

A Visual Language: Seeing and Ceremony

Painter, sculptor, ceremonial artist Tobi Kahn received his M.F.A. from Pratt Institute in New York. His work has been exhibited in over 40 solo exhibitions and 60 museum and group shows throughout the United States, as well as in Europe, Latin America, and Israel. Kahn has taught painting at the School of Visual Arts since 1985. He is co-founder, with Carol Brennglass Spinner, of Avoda Arts, which published *Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn* in 2004. Kahn and his wife, writer Nessa Rapoport, live in New York with their three children. Kahn co-facilitates with Rabbi Leon Morris, Director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanuel in New York, an artists' Beit Midrash at the Skirball Center. They spoke at Kahn's studio where the artist's projects-in-process attest to his unparalleled creative force and abundant energy.

LEON MORRIS: You are a traditionally observant Jew who, as an artist, is translating the ritual of kaddish into art.

TOBI KAHN: When my mother, Ellen Kahn, died last June, I decided that during my year as an *avel* [mourner] I would create works of art that relate to her life. I say kaddish three times a day because my rabbi, Saul Berman, told me it is my obligation as a Jew. But here in my studio I'm saying kaddish visually. English is my *second* language; art is my first.

Since I was a child, I attended Jewish day schools and yeshivot. There I learned that a text reveals itself differently not only to different students but even to the same person, depending on age and experience. When you look at my work, you may see one element the first time; six months later, because you have changed, you will see the painting or sculpture differently. One day you

could be falling in love. The next week, you're very tired; it's your birthday; you've just lost somebody. If you're at your favorite beach, the sea and sky will look different each time you are there. That's what I want for my work — not to be static.

And that is very Jewish. As a people, Jews are not at all homogeneous. I really treasure that. I want you to look at my work as it changes, and changes you. Two summers ago, for a solo

exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art, I made a wall installation of 80 sky-and-water images, each one distinct.

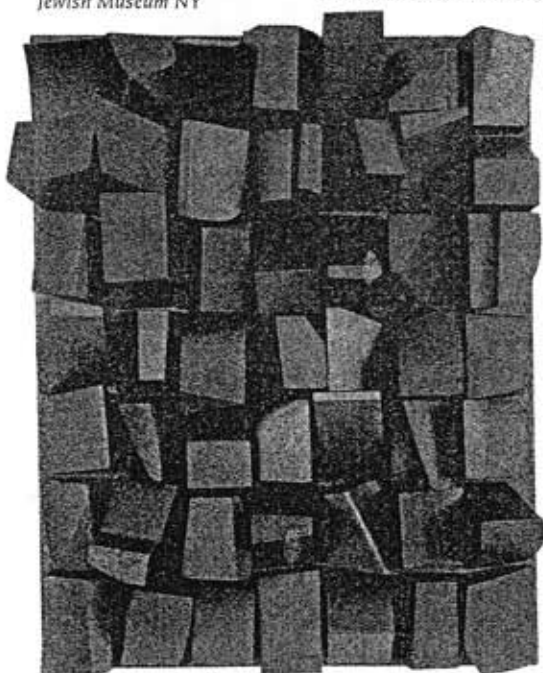
MORRIS: You're saying art is Jewish because it's nuanced and because it defies simple categorization or compartmentalization. But is all the work we do Jewish art?

KAHN: I don't believe in labels: feminist art, white art, Jewish art, gay art. I would never want to be called a Jewish artist, although I am very proud to be an artist who's Jewish. I'm very proud to be a father and husband artist, a child of survivors artist. An artist brings all of his or her experiences into the studio. The biggest single influence on me by far is not that I'm Jewish or that I'm male, or that I'm married or that I'm a father; it is that as Tobi Aaron Kahn I am named for my uncle Arthur, Aaron in Hebrew, who was one of the first three Jews murdered by the Nazis in 1933. My uncle died so tragically young. An excellent draftsman and a medical student, he would have been an artist and a doctor. At the end of my life I want to leave a body of work that comforts people. I believe art can be healing and redemptive.

MORRIS: Talk to me a little bit about space. You were just mentioning that space plays an important role in your life as an artist — sacred space. Judaism is primarily about time, but for you space is essential.

KAHN: I think Judaism is as much about space as about time. We have the concept of a *makom kavua*. We get married under a symbolic space, a *chuppah*. After a cemetery visit, we place a stone as a remembrance on the space where the body was buried. My new paintings are of sky and water — space that's amorphous. I'm working now on a Jewish hospice, as well as a meditative interfaith building. In the hospice I'm creating a room that will look much like a sukkah with twelve panels. The benches are low so that for the visitor noth-

SAPHYR
Sefirat HaOmer Counter
2002
Acrylic on wood
27 x 22 x 9 inches
In the collection of the
Jewish Museum NY



ing obscures the space or light. Artists are supposed to change the way we think. And someone who can make us change the way we think about space and light—like James Turrell—is a genius.

I used to love making very small meditative spaces or small, sculpted objects that people could hold in their hands. But now I want to hold you, the viewer, visually and conceptually within a created space.

MORRIS: What part of the process of creating do you love most?

KAHN: I love the beginning, and I love the ending; the middle is the hardest part. At the start, the idea feels boundless; it could go anywhere. In the middle, I have to rein it in, to limit it to its essence so that the viewer will have the most powerful experience. And yet I cannot constrain the idea so much that it becomes dogmatic, without room for the viewer's interpretation. I really want my work to be like manna, the food for the children of Israel in the desert that could taste like whatever they desired.

MORRIS: The second commandment states that Jews should not make carved images. What does that mean for Jews as an aesthetic people?

KAHN: The second commandment forbids making, that is worshipping, any graven images. I don't think Jews are meant to worship graven images, but in truth we're not supposed to worship anything at all, except for God. More people worship money than worship a piece of art. And they may worship the art, but very often they do because it's worth money. I think that the reason Jews have not made art is because we were not allowed to join the guilds of the majority cultures, not because the visual element is forbidden.

We are a deeply visual people, which comes, in part, from how diverse we look and how diversely we live. Jews come from so many different places, each of which shaped us in how we see the world and each other. There is no one Jewish "look."

Our stories are visual, our historical images are visual, and as soon as we were permitted to join the art community, we soared. Jews are a very small percentage of people in the world, but we're a huge percentage of the world-re-

nowned architects, painters, sculptors, glass blowers, ceramicists. When I take Jewish groups to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I begin with the art of the Cyclades. These small objects, including figurines and functional art, were made around 2800 BCE., the era of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. I then show the group a hammered gold gravy boat that was made at the same time as the Golden Calf was being fashioned in the desert. The household idols our foremother Rachel hid or the Golden Calf are no longer ancient, remote abstractions when we see their analogues in the art of the surrounding cultures.

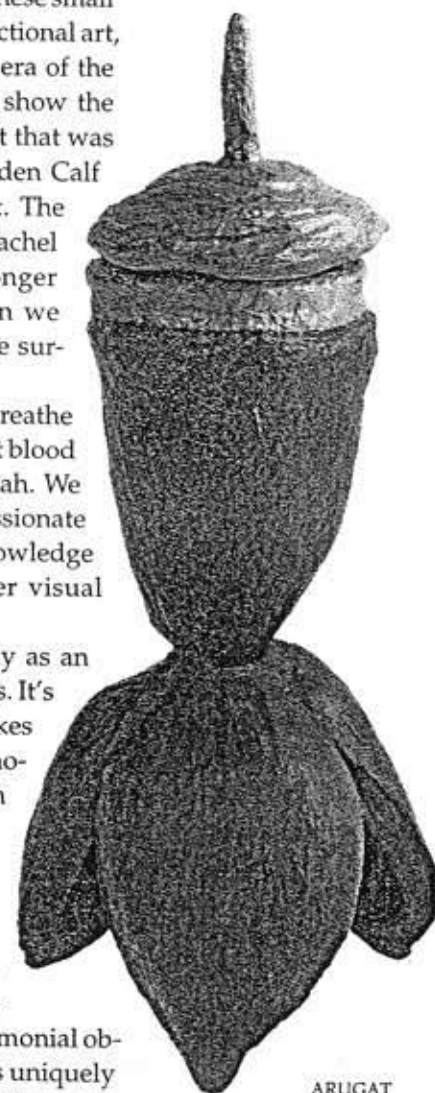
And Jews are very sensual. We breathe in spices; we shake the lulav; we put blood on the door fronts; we kiss the Torah. We were performance artists. I am passionate about retrieving Jewish visual knowledge and helping people become better visual learners.

I do not want to be known only as an artist who creates ceremonial objects. It's important that I'm an artist who makes painting, sculptures, set designs, photography, and also makes Jewish ceremonial objects. My paintings and sculpture embody and reflect my personal vision. The premise behind my role in the Avoda Institute is that when I make a ceremonial object it bears my meaning, but when I help other people make ceremonial objects, they have a ritual object that is uniquely their own. It will mean something different to them, enhanced by their using it. When I teach, I am a guide, not a director.

I'm working on a series of projects with UJA-Federation of New York. In one, all people who work in the building will make a mezuzah for their office. I am certain that they will not enter their office in the same way they did in the past. They are making themselves sacred spaces.

Art is not separate from life; it is like breathing. Not everyone can be an artist, but everyone can try to understand what it means to think like an artist, just as not everyone is an opera singer but everyone should sing.

Our society is about quickness. I want my work to slow the viewer down, so that seeing becomes a medium for understanding the world. We're all here as guests on the earth. Why just take from it? Why not give to it? 



ARUGAT
HABOSEM II
Spice container
1994
Acrylic on wood
9 1/2 x 4 x 4 inches