

JEFF DANIEL ON ART

Kahn's works reflect the sea and the sky, but they're not landscapes

A feeling of timelessness imbues his art, which has roots in abstraction but goes in new directions.

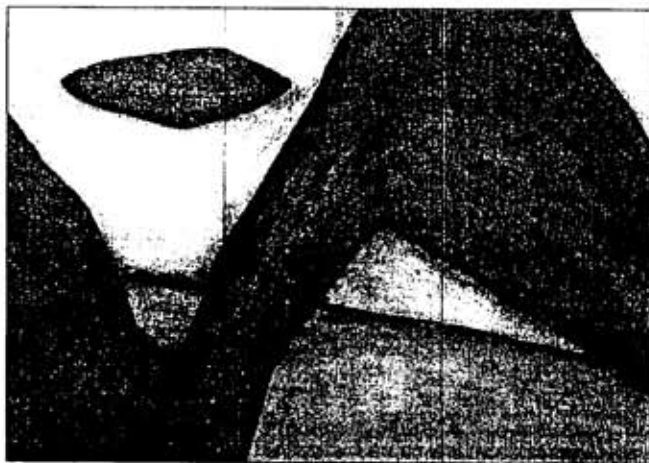
Arthur Dove, one of the earliest practitioners of abstraction in modern art, once remarked that he preferred "to take the wind, water and sand as a motif and work with them, but it has to be simplified in most cases to color, and (it has to) force lines just as music has done with sound."

For Dove, the literal became the transcendental as familiar elements transformed into something that was uniquely, unmistakably his own. In his hands, nature as an abstraction seemed — in an ultimate irony — a natural fit.

And so it is with Tobi Kahn, the New York artist whose paintings and sculptures currently reside at the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art.

A descendant of Dove, if more in spirit than in actual style, Kahn skillfully blurs the line between the representational and the metaphysical with remarkable consistency. A painting seems a landscape, and then again it doesn't. A sculpture resembles a sacred shrine, yet its history and denomination prove to be mysterious and elusive.

Throughout this exhibition, a retrospective spanning the years 1981-95 and curated by Peter Selz, Kahn's lack of reference points serves as his greatest strength. Meaning and experience, rather than being limited to specifics (the artist's religious beliefs, his points of travel, a certain socio-political agenda) instead transcend to the universal. For Kahn, nothing else would seem appropriate.



Landscape or not? Tobi Kahn's "Natah" (1987), acrylic on canvas in three panels.

"Someone once asked me why there are no people in my paintings," he said while in town for a gallery talk with art historian and longtime friend Douglas Dreishpoon. "I said that would make my work too time specific — I really prefer a sense of timelessness."

Timeless is a fitting adjective for Kahn, whose work shares that quality with predecessors — and Kahn personal heroes — such as Dove, Arshile Gorky and Mark Rothko.

And like those three, the 46-year-old artist creates pieces that can become something personal and individual for each viewer. For instance, the painting "Dakayah" (1987) might be viewed as a landscape, a yellow twister touching down on fertile ground under an ominous brown sky. Then again, the yellow cone transforms into a bird's beak, its tip pecking away at some

sort of round nut or acorn. For some, "Dakayah" may simply be about three blocks of color interacting with one another.

The same process occurs in Kahn's more traditional landscapes. A calculated ambivalence reigns. We see a horizon line, a seascape, a row of hills; yet these elements could just as easily be the pattern on a piece of bark, a microscopic look at a cell formation, or a surreal portrait of anthropomorphic figures. The visual interpretation and emotional response to Kahn's work relies as much on the viewer as the artist. Much like a Rothko painting, it becomes different things at different times.

"I think about Susan Rothenberg, when they asked her about her famous series of horse paintings," said Kahn over a cup of tea at a local coffee house.



"Lifanah," (1985), an example of Tobi Kahn's sculptural shrine.

"She said, 'My paintings have nothing to do with horses.' And that's how I feel at times in terms of landscape." Adds Dreishpoon, "It's in the same way that de Kooning used the woman in his series — it's a vehicle." Kahn's work is about the fundamental elements — land, sea, sky — so it makes sense that we gravitate toward that. But here nothing is overt or specific.

For Kahn, the art that interests him is "the work that the more time you give it, the more you see in it. Those who invest their time in his work will find those qualities. 'If you give me five minutes, I have a chance of getting you for the rest of my life,' he likes to say.

The MOCRA exhibition, featuring a catalog with essays by noted critics Michael Brenson and Dore Ashton, allows a St. Louis audience to invest that five minutes with one of the art world's trumpeted talents.

"Metamorphoses: Works by Tobi Kahn"

Where: Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis University

When: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, through May 8

More info: 977-7170

Since 1985, when 19 of his works were selected for the Guggenheim Museum's "New Horizons in American Art" show, Kahn has steadily established himself as a prolific and original voice in painting and sculpture. (He also teaches at New York's School of Visual Arts. His own education includes stints at Hunter College, Pratt and Tel Aviv University.)

Although this show, "Metamorphoses," is housed at MOCRA, the religious overtones lean toward a spirituality that has more to do with personal tranquility than any form of organized worship.

Kahn, despite his strong personal beliefs, doesn't want to be considered "a Jewish artist," and his work reflects as much. His sculptural shrines evoke memories of totemic ritual, yet they could apply to anything and everyone. These are miniature houses of the holy that appeal to our most basic, instinctual sense of reverence.

Kahn's mastery of minimalism and pared-down simplification is impressive — as well as surprising. His early influences include the abstract impressionists from which he gained a sense of honesty.

"I don't think there was one stroke those artists put down that

wasn't filled with it," Kahn says. "They weren't about fashion or style. It was a pure dialogue, and the art was done for a serious visual reason. I loved their energy, but I knew I had to make it much simpler, more of a meditative space."

Since the early '80s, his work has moved toward that area that he labels "a much quieter place." Yet such a description is deceptive. Despite its minimalist abstraction, Kahn's work contains a textural depth and kinetic sense of surface that surprises. This is no accident: Kahn may spend months on a particular field of white to get the play of shimmering light and eerie shadow that he desires.

More than anything, "Metamorphoses" demonstrates Kahn's careful sense of craft in a period of time littered with throwaway trends and lazy aesthetes. He tells a story about a large sculpture, "Shalev," commissioned for New Harmony, Ind., in 1993 (A smaller version appears in this exhibition.) Set in a field, the granite and bronze shrine required supporting steel rods, and their application required the drilling of two holes in the sculpture's top surface.

Kahn remembered some weeks later that the unfinished drilled holes — invisible to most viewers — would be seen by the cropdusting pilots who often flew overhead. He booked a flight back to New Harmony. He perfected his work. The cropdusters expressed their gratitude.

Like Dove, Kahn took a landscape and made it something entirely his own. Yet also like Dove, he created a memory to which anyone could claim ownership.

"My work is more about memory than landscape," Kahn says. "And it's more about the memory of an event than the actual event itself."