



The Visual Chant

The Prayer for the Eye in the Art of Tobi Kahn

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The bond between abstraction and spirituality is a venerable one. In the development of Modernism, the central purpose of which was the instilling of pure abstraction and its purposes into the arts, the relation began at the very beginning. Kandinsky, in his testament on the creation of nonrepresentational abstraction — *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* — commits himself to the connection on page four. In a notorious passage, or one that should be, after speaking about art awakening the “subtler emotions” and “lofty emotions,” Kandinsky without explanation or transition starts to talk about “the spiritual life.” The same assumption of an automatic relation can be found among those who followed. It exists explicitly in the writings of Mondrian, of the members of the Transcendental Painting Group, of many of the Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, Newman, along with others.

The tie between abstraction and spirituality seems automatic because it seems natural, and it seems natural because it is far older than Modernism. It may be as

old as art itself. Certainly, abstraction, or at least the overt rejection of realism, is as old as the Semitic religions, all of which proscribe the use of figurative imagery in their temples. It can be found in no mosque, in no synagogue. And the proscription is written into the Old Testament, into the Ten Commandments, in which graven images are denied. The “graven image” is sculpture, and clearly realistic sculpture, and the ban is total: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” All religious decoration in the Near East is abstract, and the height of the accomplishment can be seen at Alhambra.

The alignment of abstraction and spirituality in Western Asia is as much a tradition as the alignment of figuration and spirituality in Europe, and it is at least as old. What is new in the relation is the role of innovation in abstract imagery. The mark of abstraction under Modernism is the personal turn, the inner delving, the devising of a lexicon of idiosyncratic images intended to serve the function of established religious iconography, intended to carry a generally effective, spiritually evocative import. Abstract imagery has been devised with reference to depth psychology and ancient tribal icons, but the dependence by contemporary artists on known religious conceptions has been lacking.

The failure to make the connection between established religion and abstract art pursuing the spiritual is a strange, almost inexplicable gap. Perhaps it is a mark of a secular age in which we still seek the afflatus, the access to a spiritual reality. Perhaps it is a result of the continuing pertinence of the cult of genius in the arts, a product of our unchanged belief that the true artist is uniquely, if not divinely, inspired. But it is certainly an oddity — that few if any artists would chase spiritual inspiration by turning toward religion.

Tobi Kahn has filled the gap. His work seeks to set precisely the connection that has been omitted from the history of modern abstraction in visual art — the connection between established religious tradition and the established artistic tradition of rendering unique and personal abstract imagery that carries the import of spiritual influence. In *Microcosmos*, his stunning and breath-taking exhibition at Yeshiva University Museum, 36 paintings, executed in acrylic on canvas over wood, fill two large rooms with the subtle and yet unmistakable aura, the delicate and yet bold and overwhelming instigation, of a meditative and distinctly spiritual incursion. Throughout the galleries, there is a sense of a strange and penetrating silence, an unheard apprehension of something seeming to speak from an impossible distance, from a far-off district of the intangible, following an unknown vector, an impossible direction, to arrive as a visible whisper without breath, without urgency, yet with an undeniable imperative.

Kahn's paintings are abstraction in its authentic sense, for there is an apparent simplicity of means that belies the effectiveness of the aesthetic experience. They are also authentic abstraction in that the simplicity of the design in each work belies the complexity of the technique used to achieve it. The paintings portray simple forms — generally rounded, biomorphic shapes set large within the picture plane, often with other forms penetrating them, rendered in flat tones against backgrounds of other flat tones. Each work is done in but two or three dominant hues. The forms seem oddly reminiscent. In the beautifully designed exhibition catalogue — with three essays written by Evan Eisenberg, Mark L. Tykocinski, and Saul J. Berman: an author, a scientist, and a religious leader — we are told that Kahn has drawn his artistic thoughts from his Jewish heritage, and that the images, inspired by the Book of Genesis, are suggestive of essential shapes of creation. They are shapes that emerge throughout nature, arising at

various levels of magnification — shapes suggestive of cosmic vistas, starbursts, rivers, lakes, trees, molecules, cells, nuclei, even embryos.

Combined with the simplicity of the forms, there is a sophistication of means in the rendering of texture. The surfaces of the paintings are intricate networks of minute ridges and furrows, complexities of brushwork that grip the eye and involve the senses with the apparent tangibility of relief sculpture. The intricacy of surface is most visible in the edges between the forms and their backgrounds— or, it might be more accurate to say, between abutting forms, because the figure/ground relationship is barely discernable in most of these works. The edges are executed in pure black lines, lines that pick up the complicated surfaces and seem to haze and bristle with a living energy. They teem with what feels like the intrinsic power of viability.

Each painting is titled with a word that, again we are told, has been invented by Kahn. The titles — such as *Ician II*, 1996; *Tyla*, 2001; *Yde*, 2001; *Yrth*, 2001; and *Dariah*, 1993 — are meant to be suggestive of Hebrew words and biblical references but are, in fact, meaningless. It is clearly the tone of antique, spiritual austerity that is being sought, and not specific religious doctrine. Nor is a direct religious reference applied to the images. They are intended to portray nothing from scripture.

As is always the case with authentic abstraction, with abstraction that actually does what it is meant to do — which is a rare thing and which denotes a remarkable accomplishment by Kahn — the reason for the efficacy of the image and the precise meaning it renders, or at least the precise way in which it works, is difficult to identify. For all its undeniably prepossessing nature, authentic abstraction is hard to see, and that is certainly the case with Kahn.

What is most important here is not to fall into the suggestibility of the images. As is always the case with art, it is most imperative to see exactly — and only

— what is in front of your eyes. To see these works properly, you must resist the temptation to make the visual association, resist the impulse to see, instead of the abstract forms, the implied rivers and trees and neurons and nuclei. That is the purpose of the intricately worked surfaces — to grapple the eye to the paintings, to hold the sight on the presence of the art. Seeing with such immediacy, with such precision, is naturally difficult, for sight is a matter of suggestion — in all visual impulses, we pick up recognizable clues and then fill in the gaps from memory. To know the moment, and only the moment, is ever a challenge, but it is always the challenge of art, just as it is always the challenge of the spiritual disciplines.

What one sees in Kahn's works, when one sees them properly, is form without reference. One obtains visual experience that does not lead to prepared and, thus, clichéd and pre-digested thought, but that remains pure visual experience, that remains a pure moment of presence. What is conveyed is not a thought in any specific sense of the word. What is conveyed is something more potent, and far rarer — a visual tone, a mental state, a state of mind conditioned by the atmosphere that Kahn has rendered by inspiration in form and color and that permeates the galleries in which these paintings are installed, suffuses the rooms like an incense, like an aroma of the soul, like the air of the unsought and indispensable regions. What is conveyed is a mood — the mood by which the precincts of the spirit are entered, the mood within which the districts of the spiritual reside, the mood that is their only ingress: the mood of art.

The key to the approach to Kahn's paintings is noted in his titles. They are words that are not words; they are codes of sounds that resist the immediate transformation into thoughts. They are, in short, meaningless, and in that meaninglessness, they reach for a meaning all the more potent than concrete ideas. They are chants, and like them, the paintings they mark are chants — visual chants,

visual intonations raised to transform the soul of the viewer. They are, in fact, the visual equivalents of a prayer, the formed and painted outgrowths and evocations of the inspiration of the afflatus, the filling of the spirit like a lung with the air of something intangible and real, something which underlies all that we are.

One might well say that these works invoke perception without conception, that they hold the eye to the vision without permitting the application of identification, of naming. One might say they evoke the preconscious. But to say any of this is to lose the moment, it is to fail the quality and truth of these impressive accomplishments. To say anything at all about them is to fail to say anything right. There are some works that are too important to be written about just as they are too important not to be written about. To speak of them is to betray them. You have to see them. You have to enter into their atmosphere, into the aura that they are, to understand what has been achieved. Some art remains art, despite all our dubious efforts to write about it. That is just one mark of the authenticity carried by the highest art, and it is the mark of the art of Tobi Kahn.

Tobi Kahn: *Microcosmos*

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