

By Kathy Montgomery • Photographs by Don B. & Ryan B. Stevenson

Artwork in Progress



THREE DECADES AGO, LEDA AND MICHAEL KAHN BEGAN WORK ON ELIPHANTE, THEIR EVOLVING MONUMENT TO THE WORLD OF VISUAL ART. IT'S AN UNUSUAL COMPOUND, TO SAY THE LEAST, BUT FOR THE ACCOMPLISHED ARTISTS, IT WAS A DREAM COME TRUE.



NO ORDINARY ORGY A smorgasbord of colors and textures (left) entices visitors to feast visually at Eliphante, an art environment showcasing the work of artists Leda and Michael Kahn in Cornville, 21 miles southwest of Sedona.



“They arrived penniless, surviving on food stamps, wanting nothing more than a place to pitch a tent and plant a vegetable garden.”

Visit Leda Kahn and you'll likely find her sitting at the kitchen table of her Cornville home, a cordless phone and a copy of *The New York Times* within reach. A more banal scene is hard to imagine, except that Leda's kitchen — refrigerator, sink and all — sits inside an open-air ramada that hums with the music of cicadas instead of the drone of air conditioning. Around the kitchen in all directions stand the whimsical buildings, sculptures and galleries that make up Eliphante, the 3-acre sculptural village she calls home.

Eliphante unfolds like a dream along the banks of Oak Creek. Various writers have described the place as an oddity and a work of art in the tradition of Los Angeles' famed Watts Towers. Free-form buildings dot a field of Astroturf scattered with sculptures of stone and driftwood. At the center stands a subterranean art gallery called Pipedreams, named for the crown of twisted pipes rising 30 feet from a curvy roof, dappled in primary colors.

For Leda and her late-husband, Michael, Eliphante represented a life's work. Now Leda worries about how to preserve it. Leda is past 80. Michael, who suffered from Pick's disease, died last December. Leda would like to find a way to keep Eliphante running after she's gone. Even more, she wants to find a home for Michael's paintings, so he'll be remembered as the great artist she believes he was.

Eliphante is a monument to art, but it owes as much to the generosity of nature and the Kahns' friends. Michael turned the bounty of driftwood from Oak Creek into sculptures and mosaics, tunnels and doors. The couple dragged rocks from nearby washes and fitted them together to form cool, smooth floors. They troweled rammed earth onto building walls. Gifts of stained glass and fabric became windows and wall coverings. Chipped pottery, beads and tapestries encrust the walls like jewels. The Kahns even embedded the truck they rode in on.

Michael and Leda arrived in Sedona in 1977 with nothing but an idea. Michael, whose art education included the prestigious Art Students League of New York, had a vision for seven large

canvases, but no space to paint them in the couple's cramped quarters in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Max Ernst drew inspiration from the famed red rocks of Sedona, and Michael thought he could, too. So the Kahns built a makeshift camper on an old flatbed Ford and headed west. They called the truck Botchy because their friends told them it looked like a botched job, but it got them where they were going.

They arrived penniless, surviving on food stamps, wanting nothing more than a place to pitch a tent and plant a vegetable garden. That's when they met Bob and Joan Crozier, who were looking for caretakers for land they owned in Cornville. Michael and Leda didn't take the job, but the Croziers let them live on three acres anyway. The Kahns erected a wooden shack, using cardboard and old rugs for insulation, and lived in it while they worked on a permanent home, and they never stopped building.

The first building was the compound's namesake, Eliphante, so-called for its entrance, which rolls outward like an elephant's trunk. They used it for musical gatherings. Next came the vaguely hippo-shaped Hippodome. It was originally meant to be Leda's studio, but Michael's creative impulses took over. He embedded a mattress into the floor, fashioned a conical stand-up hot tub, and added a loft, a small office and an indoor kitchen to use during inclement weather. When it was done, they moved in.

In 1996, with help from friends David O'Keefe and Michael Glastonbury, the Kahns broke ground on their most ambitious undertaking. The new building, Pipedreams, would display “the

CREATIVE PARTNERS Leda (above) and Michael Kahn, who died last December, share a moment in the personal paradise they created at Eliphante.

ENTHUSIASTIC ART Putting all they had into it, the Kahns created Pipedreams, a serpentine exploration of Michael's artistic evolution within 2,000 square feet of partially underground space, including a floor-to-ceiling glass-and-ceramic mosaic (right).





BOLD STROKES To the end of his life, Michael worked in the bold colors characteristic of his exuberant style (left).

TRUNK SHOW Eliphante's namesake trunklike entrance (above) leads to a spacious room the Kahns formerly used for musical gatherings.

NO SWIMMING The Hippodome's painted-cement floor (below) resembles an overflowing pond cascading into the kitchen.



BALANCED SCALE A 6-foot-tall balanced-rock sculpture (right) stands in simple counterpoint to the carved-door exit from Pipedreams (below, right).

CANVAS FRIDGE Caretakers Lonnie Haight and Vicky Kennedy relax in the outdoor kitchen (below), where even the refrigerator became a canvas.



process," an exhibit of Michael's paintings that documents his transition from representational to abstract art. The interior of the 2,000-square-foot subterranean gallery flows in a circuitous path leading visitors through intimate, fabric-draped exhibit spaces highlighting one painting at a time. An assortment of pillows and orphaned chairs encourages lingering. There are fabric rainbows, carpet mosaics and stained-glass portals. A giant tassel hangs near the exit door, which is painted with the word "maybe."

"Maybe. That's what Michael felt about life," Leda explains. "Everything is maybe. There are no expects."

Living life with no expects hasn't always been easy. For many years, the Kahns were poor, and art always took precedence over comfort. But if the lifestyle has taken its toll on Leda, it doesn't show. Though her skin is brown and sun-creased, she looks younger than her years. Her silver hair remains thick and soft, and her brown eyes, gentle. Her hearing has begun to fade, but Leda's mind remains sharp, thanks, perhaps, to a mostly vegetarian diet and the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

Michael was diagnosed with Pick's disease in 2004, a form of right frontal lobe degeneration for which both cause and cure are still undiscovered. The disease robbed him of the ability to communicate. Still, he continued to paint and build, collecting driftwood and rocks during daily walks along Oak Creek and adding them to the sculptural forms and groundwork at Eliphante.

Preserving that work has been Leda's toughest challenge. She'd like an organization like The Nature Conservancy to take over the property, and she hopes to donate Michael's paintings to a museum. Her various attempts to secure these ends

fill a binder. Recently, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum accepted a painting of Michael's for their permanent collection: a small victory, but a start.

Despite the hardships, Leda can't imagine living anywhere else. When she was a child, one of her favorite books was about a girl who got stranded on an island. The girl made everything from the materials that came her way and built a life. Leda believes her life has turned out like that of the heroine in that book. "It's a blessed life," she says.

Back in the Hippodome, Leda watches the screen of a small TV as she fast-forwards through a DVD of a French art documentary to a short segment about Eliphante. Throughout most of the film, Leda provides the narrative. But in a scene in which Michael and Leda appear together, Michael says, "Together, we got everything."

"I'm not sure what he meant by that," Leda says. "But it makes me weep every time." **AH**

Kathy Montgomery is a Mesa-based writer and a regular contributor to Arizona Highways.

The father-son photo team of Don and Ryan Stevenson have visited numerous art galleries and exhibitions, but nothing compares to the unique open-air setting of Eliphante along serene Oak Creek near Cornville.

> when you go

Location: Cornville.

Hours: Eliphante is open on a limited basis through Blue Feather Tours in Sedona. The "Artist Extreme Home" tour is a four-hour tour that includes a visit to a vortex.

Fee: \$85.

Travel Advisory: Eliphante is best enjoyed alone or with one or two people. It's not appropriate for large groups.

Information: 877-733-6621 or BlueFeatherTours.com.