

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

Scott Kahn at Almine Rech

By Jonathan Goodman, June 2022.



Scott Kahn, *In the Night*, 1986. Oil on linen, 157.5 x 172.7 x 2.5 cm; 62 x 68 x 1 inches. Courtesy of Almine Rech.

Scott Kahn is a veteran painter whose allegorical scenarios deliver a lasting impression. Painting in a traditional figurative style, he creates usually simple but evocative impressions of people and the landscape, in ways that suggest metaphysical meaning. His manner of working exists in contrast to the formal exuberance found in expressionist abstraction; his muted symbolism, bolstered by a skilled, realist hand, makes contact with a meaning sometimes quickly evident, and sometimes more mysterious, being indebted to suggestions not easily clarified. This is a time of extreme individuality in art, and even though New York's long love of abstraction continues, a painter like Kahn can be appreciated for the inventiveness of his imagination. Perhaps, in a distant fashion, he might be compared with Magritte, whose mysteries were enhanced by his technical skill. The title of the show, "The Walled City," lends itself to imaginary readings of images that imply limitations and defense. In many ways, then, Kahn is a painter of the melancholy we associate with settings which are larger than ourselves, and which often seem determined to overwhelm us.

In fact, *The Walled City* (1988) is also the title of an especially emblematic painting. It consists of a single chair—an audience of one—facing an apocalyptic wall of fire that rises as it moves to the right. On the far right is a heavy jade-green curtain, sectioned in the middle, that falls from ceiling to floor. On the right, above a dip in the flames, we view the lower end of the Manhattan skyline; the twin towers are prominent. It is night, and hanging above the towers is a thin sliver of the moon. One could hardly ask for a more mysteriously meaningful set of circumstances; we are asked to experience it one person at a time, as the lonely chair indicates.

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The Walled City is a particularly good example of the way Kahn works; content merges with image. *The Gate* (2021-22), painted much later than *The Walled City*, is another image easy to subscribe hidden meaning to. It consists of a gravel path running down the middle of the composition, leading to a half-height iron gate attached on either side to short white columns. On both sides of the path there is a stand of trees: blue-white on the left and reddish pink on the right. The grass is yellow on the left and green on the right, while the shadows of the trees, planted in a semi-circular pattern, create a sphere-like image on the ground. Beyond the path, there is a narrow road cutting across the picture, and moving further into the background, one finds a green hedge backed by more trees, variously colored.

The idea of a gate to a natural paradise surely has precedents in literature and art. There are no people in the picture, but the meaning of the painting is tied to the human need to pass through an entrance into a place of beauty. The aura of the work's palette, close to surreal, gives the forms Kahn uses the quality of a fairy tale. Perhaps Kahn is best when he juggles the surreal with a staunch realism, investing the latter with something tacitly visionary. *The Barn* (1982) is now some forty years old, suggesting that Kahn's show is a small retrospective. A very pale yellow-green meadow takes up the lower half of the painting, giving way to a low bush and tall tree on the left. Behind them we find the gray barn, two stories tall, with visible windows on the first floor on the left, and a red double door in the center. Above the roof is a chimney, and to the building's right, we see a small dwelling painted the same colors. Behind the cabin a gray, fog-like atmosphere occurs, through which pale effegies of tall trees are found. This work is more descriptive than symbolic, but the melancholy of the composition implies loss, a sense of otherworldly fatedness. Kahn is a realistic painter of mysteries, given to a charged world of his own devising. His emblematic treatment of things we know well, in addition to his understanding of a world poised between easy recognition and hidden content, makes him a painter of high interest.