

COUNTRY LIFE

Wolf Kahn | Out of the woods

16 September 2026 | By Carla Passino



Foggy, 2005, Oil on canvas, 36 x 52 inches.
Courtesy of The Wolf Kahn Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery.

AMID the calamities that struck his childhood, Wolf Kahn was lucky. Born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1927, he was little more than a toddler when his mother, Nellie Budge, left him and his father, German Jewish conductor Emil. Kahn Sr. worked for the Stuttgart Philharmonic, but, after Hitler rose to power, he moved to the US. Wolf stayed behind with his paternal grandmother, Anna Kahn, who, when the winds of war began to blow, managed to secure him a place on the Kindertransport (tragically, she herself would die in the Holocaust). When 11-year-old Wolf arrived in Britain, the family that took him in was expecting a sad child. Instead, they found a precocious one. 'He was very well educated, he had his own little opinions and he was very smart and very bright,' says Lucasta Partridge-Hicks of the Miles McEnery Gallery in New York, US, which represented the artist for decades and now does the same for the foundation that bears his name.

Later, Kahn was reunited with his father, stepmother and siblings in America, where he would go on to study art, eventually joining the school of another German artist, Hans Hofmann, of whom he would become for a time studio assistant. When his future wife and fellow artist Emily Mason was awarded a Fulbright grant to paint in Venice, he followed her and it's there that they married by the Rialto Bridge in 1957. Together, they painted all their life: she died in December 2019 at 87 and when he drew his last three months later, aged 92, he still had a half-finished painting on his easel. 'He lived a wonderful life; without sounding cheesy or silly, [he lived] the American dream,' says Ms. Partridge-Hicks, who knew him in the last decade of his life and remembers him as a charming, generous, cheeky and wonderfully social man, a painters' painter who valued friends, gallery staff and other artists more than financial success. 'He loved people no matter what, so we joked that he died the week before Covid broke out, because he just didn't want to deal with that.'

Next year will mark the centenary of Kahn's birth and, ahead of that, the Miles McEnery Gallery brings his work back to the UK—the country that allowed him to escape the Nazi horrors—with an exhibition at Frieze Masters next month. 'He was such a New Yorker at the end of his life, but his European roots were very important to him and I think that's why we're excited to bring his work to the UK.'

It is, however, a Kahn with a difference that will be shown on these shores: there are none of the Vermont pictures bursting with vibrant orange, red, yellow and bold purple for which he became known. 'We're showing paintings from the 1960s through 2008, which are slightly more subtle,' notes Ms. Partridge-Hicks. In the 1960s, after his spell in Venice, which was very influential for him, Kahn went to Nantucket and his pictures from the time convey an oceanic feel, with plenty of subdued grey hues. 'They are incredibly thoughtful and calm, they are so clearly "Wolf," but they are not in any of the bright colours with which he later came to be associated.' Similarly, the pictures from the first decade of the 2000s, including the 'wonderful' *Foggy*, are more understated in their choice of hues. 'All these paintings have the kind of classic exemplifiers of Wolf Kahn. They have those three bands of colour: the foreground, the landscape, the sky... and then of course there are the tree screens that he became so brilliantly well known for, but, again, in a subtle way.'

Ms. Partridge-Hicks believes the early Venice years had a lasting influence that still emerged in works such as *Foggy*, made some half a century later. In the same way, she feels that something of his harrowing childhood stayed with him. 'He overcame the negativity, he was such a positive man.' Yet, she says, 'I think that sense that it could all go wrong at any minute never left him.'



Cypresses, 1963-1964, Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 51 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of The Wolf Kahn Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery.



Seven Gates Across the Sound, 1960, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of The Wolf Kahn Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery.