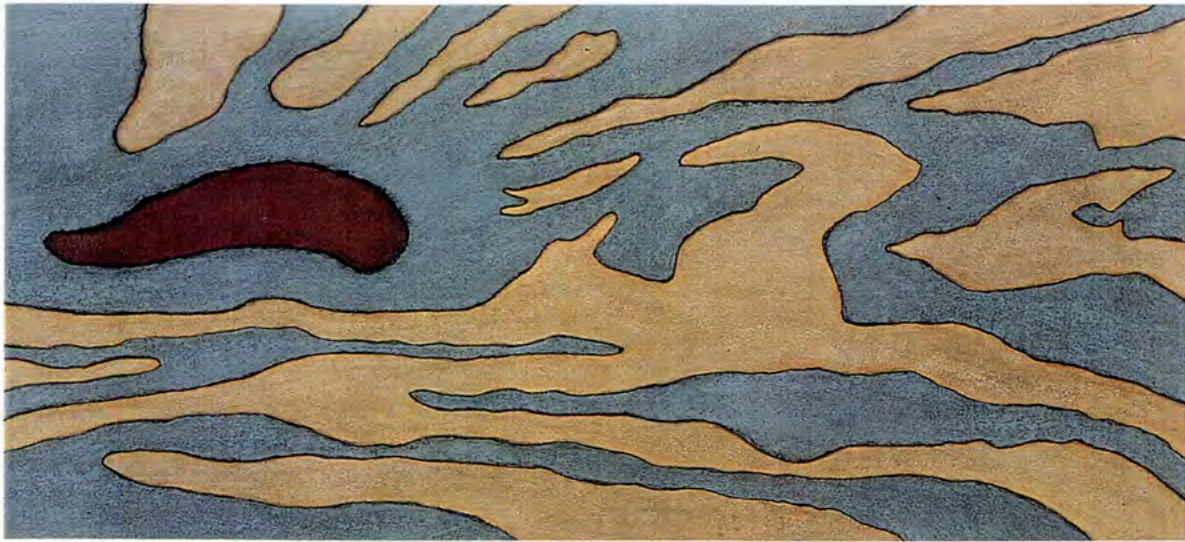


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I M M A G E



The Art of Tobi Kahn

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her prints, paintings, and installations for many years. She said that unfortunately my perception was often true, but that Tobi has made a dramatic point in turning to Judaica. "He has gotten closer to the sources of inspiration, and brings the intelligence and vision of a master artist to this."

Ceremonial objects are made to be used, not merely admired, and over the years Kahn has gathered quite a collection of items that he'd made for family occasions. *NATYH* from 1986 [see Plate 5] are three chairs that he made for his wife, his mother, and his mother-in-law on the occasion of Shalom Bat, or baby naming, when a newborn girl receives blessings. Tobi says that this is a tradition, not a law like the requirement of circumcision for males. The chairs were his way of enhancing that tradition, and helped bring dignity, beauty, and memory to the family's reception of a new member. Tobi explains that the impulse for this comes from the Biblical concept of "Hiddur Mitzvah," which means to "beautify the commandment."

In the mid-1990s, the Jewish Museum in New York asked Tobi if he would teach a summer course for high school students. He was interested and said he would like to do a workshop on making ceremonial objects. He believes that people should make rituals based on their beliefs, and that ritual helps people connect to what is sacred in their life. One of the people attending a workshop was Carol Spinner, who was working for the Continuity Commission of the UJA-Federation of New York. The commission was looking for innovative educational programs, and she was struck both by the number of teenagers who said "this is the first time Judaism makes any sense," and the fact that she too felt a powerful connection to her identity as a Jew. She describes Tobi as a born teacher who meets people where they live, and helps them overcome their fear that they can't make "art."

Around the same time, Laura Kruger, the curator at Hebrew Union College Museum in New York, was trying to persuade Tobi to exhibit his ceremonial objects. He was reluctant, fearing perhaps that this would put him in the "Jewish art" box he wants to avoid. When the art historian and critic Michael Brenson told him "don't be ridiculous, these are beautiful, exhibit them," that helped change his mind. After the initial exhibit at the Hebrew Union, which was well received, Spinner proposed a traveling exhibition. Kahn agreed, if she would find the funding, and if the exhibit would include workshops on ceremonial objects.

The result is the traveling exhibit *Avoda: Objects of the Spirit*. The word is derived from the Hebrew *Avodah*, which can mean both work and worship. The exhibit was funded by philanthropic organizations for a year to test the concept, and the exhibit and workshops traveled to museums, universities, and summer camps. More than 1,400 people participated in the workshops, which were not just oriented to Jews. Spinner says, "Students walk away from our workshops tremendously empowered by the experience, whether they are black, Jewish,

Chinese, or Muslim.” Now *Avoda* is a five-year traveling exhibit and workshop, and a book on the project with essays about its significance for art, religion, and culture will be published next year.

The number of projects in planning stages, the traveling exhibits (in addition to *Avoda*, *Correspondences*, an exhibition of paintings and works on paper is traveling throughout 2003), and forthcoming single exhibitions (paintings based on the idea of creation at Yeshiva University will open in September of 2002, and *Sky and Water* paintings will open at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, opening in May of 2003, both in New York) give ample evidence of growing critical recognition for Kahn’s work. Tobi does not take it for granted, and tells me, “I know this could evaporate quickly. I’ve seen it happen.” He also takes pains to establish that he is “in this for the long haul,” and is working on what is important to him. He recognizes the growing interest in the spiritual and religious in the art world, but is not too worried that this will ever become a trend. “I thought that might happen after September 11, but it looks to me like things haven’t changed that much.”

Part of the significance of Kahn’s work is its relation to this historical moment. If the concept of the spiritual constituted modernity’s passage into the rocky terrain where religion and art meet, the interest in Kahn’s ceremonial objects may indicate a change in our landscape. The artifacts and practices of Judaism have passed from the private sphere of Kahn’s immediate family to a small but interested public. Engaging this work involves a different set of assumptions and perceptions than, say, looking for coded thematic elements of Jewish experience in Richard Serra’s work.

Finally, this is a testimony to the *art* of Kahn’s work, which is as he wants it. But it is interesting to note that religious identity, particularly when practiced with the hospitality towards diversity that characterizes Tobi’s thinking, is no longer outside the frame of art. Kahn’s art has been preoccupied with evoking our sense and memory of things that quietly persist even as they defy direct representation. Kahn has found a way to traverse the boundaries that so often keep art separate from the act of living.

Forthcoming in *Image...*

The Art of Meltem Aktas & James Wallinger

Essays by Roger Lundin, Kate Campbell & Jeanne Murray Walker

An interview with Richard Rodriguez

Poetry by Julia Kasdorf, Rodger Kamenetz & B.H. Fairchild

Fiction by Caroline Langston & Deborah Joy Corey