

River of the Glimmering Cubes: The Octogenerian Artist in Spring

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In the darkness of an oak tree swamp
With its thousand million unseen eyes
And its myriad sharp-seductive eyes
Beats a heart as old as it is wise. . . .

— James E. Tokley, Sr.,
"The Song of the Hillsborough"

A river never goes backward. Neither does abstract expressionist Gladys Shafran Kashdin.
Like a river, she is wise, she is always searching, and she herself is a marvel of creation.

Dr. Kashdin, Professor Emeritus of Humanities at the University of South Florida, is nationally known for her provocative, beautifully executed, abstract, mixed media works of art. She sees her life in art as thematic, with a theme taking at least a decade to develop. Now in her mid-eighties, she is profoundly future-oriented. A new theme is even now slowly coalescing in her mind, beckoning and projecting her ten years or more into the future. "That's just the way I think," she says, acknowledging her age with an offhand shrug. "And, I'm healthy." But because she is wise, all her past themes are also still alive within her. How alive, she did not know until she confronted one of them, the Hillsborough River, again.

The Hillsborough River, in all its aspects — its history, its ecosystem, its living organisms, its future — drove Dr. Kashdin's artistic life throughout the 1970s. She devoted more than three years to research, traveling by water all of the river's diverse fifty-four miles, from its beginnings as a trickle in the Green Swamp to its salty marriage with Hillsborough Bay. During these

powerboat and canoe journeys, many of them captained by Herb Allen, then the outdoors editor at the *Tampa Tribune*, she used her photography background to document the river with 2,000 photographic images. Those images became a foundation for her 1974-1980 series, "Aspects of the River." The series has been described as forming an artistic journal of the river. Some of the works are large-scale, some are miniatures. She worked with collage, acrylic paints, ink wash, handmade paper, fabric. She captured what she felt and saw, reduced it, expanded it, worked at capturing the river's very being. Dr. Kashdin's art is bold, with deep meanings and themes. Like Dr. Kashdin herself, the images have a way of gripping the interiors of your mind, keeping themselves available for more reflection.

The Hillsborough, though an important theme in the artist's life, was, nevertheless, three decades in her past. But then, in 2005, came the three events pushing her back to the river: The Florida Humanities Council sought an interview about Kashdin's Hillsborough work for a story about Florida rivers in its magazine, *Forum*. The City of Tampa commissioned Kashdin to create a work of water-themed art for the city water department headquarters. Lastly, the Florida Studies Program at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, invited her to re-explore the Hillsborough with students in its innovative Rivers of Florida course. Something was calling her to revisit, rework, refine a timeless theme and a timeless aspect of nature. These three calls entwined around the memories of the Hillsborough, forcing them forward in her artistic and in her personal consciousness. Dr. Kashdin said yes to all three. She would travel and paint and experience the Hillsborough River. Again.

For the *Forum* article, Dr. Kashdin talked with museum consultant Mary Mulhern about her "Aspects of the River" series and the 2000 slide "journal" that is now a part of the collection of the Museum of Science and Industry in Tampa. She explained that the Hillsborough runs through her tree-shrouded, Temple Terrace neighborhood, and that she has a possessiveness toward the river. "It's my river," she said. "I know every foot of it; I've photographed every mile." To the commission, she said yes, and interrupted her work on her current theme, "Gai's Daughters," a celebration of the Greek goddess of the earth and of the sacred feminine, to rethink the Hillsborough. And she was quickly open to the idea of once again interacting with the river. "I would like to get out on the water," she said. "When are we going out?"

But the Hillsborough flows onward,
Through a timeless open door
That seems to lead to an oak tree swamp
On a bright, familiar

Shore. . . .

On the appointed day, at the early morning hour, the professor emeritus was ready, physically and spiritually, to meet with her river once again. Her fingers were individually taped, as usual, to help counteract the arthritis that plagues her hands but which she rarely mentions or frets over. She wore denim slacks and jacket, cotton blouse, wide-brimmed hat, canoe-suitable shoes, sunglasses, and a camera. The exterior outfit was just right. So, it turned out, was the interior landscape: excitement at the adventure, eagerness to revisit good memories, determination. Before leaving her studio and home in Temple Terrace, Dr. Kashdin methodically checked her potted plants on the screened porch, her telephone messages, her calendar. She passed through her orderly, sky lit studio. Waiting there was a carefully edited selection from her original slides — now on loan back to her from the museum — three small watercolor and acrylic studies of the river, and one very long and large stretched blank canvas awaiting her artistry. One last look, set the alarm, and she was good to go.

At the entrance to Hillsborough River State Park, the memories began to crystallize. “I remember this now,” she said of the 1930s ranger station. “It looks the same.” Small and animated, she met the students who shared her enthusiasm for the precious half-wild-half-urban river, and evaluated them instantly with the insightful eyes of the experienced professor: “I like your students.”

But the intensity of this visual reunion with the sultry river, with its hovering, semi-tropical, lush hardwood forest canopy, took Dr. Kashdin by surprise. She stopped on the familiar shore of a sandy bank, looked, took a deeper breath. “I have been all over the world, and I’ve seen many things. This is the most beautiful river, and it’s here, in our city.” She sat in the bow of the park rental canoe like a venerated priestess. As the craft took float, she looked around and smiled the smile of a one rejoined with a beloved, found her camera, and began the dialogue.

The conversation between a visual artist and a river is different from other human-river conversations. The hydrologist and the river talk about the river’s drainage area; the historian and the river talk about the people in the river’s past; the botanist talks about the dazzling plant life nurtured by the river; the marine scientist talks about the river’s mighty estuary; the naturalist talks about where to gently launch a kayak; the writer searches for phrases. The artist approaches the river to experience and to feel its essence and to reinterpret that essence through her own, using form, structure, texture, color. Dr. Gladys Kashdin approaches the river by a process of insightful reduction, reducing each part, each nuance of the river to its basic geometry. “Everything is in geometric form, all that is,” Dr. Kashdin stated firmly as she points her camera and captures an outcropping of rocks bisected by vertical shafts of clear spring sunlight. Although she sees nature as her “metaphor for philosophical value systems,” and it is the meta-theme of all her work, she has been quoted as saying “I do not know the

Latin names of the flora and fauna, nor do I care to burden my head with the minute differences in the species. I look at these phenomena as an artist. I use them as a poet or a philosopher would use a metaphor in a series of the river or grass and its inhabitants.” For Gladys Kashdin, close observation is much more than classification. That morning on the Hillsborough, her eyes saw differently than the other human eyes. She did not miss a geometric form, and there were thousands within sight at each moment. As she took in all the shapes, she also edited them, searching for the most wonderful — the forms with arresting light, texture, color. The forms that spoke to her, engrossed her.

“Turn here. No, a little more to the left. Just a little bit,” she instructed USF Professor Thomas Hallock, who was the artist’s designated canoe paddler.

“Closer, closer, closer.” With a practiced snap of the shutter, she captured yet another image of her river onto a color slide.

Kashdin’s photographic skill has been honed over many pre-digital decades. As a sixteen year old child of the Depression and new high school graduate, she worked as an apprentice in a photography lab, using her visual arts abilities as the foundation for a trade. “I’ve been artistic ever since I was four years old,” she recalled. “I’ve been a professional artist since I was twenty-two years old. I had a mail order photo lab business for twenty-two years. We did copies, prints, coloring — airbrush coloring, during the Thirties and Forties. I had good equipment, a big Pentax that I gave to the Audubon Society.”

Dr. Kashdin began her formal art studies in 1939, when she attended the Art Students League in New York City at night to study color and experiment with technical aspects of art. When she was twenty-three, her second exhibition of paintings was favorably reviewed by the *New York Times*. At the end of World War II, she and her husband moved to Miami where she opened a photo lab and continued to paint. Her themes then were social realism and regionalism, and featured human figures and luminous backgrounds, painted in earthy tones. After exhausting that theme, Dr. Kashdin realized she needed and wanted a liberal arts education. In the late 1950s, she enrolled in the University of Miami, earning a B.A. in Art, *magna cum laude* in 1960. She then earned a M.A. in Art (Painting and Art History) from Florida State University in 1962, with a thesis on paint textures. Finally, she earned a Ph.D. in Humanities from Florida State University in 1965. Her dissertation papers are archived in the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of Art. She had interviewed seven of the world’s leading abstract expressionists — including Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko — with the goal of discovering if they had an aesthetic. Kashdin chuckles at the memory. “I concluded that they didn’t.”

The University of South Florida quickly persuaded Kashdin to join the faculty at the young, urban university. By 1974, she was a tenured professor of humanities and active in university politics, women’s groups, humanities and arts groups and community service. With a studio and students (“I’ve had so

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many I can't remember them all, but I'm always glad when they call, and they do"), she had found her professional rhythm.

The image of water, the source of all life, has resonated in Kashdin's work since 1945. She was painting inlets and beaches in New York State when she was in her early twenties, young, unformed, but probably still more intellectually and emotionally developed than most people of more mature ages. As time went on, she explored cubist concepts, moved on to abstract expressionism, with its emphasis on the frontal plane; "this made sense to me in the communication of the idea," she has said. "The seduction of perspective was eliminated, and the idea was 'in your face,'" and elaborated with textural experiments. The human form and realistic ideas disappeared from her art and conceptual ideas commanded her creativity. Kashdin has described this process as finding her "language."

A panther screams,
The river snakes,

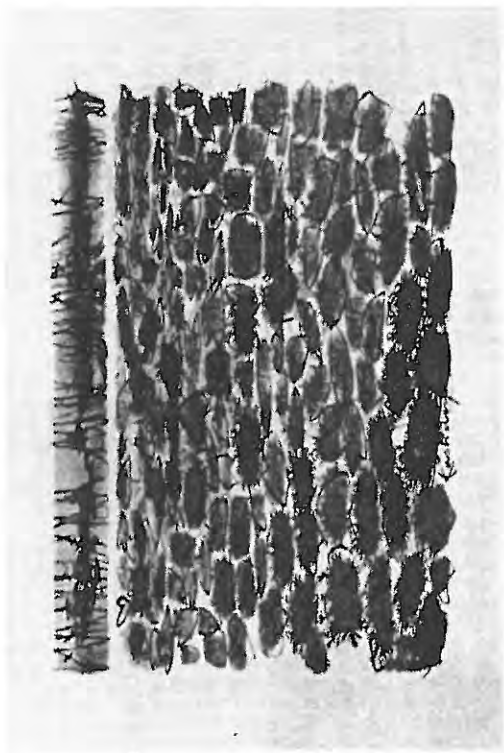
And the land gives way to a painted sun
Come crashing through palmetto breaks
Like a razor back, on a morning's run.

Hillsborough

Winds like a cotton-mouth
To a silver bay that lies due south.

Now, as the long day with river and students ends and Gladys Kashdin returns to her studio, she still exudes energy and focus. After all, she paints almost everyday, most of the day, and she has experienced a mental and emotional recharge. She unlocks the door, enters the room, where thirty of her favorite slides of the Hillsborough await to provide inspiration, and looks at the thirty-six inch by eighty inch blank canvas. Part of her credo is that she must experience nature physically and emotionally, looking for the creative spirit. She cannot paint something she has not seen or been a part of in some way. The new work will be release, an outpouring of experiences past and recent.

Silver, the river will be silver, viewed as if by a bird. It will curve and flow and stretch and grow, at one with all around it, just like the artist.



"Lily Block" by Gladys Kashdin.



"Lily Pads III" by Gladys Kashdin.



"Rock Bottom" by Gladys Kashdin.



One of Gladys Kashdin's many photographs of the Hillsborough.