

Thoughts on Jewish Identity in the Arts

Robert Pincus-Witten

For Bertha Urdang (1912-2001)

In 1975, I published a little article called “Six Propositions on Jewish Art” in *Arts*. Even with the demise of the magazine in which it first appeared, the piece continues to have an underground life. That I once held that “an abstracting philosophy of sign functions and an aversion to graven images coalesce to form a Jewish art abstract in both form and content” seems rather exclusionist today, to say the very least. To dismiss representationalism out of hand – a basic artistic premise that has richly served for more than eight centuries – surely can’t be true, even if it is true, if you catch my drift.

My thoughts back then were prompted by an invitation to participate in the 10th anniversary proceedings of the Israel Museum, a meeting that questioned the role of the museum generally, and, more particularly, the museum’s role in collectivized society. To be sure, the role of all museums in terms of their societal obligations was then a fresh and brave subject though, as I recall, the porous membrane separating politics and archaeology, a topic of considerable consequence in Israel, was still beyond the pale.

In the mid-Seventies, I was convinced (and remain so) of the importance of Beni Efrat and Joshua Neustein for contemporary Israeli art. At the very least, they offered serious alternatives to the Rembrandtism endemic to history painting on Jewish themes and an antidote to a range of images early tagged as national in character – among them, ecstatic Hassidim, or young soldiers in prayerful attitudes amidst the mayhem of war (military updates, that is, of the agnostic *hallutzim* (early pioneers) and kibbutztniks of Mandate

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Palestine or of the first years following the War of Independence, years that, since the onset of the second Intifada, now seem a golden age). Efrat and Neustein's Minimalist/Conceptualist proclivities (along with many similarly minded-artists of their generation) significantly rejected the illustrative, the propagandistic, and the touristic – all ubiquitous options essential to Israeli art.

At that time I also visited Moshe Kupferman in his distant kibbutz, an encounter that further confirmed my belief in the core abstraction of Jewish art. Mind you, I do not conflate “Israeli” with “Jewish.” It strikes me that the illustrative (not to say propagandistic) requirements of a national art radically diverge, especially in the case of Israel, from the abstraction that lies at the core of its nominal state religion. It is the abstraction these artists were seeking that matters, not the occasional national theme they might choose to explore. (Of course, affiliations with performance art, with photography and/or work in video have at times lead Neustein and Efrat to address volatile political issues albeit with the intention of deconstructing nationalist ideology through the use of irony and skepticism.)

I adduced arguments some of which are simply trite – the Eastern and Mosaic injunctions against graven imagery stemming from the Second Commandment, proscriptions honored by the two great Abrahamic religions. To this was added the less familiar influence of Kabbalah and gematria inherent to the Ashkenazi fetish of the Book, one felt acutely by the Hassidic community. “The Book,” I wrote, “is in this sense only secondarily a repository of narrative (language's counterpart to illusionism): primarily it is a hoard of signs within which the indescribable and the unnamable – the Ultimate Abstraction may be deciphered.”

I postulated identity reversals whereby the Gentile who paints abstractions denies in some fundamental way his identity as a Christian. Conversely, the representationalist Jew gives up some elemental feature of his Judaism – the fallout from which I sought protection by asserting that “Both acts are reconstructions of the psyche of such depth that language is inadequate to communicate the process and art is but testimony after-the-fact of this transformation.” Despite that cushion, the notion of possible identity exchanges is a telling clue to the formation of a Jewish identity in the arts since the latter is, in great measure, established by the Other, the *trayf*, the forbidden. Synagogue and Ecclesia; the old dispensation versus the new. Christianity, in setting up barriers for Jewish art and artists also

compresses, rams down tightly, the enormously transgressive potential of Jewish art so that, when finally released, it is apt to burst forth that much more vigorously. (This is less true for Islam – owing to Islam’s own claim to an abstract core for its art.) Indeed, it seems impossible to talk about Jewish art without referencing Christianity.

In so far as Jewish Expression in the arts is concerned, Kupferman may be its ideal contemporary exemplar. This judgment is made independent of the artist’s painful personal history – events that nonetheless allowed him access to his deepest existential perceptions. On the world stage, Kupferman’s work may be seen as similar to that, say, of Cy Twombly or Brice Marden. However, while formally or stylistically linked, the work of these artists provide only pseudo-morphs on the psychological level – so vastly dissimilar is Kupferman’s tragic experience from that of the Americans. Thus, I am tempted to add the tragic sense as another clue to Jewish identity. More to the point than even a sense of tragedy, it seems to me that the essential Jewish trait is waiting – just waiting, pure waiting – for a messiah who never comes. For should he/she/it appear Judaism would cease and become – as it has before – Christianity or Islamism or any of their manifold subsets, not to rule out any other Messianic configuration. In a certain sense, Kupferman’s palimpsests address this issue, may even be seen as an expression of frustrated waiting, even a kind of pictorial anger at having to wait for a messiah who will never appear. Apart from the beleaguered question of evil in the world, the un-arriving messiah must have been a tormenting question for the survivors of the camps who in our lifetime are the proof of God’s in-attendance.

Even apart from purely aesthetic considerations, Kupferman’s imagery and working practice – the dredging up of deeply aniconic, elemental configurations, checker board grids and their transcription within a monochromatic froth of graphic palimpsests – had the greatest effect on my thinking. His imagery seemed to surge outward from an existential core “near-impervious to analysis” since his figures are “sufficiently lean to pass out from the innermost core to imagistic consciousness.” But, at the end, my early certitude has given way to gnawing doubt. And, to tell the truth, I am, at heart, deeply unsure that there is a fundamental Jewish expression in the arts. It’s a bit like talking about God – maybe yes, maybe no.