Kabbalah and Jewish-American Artists

Matthew Baigell

Bruria Finkel, *The Divine Chariot*. 1985–1997, bronze, 8' x 31" x 16". Courtesy of the artist.

Check out the Judaica section in any bookstore. You will be surprised at the number of books concerned with Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. Some are feel-good, New Agey; others are rigorous academic and religious studies. All reflect what seems to be an unquenchable desire for spiritual fulfillment as well as for a deeper connection to a Judaism that exists outside of the synagogue, the shtetl, and old traditions. Jewish-American artists have also responded in kind, turning to Kabbalah as a source of inspiration. In effect, and in an odd turn of events, nonmainstream Jewish religious concerns have replaced Jewish communal culture as a way for artists to identify as Jewish.

Current curiosity about Kabbalah surfaced in the 1960s as part of the general interest in spiritualism and spiritual systems generally Eastern in origin, such as Zen, Yoga, and Buddhism. By the 1970s, Kabbalah and those aspects of Jewish history and religion found in the Torah and Talmud informed the works of an increasing number of artists. Like the general public, the artists' range of commitment has varied from "grazing" through various books, as one artist described the way he obtains information, to serious study with mystics and Hasidic rabbis, from California Kabbalah concerned with obtaining cosmic energy, good health, and good sex to the serious task of translating kabbalistic materials into English. Using a variety of styles, artists have not necessarily illustrated particular passages, but rather found in them points of departure for their visual meditations. As such, their work is not an isolated instance of Jewish mystical art in modern times, but part of the largely unstudied history of mysticism (Jewish, Christian, Zen, etc.) in recent American art.

Clearly, there is no single point of view, let alone a school or even representative figures in this recent Jewish mystical art, as each artist finds his or her own way in this vast and often contradictory literature. For the artists, mysticism is really a form of self-assertion, a coming to terms with the forces of the universe. In their differing ways, they use canonical texts to help them convert religious encounters from received dogma to living experience. They seek an immediate awareness of a relation with God, an awareness of the Divine Presence in the world, avoiding the intermediate step of synagogue worship. Old-fashioned objections, voiced by the ultra-religious, about the very fact of women artists exploring this subject matter or of images which approach too closely the Second Commandment restrictions concerning graven images, are of little relevance to these artists. Although Kabbalah is the source, the artists are post-traditional in their ways of thinking.

A case in point. California-based Bruria Finkel has been using kabbalistic imagery since 1966, when she was introduced to the writings of Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist. Since the mid-1980s, she has been making a series of wheel-shaped sculptures which contain Hebrew lettering and human hands. The wheels refer both to Ezekiel's vision of the chariot which supports the throne of God (I:4–15) as well as to the interpretations of Ezekiel's vision by Abulafia, who, in order to contemplate the presence of the chariot, and therefore the Divine, developed a method of meditating on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet to invoke the proper ecstatic mood.

Finkel, who has been translating Abulafia's writings into English since the late 1960s, insists that her work is humanistic rather than religious in a ritualistic sense. For her the bronze wheels "represent time, place, and function as a bridge into ancient philosophies. The chariot, considered by the Kabbalah to be a symbol of the highest form of human attainment towards peace and divine influx, is configured by the four wheels and their pedestals." In effect, she visualizes what Abulafia might have imagined during his (and now her) meditations, a way to grow nearer to the cosmic stream of life, or at least to the power of the human spirit to evolve into higher reaches of contemplation.

Edith Altman's spiritual quests are, by contrast, more activist than meditative. The kabbalist, or mystic, is supposed to remain active in the community as a source of inspiration, information, and leadership, and ideally should not

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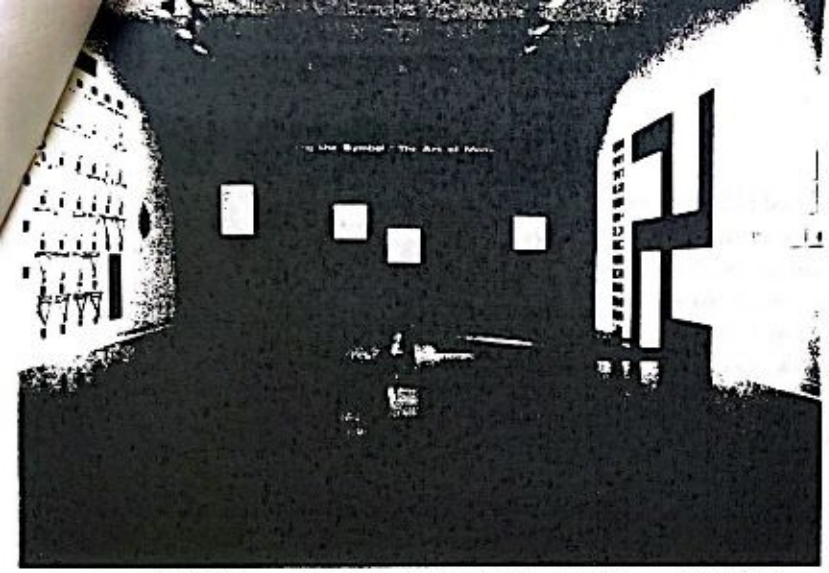


Edith Altman. *Reclaiming the Symbol/The Art of Memory.* 1988-1992. mixed media installation, dimensions vary. Courtesy of the artist.

isolate him or herself with other mystics. In keeping with that ideal, Altman and Finkel want their art to contribute to spiritual growth and development. No doubt, Altman would agree with Finkel, who feels that Kabbalah can be invoked as a salutary presence in the world, that the purpose of her work "is to create a healing moment that carries across time and space, both as metaphor and as a real experience."

In fact, these words well describe Altman's intentions in her "Reclaiming the Symbol/The Art of Memory," an installation begun in 1988. A student of a Lubavicher rabbi in Chicago, Altman is strongly motivated by the concept of *tikkun olam,* or repair of the world. "Reclaiming the Symbol" concerns restoring the swastika to its pre-Nazi configuration and meaning as a symbol of growth, or, more universally, the triumph of good over evil, of sustenance and renewal, a subject treated in many kabbalistic texts. Altman has added several kabbalistic references to the work, including a gold swastika, configured in the pre-Nazi way, representing base matter transformed into spiritual gold which draws on the energies of the upper spiritual world. The lower spiritual world is symbolized by the black swastika on the floor (configured in the Nazi way).

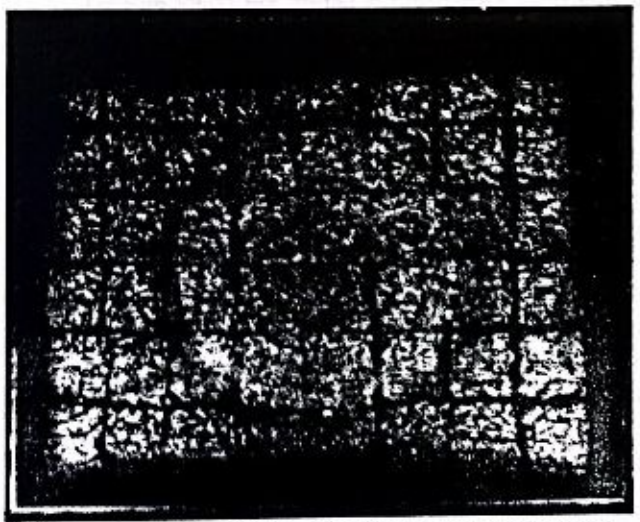
Having experienced Krystallnacht as a child in Germany, and with the spiritual support offered by her readings in Kabbalah, Altman wanted to face the hated symbol directly, to neutralize it, and to subdue residual fears it still evokes; that is to say, to spiritualize it and to reinvest it with archaic and mythic meanings once again. To say it in more polemical words: to invoke Jewish mysticism rather than the rationality of the rabbinic tradition and traditional orthodoxy. Of works such as this one, she has said that

> everybody has a function. I see mine as healing. The idea of *tikkun* is part of Kabbalistic thinking; it shapes a way of looking at your lifetime. The idea of *tikkun* is that we are here to repair ourselves and in doing so to help repair the world, helping to bring it back into better harmony.

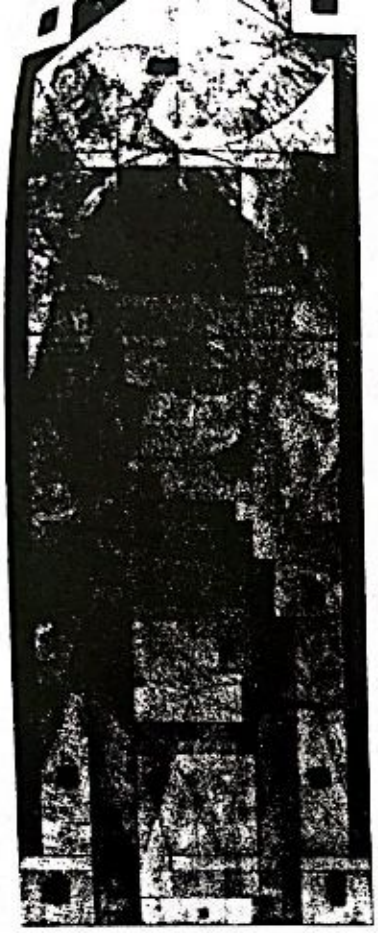
Other artists who use kabbalistic sources for personal reasons can be equally, if differently, socially-minded. Beth Ames Swartz, who lives in Arizona, bases her interest in Kabbalah on political activism, feminism, and a high regard for the sacredness of the earth. Her interests in Kabbalah began after a trip to Israel in 1976 when she realized that she could no longer ignore her Jewish heritage. Even as Kabbalah began to play an important part in her life, however, she continued to be interested in other mystical systems. This is not to say that she shops around for mystical insights, but rather to raise some serious questions: What is the Jewish commitment of artists whose main concern seems to be spiritual enlightenment as much as, if not more than, Jewish identification? Except in the most generic sense, can such works be called Jewish, whatever that term might mean in this context? Further, in a multicultural age, what does Jewish identification mean, anyway? For the artists, answers to these questions depend on the observer's degree of religious and cultural commitment.

But Swartz sees herself operating within a Jewish ambience. I do not think anyone could seriously question Swartz's Jewish identification in the series of performances she enacted in Israel in 1981. In that work, Swartz visited ten sites associated with women (such as Rebecca and Rachel) and performed rituals in their honor. In the process, she created flattened, relief-like forms made of paper, various media, and the earth (literally) which were then hardened by a firing process. Some objects were formed so that Hebrew letters could be discerned in their overall shapes.

Swartz's most recent efforts, several paintings brought together as the "Shen Qi Series: The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds," is based on the Chinese healing tradition of Qi Gong as well as the Kabbalah. The four worlds of the title refers to the four interrelated levels of creation, from the spiritual to the physical, adumbrated in one of the earliest kabbalistic texts, the *Sefer Yetzirah* or *The Book of Creation.* In the paintings there are layers composed of mandorlas and lines based on the Tree of Life or the Sefirot.



Beth Ames Swartz. *Shen Qi Series: The Cabalistic Scheme of the Four Worlds,* #5. 1998, mixed media with gold leaf on canvas, 48" x 60". Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Kirschbaum. *Kidroon Valley, #3*. 1991, oil on wood, 80" x 30". Courtesy of the artist.

squared areas of gold leaf to symbolize purity of the soul, and still other lines to suggest the transmission of energy through the various levels of spiritual and physical being and good health. For Swartz, each painting is not merely a pictorial synthesis of some mystical material she has read, but a living document which she feels gives off energy a sympathetic viewer can feel.

Robert Kirschbaum's architectural studies, begun in 1977, have equally complex layers of meaning, but are not meant to engage the viewer so aggressively. Rather they might be considered intellectual exercises in exploring the various mystical states of mind evoked by contemplating the Temple in Jerusalem. Motivated, in part, by sacred temple sites he had seen in India, Kirschbaum, a Connecticut resident, has explored a variety of images of his chosen subject since the late 1970s. Usually they consist of vertical paintings of architectural forms, often overlaid with geometric elements; their colors are usually bright for a very precise reason.

He chose architectural work because it is "the single most potent image in a religion that eschews representation." For Kirschbaum, the vertical image becomes an archetypal doorway that suggests not only the poetic idea of passage, but specific biblical and kabbalistic references. Kirschbaum likens his artistic creation to the symbolic rebuilding of the Temple, while its overpainted grids invoke, for him, the tent-like structures he associates with the Tabernacle. At the same time, his vertical forms conjure up the notion found in the Zohar of the Torah as being like both a human body and an entire building. In this view, the complex grids superimposed on the designs symbolize the primordial and still unsettled world of points which expand during the process of creation, according to the kabbalistic interpretations of Isaac Luria.

The bright colors, particularly the yellows and golds, recall the many images of light to be found in Kabbalah, symbolizing a variety of aspects up to and including the Ein Sof, the unknown and unknowable force at the center of Kabbalistic thought. Kirschbaum has singled out one passage in the Zohar as key to the meditative qualities with which he imbues his work (in Gershom Scholem's translation):

"The primal center is the innermost light, of a translucence, subtility [sic] and purity beyond comprehension. That inner point extended becomes a palace, which acts as an enclosure for the center and is also of a radiance translucent beyond the power to know it."

In a way similar to Bruria Finkel's meditations on the meaning of the chariot wheel, Kirschbaum suggests that reflecting upon the Temple and entry into it symbolizes transformation, revelation, rebirth, and, not least, hope.

There are yet other artists who find inspiration in Kabbalah. In broad artistic terms, they share with the artists mentioned here a desire to add spiritual content to their art. To a greater or lesser degree, their art is meditative, descriptive, or a combination of both, and they would like their art to be in dialogue with the viewer. As Jews, their art is part of their search for Jewish identity in ways that can link them to ancient religious traditions rather than to changing contemporary Jewish cultural conditions. They are less concerned with community, as basic as that is to Jewish modes of worship and group activities, than with a few core ideas that define Judaism for them. These include, as considered above, passages from the Torah, kabbalistic interpretations of these passages, and the actual locations mentioned in the Torah and their resonances through history. Perhaps most important for the artists, they want to define their Judaism on their own terms. The Kabbalah is fluid enough for them to do so. ❑

For John *(continued from page 52)*

the heights of the Sierra Nevada. I spread them near a spot where my congregation worships and celebrates creation every Rosh Hashanah.

Twice a year, I am sure to remember John. On his Yarhzeit. And as a new year begins.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash ...

I mourn John's life, ended in Louisiana's electric chair at the age of twenty-five.

I mourn too John's victim, Barbara Jo Brown, her life ended violently on a levee in Luling, Louisiana, at the age of eleven.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash ...

Ten years later, little in our justice system seems changed. I remain the committed opponent of capital punishment that I was then. I know the arguments on both sides. I doubt that positions on this horrible matter will be swayed by any of them.

I know though, with a certainty, that I have seen the demonic incarnate in this world. Firmly grounded in a tradition that holds life's sanctity above all else, I know clearly when life's holiness has been upended by state-sanctioned murder.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash ...

I know no way to say "Amen." ❑