When artist Morton Kaish returned to New York in 1959 after a long sojourn in Italy, he was in for a rude awakening. "I’d been painting the Italian landscape and street scenes very happily," he recalled. He and late wife, Luise, moved into a loft in an Italian neighborhood in Greenwich Village. "It seemed like an extension of where we’d been living," he said. "We didn’t know until the weekend that it was the epicenter of everything that was happening in the 1960s."

Their loft was above the Cafe Rienzi coffeehouse, a popular gathering place for Beat generation intellectuals. The Cedar Tavern, haunt of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Mark Rothko and other avant-garde artists, was a few blocks away. Needless to say, Kaish’s environs challenged his more traditional sensibilities.

How he resolved that crisis can be seen in the galleries of the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens in West Palm Beach, where An Eye for Nature: Paintings and Prints by Morton Kaish is on view. The show includes straightforward pictures of floral bouquets and single blossoms, fanciful combinations of cosmic symbols and butterflies that recall the psychedelic era, and effusions of flower imagery so dense they’re nearly abstract.

The quality of Kaish’s art, which resides in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and other institutions, his life experience and subject matter appealed to the Ann Norton, executive director Cynthia Kanai said. "We’ve been in a 2-acre garden," she said. "He creates pieces about nature, which really brings the garden inside our gallery." Kaish is new to the gardens, but not to Palm Beach. He showed his work at the late Irving Luntz’s Worth Avenue gallery. Now 92, and still a New York resident, he’s clung to representation, although he pushes its boundaries. "I felt I belonged to a continuum as old as art of life," he said. "I wasn’t going to walk away from that. I loved it."

Kaish’s collision with Painter reconciles nature with abstract innovation.
the abstract expressionists released something inside him.

"I saw a freedom and a willingness to risk that I had not been aware of before," he said. "I saw all these people were working at the edge every moment, where it was possible to lose something and by losing that find something else."

For him that meant unleashing the possibilities of color, while retaining the discipline of drawing and graphic design.

It wasn’t the first clash of sensibilities he’d had to integrate into his practice. Midway through earning a fine art degree at Syracuse University, there was a changing of the guard in the faculty. The classical regimen passed down from 19th-century academic painters was swept out, to be replaced by teachers who stressed color, form and concepts.

After he moved to Europe, he soaked up the art of the past as well as the techniques of graphic design, which he swings into as easily as he does painting. Works in the exhibition range from the 1980s to 2018.

The diptych Delicate Balance is perhaps the most autobiographical of the images. Kaish painted it in 1992 after emerging from what he describes as a period of austerity into “a kind of blooming and flourishing.” The two sides of the work are mirror images of a flower, one in shadow, the other in full color.

With monotypes such as Blue Velvet, Kaish said he revels in the freedom the medium gives him to produce oil painting effects quickly and exploit fortuitous surprises.

He embarked on his butterfly series in 2016 during a vacation with his family in Italy. He and his granddaughter were stuck inside during a rainy day when his daughter proposed they paint inside together. They cast about for a subject to paint, when Kaish suggested they look out the window. There they spotted a butterfly fluttering in the midst.

He’s been painting them ever since. He likens his process to the themes and variations of the classical chamber music he listens to while he creates. Like the composers, he begins with a motif then develops its elements “to as many variations as that theme might suggest,” he said.

Summer Nocturne is the first example of his most recent venture into printmaking — sublimated prints on aluminum, a process that uses heat and pressure to fuse an image onto an aluminum surface.

In the image, tall multi-flowered stalks of hollyhocks stand out against a glowing blue background. Kaish is glad the print retained the aliveness of the painting it’s based on. He won’t part with the painting because he created it as a gift to his late wife and cherishes it as a reminder of her.