

# The sky's not the limit

Oscar Wilde once made the partially satirical claim that "all art is at once surface and symbol."

Art, in this philosophy, not only has at least a superficial subject but also a symbolic purpose (whether the artist "intends" it or not).

It might be a fault in my criticism that I look for this extra dimension of meaning in the art I review.

So I was very excited to hear that Diana Ferrone Gallery (1951 So. Coast Highway) was showing the landscape paintings of Kathy Buist.

I was excited because Buist's landscapes are not only just landscapes. It might be more accurate to describe them as fantasy skiescapes.

Buist works very intensely with layers of paint and color. It's not uncommon to find examples of this in galleries, abstract skylines that look more like excuses for color studies.

But Buist works in something more, something almost intangible.

Any given canvas, for instance, can range from almost photographically realistic to fantastically distorted within the space of a few inches.



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That she can unify such variation in form is remarkable in and of itself. But Buist also manages to do the same with color.

"Siena Hills" (48 x 60, and, as with all Buist's work, oil on canvas) is a carefully crafted impressionistic sky, formed from careful under painting and many layers.

The title comes from the "hills" in the lower quadrant of the painting, rough forms done in burnt sienna.

From there, the colors soar and range from rich oranges to cerulean. "Clouds" appear in the form of paint mixed so thickly with medium, it's allowed to blend on the canvas with the ground into shapes no cloud ever took.

So dense is the variation of form in Buist's canvas, that you get a pretty good sense of the imaginary cosmos behind these clouds, a deeper sense of the universe.

This is the "surface and symbol" I'm thinking of: Buist's skies take the forms and colors of nature and reach beyond the limits of the real into the sublime. Some seem more like sky, some less.

"Sea Mist" (48 x 60) is a study in blues and pale golds. So sweeping is the wash that it seems to bear more resemblance to a silk scarf than the seascape suggested by its title.

As you glance around the canvas, just when your eye begins to believe this might be a rain-swept cloud at sunrise, you find a kind of fissure or crack in the paint that reveals the layers beneath.

This brings up another aspect of Buist's work that amazes me. Any given section of her canvases could almost stand alone as a composition. Something interesting is going on with color and form in every quadrant.

The artist's smaller canvases are just as successful but in totally different ways. If the larger canvases seem like complex compositions, the smaller seem like mysterious fragments.

As you stare at "Golden Dusk," for instance, it resolves itself into some ideal form of a sunset, richer than the richest reds in the natural sky. The movement from one color and form to the next creates a kind of endless fascination.

And every canvas holds a surprise somewhere in its frame. "Late Afternoon" (36 x 46) works in chartreuse like a theme, starting at the bottom in swirls and streaks, but working up into mysterious washes.

Shadows that seem almost purple spread like a stain that is almost shocking.

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"Yellow and Blue" might be one of the more striking examples of this, a mere 12 x 12. It reveals something of Buist's mind, the way she thinks about the colors, with layers that make the tiny canvas seem almost chubby with color.

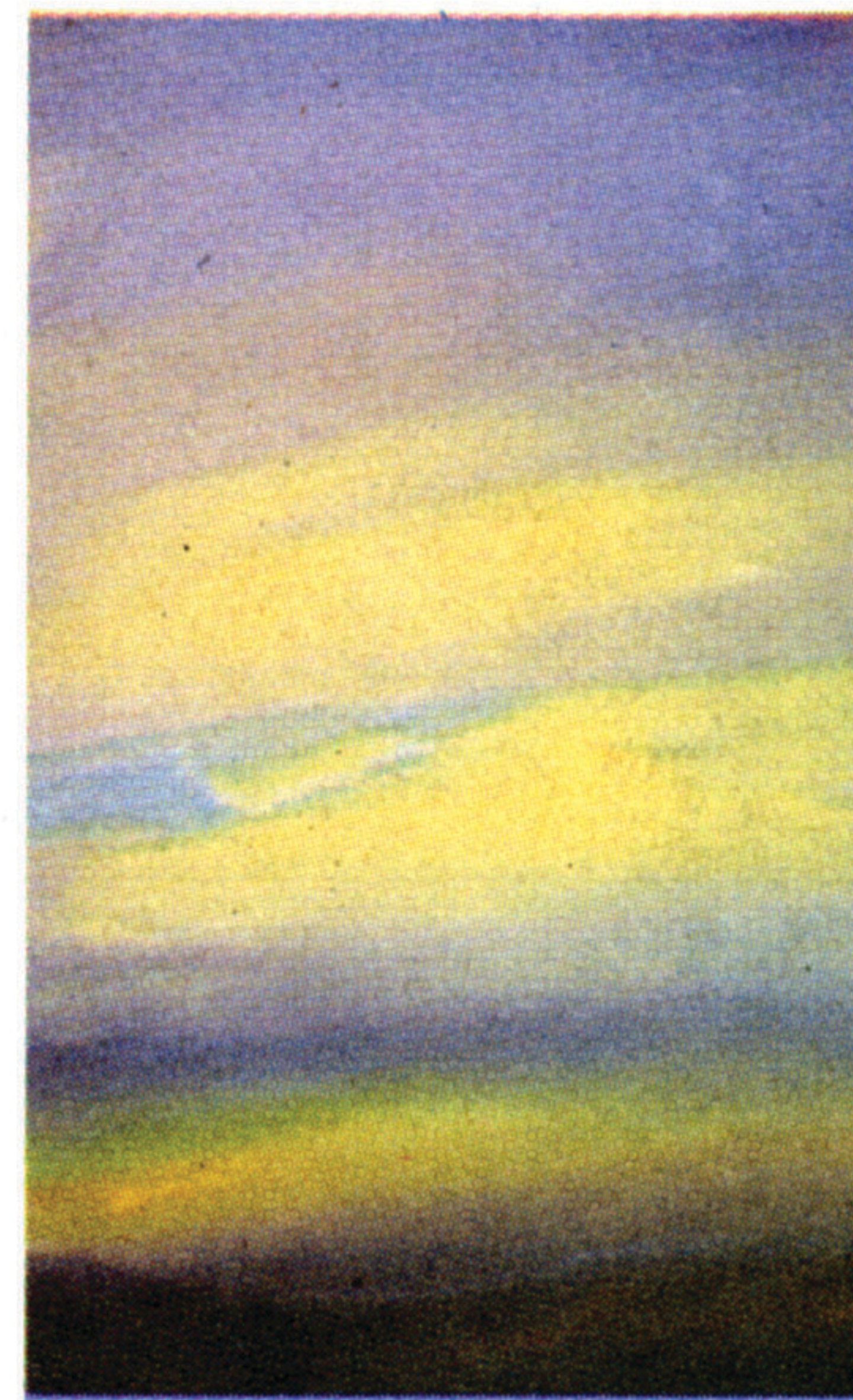
So you may be wondering now what is the "symbol" I'm trying to imply with all this "surface"?

It's not that simple — and that's Buist's appeal.

She seems to be interested in creating the pure moment, something so beautiful it creates something new, something beyond itself, not a landscape, but an anti-landscape.

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Detail from "Late Day"



"Siena Hills" by Kathy Buist



Detail of "Early Sunrise" by Kathy Buist