

# The Shiviti Paintings of Jill Nathanson

*The Elizabeth Harris gallery is noteworthy for its focus on painterly painting. Ms. Harris maintains a space in Chelsea, where the concerns of process and material aspects of the painter's trade have an ongoing home. If the gallery has any sort of agenda, it is that artistic emotion and thought be embedded in this viscous and palpably tactile medium, a demand that illicitly startling admissions of honesty and vulnerability as demonstrated by the exhibited works. The examples of Pat Passlof, Jim Bohary, Tracy Jones, Victor Pesce and a group show appearance by the ever-mysterious Albert York, harness a well felt maturity and unflagging imagination usually inspiring confidence. What amounts to stylistic difference is far less important than initially apparent. As Harold Bloom has stated in *The Anxiety of Influence*, 1 a tension always exists between the exhaustion of a historical style and the will to be original at this late point in our culture. Thus, an aura of poignancy is added to these artist's considerable gifts, giving their work a meaning, emotional directness and resolve in an era that has often abandoned or ironized models of subjectivity.*



Jill Nathanson is also a member of the gallery readily demonstrating such complexity. In a body of work stretching over several exhibitions, Nathanson has sought to expand the context of abstract painting. Such works as *Influence*, 2002 and *Secrets of a Solid*, 2000 play off the schematics of traditional two-point perspective. Diamond-like shapes are held in place by a grid. This organization could easily double for the panes of glass on a skyscraper in any urban environment. Illusion is enhanced by the draftsmanship as a view seen from the ground. Vanishing points fly off rather steeply, implying great distance. Yet going to great lengths, the artist undermines this experience, aerating or encrusting the surface as she sees fit. Her interests in Matisse and Hofmann concern color as an organizational principle. Hofmann's Push-Pull theory is of particular importance, prioritizing color

relationships as dynamic spatial tensions inherently in conflict and addressed only through balance. This lesson is transposed to Nathanson's carefully layered and loaded trapezoidal shapes, which interrelate as flattened design elements but also exist within an implied perspectival matrix. Terra verde greens, salmon pinks or icy blues constantly invert expectation by the subtle intrusion of patches of color breaking against the picture plane. In her words, this sets up an "aesthetic of negation"; a contradictory flux employed against the positivism of the drawings perceptual evidence. A category is then created. It is neither abstraction as an autonomous object, or a nature-based reduction purified to an essence, but a dialectical and unstable relationship of the two. Its very meaning rests upon perceptual and cognitive anomalies that have sent human beings to scratch their heads in negotiating space and assessing experience since time began.

Nathanson's other body of work is related formally, but is more specific and personal in content. In her Shiviti Series, the artist has addressed her own Jewish background and its relationship to the ideas of Modernism. From the Kantian Sublime and Theosophy, to Mondrian, Rothko and Newman, artists have addressed issues of spirituality through what was impossible to express or demarcate in conventionally figurative terms. Robert Rosenblum traced this development from the Northern Romantic painters and their experience of an abstracting transcendental principal derived from the landscape.<sup>2</sup> However, Jewish painters like Rothko and critics like Clement Greenberg emerged from a different tradition. Jewish culture grapples with an invisible God, where the proscriptions of the Second Commandment do not out-law representational images as is popularly imagined, but proscribes their limitations. The overwhelming concern is a fear of idolatry, as Mimesis, the mirroring of nature may become something to worship in itself. Many philosophers characterize Mimesis as the essential Greek preoccupation, whereby hermeneutics and textuality remain the essential Jewish ones. This is experienced as a conflict in the West, as old as the Iconoclastic Controversy of the Byzantine Empire and as new as the anti-visual discourse of the French Deconstructivists. It sets up a Jewish dialectic as a unique arbiter of meaning, one that Nathanson comments upon and is readily familiar.

Shivitis are also called Misrachs. They are decorative plaques found on the eastern walls of Synagogues in Europe and the Middle East. During Diasporic times, eastern walls took on a special significance as they faced Jerusalem, the spiritual home of Jews in exile. The origin of the Shiviti comes from the 16th Psalm, transliterated into Hebrew and translated as: "Shivi Adonai Lunegdi Tamid. I have set the Lord before me always." The words became part of the daily prayer. By the 18th and 19th Centuries, votive tablets with these words on them were used as a point of focus and mediation in Synagogue worship. Nathanson has accessed the history of both Abstract Expressionism and Cubism to produce a series of creative Shivitis for no actual religious purpose, but for a powerful analogy between the specifics of

religious worship and the Sublime as related to Modernist Painting. The series is merely numbered, such as Shiviti #5 or 7, recalling the Greenbergian inspired practice of Jackson Pollack. They are also executed in an oval format, similar to the Cubist still-lives of Picasso and Braque. Nathanson employs text as does Picasso's *Ma Jolie*, 1911-12, but use of the painted Hebrew liturgical phrase slyly equates her technique with concepts and the process of the sacred text itself. In Talmudic thought, God consulted the Torah in the world's making, so so textuality is paramount and is subsumed into the visual. The artist effaces a portion of the phrase as part of her practice, another apparent aside to the act of creation as both artistic and divine.

The Jewish mystical tradition, called Kabbalah, sees the absolute unity of creation within the 26 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Nathanson perceives an affinity with the German Pictorial tradition beginning with Goethe and ending with Hofmann and relates it to Jewish thought. Colors have individual characteristics of their own, but as previously mentioned create aesthetic wholes through dialectical tension. From a Jewish point of view, this corresponds to the Kabbalistic concept of the Spherot, dynamic qualities of the Godhead that must be reconciled specifically through the moral actions, prayers and meditations of the individual. In this case, the aesthetic integration of the picture must be completed by the observer yearning for completion, yet never actually receiving it. The Shiviti paintings render a Jewish dimension to the teachings of Hofmann, even as it refers to Nathanson's other body of painting. If a German and Jewish connection seems odd, a worthwhile corollary to this premise is an article by the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas on the German Idealism of the great Jewish philosophers. An important dialogue has been tragically cut short, one that is still open to speculation. For Nathanson the artist, the German artistic legacy must be embraced. For Nathanson the Jew, this embrace is inherently problematic but essentially dialectical. Historical conflict is a state never to be resolved, but diacritically presented through social, utopian, religious or artistic constructs. Strangely, this diacritical stance echoes the color and picture plane problematics so important to Hofmann and to the artist, herself.

These paintings exist in a world where color is paramount as a speculum of metaphysical activity. Never slathered or wantonly spilled, the works are instead layered and stippled with utmost precision. Conversely, Nathanson is also an experimenter, evoking the text while creating webs of meaning that conceal even as they reveal. Reds, blues and violets dominate, reversing weights and perceptions of volume through chroma alone. By placing a purplish black on top, or a thin butter yellow on the ground plane, she analogizes universal concepts of creation as speculated by rabbinical sources, all while simply playing with color. If the weight of history has often stymied us, as Harold Bloom suggests, artists like Nathanson can reinvigorate abstraction by creating a dialogue with Jewish ideas and the

artistic past. Ultimately what is most Jewish in Bloom and Nathanson herself, is the idea that only through embracing the weight of the past, can joy and henceforth spontaneity be utterly possible.

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Footnotes

- 1) Bloom, Harold The Anxiety of Influence. Pgs 19-96
- 2) Rosenblum, Robert Modern Painting and the Northern Sublime. Pgs 10-64
- 3) Habermas, Jurgen The German Idealism of the Jewish philosophers Pgs 21-43

References

- 1) Bloom , Harold The Anxiety of Influence; A Theory of Poetry. NY: Oxford University Press.1997
- 2) Habermas, Jurgen The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers. Philosophy and Political Profiles, Pgs21-43 Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983
- 3) Julius Anthony Idolizing Pictures; Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art. NY: Thames and Hudson, 2001
- 4) Kochan, Lionel Beyond the Graven Image. NY: New York University Press, 1997
- 5) Rosenblum, Robert Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. NY: Harper and Row, 1975
- 6) Gabreille Sed- Rajna Jewish Art. NY: Harry N Abrams, Inc 1995

