.*

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism / Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 99–100.
- ² Carolyn A. Jones, in *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg: Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 314.
- ³ In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism / Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 56.
- ⁴ In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism / Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 82.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 82–83.
- ⁶ Frank Stella, in William S. Rubin: *Frank Stella*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970, pp. 41–42.
- ⁷ Brian Kavanagh, unpublished artist's statement, August 1987.
- ⁸ *The Long Sixties: Washington Paintings in the Watkins and Corcoran Legacy Collections, 1957–1982*. Washington, DC: American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 2021, pp. 16–31.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ An informal competition within the international intelligence community, deploying divergent cryptographic methods, has succeeded in discerning that a complete cracking of the code may be found only as an answer to a riddle within a riddle, and so on....
- ¹¹ *The Studio: Sculpture by Yuri Schwebler*. Yonkers, New York: The Hudson River Museum, 1981, p. 13.
- ¹² Wikipedia entry "Necker cube."
- ¹³ Unpublished statement, February 4, 1981.
- ¹⁴ Unpublished artist's statement, August 1987.
- ¹⁵ Emails to the author, November 16 and December 2, 2022.

And the Night Illuminated the Night

Rosemary Macchiavelli DeRosa

I found the title for this personalized “mini-bio” of my late husband Brian among his copious and entrancing and sometimes mystifying notes. Some might find Brian’s words and paintings cryptic. He was, after all, in passive opposition to “preconceived opinions,” preferring his own way toward fathoming the unfathomable. What mattered to him was that the viewers, whom he considered the partnering force to his creations, could decipher or decide what did or did not appeal to them. That’s all.

The short biography below was prepared by Brian for one of his exhibitions—likely at Jane Haslem Gallery, in Washington, DC, circa 1996.

Born 1947 of Irish parents in New York City. Attended parochial school in a largely Irish neighborhood and began painting in 1961. Attended Xavier High School (a Jesuit military school) on a partial Emerald Society

scholarship. Attended Fordham University in 1964–65 and studied literature. Enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1966, worked as a draftsman, illustrator and librarian. In 1968 Bertrand Russell, Thomas Merton and Norman Thomas die. Discharged from the Marines as a sergeant in 1969. Attended Hunter College, C.U.N.Y. studied Art History and Studio Art. In 1972 began study of Greek and stopped painting. Graduated Hunter College, Magna Cum Laude, in 1973. Moved to Washington, DC in 1974 to work at the Hirshhorn Museum. In 1975 met Rosemary DeRosa, writer, and began painting again. In 1979 had two one-person shows (Barbara Fiedler Gallery, WDC and Frederick College, Frederick, MD). 1981 – one person show The Arts Gallery, Baltimore; 1982 – one person show Washington Project for the Arts, WDC; one person show Meredith Contemporary Art, Baltimore. In 1983 published an illustrated manifesto in Washington Review special issue: Artist’s Manifestos. Douglas Messerli, editor; Exhibited a

large collaborative painting with Joe Shannon at Jane Haslem Gallery, WDC. 1984: several Group shows in Baltimore and DC. 1985 one person show, Meredith Contemporary Art, Baltimore. In 1987 A one-person show at McIntosh/Drysdale, WDC and one-person show at Penine Hart Gallery, NYC. 1988; a suite of prints De Rerum Natura was selected by the U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia for exhibition in the Embassy in Tunis. Various and sundry group shows in NY, DC, MD and VA over the next years but no one-person shows after Penine Hart and McIntosh/Drysdale both close in the early 90s. 1995; one person show at the Washington Shakespeare Theatre. 1996; selected for an important group show at the Art Gallery of the University of Maryland: Crosscurrents, an annual curated show of area artists. While continuing to work I have been loathe to show my work in area group shows of late because of a lack of connectedness to the current scene.

* * * *



Brian in the mid 1970s. Photo: Peter Harholdt

This is an attempted rendition, in my own words, of a small bit of Brian. Hopefully, it captures something of his felicitous and lyrical nature—while alluding to that which was enigmatic. Brian posited, in his notes, that “A good painting is a little bit like a riddle or word game we must decipher.” My words resemble a crossword puzzle (to which Brian was addicted) or Scrabble, where letters on the tiles spell out—an enigma. A timeline of events could not, in my mind, contain what

created Brian, such a spirit and beloved human being, so I defer, gratefully, to what he, himself, wrote.

What ensues, somewhat out of sequence, is a continuation of Brian’s bio, wrought through my reminiscences about his later years, relying on his words and my own musings. A counterpoint to Brian’s adoption of one of Nabokov’s phrases in his art: “How tenuously the sense endures.” It is not tenuous, to me, in the least.

In the decade following Brian’s narrative, transcribed in the above exhibition history curriculum vitae, his work was included in a group exhibition, *Legends*, at the McLean (VA) Project for the Art’s Emerson Gallery, in 1993. One of the paintings in this exhibit, *Weathervane* (pg. 54), came from that show and is now in the collection of our dear friends Sidney Lawrence and Tom Birch.

During this period Brian became the Head Registrar at the Hirshhorn Museum. The position left him little time to devote to painting, but he did exhibit new works in *Irish Painters*, an exhibition held at the Waddington-Tribby Gallery, in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 2001.

After exhibiting with *Irish Painters*, he entered into his second hiatus from making art.

Three of the works that had been in that exhibit are included here, courtesy of Peter Harholdt. Brian retired from the Hirshhorn in 2003, continuing to consult with the staff about the collection and also turning to other pursuits.

This will interrupt any “time-based” flow—nevertheless, it is important to mention that following his discharge from the U.S. Marine Corps in 1969, he and Susan Brennan married, in Queens, New York, where his daughter, Etta, was born. Etta married Brian Ferdinand. In 2012, their son Keiran was born—a great delight to Brian, the proudest of grandfathers, who chose to be called “Dado,” an affectionate Irish appellation for “grandfather.”

In retirement, as he had always done, he supported my own career as an independent registrar in a multitude of ways and, on occasion, assisted with cataloging projects. Brian continued to meet fellow artists from his Hirshhorn days, often with Clarke Bedford, Sidney Lawrence, or Bruce Day, taking in whatever local exhibitions caught their interest.



Brian Kavanagh, *Dante*, 1993. Oil on fiberboard/plywood in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 14 7/8 x 17 3/4 x 3 1/2 inches, Courtesy of James A. Palmer and Sheila Arkell.

Close to the home we'd made on Q Street, he discovered St. Luke's Gallery before his retirement. It was a local venue for old master paintings, drawings, and prints. It became a forum for discussions of art history and culture, where he had formed a friendship with owners, Ellen and Nizar Jawdat.

With Brian's promotion to the Chief Registrar position at the Hirshhorn, his interests turned

gradually to naval history. He read all of Patrick O'Brian's novels about Jack Aubrey's adventures during the Napoleonic Wars on the seas, which led to his interest in nautical research and ship-modeling. Both activities satisfied his need for tactile and intellectual engagement. His later paintings, with the carefully constructed frames he made as integral to their meaning, served as a prelude to his eventual hobby as a "modeler." The stories of 19th-century naval adventure, questing, and combat into that faraway world gave him a "newer" universe to explore. Ship models sit in his library/study/workshop as evidence of his fascination with discovery, along with 18th-century muskets hanging on the walls. He, of course, continued his voracious habit of reading history, criticism of literature, archaeology, and prehistory. His encyclopedic knowledge of art was called upon, at times, to enlighten those not fortunate enough to have studied art in a university setting.

Here I intersect with another of Brian's deeply influential authors, Dante Alighieri—whose image he rendered in one of his only overtly figurative works, included in this exhibition, thanks to lenders, Sheila Arkell and Jim Palmer in Alaska.

Nel mezzo cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura.

*[Midway along life's journey,
I found myself in a darkened wood.]*

But, contrary to this opening verse of Dante's "Inferno," I found myself, midway along life's journey, not in a darkened wood, but, rather, in a bejeweled landscape: that was among a trove of Brian's early work in a Landover, Maryland, warehouse—it flew me back to the time we began our journey together. And, it's what ignited this exhibit—along with my weekly conversing with devoted friend Howard Fox, who realized, with me, this dream of honoring Brian's work.

Duchamp's *The Green Box* appears in Brian's notes as a quote, "reads as a delirium." Brian's creative outpouring was akin to the description of a "delirium," not in the sense of "madness," but, rather, in the sense of a state of "uncontrolled emotion and excitement." What I saw, arrayed around me in that warehouse, was an orderly outpouring of art, pulsing with Brian's energy, both sustaining him, and which he sustained, for twenty years.

When the question of Brian's withdrawal from his beloved activity of painting emerged, I saw it as being neither a deliberate act, nor a failure. It was a slow accrual. Speaking recently with Peter Harholdt, Brian's artist-philosopher friend and co-worker from their early Hirshhorn days, he recalled their conversing often about Marcel Duchamp's writing and thinking. They found Duchamp's ideas about finishing one's work aligned with their own ideas.

Duchamp said that whatever he needed to express had been expressed, and, thus, he ceased to engage in making art.

On rare occasions, Brian would experience a stiff shiver; then shake his head and say, "A crow just flew over my grave." And, in one of Brian's notepads, what did I find but that very sentiment!!

A fitting memorial for his passage on this earth, whence he departed in May of 2020, was, by necessity, condensed at the direction of Arlington National Cemetery. Brian was, despite possessing an un-militaristic nature, deeply proud of his service with "The Corps,"



Brian in a friend's garden, Georgetown, c. 2010. Photo: Rosemary DeRosa

acknowledging its formative influence. His words appear on the cover for the niche, where his ashes now reside, placed among his comrades, in a columbarium in the serene Arlington grounds:

Artist & Dado
Husband & Dad

It seems appropriate to close with Brian's own words, describing the influences on his art:

While continuing to work I have been loathe to show my work in area group shows of late because of a lack of connectedness to the current scene.

My connections to Ireland have always been both/real and figural. Growing up I had more relatives in Ireland than the USA. When air travel began to be affordable my parents began regular trips "home" and in 1969 built a house in Wexford on land given to them by my Aunt.

I grew up in a household so Irish that I was seven before I realized that the red, white and blue referred to the American flag not the banner of the "Sassenach Foe." Irish music, poetry and dancing were a regular part of life (not just for me but many of my friends and their families). We did not wear green on St. Patrick's day but wore small sprigs of shamrock sent from Ireland by relatives. In high school I attended many events at Irish and Irish-American institutes in NY, hearing poetry both old and new and discussions of Irish history and politics and even attempted to learn the language (not successfully). Irish cultural and sporting events were more visited than baseball games (though we didn't ignore those either). In all, Irish ideas of myth, legend, poetry, music and literature inspired me and infused my thinking all my life.

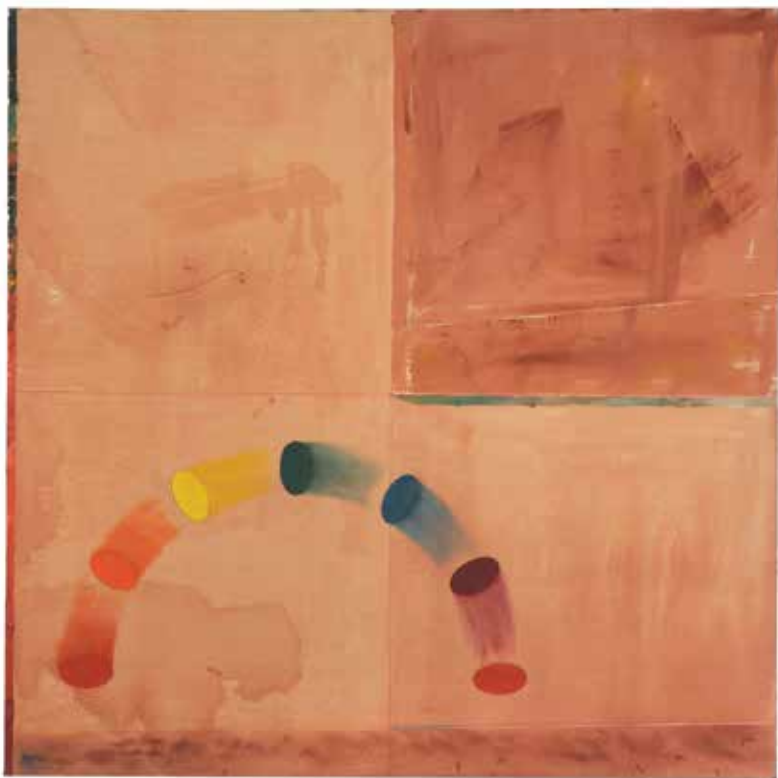
THE VERY IDEA!

ART OF BRIAN KAVANAGH

Object information, is as supplied by the lenders. Titles are given exactly as Kavanagh specified, either by inscription on the objects themselves or in his notebooks. Dimensions are height x width x depth. Photos are by Greg Staley, except as noted.



Brian Kavanagh, *For Rose Syzygy*, 1977. Oil, mixed media on paper, framed: 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. Courtesy of Rosemary M. DeRosa.



Brian Kavanagh, *Just a Cheap Old Camera*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 48 ½ x 48 ⅝ in.
Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *The Amorous Gift*, 1979–1980. Oil and pencil on canvas, 29 ⅛ x 32 ¾ in.
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Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, 1977–1979. Oil on canvas, 61 x 37 ¾ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, c. 1978. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36 ½ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Asking will lanthe awake (Triptych I)*, 1978–1979. Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 36 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Being told lanthe will awake (Triptych II)*, 1978–1979. Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 36 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



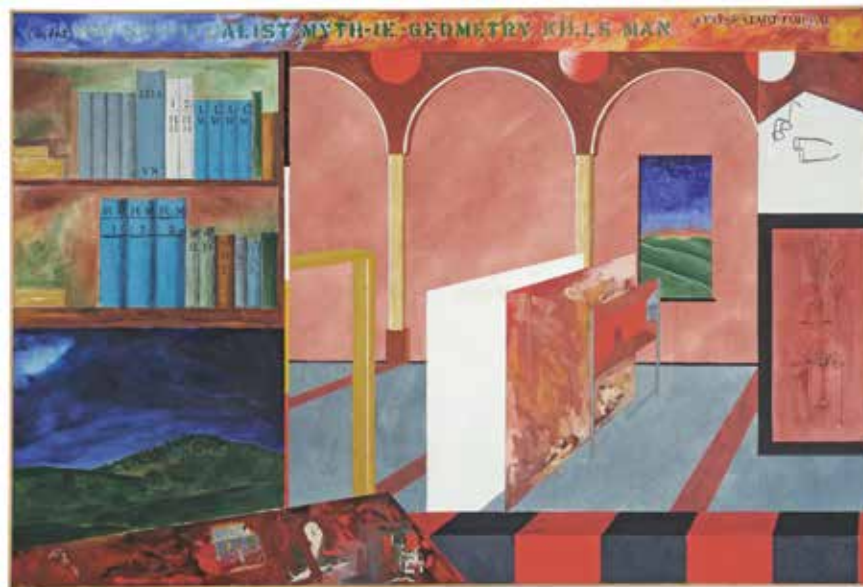
Brian Kavanagh, *Embroidering lanthe's Sleep (Triptych III)*, 1978–1980. Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 36 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, c. 1979. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 50 1/8 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Dulce Utile*, c. 1981. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 40 1/8 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *On the 1st Spiritualist Myth – I.E. – Geometry Kills Man A False Start: for P. H.*, 1980–1982. Oil on canvas, framed: 40 3/4 x 61 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



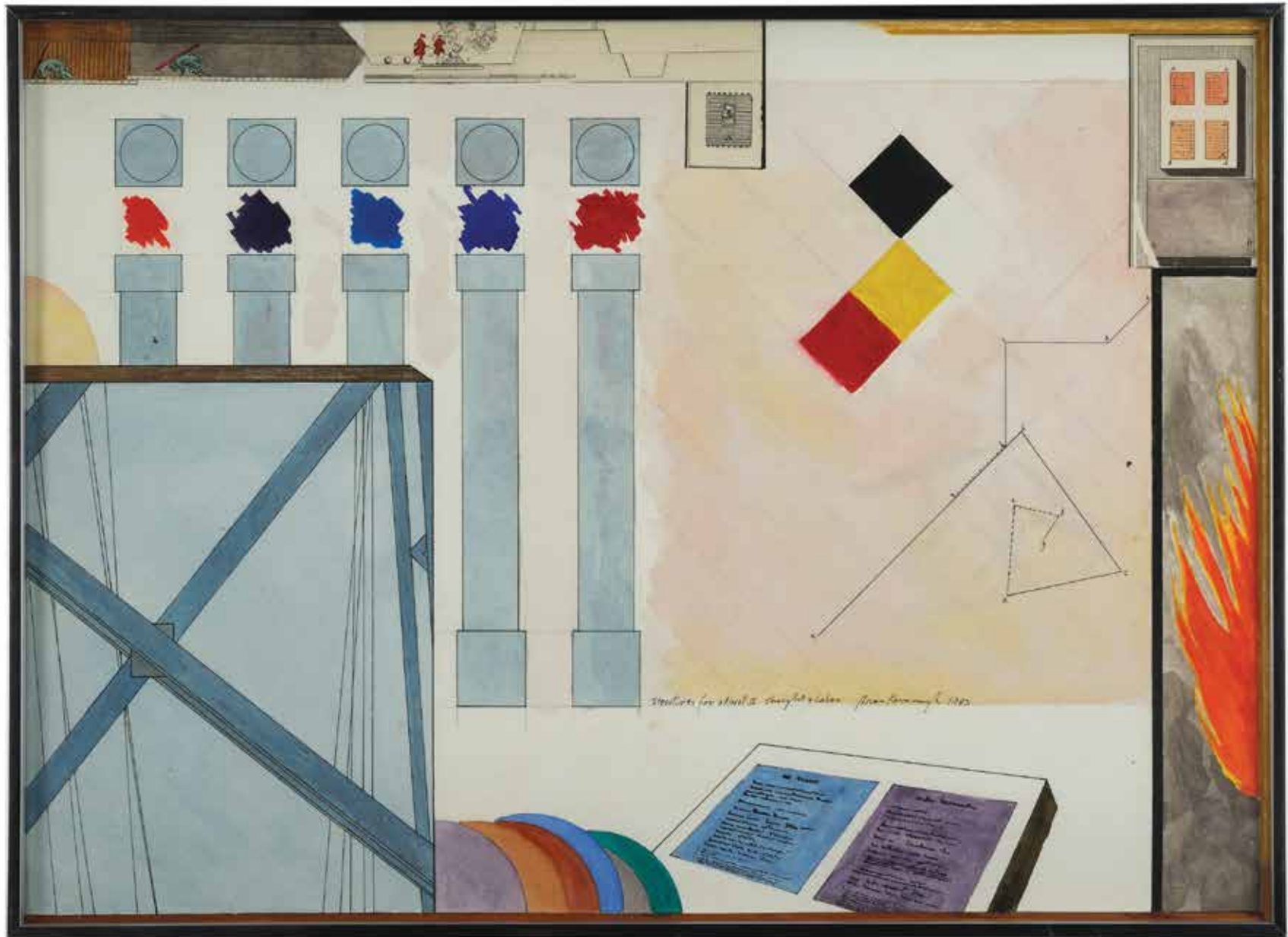
Brian Kavanagh, *Field (Big)*, 1980–1983. Oil on canvas, framed: 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 53 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *"The Woods of Arcady are Dead,"* c. 1981. Oil on canvas, framed: 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 53 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



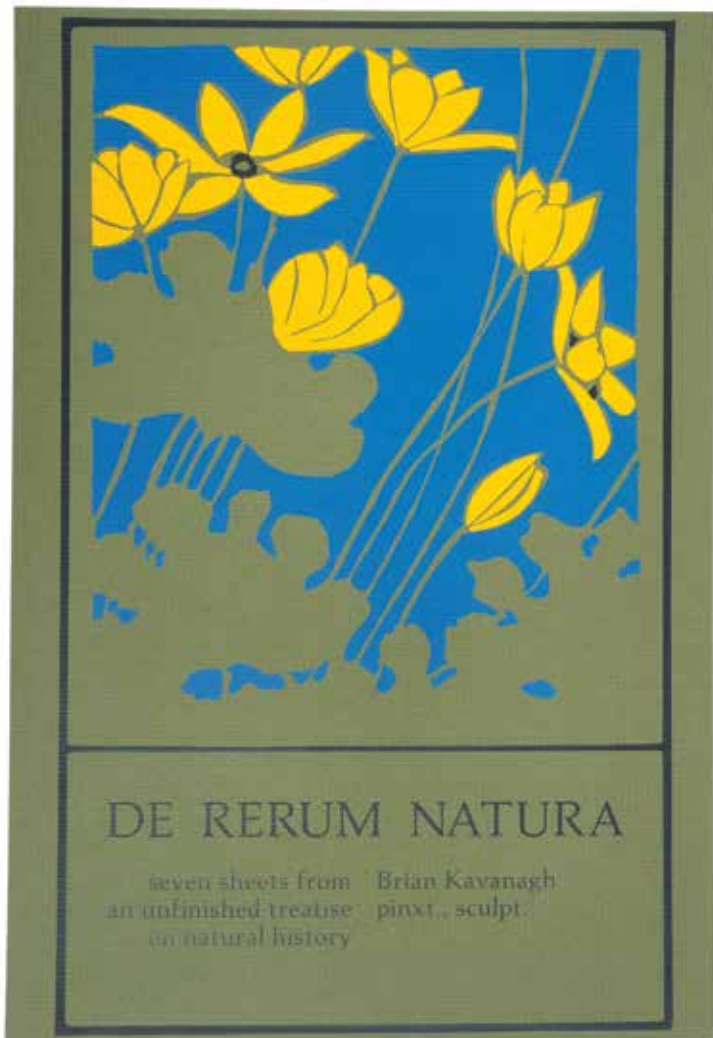
Brian Kavanagh, *Ad Altare*, 1980–1985. Oil on canvas, 36 x 72 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



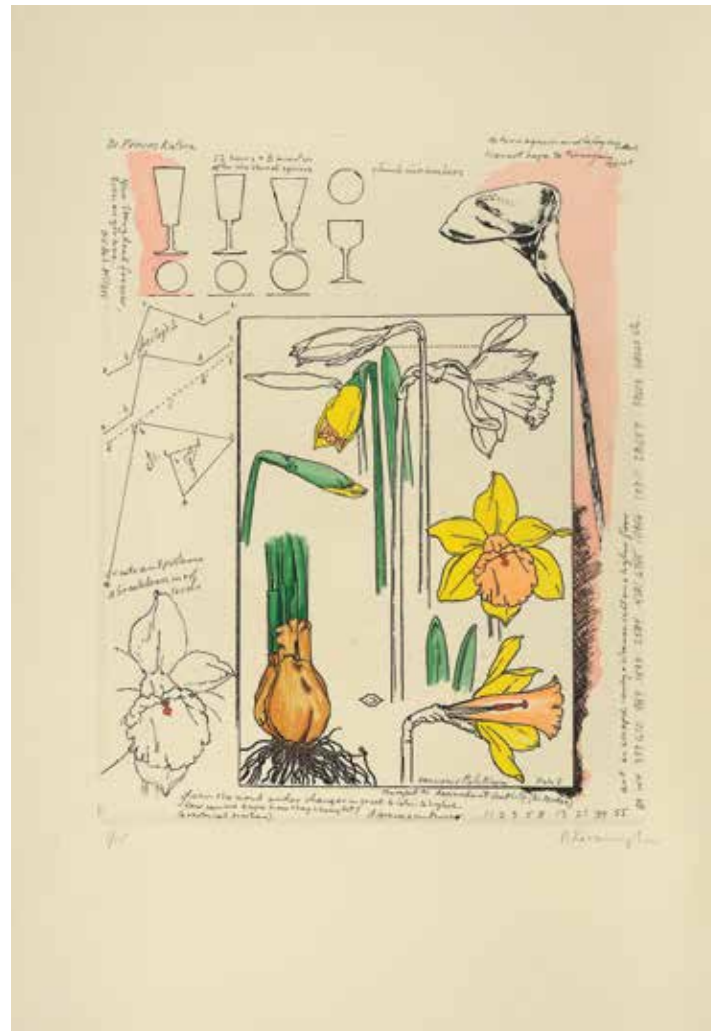
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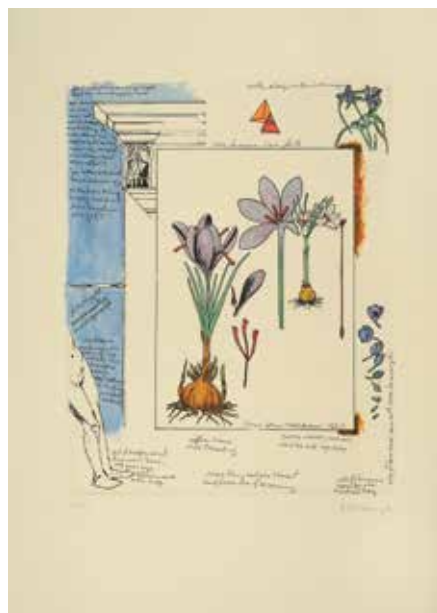
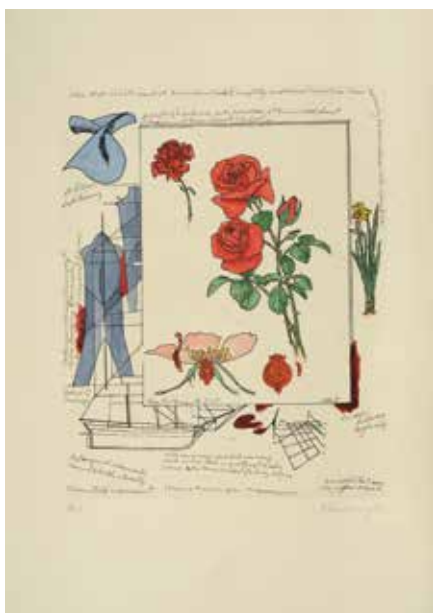
Brian Kavanagh, *An Essay on Self-Portraiture*, 1984. Mixed media, framed: 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 2 in. Sheet: 15 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Phyllis Rosenzweig and Alan Wallach.



Brian Kavanagh, *De Rerum Natura*: Title Page to Suite of Etchings, Robert Allen, Printmaker, 1984–1985. Serigraph, Sheet: 14 x 10 1/16 in. Courtesy of Robert and Rachel Allen.



Brian Kavanagh, *An unfinished treatise on Natural History: Narcissus, "Molly Bloom,"* Plate I, Robert Allen, Printmaker, 1984–1985. Etching, watercolor, pen and ink on Arches paper, Sheet: 15 x 10 1/2 in. Ed. 3/25. Plate: 10 x 7 7/8 in. Courtesy of Robert and Rachel Allen.



From left: Brian Kavanagh, *An unfinished treatise on Natural History: Rose Britania, "Mr. Eliot,"* Plate II. Sheet: 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Plate: 10 x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

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All etching, watercolor, pen and ink on Arches paper, Robert Allen, Printmaker, 1984–1985. Ed. 3/25. Courtesy of Robert and Rachel Allen.



From left: Brian Kavanagh, *An unfinished treatise on Natural History: De Rerum Natura. Tradiscantia Virginiensis "Marco Valdo,"* Plate V. Sheet: 15 x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Plate: 10 x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

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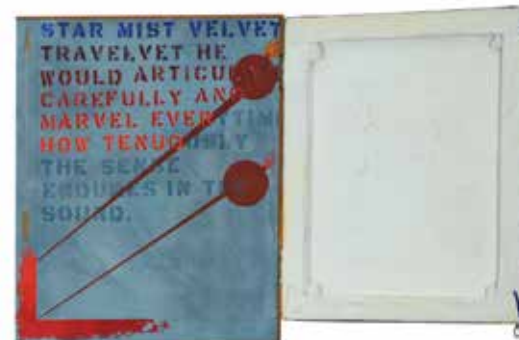
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All etching, watercolor, pen and ink on Arches paper, Robert Allen, Printmaker, 1984–1985. Ed. 3/25. Courtesy of Robert and Rachel Allen.



Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled for V N*, 1986–1987. Oil on canvas with brass hinges connecting to canvas panel, framed: 48 ½ x 72 ¾ x 1 ½ in. Hinged panel: 20 x 16 x 7/8 in. Private Collection.

Right: *Untitled for V N* (detail of hinged panel).





Brian Kavanagh, *A Cenotaph – Mors letum obitus*, 1985–1987. Oil on canvas, wood, gilded molding in an artist-constructed frame, framed: 28 x 60 x 3 ½ in. Gilded frame fragment: 2 x 3 ⅝ x 1 inch. Private Collection.



Brian Kavanagh, *Details*, 1987. Oil on canvas with canvas collage, framed: 48 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 73 in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Sign Painting*, 1987. Oil, mixed media, collage on paper, framed: 16 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Study for an Altar*, 1990. Oil on fiberboard/plywood in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 13 x 15 ½ x 1 ½ in. Courtesy of Peter Harholdt. Photo: Peter Harholdt.

Left: Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, c. 1990. Oil on paper, framed: 42 ¾ x 16 ¾ x 1 ½ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled*, 1991–1992. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid frame, frame: 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



Brian Kavanagh, *Veil*, 1992. Oil on fiberboard in an-artist constructed ebonized frame, frame: 15 x 16 x 2 in.
Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



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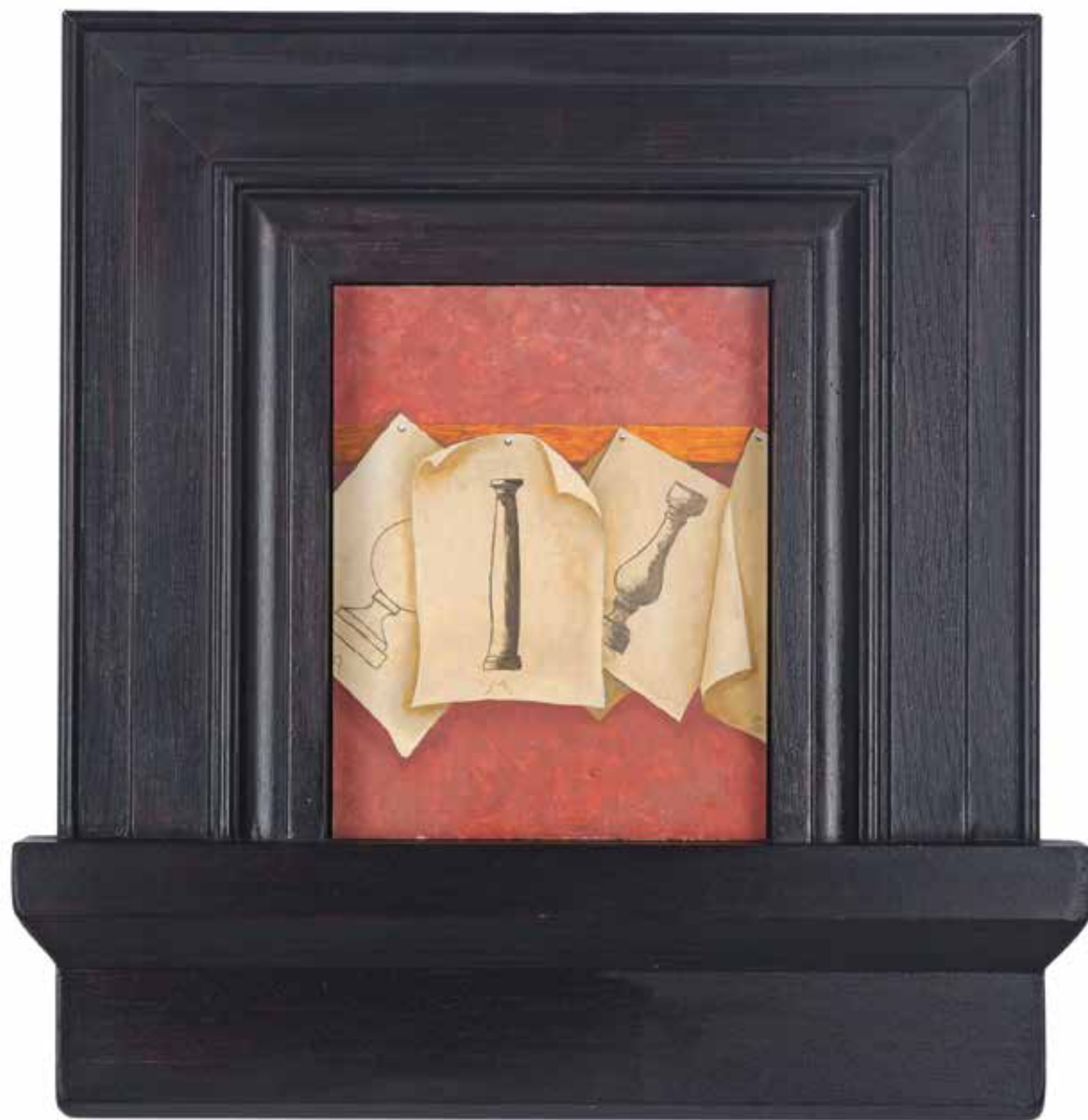
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Brian Kavanagh, *Snuffed*, 1995. Oil on fiberboard/plywood in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Courtesy of Peter Harholdt. Photo: Peter Harholdt.



Brian Kavanagh, *Venice/Venezia A Verse Translation*, 1993–1994. Oil on fiberboard in an artist-constructed wood frame, frame: 10 x 13 ¼ x 3 ½ in. Private Collection.



Brian Kavanagh, *Jesuitical Painting*, 1992. Oil on fiberboard/plywood in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Courtesy of Denise Arnot.



Brian Kavanagh, *Study for an Essay in Self-Portraiture*, 1994. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid wood frame, frame: 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.



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Brian Kavanagh, *Columbarium*, 1993. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized and inlaid frame, frame: 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Private Collection.



Brian Kavanagh, *Motherland*, 1996 *The Night sky over Clare... on 1/31/07, 1996–2007*. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed wood frame, frame: 13 x 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Private Collection.

CHECKLIST

Artist for all entries/works: Brian Kavanagh

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Memento Mori, 1992. Oil on panel in an artist-constructed ebonized wood frame, frame: 14 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. Courtesy of the Estate of Brian Kavanagh.

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2



TWO



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Washington, DC, with its abundance of American national and private museums, is a true international focal point showcasing world art, natural history and sciences, and the social and cultural history of the American peoples. And while contemporary art is now included in the collections of all the relevant national museums here, historically these museums have not often focused on presenting and studying the vital art scene of the capital city itself. But since it opened in 2005, the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, supported in part by its Alper Initiative for Washington Art, has emerged as a premier venue for exhibitions of the region's living artists and its art history over more than a century.

It is with great pleasure that we have been able to co-organize this exhibition of the art of Brian Kavanagh, one Washington's most original artists working in DC from the mid-1970s through the mid-'90s—a period when the capital city emerged as an increasingly active hub of contemporary art in America.

We are immensely gratified that the AU Museum has produced this exhibition—Brian's first museum exhibition in DC, where he lived and worked for so many years. The show presents a core sample of his art to a museum-going community who may be acquainted with Washington art in the 1980s and '90s but who are only recently discovering—largely due to the Museum's ambitious visual arts programming—the true breadth and depth of that vital era.

Our first thanks go to the museum's director, Jack Rasmussen, who, upon being introduced to Brian's work at a storage facility in the summer of 2022, was quick to respond favorably to our proposal to organize this project, recognizing that it would advance the museum's distinctive mission to illuminate the recent history of Washington art.

Jack is blessed with a talented and dedicated staff and affiliates. Assistant Registrar Alexandra Schuman was our first and abiding partner in establishing the architectonics of all aspects of the gallery presentation. We also worked in concert with Museum Registrar Beth Bright, and Marketing and Publications Specialist Kristin Howard. Head Preparator Kevin Runyon and his crew adroitly handled the artworks and their installation. We thank them all for their expertise and commitment to realizing this exhibition of an artist too little known in his lifetime.

Graphic Designer Vida Russell of Lloyd Greenberg Design, LLC, created the handsome design of this catalogue. Greg Staley expertly photographed most of the works. Peter Harholdt, a lender to the exhibition and a professional fine art photographer, provided supplemental photographs (as well as many perceptions drawn from his personal friendship with Brian). In Los Angeles, Pablo Capra brought his great editorial acumen and insightfulness as a reader's representative to editing all the texts for this catalogue. We are deeply beholden to each of them for bringing Brian's vision into published form.

We note with special thanks, and sincerest appreciation, the personal and professional dedication of Kevin Mahoney, who was a facilitator extraordinaire in much of the behind-the-scenes activities of our own responsibilities in organizing this endeavor.

Independent conservator Catharine Valentour conferred her loving care in bringing several paintings into tip-top condition for this show. We are especially grateful, too, to Scott Pittman, friend and co-founder of Bonsai Fine Art Service; to Eric Fischer of WTW Fine Art; and to Hank Griffith, all of whom offered their expertise and generous collegial support along the way.

Several vendors availed their expertise and facilities in making this presentation possible. We extend our warm thanks and respect to Mark Silverman, Chief Operating Officer at U.S. Art Company, Inc., Boston, and his staff in Landover, MD: Gabrielle Joles, Mikaila Guerra, and Jabari Jones; and to Kristen Loudermilk, Loudermilk Conservation, for her thoughtful and meticulous treatment of *Details*, one of the works in the show.

And we of course extend our sincere thanks to the lenders to the show and to our friends and loved ones—you know who you are—whose caring and closeness underpinned our own efforts to bring Brian's art to an expanded audience.

We also joyously thank each other for bringing this gratifying venture to fruition.

Howard N. Fox
Los Angeles, California

Rosemary M. DeRosa
Washington, DC

First published in conjunction with the exhibition

The Very Idea! Art of Brian Kavanagh

February 7 – March 17, 2024

American University Museum

at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

www.american.edu/cas/museum

This exhibition was co-organized by Howard N. Fox and Rosemary Macchiavelli DeRosa

American University Museum

Beth Bright, *Registrar*

Alexandra Schuman, *Assistant Registrar*

Kristin E. Howard, *Marketing & Publications Specialist*

Jack Rasmussen, *Director & Curator*

Deborah Hanselman, *Associate Director*

Kevin Runyon, *Preparator*

Curated by Howard N. Fox and Rosemary Macchiavelli DeRosa

Assisted by Kevin A. Mahoney

Pablo Capra, *Editor*

Photography by Greg Staley, except as noted.

Design by Lloyd Greenberg Design, LLC

Vida Russell and Lloyd Greenberg, *Designers*

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“The Very Idea! Art of Brian Kavanagh” essay © Howard N. Fox

Front cover: Brian Kavanagh, *Untitled for V N*, 1986–1987. Oil on canvas with brass hinges connecting to canvas panel, framed: 48 ½ x 72 ¾ x 1 ½ in.

Hinged panel: 20 x 16 x ⅞ in. Private Collection.

Page 64: Brian Kavanagh, *For Rose Syzygy* (detail), 1977. Oil, mixed media on paper, framed: 20 ¾ x 17 ⅝ in. Courtesy of Rosemary M. DeRosa.

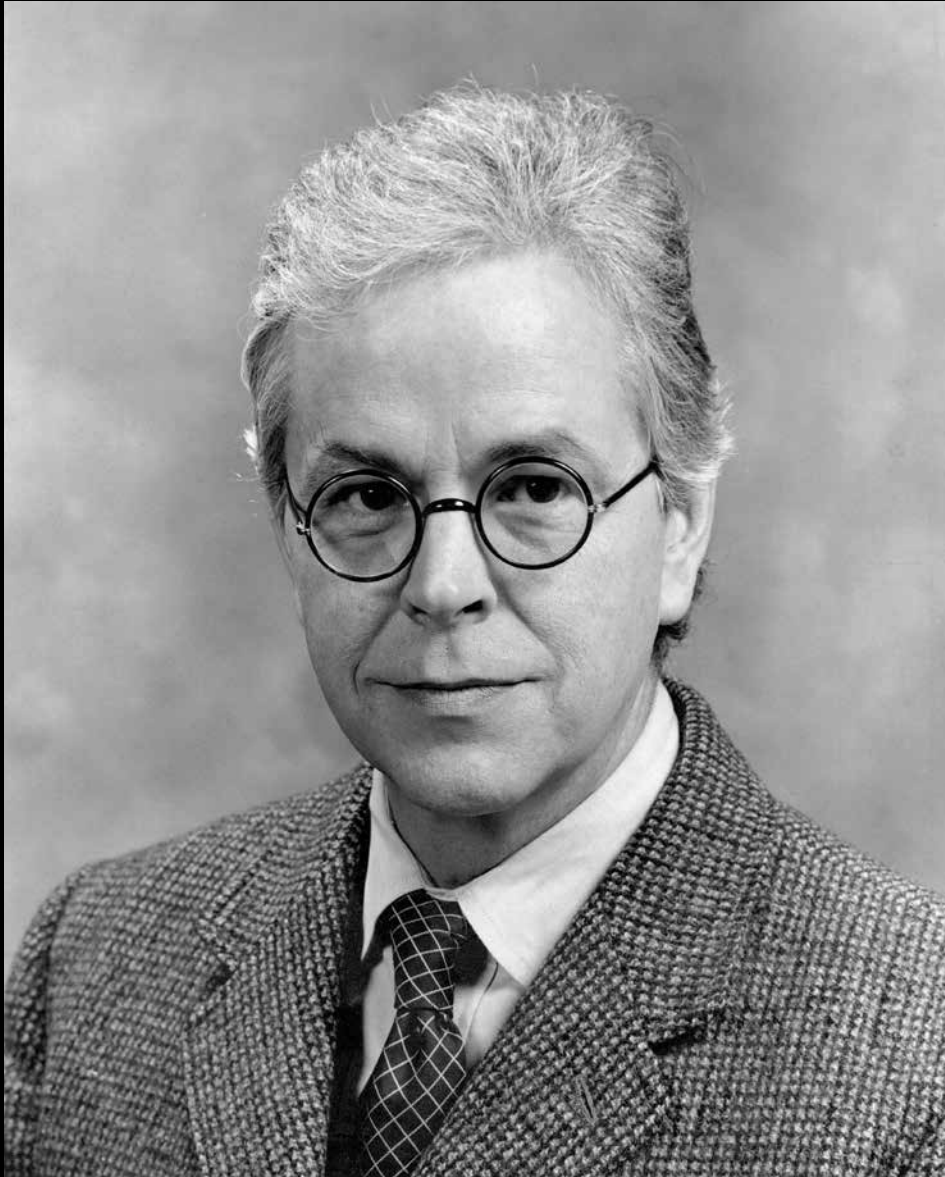
Back cover: Brian Kavanagh official Smithsonian Institution portrait, c. 2000.



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
AT THE KATZEN ARTS CENTER

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“Each painting begins and ends with an idea (rarely the same). The desire to make something, to understand something, to acknowledge, to translate, to transmute. When I use a representation of a thing...I intend no direct transfer of information. Rather I want the viewer to look at the work as a thought process.”

– Brian Kavanagh
February 4, 1981