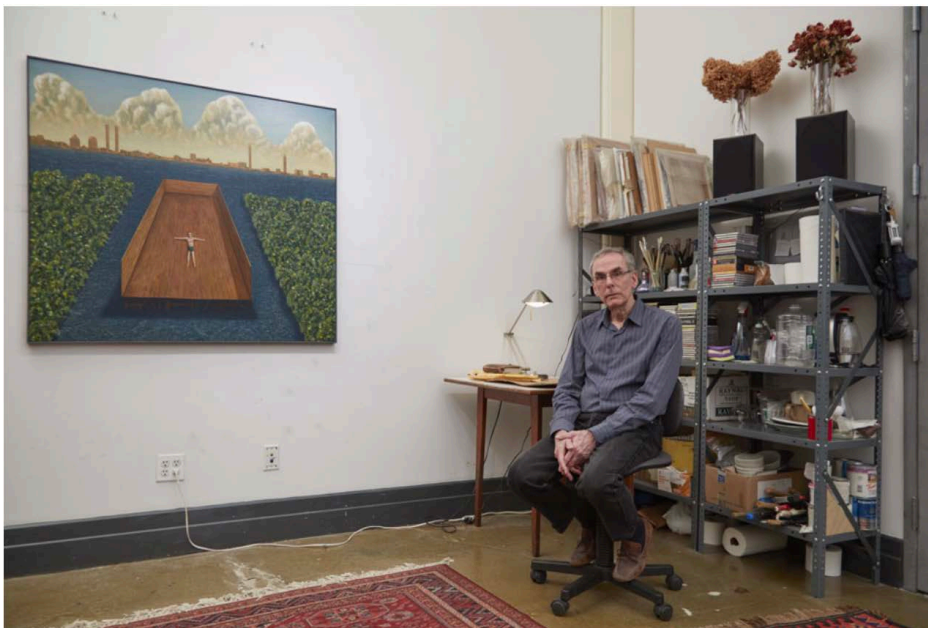


Artnet News

## How Septuagenarian Artist Scott Kahn Went From Living in His Cousin's Attic to Selling Out Solo Shows in Just Three Years

Kahn credits the late painter Matthew Wong with jumpstarting his career.

By Katya Kazakina, May 3, 2022.



Scott Kahn in his Brooklyn studio, June 2021. Photo: Tom Powell Imaging. Courtesy of Almine Rech.

The painter Scott Kahn is in the midst of a remarkable run.

In the past year alone, he's had sold-out solo shows with Almine Rech in Paris and Harper Levine in New York; his works have sold for nearly \$1 million at auction; and his studio with decades' worth of inventory has been emptied out by dealers.

Collectors in Asia are clamoring for his dream-like, jewel-toned landscapes depicting solitary figures and objects. Now, auction houses are ramping things up, with six paintings by Kahn headed to the block this month. The artist's solo exhibition, "The Walled City," opens at Almine Rech gallery in New York on May 3, and will include 15 works made between 1988 and 2022. Many look like a visual diary, drawing from memory and imagination and depicting people and places he encountered. Prices range from \$290,000 to \$1 million.

Just three years ago, Kahn lived in his cousin's attic and couldn't sell a painting for \$5,000.

"It's just been an amazing, amazing journey and very unusual," Kahn, 76, said in a recent interview. "Because I'm still alive."

The artist credits one person for the dramatic turnaround in his fortune.

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Several years ago, he began corresponding on Facebook with the Canadian painter Matthew Wong. Despite their age difference (Wong was born in 1984) and extreme physical distance (Kahn was in New York, while Wong was in Edmonton), the two artists found a lot in common.

Both were self-taught and interested in nature and magical realism. At the time, Wong was making works that combined traditional Asian ink-drawing imagery with Western abstract expressionism. Kahn found them intriguing and invited Wong to visit his studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn, on a visit to New York. They saw each other on other occasions and Kahn later learned that Wong had told his dealers about him.

"Matthew was really a great champion of my work," Kahn said. "The only way I can explain it is that we were soulmates."

Wong's career began to take off following his breakout solo show with Karma gallery in 2018, and Kahn's followed.

In 2018, Wong—whose market star has risen sharply in the past few years—bought a painting by Kahn, whom he had credited as an inspiration. Titled *Cul de Sac* (2017), it depicted a curving yellow path framed by colorful trees underneath a starry sky. Wong posted the painting on his Instagram feed.

"It set off an avalanche of people going over to my feed and people started streaming through my studio door in Dumbo—big collectors, galleries, other artists," Kahn said. "It was non-stop, and it hasn't abated to this day."

Wong's endorsement reignited a career that had been dormant for 15 years, Kahn said. "No one was paying any attention to me. I thought I'd die in my cousin's attic, in poverty, without any recognition. And then Matthew came along."

After Wong's death, at the age of 35, in 2019, his market soared, hitting a record of \$4.8 million in 2020 for *River at Dusk* at Phillips in association with Poly Auction. Seven of Wong's top 10 auction results took place in Asia.

Some of this demand spilled over to Kahn, who hasn't been represented by a gallery for more than 15 years. When the dealers started coming over, they discovered a studio crammed full of work.

"The first thing they'd say was, 'Oh, you've got so much work,' and I could see the dollar signs rolling in their heads," Kahn said. "The dealers have, very kindly, shown old work and new work. And it doesn't matter what year the painting was painted—there seems to be an interest in it. I mean, they sell."

Harper Levine gave Kahn solo shows at his uptown and Chelsea galleries in 2021. Everything sold.

"Greatness eventually wins," Levine said this week. "He's our Magritte."

The dealer attributed the artist's rise to a combination of factors.

"Great artist, hot gallery, contemporary context via Matthew, heightened interest in post-Surrealism, market is rewarding technical brilliance. Put all that together and add a little luck, and bingo."

Older works sold over the years are now trickling to auction. On May 13, Christie's will include two paintings in its postwar and contemporary art day sale. The *Daniels' Garden at L'Angle D'Oie* (2000), which depicts shrubs beneath billowing clouds, is estimated at \$75,000 to \$95,000.

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The clouds appear again in Pennsylvania New Jersey Border (1993), which is estimated at \$150,000 to \$200,000. (The ochre and gray hues echo Wong's painting Mili's Corner in the same sale, a smaller canvas estimated at \$380,000 to \$450,000.)

"How do you like that, Friday the 13th?" Kahn mused of the date of the forthcoming auction. "But you know something, I think it's very strategic on the part of Christie's. It'll be evening in Asia and I think they're aiming for the Asian market."

Kahn has "quite a following" in the region, as he put it. Almine Rech sold two paintings to museums in China; one, the Long Museum, has offered him a retrospective in 2024, he said.

Two more paintings will be offered on May 19. Phillips has Variation (1986), depicting two dancers in a room with open doors and big windows overlooking a garden. It's estimated at \$100,000 to \$150,000. Meanwhile, Bonhams has The Studio (1989), showing an unfurnished room with an open door and an ochre hill beyond the window. The estimate of \$10,000 to \$15,000 is likely to be broken or become a major steal of the season. Two more paintings are coming up at Christie's in Hong Kong later in May, Kahn said.

"Many of these collectors are now much older, as I'm older, and maybe they're downsizing or their children have left their homes and they're retiring," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me if they auctioned the paintings they bought 20, 30 years ago."

With works selling like hot cakes, Kahn has pushed his dealers, including Rech, to raise his prices.

"I was getting worried because I'm a very, very slow painter," he said. "I could see these paintings going out that would take me years to paint. I'm not going to be able to replace them so quickly for another exhibition. I mean, my studio is now cleaned out."

These days he's glad to see younger artists responding to his work and sees a silver lining to being recognized late in life.

"You build up your inventory," Kahn said. "You hope you don't die in a studio full of paintings. I'm lucky because now they're out into the world."