

Michael Kennaugh - *Broken Bridge*
Moody Gallery, January 10 – February 21, 2026
Exhibition Review by Elliot Penn

Broken Bridge, an exhibition of recent oil paintings and works on paper by Michael Kennaugh, opened at Moody Gallery on January 10, 2026. “You don’t invent anything. You deviate from it,” the artist shared in his brief remarks at the opening. According to Kennaugh, “Art history plays such a major part in my work. It really does. It’s hard to make a decent painting. But to make one without the knowledge of art history, you’re really swinging, not connecting.” The pictures that compose *Broken Bridge* are informed by tradition and the diverse styles of art history. However, as the show’s press release suggests, despite their ties to the art-historical canon, Kennaugh’s latest artworks are resolutely vital, fresh, personal, and experimental. For *Broken Bridge*, Kennaugh gracefully balances art-historical influences with ingenuity, creativity, and personal expression.

Michael Kennaugh (b. Wyoming, 1964) currently lives and works in Houston, Texas. *Broken Bridge* is Kennaugh’s eleventh solo show with Moody Gallery. Since showing with Moody Gallery, a relationship that formally began in 2001, Kennaugh’s production has been predominantly nonrepresentational, though his approach to this mode of painting has evolved over the years. Previously, Kennaugh’s style was overtly lyrical, rhythmic, richly colored, and gestural. In his own words, he was focused on creating “shallow, flat space with big, colorful passages of shape.” Today, he employs a grid to structure his compositions, each one densely filled with forms and shapes that interlock or adjoin harmoniously. His palette, once filled with vivid greens and vibrant reds, has grown subdued, somber, and heavily achromatic. For evidence of this evolution, compare *The Illustrated Man*, painted in 2018, to *Gulf of Mexico*, which dates to last year.



Michael Kennaugh, *The Illustrated Man*, 2018, oil on paper, 15" x 22 1/2" (left)
Michael Kennaugh, *Gulf of Mexico*, 2025, oil on canvas, 79 1/2" x 98 1/4" (right)

Notwithstanding these numerous changes, Kennaugh’s hand, his painterly touch, remains expressive. Kennaugh does not strive for an industrial effect or a sleek, refined appearance in his recent abstract canvases and works on paper. Instead, he leaves traces of his artistic process, his starts, stops, edits, changes, and adjustments. It is necessary to stress that abstract, in Kennaugh’s case, does not refer to the fracturing of a motif from the visible world into a discrete, stylized entity, recognizable in the end for its parts as in early Cubist pictures. Nor is Kennaugh’s abstract style a recapitulation of Piet Mondrian’s non-objective aesthetic theories. Rather, Kennaugh’s abstract style reflects life and nature. Namely, it mirrors Kennaugh’s existence, environments, and doings. Kennaugh is unique among artists in that he makes no attempt to conceal, shroud, or misdirect attention away from this psychological mirroring. As an artist, he wears his heart on his sleeve. “The beautiful thing about being an artist is that it never ends, you’re always responding to life...” Kennaugh gratefully acknowledges.



Michael Kennaugh, *Periscope*, 2025, oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (left)
 Michael Kennaugh, *When the Deal Goes Down*, 2025, oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (right)

For all their shared qualities, the artworks included in *Broken Bridge* are hardly identical, nor do they all achieve the same pictorial or visual effects. Some compositions, *Periscope*, *Sun and Shadow*, *Lighthouse*, *When the Deal Goes Down*, and many of the works on paper, feature lively brushwork. These pictures, with their swaths of white pigment, which appear like patina or weathering, and painterly finishes, suggest energy, movement, dynamism, and life. In comparison, paintings like *Gulf of Mexico*, *A Sea of Riddles*, and *Across the Water* are tranquil, harmonious, perspectively flat, and more exactly balanced. Additionally, certain paintings more explicitly convey illusionistic depth. Whereas *Gulf of Mexico* has minimal depth, primarily evident in the bright blue segments in the upper left and right corners, seemingly peeking out behind the dense configuration of black, sludgy grey, and mustard forms, paintings like *In the Darkness of the Room*, *Get Behind the Mule*, and *Arrow* are staged in a manner that more closely mimics or references inhabitable space and the effects of light.



Michael Kennaugh, *Across the Water*, 2025, oil on canvas, 30" x 36" (left)
 Michael Kennaugh, *A Sea of Riddles*, 2025, oil on canvas, 12" x 9" (right)

Kennaugh spent just shy of three years working on the body of work for *Broken Bridge*. Describing his process, he states, “Color came late. The color grounds the grid in the real world. Blues and greens... people can connect that with water, grass, air, landscape... color links these (works) to the physical world in a way.” He began these compositions with black pigment against a white ground, filling in the darkest elements of the grid first. Slowly and intuitively, Kennaugh constructed shapes, formed layers, and added values to each composition. With grey, brown, and beige tones, he built depth and articulated forms in space. Having started with a non-naturalistic palette, Kennaugh invited nature back into his works through the process of painting. Though they only make up a small fraction of each composition, and despite their unnatural angularity, Kennaugh’s bright blue, burnt yellow, vibrant red, and earthy green shapes anchor each work in the visible, natural world. “The less color I used, the more powerful it became.” he comments. Kennaugh chose to adopt this restrained palette, using color subtly, efficiently, and effectively, after studying the floral still life paintings of Édouard Manet. “It is only at the very end that he (Manet) punched in a red rose or a green leaf... There is a very traditional way that I am building these paintings.” he explains.



Michael Kennaugh, *In the Darkness of the Room*, 2025,
oil on canvas, 14" x 20" (diptych, each panel 14" x 10")

In 2015, Kennaugh wrote, “Making work is an organic thing. It hinges on my experiences of joy and pain, love and loss.” More recently, Kennaugh is still working in an intuitive, emotionally driven manner. Intuition, in the case of Kennaugh’s painterly process, is the implementation of experience gained over the course of time. Kennaugh intuitively makes each painterly decision based on the specific results of prior action. He knows how it feels to put his entire life into his art and how to paint without intellectualizing the process. His “experiences of joy and pain, love and loss” propel him to paint and are represented in the results.

Like a diary or clock, Kennaugh’s newest work gives the passing of time a lasting, visible aesthetic. Like keeping a diary, Kennaugh painted day after day for years, pouring himself, his moods, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas, into each composition. For Kennaugh, just as a clock tells or tracks time, color can do the same. He became fully aware of color’s ability to convey time in 1986 after a conversation with John Nicholson, a noted Manx watercolorist and member of the Royal Academy. Kennaugh recalled in 2015, “He told me to never clean my palette... I thought about that for a while and realized that his color represented time.” If the colors of nature found throughout the works in *Broken Bridge* are not sufficient proof of Kennaugh “responding to life,” he has christened these compositions with poetic, evocative titles. Instead of pictures with numerical or otherwise vague and impersonal titles, his titles reference the lyrics of Bob Dylan and Billy Joe Shaver, tree species, and bodies of water. Kennaugh’s titles, beyond adding a layer of meaning to each abstract artwork, further tie each composition to nature, reality, and the human experience.

Contemplating the role of tradition in the creative process, Arshile Gorky wrote in 1947, “The soloist can emerge only after having participated in the group dance.” Despite self-describing as a loner who tends to paint by himself and mostly avoids outside opinions while working, Kennaugh has plenty of experience participating in “the group dance.” As previously illustrated by his experience meeting John Nicholson, throughout his life, Kennaugh has worked closely with and learned important lessons from other painters. Contemporaneously, he keeps richly illustrated art books on hand in his studio. While working on the pictures for *Broken Bridge*, he regularly consulted the art of Pablo Picasso, Diego Velázquez, and Eduardo Chillida.

Kennaugh’s art-historical influences are far-ranging. Given the nonrepresentational nature of his art and his use of the grid, there are undeniable affinities between Kennaugh and numerous modernist masters. Previous writers, discussing former incarnations of Kennaugh’s artistic vision and process, invoked figures including Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Willem de Kooning. While the list of Kennaugh’s artistic influences could be amended an infinite number of times and ways, it is critically important to recognize Kennaugh as equal parts student of art history and creative, expressive, pioneering artist. Rather than simply restating or parroting familiar styles, Kennaugh, a curiously minded and sincere painter, learns the lessons of his forbearers, synthesizes them, and implements them in his own unique, distinctly personal way. For visitors, *Broken Bridge* offers the opportunity to view abstract artworks that are both reflective of lived experiences and informed by tradition. In Kennaugh’s case, these two factors, lived experience and tradition, are not in opposition. Instead, Kennaugh engages with tradition as a living language, one that can be articulated, expanded upon, deviated from, or otherwise modified in the present.