

Beth Ames Swartz "The Word in Paint"

Notwithstanding the known impact of theosophy upon the early, pioneering abstract work of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, the spiritual in art is still more or less taboo. Could we also be reminded that both Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross and the murals of the Rothko Chapel were created without irony? What prevents most critics from digging deeper into the spiritual content of Joseph Buys' work or even Yves Klein's? Nowadays if art and poetry have a religion it is certainly Buddhism, beginning with Zen in the Fifties and now almost universally of the Tibetan kinds. Yet spirituality, because it is too often confused with the evils of organized religion; because it breaks apart formalist cant and a rigid, received view of art history; because it is perceived of as personal, subjective, and certainly unquantifiable; and, above all, because it is deeply embarrassing - is censored. Spiritual art proclaims that art must be more than a product or an investment strategy. Beth Ames Swartz, whose work of over more than forty years was sampled at the Phoenix Art Museum and then traveled to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University in 2002 is a spirituality-in-art stalwart.

We could, I suppose, just look at Swartz's work as just paint and a myriad of materials on flat surfaces - somehow no longer flat, no longer mute - but that would miss the point. A painter friend surprised me when I said I was writing about Swartz: "Oh, yes, she gets great textures." My feeling is that the "textures" are not about beauty or tour-de-force but come from the pressure to express the normally inexpressible and communicate the incommunicable. As glittery or as radiant as her paintings are, they are from somewhere else; at their best they are scary and alien. Even the recent paintings, which are outwardly more contemplative and less convulsive, because of the partially and the mostly indecipherable texts in both the "Visible Reminders" paintings and the new "The Fire and the Rose" series, are as original as anything Swartz has done. The paintings seem to come, not from Abstract Expressionism, but from an unknown civilization. They are not easy art and they are a glory to behold.

The larger paintings in the new series use words from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," the last section of his Four Quartets. Swartz's choices are perfect. The text used in *But heard, half heard, in the stillness* begins with the words: "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling." Or, to take another example, *Love is the unfamiliar Name*, uses a section that begins: "Who then devised the torment? Love,/Love is the unfamiliar name..." Eliot, of course, was once the most influential of the 20th century modernist poets writing in English. If one knows his poems, it is impossible to fully strip even fragments of their incorrigible irony. Swartz innocently - and successfully - trims the text to its spiritual bones. Rather than illustrate the poem, she uses the words themselves to impart a kind of mournful transcendence, a kind of Church of England Vedanta.

The Phoenix Museum retrospective in 2002 - a trial-run, I think, for the larger survey that is clearly required - and the Hudson Hills monograph published in association with it were both titled *Reminders of Invisible Light*, which is a clue to the mystical content and effect. In the book, curator David S. Rubin's essay called "Ritual and Transformation" is a factual and level-headed survey of Swartz's development from early Color Field watercolors, through the burned, torn and buried paper works often based on the Kabbalah, culminating in her Israel Revisited Series in which process/rituals she had developed were performed at sites in Israel associated with women in the Old Testament (shown at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1981); through her A Moving Point of Balance healing installation of paintings inspired by the chakras or traditional tantric energy centers; through her "Eleventh Hour" sets of paintings; up to her "Shen Qi" paintings of the late '90s and several points in between.

Arlene Raven's poetic, personal essay balances Rubin's more measured descriptions. What is missing is an overview of the spiritual in art, how Swartz fits in, and some sense of her bravery in the face of the art world's fear of the cosmic and the healing, transformative functions of art.

I have followed Swartz's work and commented upon it since the First Western States Biennial in 1979. I contributed an essay to the small catalogue for *A Moving Point of Balance* and as Director/Curator of the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor in Staten Island, booked it in 1989 for the historic 1831 Main Hall. It wasn't easy; all the windows had to be covered. Viewers were bathed in colored light as they stood before each chakra painting; soothing sound was also a component; an Indian medicine wheel provided the introduction and a kind of stabilizing de-briefing environment ended the choreographed sequence of viewing, which had culminated in the Crown Chakra. If I remember correctly there was even at one point a let's-hold-hands-in-a-circle ceremony which participants adored but which embarrassed me. But it all worked. It was amazing. People wept; the comment book was full of ecstatic testimonials. I should have known. Swartz did exit surveys at the San Diego and Aspen venues and found that 98% of the viewers "of all age groups from broad socio-economic and geographic backgrounds felt relaxed, uplifted, and spiritually moved by their experience."

In some sense the taboo against the spiritual in art is the same as the taboo against art therapy. Even craft apparently now needs to be divorced from art therapy. Art is not supposed to have a use. Show me the art that has no use and I will show you the art that is a monopoly board-piece. In an effort to protect art from political interference, our predecessors also protected it from the heavens and in the process, alas, turned it over to the art heathens.

In terms of Swartz's art we are entering difficult territory, one that art history strategies and modes of criticism are of little or no use. Like beauty, the spiritual cannot be quantified. The spiritual in art is also radically nonformalist: we are no longer talking about art about art or forms about form. Even beauty - perhaps beauty in particular - is in service of spiritual ends. Or, as some might have it, beauty itself is a symptom of the spiritual (although I myself am not certain of this).

Spiritual art is like political art in several ways: Spiritual art that causes spiritual states is on a higher plane than art that just illustrates the same, just as political art that causes political action has to be considered more important than political illustration. How to differentiate these two modes in both types of art is extremely problematic.

But political art and spiritual art are different in two important ways: Beauty is not a political tool, unless one thinks of hairless, stern-jawed Aryan youth as beautiful. I think not. Or unless one thinks of oppressive architecture from Egypt to Rome to Washington as beautiful. Although I am no doubt in the minority, I don't.

Although the very effort might increase commitment, intensify solidarity, and even clarify beliefs and positions, political art is not in any major way about making the artist more political. Whereas spiritual art often comes about as a process that transforms the artist.

There is no question that addressing the spiritual in art brings us into difficult territory. New distinctions must be made; new vocabularies called into play. There is, for instance, the art that has a spiritual effect on the maker, the art that effects the viewer, and the art that effects both. What do we mean by a spiritual effect? What do we do with Shaker drawings or mediumistic art in general? Are memory or

meditation aids also to be considered? Can the artist be merely a conduit and produce spiritual art without himself or herself being particularly "spiritual"? In other words, as certain major religions claim, is it really the office and not the officiator?

It is probably obvious that images of the Buddha and diagrams such as the "tree" of the Kabbalah can communicate spiritual content or even have spiritual effect, but what of totally abstract forms? Were Mondrian and Kandinsky right after all? Is a spiritual artwork necessarily easily identifiable as such?

In the meantime, Swartz's work keeps these issues alive.

The Beat Generation has been safely put away, the hippies are all stockbrokers or fathers and mothers of same, at least until recently. And although thousands will come to hear the Dalai Lama and countless artists and musicians donate their works or perform for free to aid the Tibetan cause, there seems to be no interest in analyzing what this is all about. Is it because of the misguided notion that to have freedom of religion one must keep one's spirituality totally private? We don't want to step on anybody's toes and, rightfully, don't want to impose our beliefs on others. The world once again is being torn about by rigid religionists.

Beth Swartz's art says that religion may be one of the problems but the spiritual is the solution. Also, there may be the mistaken idea that the spiritual in art was an '80s thing rather than perennial. Suzi Gablik had her say, but not her way. Even I wrote positive things about Alex Grey and a few other artists who were engaged in creating art with a spiritual purpose. Maurice Tuchman at the L.A. County Museum presented a huge exhibition that outlined an historical overview.

Swartz's art proves that the spiritual in art won't go away. We need not go into the possibly demonic mediumistic art that the surrealists were enamored of and the spiritualists included in Art Brut. We need not discuss the automatism that the Action Painters lifted from the surrealist. Although it is action painting and then earth art that are Swartz's first inspirations, there is something more important:

Swartz's art embodies the yoga of art, experienced by any artist when you are truly inspired. Something can happen when you make art; something can happen when you look at art. That "something" cannot be explained away by referring to a mysterious "aesthetic response." The mystery is deeper.

- John Perrault, 2003