

THOMAS H. KAPSALIS
ARTIST'S HOUSE
Paintings & Sculpture 1947-2008

On the Street Where You Live

Thomas H. Kapsalis and the Abode of Abstraction

By John Corbett

The locus of Thomas H. Kapsalis's world is a house on the northwest side of Chicago. For half a century, this three bedroom, one-story home has been both the center of his domestic life, with his wife and two children, and his base of operations as an artist. Downstairs, in the finished basement, Kapsalis stores his work in neat bins, responsibly inventoried and carefully shelved by size. There he also maintains his incredible personal archive of ephemeral materials, most of it pertaining to Chicago visual art — basically every announcement, catalog, and exhibition poster he's managed to lay hands on over his seventy years as an artist. His wife Stella, a fine textiles artist, maintains her studio in the basement as well. Upstairs, a converted bedroom functions as Kapsalis's studio, currently shared with his daughter Adamandia, also an artist. The whole arrangement is as economical and intelligently organized as one of his paintings.

With the exception of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which has also been a crucial spot for Kapsalis, serving first as his alma mater (he graduated on the GI Bill in 1949), then as his employer (he taught at SAIC for an unprecedented 54 years before retiring in 2006), this home sweet home has been both his private sanctuary and secret laboratory. The notion of a shared live/work situation is in fact quite common in Chicago. Many artists who came of age in the 1940s, when the prospect of making a living through sales of one's work were even bleaker than they are today, adopted this sort of fully integrated lifestyle, marking off a space in their apartment or house in which they could paint, sculpt, draw, or make prints. Before he moved into this dwelling, in 1962, Kapsalis had maintained a studio in the basement of his parents' house. For him, it is a common sense, pragmatic way of working. In a very down to earth way, his practice bridges the art/everyday-life divide. There is nothing extraordinary about it for him; in order to create art, he has to be disciplined about going into his studio, focusing, shutting out the distractions of day-to-day business.

What strikes me as particular about the Kapsalis house is the way that it flies in the face of the common conception of an artist's house — the sort of impermanent, paint-smeared bohemian hangout or disheveled, booze-bottled, cigarette infused beatnik parlor that artist stereotypes can conjure. That just isn't Tom. He is as unassuming and unpretentious as they come, an even-tempered fellow with vast knowledge and experience and a presence of mind that is the product of harrowing circumstances early in life. The working-class soul of Chicago art is epitomized in his unflinching humility and good humor (the latter a key characteristic of his artistic

personality), while his gentility, generosity, and openness are counterbalanced by firmness, sure-footedness, and fanatical devotion to formal criticality. All these traits, which have served him so well as the teacher of generations of young art students, have as their ultimate source the solid foundation and unambiguous clarity of his Chicago home.



To discuss Kapsalis's artwork and career, it is important to start off considering a few essential things:

- * He is an American of Greek descent
- * He is a decorated WWII veteran
- * He is an unrepentant, unreconstructed modernist
- * His work is resolutely serious
- * His work is secretly full of humor

If you were to invert the final two of these — an artist who is resolutely humorous but secretly serious — you might have a good way of describing the Chicago Imagist artists, almost all of whom studied with Kapsalis, some quite extensively. On a cursory viewing, the non-objective abstraction that has been Kapsalis's main approach since the late '40s might seem to have little to do with the figure-based, comics-influenced work of Karl Wirsum, Suellen Rocca, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Ed Paschke, and Christina Ramberg. But when you begin to unpack Kapsalis's work and see it more fully, the substrate of humor seems more and more relevant as a presence in his paintings and sculptures, and conversely the formal imagination and depth of plastic invention of the younger artists is consistent with Kapsalis's rigorous standard of abstraction. They are, as you might say, two sides of the same coin — seriousness and humor. Balancing the laughs with the call to austerity and reason that are so often the sidekicks of the geometric abstractionist, well that's the real trick.

Humor, for Kapsalis, leavens his work, keeps it from turning rigid or dogmatic, and it gives it a beautiful multi-dimensionality. For one of the most overt examples, take his 1961 construction *A Frame Framed*. Here the artist makes a proto-conceptual piece manifesting an urge that every painter feels: To turn the picture inside out, moving the canvas to the exterior and placing the mitered wooden frame, snugly assembled in homage to his friend H.C. Westermann, at the center of the work. The result is both an elegant, concrete, rectilinear abstraction and a brilliant, durable one-liner. In the era that Kapsalis emerged, subtle, understated humor was unusual, even in Chicago, where a unique brand of surrealism took shape. Of course the pustulant grotesquery of Ivan Albright (a vicious humor all its own) existed alongside the portentousness of legion social realist painters in the 1930s and early 1940s, and Chicagoans from Seymour Rosofsky to Dominick Di Meo continued to explore a kind of roughneck gallows humor in a subsequent generation.

But the milieu of the early 1950s, when Kapsalis was first exhibiting his work, was also infused with a vein of self-seriousness, whether it be in the mythological allusions of Leon Golub and George Cohen or the aspirations for an international style and search of the essentials of design of various New Bauhaus associates. From quite early on, Kapsalis maintained a sly, sotto voce humor. His cubistic 1959 painting "*Danger Ahead*" offers a wonderful example of his punning delight in the inside joke, replete with a meditation on the perils of perception. Here is an aspiring non-objectivist, the diligent modernist painter executing a taut, elegantly faceted abstraction. But wait. Is that a neck? An ear? An eye? A profile? Danger: A head.

The sweet, playful side of Kapsalis's paintings and sculpture is that much more remarkable if you consider it in light of the brutality of his young adulthood. He was born quiescently enough in Chicago, into a Greek-American family with two younger brothers. His ethnic identity has been of lasting importance to him, subtly shaping his aesthetic sensibility and perhaps giving him the slightly distanced perspective on American culture of a second-generation immigrant. Here, too, his potential to identify both as American and as European gave him a transatlantic sensibility, which was a good thing for an abstract artist in the 1940s, when he initially entered SAIC with the support of his parents. He studied under Constantine Pougialis, in whose class he met Miyoko Ito, a gifted young painter from California who barely seemed a teenager even at 18. His teachers also included Paul Weighardt, a transplanted European who had studied with Paul Klee. Weighardt would prove to be a decisive influence on young Kapsalis, who was impressed by his thinly painted, slightly hazy-edged abstract compositions.



Kapsalis (left) with his mother and two brothers, 1930s

In 1944, two years into his studies, Kapsalis was inducted into the 106th Infantry (known as the “Golden Lions”), 422nd Regiment, of the U.S. Army. He quickly went through boot camp and soon found himself on the ground in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge, the largest, nastiest engagement of WWII with the highest Allied casualty rate. Along with the entire 422nd and 423rd regiments, Kapsalis was captured; upwards of nine-thousand American soldiers from those ranks died in the fighting. En route to Stalag IIA, where he was imprisoned for five months, Kapsalis was shelled (by friendly fire), instantly killing his bunkmate and injuring him. (He still has shrapnel in his hip from that night.)

In January 1945, the Kapsalis family was informed that their son was missing in action; it was not until April that they were told he was a prisoner of war; by May, the P.O.W. camp had been liberated by the Russians. In letters home, Kapsalis assured his loved ones that he was recovering well and mentioned that he was continuing to sketch. His life as an artist, so abruptly interrupted, was still foremost in his mind, despite his dire circumstances. When he returned, he was awarded the Purple Heart, and he is a proud veteran, though his vivid, terrible experience also led him to question the rationality of war. In 1946, Kapsalis re-entered SAIC, studying with Kathleen Blackshear among others. In Blackshear’s class, he painted a small study, part of an exercise in design and



Left: Kapsalis, 1944
Right: Kapsalis, 1945

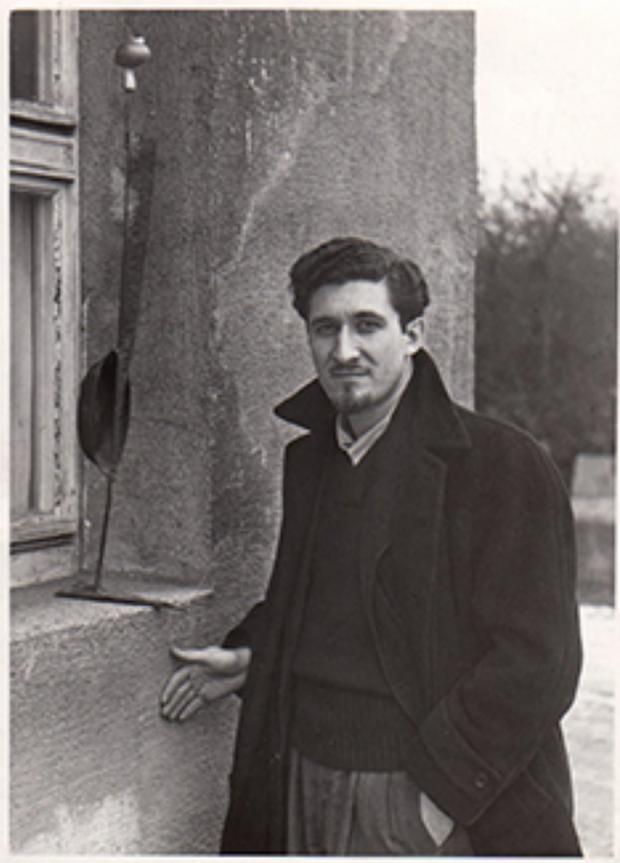


dimensionality, that he titled “Dream of a Prisoner of War.” Among the dreamt for items — fruit, books, home, girls — is a blank canvas. Back in Chicago, he pursued his dream with renewed enthusiasm, participating in the annual SAIC Dada & Surrealist Costume Balls, and even appearing with his classmate Whitney Halstead in the Maya Deren-esque films of Ginger Ellis.

One of the most important inspirations on the forming artistic persona of Thomas Kapsalis was a little zoology textbook with the intriguing title *Animals Without Backbones*. In this college pre-med classic, the artist discovered a wellspring of biomorphic, organic shapes that he mined for forms in his work. In particular, the “spicular” shapes — miniscule spiky structures ubiquitous in various invertebrates — provided Kapsalis with endless fascination. In paintings, etchings, and sculptures from the late ‘40s, these shapes held sway, swimming in a modernist tide-pool of abstract organisms. The earliest work in this exhibition includes rounded versions of these spicular shapes in the form of several fishy ceramic pieces. “Fish and Cube” was originally much, much larger, with many more pieces, and alternatively titled “Fish People.” Constructed in 1947, it was included in the important Momentum Exhibition of 1952, during which it was dropped and all but completely destroyed. Three ceramic parts were left, and Kapsalis reconfigured them into a new piece, with a large, painted wooden base.

Perhaps the most telling passage of the early part of Kapsalis’s life, in fact, comes in 1953. Keep in mind that, with his Greek heritage, he should have had little in-built affection for Germans, who after all were utterly ruthless in their treatment of Greeks during WWII. Add to that his German imprisonment, with many un-recounted cruelties, and what follows is that much more extraordinary. Longing for European input, Kapsalis decided to apply for a Fulbright fellowship. Initially, he wanted to go to Greece, but with only a few slots he was discouraged from doing so. There were, however, many such awards for Germany, so less than a decade after leaving a German camp, Kapsalis was awarded a fellowship and left to study in Stuttgart for a year in the studio of the significant abstract painter and printmaker Willi Baumeister. There he made metal sculptures and paintings, continuing to explore a vibrant strain of biomorphism, as well as a humorous proto-neo-dada sensibility presaging *A Frame Framed*. In a Stuttgart photograph, sporting a little goatee, he stands next to a metal sculpture titled *Breakfast*, the base of which includes a cast iron skillet, high over which hovers a metal egg, suspended from above.

Back in the states, Kapsalis experimented with bronze, welded steel, as well as painting. At the turn of the decade, around 1959, after having further explored some Wieghardt-like soft edge paintings, particularly influenced by a residency in California, Kapsalis began to paint in the manner that he would continue and refine to this day. In the long, thin painting *Pinwheel*, which may, like many of Kapsalis's paintings, be hung in multiple orientations, the artist starts to use the signature harder edged geometric approach of his mature works. Indeed, stung by dismissive comments by an observer about some of his earlier biomorphic works, Kapsalis destroyed many of them, leaving only a select few examples of these terrific works behind. But he had found a personal new style, with a lovely post-cubist sensibility and sensitive use of under-painting that sometimes featured light over dark, with delicate textures that may have been influenced by his former schoolmate Miyoko Ito, who had also left SAIC mid-stream in order to join her family in a California internment camp. "*Lake and Wabash*" and "*Black and White, Etc.*" are outstanding Gallery in the mid 1960s (the rest of it was destroyed subsequently), demonstrates his continued interest in metal sculpture, in this case utilizing found materials.



Kapsalis in Stuttgart in 1954 with *Breakfast*.

At this point, Kapsalis's WWII experience once again becomes directly relevant. When the first U.S. combat troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, Kapsalis, the decorated veteran, decided to declare a protest, a sort of general statement on the futility and banality of war. Rather than make classic topical protest art, however, he did it in his own, quite unusual manner: He eliminated color from his work. Or more precisely, he decided to reduce his palette to black, white, and grey. Indeed, many people who know Kapsalis's work, including some of the most important artists he taught, think of him as a black, white, and grey artist. His small black, white, and grey painting "*Artist's House*" was shown at the Art Institute in their Chicago & Vicinity Exhibition in 1967 (one of 12 times Kapsalis was included in that annual exhibition). Other widely exhibited paintings from the period, such as *Portraits and Heads*, and the ingenious *Table in Parts*, delve into the play between abstraction and representation, while *Three Cubes and Untitled (Point, Line, and Plane)* deal more strictly with non objective composition.

When color returned to Kapsalis's life, it did so with gusto. And the work since the late '70s has continued to be exuberant and often quite bright, with occasional moves back into a muted scheme. Biomorphism, too, has had various new lives in more recent phases of Kapsalis's work, sometimes in direct reference to (or even versions of) earlier pieces. Many *Life Forms*, for example, from 1994, riffs on a Kapsalis painting from the 1940s. With an enormous bank of experiences and ideas, he is now quite free to move between many different ways of constructing a picture, whether dealing with spatial illusions, working entirely flat, considering texture (literal or depicted), introducing collage or assemblage, representational elements (having taught life drawing for decades, his latent skills in this arena sometimes come forth), or playing games with balance, symmetry, asymmetry, pattern, and dissonance.

One thing to know about Kapsalis's work from the last four decades — earlier, too, but most forcefully since the '70s — is that there are very few arbitrary moves. His abstractions are not abstract because they "look neat" or because he impulsively "felt like it," but instead emerge from some internal, often formal and logical puzzle, a problem that he's trying to solve in an image. Each piece is its own entity, with a unique concept and set of preconditions; Kapsalis basically doesn't work in series — he's interested in the specificity of every work. He is very happy to explain their origins, spell out their dynamics.

But I'm quite sure that, in most cases, other little hidden parts of the hermeneutic are left unexplained in these discussions. They're the funny parts, the understated witticisms that are so crunchy and delicate — little intellectual spicules, you could call them — that to talk about them would mean their certain destruction. Take the diagrammatic little pointer on the left side of "Street Scene." What exactly is that amoeba — backbone-less being — that it's directing us to view? Or the circular area that seems magnified just above it? Or for that matter the bent hot dog shape in the lower right, which forms a sort of tongue sticking out of a face with the blue and white Arp-like form with which it intersects (you see it there — danger, a head!). "I tried minimalism," Kapsalis says of this bustling work, "and I had to move on to a different kind of order."

"Street Scene" is a versatile, virtuoso generator of meanings, and at the same time it is a denier of those associations. An abstraction shucked of any overt referential qualities and simultaneously a sponge sopping up any and all interpretations, it's almost infinitely renewable, a modular masterpiece from the house of one of the most singular, original, forcefully modern living American artists.*

**This essay was written in 2009 and published in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition Thomas H. Kapsalis: Artist's House: Paintings & Sculpture, 1947 - 2008 at the Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso, Indiana. Select details have been updated.*



Figure, 1954, bronze. Photographed in Germany.

