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Tobi Kahn: A Profile

TOBI Kahn is standing near the sliding doors of the meditation room he has just completed. The room is in the offices of the HealthCare Chaplaincy on the east side of Manhattan [see Plate 1]. The Chaplaincy is a multi-faith center that provides spiritual care for the patients in forty of New York City's hospitals. It also educates medical professionals, seminarians, ordained clergy, and qualified lay people in the "art and science of pastoral care." The room is for the use of the staff and provides a quiet place for reflection, meditation, or prayer. It is meant to be a place of refuge and refreshment for those who serve the suffering.

Kahn has been showing the room to a few friends. He made the paintings that literally fill three walls, and designed everything in the room except the wooden architectural framework in which the paintings are recessed. The initial effect is a bit like being in a summer porch or sunroom with a vista of the ocean. In the room are three chairs and two benches, all made by Kahn, and two more benches stand outside the doors. The doors are made of a simple horizontal grid of glass framed by oak mullions. The panes are rendered translucent by a slightly irregular pattern of rectangles filled with fine parallel lines. A bookstand beside the doors holds the scriptures of several faiths. When the doors are closed, they filter the light from the outside the way a Soji screen might, and effectively mute one's awareness of the lobby and reception desk a few feet away.

Employees are leaving for the evening, and stop to say goodbye to the gregarious artist. It is clear they like the room and enjoy interacting with him. One woman pauses to ask, "I hope you won't be insulted by my question, but would you call yourself a minimalist or an abstract expressionist? I'd like to be able to talk about your work when people ask questions." Tobi smiles and says, "Well, I don't think there is such a movement, but I'd call myself a 'reductive realist.'" He goes on to say that he wants to give people images that are rooted in recognizable things, but are not so specific as to lead to foregone conclusions. "I love it when people see things that I'm not aware of and wasn't thinking about when I made the paintings."

The nine vertical panels that form the walls of the room are characteristic of

Kahn's landscape imagery, and his sky and water paintings. The imagery is simple and stark. The three wide central paintings opposite the glass doors depict a thickish dark horizon line with ocean below and sky above. The narrower paintings to the right and the left continue the horizon line. In them are small island forms, two on the right and one on the left. If you sit in one of the chairs, you have the sense that a land mass stretches off behind you.

The three chairs are made of wood painted a deep graphite gray, and they glisten with a pale iridescence. The seats and backs are upholstered in rich wine-red leather. Tobi, who leaves no detail to chance, shows us that the cushion of foam beneath the leather retains the imprint of the body for about a minute after one leaves the chair, gradually returning to its full form. "I chose that because I wanted the presence of the person to continue for awhile, even after they've left. Isn't that beautiful?"

As is often the case with Kahn's furniture, the chairs have paintings on them. On the back of each one, a chain of organically shaped golden forms with deep red edges hovers over a grayish-white field. They suggest cells, with microscopically defined edges, and also the way an atoll emerges from the ocean, with smaller shapes extending from a larger central mass in an encircling embrace. They have a biological and geological primacy. Kahn explains that for him the image suggests the presence of God, and also the act of creation.

The chairs, like the doors, are simple and rectilinear, and are related to the proportions of the room. They seem to belong to a larger whole, yet are not matched to the room in any obvious way. The room conveys a subtle feeling of purpose, and to sit in the chairs can lead to a sense that you are participating in an undisclosed plan. As you face the paintings, the horizon line is slightly below eye level, "so you won't feel like you are in the water," Kahn explains.

The horizon itself is not a sharp line; it darkens where the sky and sea meet, and neither area is chromatically uniform. While the paintings are dominantly one color, their entire surfaces are inflected by hints and glimmers of difference, and the dominant colors have shifts of tone, temperature, and intensity. This mutability is achieved by a density of paint that is one of the hallmarks of Kahn's work. The painting surface does not have the lush, oily wetness that one associates with an abstract expressionist like de Kooning. They are thick and matted, the result of a painstaking layering of acrylic paint. The first layers are made with modeling paste; after that, many layers of differently pigmented semi-opaque acrylic polymers are built up over the textured surface. The final layers are washes, and they disclose the presence of the earlier colors beneath. The effect is paradoxical—the paintings have an insistent physicality, but create a visible evanescence that can't quite be pinned down.

Kahn particularly delights in the room's lighting. The ceiling has square recessed lights, but also features a shallow rectangular barrel vault that opens

above the three chairs in the center of the room. The vault is lined with hidden fluorescent lights, and the different sources and intensities make multiple lighting arrangements possible, which can dramatically change one's sense of time, color, distance, and reference. Kahn says he likes the room best when all the lights are off and the walls are barely illuminated by the ambient light filtering through the glass doors. Then the barely visible images of sky, water, and land have a nocturnal quality that evokes my childhood memories of being near the ocean. When I ask Kahn where he spent his summers as a child, he tells me his family rented a place on Long Island, and he would look at the ocean for hours, mesmerized by the interaction of the land, sea, and sky.

Another chaplaincy staff member has joined us, a shy and serious young man who relates that he tries to spend fifteen minutes a day in the room. I ask him what he does during that time, meditate or worship? He meditates. However it is used, Kahn's room involves time. It is not made for the art world's equivalent of channel surfing, standing at the door of a gallery and scanning for some quick stimulus for the eye, the mind, or the heart. If no immediate connection occurs, we shift our gaze and move on. A lot of art, like so much of our visual culture, is engaged and passed over in a matter of seconds. The HealthCare Chaplaincy installation requires the physical and temporal experience of being *in* the room—its simplicity belies the fact that one can't "see" the work in a glance.

While he has made over a dozen commissioned environments, this is the first room-based project that Kahn has completed. Two more are in the planning stages, one for a meditation center in Manhattan, and the other commissioned by Jane Owen and the Blaffer Trust for New Harmony, Indiana. The New Harmony project will be Kahn's first freestanding building. He has also completed two Holocaust memorials. All these projects unite several interests of Kahn's, including painting, sculpture, ceremonial objects, furniture, sacred space, religion, and the potential for art to be redemptive and transformative.

Kahn is a native New Yorker who grew up in Washington Heights, a community nicknamed "Frankfurt on the Hudson," because it was so heavily populated by German Jews who had escaped from or survived the Holocaust. Kahn and his older sister, a poet now living in Israel, were unusual among their childhood friends because they knew their grandparents. The grandparents had managed to get out of Germany alive.

Kahn's father's family had lived in Germany for over four hundred years, and his grandfather won the Iron Cross in World War I. The cross was awarded to him along with a note stating, "The gratitude of the Fatherland is yours forever." That forever had a tragically short life, as Kahn's uncle was one of the first Jews Hitler executed for his part in anti-Nazi protests at Würzburg University in 1933. After Kahn's grandparents came to the United States, they encouraged their two remaining sons to enlist in the American army and fight against Hitler's armies in

Europe. Kahn's maternal grandparents had substantial means, but abandoned everything when the grandmother, sensing the import of Hitler's rise to power as Chancellor, refused to return to Germany from a skiing holiday in Switzerland. They left everything they had in Germany and fled first to Holland, then England, and finally to America. So Kahn's life is bound to the Holocaust, and of course, to Judaism.

If one thinks that Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* defines the relationship between Judaism and art, one might assume that Tobi's life and work would be in tension with his heritage. Nothing could be further from the truth. His father became a successful wine importer after World War II. Tobi was taken to museums as a child, and art and culture were valued in his home. Any tensions between Tobi and his family over the choice to be an artist were practical, not religious. The dominant post-war image of the artist as the unstable, struggling Bohemian was at odds with his family's desire to see Tobi establish a family and achieve the secure, "normal" life that the United States offered Holocaust survivors.

Kahn was educated at a Talmudic academy in New York City and studied for a year at Tel Aviv University, then for three years at a yeshiva near Jerusalem. Many people who spend that much time in a religious education go on for ordination, but Tobi never planned on a religious vocation. He tells me, "I just found it incredibly stimulating to study Talmud."

Tobi traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East before returning to major in photography at Hunter College. He did his graduate work in painting at the Pratt Institute, where he studied with George McNeil. McNeil had been a participant in some of the major postwar American movements, including abstract expressionism during the early 1950s. But McNeil developed as an expressive figurative painter in the seventies, which went against the grain of the emerging interest in concepts and contexts, as well as the formally oriented abstraction that still reigned in American art. His art was related to postwar European existential movements like Cobra and *art brut*. Like Philip Guston's, McNeil's late paintings foreshadowed the rise of neo-expressionism in the 1980s.

McNeil had a big influence on Tobi, which extended beyond stylistic and thematic considerations—though those are evident. McNeil exemplified something fundamental about how to be an artist. "He stressed that you should look at everything and not be guided by what is currently fashionable. He provided an example of how to live your life as an artist." Kahn tries to develop this sense of openness to diverse sources and influences in his students at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he teaches one foundation class and one advanced fine art workshop two half-days a week. He has taught at the school since 1985, and relishes the contact with young artists, though his growing number of projects and exhibitions makes time scarce and a steady income less of a necessity.

In 2000 Pratt honored Kahn with the Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award, and in the spring of 2001 exhibited a series of his heads along with three of McNeil's paintings from the 1970s. Some of Kahn's heads in the exhibition go back to his graduate days. In the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibit, the art historian Peter Selz writes that they are "remarkable works of a kind rarely produced by a graduate student." What is striking to me about the heads is the level of anguish and disquietude that they convey. In works like *LEIMA I* [see Plate 2], done in 1977, one recognizes the thick defining contour and simple shapes that characterize Kahn's mature work. But here the qualities of isolation, loss, and an intimate knowledge of grief seem at odds with the emotional tenor of so much of his later work.

Tobi tells me that two things coalesced to give the heads their sense of tragedy and loss. He decided to confront the Holocaust personally, and in the mid-seventies he visited many of the major death camps, like Auschwitz and Dachau, as well as studying documentary films and photographs about Hitler's program of genocide. He had to see for himself that his relatives, including the uncle whose name he bears, experienced annihilation. He became aware of the fragility of his own being and how close he stood to the awful silence of the missing lives. Then, when he returned to the States he found that a young woman he was deeply involved with was deathly ill. She was hospitalized and had lost her hair to chemotherapy. He saw in her physical deformation the same kind of violation the death camps had wrought. The woman recovered, but the combined experiences gave those early heads their emotional charge.

The subject of the Holocaust presents difficulties for any visual artist. The immensity of the crime and the presence of so much documentary evidence make it hard to grapple with directly. The critic Robert Hughes observed in *The Shock of the New* that "Expressionist distortion of the human body in art seemed to be...a gloss on what the Nazis had done on a vast industrial scale to real bodies." It is significant that Kahn nowhere reveals the source of anguish and sorrow in the heads. They seem to be a psychic response to what has happened *within* those of us who see suffering, a record of what loss feels like rather than generalized pictures of a victim of some tragedy. And the particulars of Kahn's experience are not finally the point of his art. He aspires to a body of work that strikes a universal human chord, and speaks to diverse experiences and circumstances.

We are now at the stage in history where direct contact with those who lived through the first half of the twentieth century is quickly slipping away. Our need to recall history can no longer be met by first-person narratives. This change corresponds to a growing interest in American art and culture with memorials, beginning with Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Kahn has created two memorials to the Holocaust, one made in 1997 for the Jewish Community Center on the Palisades in Tenafly, New Jersey, and the other

at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center in San Diego in 2000. Both are located on the grounds of the centers and incorporate fully landscaped settings with plants, trees, and stones.

The photographs that Kahn gives me show expressive figural bronze forms in each memorial. I hesitate to write about any sculpture or site without direct experience, but one photograph of the San Diego memorial intrigues me [see Plate 3]. The two bronze forms are almost featureless, but gesture evocatively. The larger central figure is rising, holding a bronze basin that overflows with water. The smaller figure in the background raises arms in supplication. Tobi tells me that he conceived of them as a mother bringing water to a parched and desolate child. They are set in a field of boulders that he selected and placed to evoke old eastern European Jewish graveyards. The names of death camps throughout Europe are on many stones; a few others bear the names of "righteous ones," who came to the aid of Jews during the Holocaust. The place is made to suggest that water from the basin irrigates all the plants, including a tree beside the boulder field. The gestures, materials, and elements bring together both the biblical imagery of watering with tears, and the tree that flourishes in the desert. The whole composition is framed by a dark granite wall that lists the names of San Diego family members who perished in the Holocaust. *REMEMBER* is written in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish at the top of the wall, and inside the complex is an archive of audio recordings of individuals' experiences of the Holocaust.

The total image is solemn, but not funereal. It commemorates something hideous, but also suggests that the barren ground of the Holocaust has within it the potential for renewal and transformation. Tobi's wife Nessa Rapoport wrote a meditation for the memorial whose epigraph is Isaiah 58:11, "You shall be like a watered garden, a spring whose waters never fail." One verse in the poem says, "Here in this meditative space, we can stroll or sit, reflecting on what can never be repaired, and on what continues, despite all we have undergone, to persist and flourish."

There is a twenty-year span between the heads Kahn made as a graduate student and the recent Holocaust memorials. The period is a cornucopia of artistic productivity—painting, ritual objects, shrines, and small and large sculptures—the result of a remarkable drive and energy. He seems to be spring-loaded, and his walk, actions, and conversation have a kind of buoyancy. He is a consummate multi-tasker who can take phone calls, discuss his work, wrap paintings going to an exhibit, and explain what needs to be done to a studio assistant with hardly a break in stride. He once showed me some small sculptures he'd whittled while on the plane trip back from Israel, using the time to make studies for larger wooden or bronze pieces. Every moment seems to be put to a use—there is no idle time. One wonders how he copes with the Sabbath that he

so scrupulously observes with his family, cut off as he is from telephones, faxes, and the burgeoning demands of his art. It is hard to imagine Tobi at rest.

When I remark on his industry Tobi explains that children of Holocaust survivors are often high achievers. There is something about the heritage that can propel people towards productive and socially useful lives. He names children he grew up with, who have become prominent in their fields, including one that he thinks may someday win a Nobel prize for his work in pathology. "There are articles written by sociologists about this—the way some children of survivors are such high achievers."

On several occasions when I question Kahn about the drive behind his work, he says that one of his desires is "to leave the world a better place than I found it." He goes on to say that this is something critical that he wants to impress on his three children. In fact, his children are also part of the story of survivors. It was unimaginable to him, given the extermination of so many Jews, not to have children. His wife is a writer who currently works with a foundation that supports advanced leadership education in the Jewish and non-profit worlds. They both have high-paced, fully scheduled lives, but it is clear that family is central to their identity. Often during visits to his studio he is on the phone with his parents, wife, or children. He preferred to conduct our evening discussions in his home, rather than be away from them. There, the children come and go, participating in our conversations to the degree that they are interested, and Harry Potter rubs shoulders with Mark Rothko. What strikes me is that this emphasis on family shelters Tobi from the fate of too many artists, who offer up family life as a sacrifice on the altar of art.

An artist's studio is special. As a wonderful book about them so aptly suggests, the studio is *Imagination's Chamber*. In the studio you can see the materials and processes of procreation and observe the gestation of an artist's work. In someone's studio I have a sense that I am privy to something hidden. There is no model for studios; each is unique to the patterns and needs of the artist. The re-creation of Mondrian's Manhattan studio in the comprehensive exhibition at MOMA a few years back demonstrated that Mondrian ordered his life and work just as he did his art; stripped to essentials, based on rectilinear coordinates, and with considerably more space than objects.

Though in a very different manner, Kahn is an artistic essentializer and distiller like Mondrian. But his studio bears no relation to Mondrian's monkish cell. Kahn's studio is in Long Island City, across the East River from Manhattan, in a nondescript neighborhood just beginning to show the first signs of revitalization after years of neglect. He has had the studio for twenty years—five rooms on the third floor over a steakhouse. The rooms pass one from the other at odd angles. The spatial confusion is compounded by the fact that the rooms are stuffed with paintings, sculptures, shipping crates, shrines, furniture, odd and interesting

things Kahn has collected, woodworking machines, tables full of brushes and paint jars, half completed work, piles of papers and catalogues, and just plain stuff. Even after several visits, I have a hard time finding the bathroom.

The density of the things in his studio testifies to Kahn's artistic fecundity. He currently has three former students working for him. This may sound extravagant, but it is minimal compared to the reported eighty assistants Jeff Koons had at his high point. Tobi is very particular about only having assistants prepare materials and rough projects out with his oversight; the completed object is always made by Tobi himself. He does not operate on the factory model, where the artist designs but somebody else produces, except for perhaps a few "personal" flourishes applied at the very end. He has never heard of Thomas Kinkade.

Since Tobi's life has some of the multi-directional kinetics and bounce of a Frank Stella relief, it would be logical to expect that his art would have this quality too. But that is not the case. The element of time in Kahn's work seems unbroken, unlike the rhythms and divisions of a schedule. This is particularly true for the paintings, which have a stillness that is not static, since they do not have classically balanced elements designed to achieve structural equipoise. The quiet that pervades his painting has a brooding quality, as if the image might shift slightly if you looked away.

Essentially the paintings fall into two large groups. There are early paintings like *ISA* of 1985 [see Plate 4] where the reference to a landscape is clear. In more recent work the landscape imagery is often less stable, and may shift to read as a biological form like a microbe, or something phantasmagoric. *QINTA III* of 1998 [see Plate 6] suggests both of these, as well as a shoreline or estuary. Sometimes a painting will read as a head too, recalling his graduate-era work, as *SIDO* of 1989 does. And some paintings resist the spatial logic of landscape, even as their organic forms so easily read as parts of one. Kahn is a master of figure-ground relationships, and this, combined with highly suggestive forms and beautifully adjusted color and tonal relationships, gives his work its feeling that the images and atmospheres are animate, even in their stillness.

The sources for the imagery are fed by Kahn's extensive travels. He is particularly drawn to places like the desert in Israel or the southwestern United States. He is also drawn to ancient and prehistoric sites, and to the imagery of microbiology. He often takes photographs as a form of visual notation, sometimes drawing or painting on top of a photograph to provide a point of departure for his work. But essentially the imagery springs from within him.

An important aspect of Kahn's work, and part of what gives it its sensibility of being undisturbed by the changes of time, is that he is interested in memory and what is visualized within. The critic Dore Ashton has written that Kahn unites our perception of the material with our memory. His paintings have a strong evocation of place or thing, but not as these subjects are directly apprehended.

Rather, Kahn shows them as they might be remembered, perhaps springing from the deep wells within us where longing and memory intermingle. In this way they touch something primal and direct.

The titles Kahn gives his work sound like words from a lost language. They have no literal meaning, even though they are sometimes derived from English or Hebrew words, and have personal references for the artist. But they can be marvelously evocative, and like the art mix what is intuited with what is mysterious.

The first "big" show Kahn participated in was *New Horizons in American Art* at the Guggenheim Museum in 1985. It featured the work of nine artists, and Kahn was one of four whose work used landscape as a subject. Since then he has been in many thematic exhibits devoted to landscapes, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's *Landscape at the Millennium* which closed two days into 2001. One of three artists exhibited, he created an installation of nine large *Sky and Water* paintings that are directly related to the central wall of the HealthCare Chaplaincy.

The Albright-Knox also exhibited examples of nineteenth-century American artists who are often mentioned in discussions of Kahn's work. Both Romantics like Ralph Blakelock and Albert Pinkham Ryder, and luminists associated with transcendentalism like Albert Bierstadt and John Kensett were there as artistic antecedents. Kahn's imagery also places him in a lineage of twentieth-century artists that includes Wassily Kandinsky, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and Rothko. While these artists differ in significant ways, they are united by a conviction that art can bear witness to and increase our sensitivity to the spiritual currents that lie beneath the skin of the visible world. Kahn's work is most often discussed in terms of its spirituality, and the spiritual is a quality he actively seeks to cultivate.

Someday someone wise enough—or foolhardy enough—will set out to delineate the complex and often troubled relationship between the visual arts and religion in the modern period. Suffice it to say here that the concept of the spiritual in art grew out of the desire on the part of some artists, historians, and theologians to forge an alternative to the difficulties that art and religion have created for each other over the last two centuries. Thus, the concept of spirituality has created a free zone where distinctly individual beliefs can affirm the experience of transcendence, without resorting to conventional religious symbols, or making claims of ultimacy, or resting on received tradition. The spiritual in art is personal instead of institutional, and is the artistic stepchild of the liberal democratic impulse to accommodate difference, rather than favor orthodoxy. While Kahn has drawn deeply from his own Jewish roots, he has also been inspired by the art and artifacts of many cultures. The small shrines that usually house an abstracted figure are good examples of his varied cultural interests. Their architectural sources include the biblical Holy of Holies, Cycladic structures, classical western

elements, Middle Eastern tombs, and Asian temples. Kahn wants to create an art that is accessible to as many different people as possible and that will draw from the positive elements he believes all religions teach and point toward. He is interested in the fact that all cultures have sacred spaces, but he is not interested in trying to define the sacred.

Tobi has never rebelled against his own identity as a Jew. He has been observant his entire life. While he was a student in art school in the 1970s he wore his yarmulke, the small cap that is a sign of reverence for God. This faithful gesture was not a path to quick acceptance by some of the students and faculty, who tended to view open Jewish commitment suspiciously. He says, "It pained me to realize that people were categorizing me before they knew me. They felt it created a division, like I was saying, 'I belong to this party.' I believe in relating to all people, not in dividing them up into groups."

Being observant means submitting oneself to the practices that give form to faith, and Kahn willingly follows Jewish laws. But he is concerned that this is easily misperceived. He does not attend gallery openings on Friday evenings because of Shabbat, but emphasizes that this is something positive for *his* life, rather than a statement about what other people should do. And he does not see his life as monocular, where everything leads to or flows from the one point perspective of belief. He particularly feels this about his art. "I do not want to be a poster boy for Jewish art. There are many interests in my life, and my art grows out of those. I am not about one thing, and to interpret what I make as if it were simply this or that would be wrong."

While Tobi is not interested in creating an art that is Jewish, he is very interested in what art can bring to Jewish practice and ritual. For almost twenty years he has been making objects that are used in the ceremonies and rituals his family observes. Shortly after their marriage, he and his wife were traveling in England and happened to visit Charleston House in Sussex, one of the houses frequented by the Bloomsbury Group. He was stunned by the way everything in the house was designed purposefully, including the painted furniture. Here the art was enhancing all of life, and this vision stimulated Kahn to make his first furniture. Over the years he has made not only furniture, but also things categorized as Judaica—like the menorah used during the celebration of Hanukkah, or the mezuzah that houses portions of the Torah and is mounted on the doorway of the home.

My own concept of Judaica is tarnished by its association in my mind with religious kitsch. My scant exposure to it makes me lump it in with paintings sold in Christian bookstores and night-lights that are also plastic Madonnas. I asked Ruth Weisberg, who happened to be visiting Tobi's studio during one of my calls, if my perception was correct. She is the dean of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California, and has been working with Jewish subjects in

her prints, paintings, and installations for many years. She said that unfortunately my perception was often true, but that Tobi has made a dramatic point in turning to Judaica. "He has gotten closer to the sources of inspiration, and brings the intelligence and vision of a master artist to this."

Ceremonial objects are made to be used, not merely admired, and over the years Kahn has gathered quite a collection of items that he'd made for family occasions. *NATYH* from 1986 [see Plate 5] are three chairs that he made for his wife, his mother, and his mother-in-law on the occasion of Shalom Bat, or baby naming, when a newborn girl receives blessings. Tobi says that this is a tradition, not a law like the requirement of circumcision for males. The chairs were his way of enhancing that tradition, and helped bring dignity, beauty, and memory to the family's reception of a new member. Tobi explains that the impulse for this comes from the Biblical concept of "Hiddur Mitzvah," which means to "beautify the commandment."

In the mid-1990s, the Jewish Museum in New York asked Tobi if he would teach a summer course for high school students. He was interested and said he would like to do a workshop on making ceremonial objects. He believes that people should make rituals based on their beliefs, and that ritual helps people connect to what is sacred in their life. One of the people attending a workshop was Carol Spinner, who was working for the Continuity Commission of the UJA-Federation of New York. The commission was looking for innovative educational programs, and she was struck both by the number of teenagers who said "this is the first time Judaism makes any sense," and the fact that she too felt a powerful connection to her identity as a Jew. She describes Tobi as a born teacher who meets people where they live, and helps them overcome their fear that they can't make "art."

Around the same time, Laura Kruger, the curator at Hebrew Union College Museum in New York, was trying to persuade Tobi to exhibit his ceremonial objects. He was reluctant, fearing perhaps that this would put him in the "Jewish art" box he wants to avoid. When the art historian and critic Michael Brenson told him "don't be ridiculous, these are beautiful, exhibit them," that helped change his mind. After the initial exhibit at the Hebrew Union, which was well received, Spinner proposed a traveling exhibition. Kahn agreed, if she would find the funding, and if the exhibit would include workshops on ceremonial objects.

The result is the traveling exhibit *Avoda: Objects of the Spirit*. The word is derived from the Hebrew *Avodah,* which can mean both work and worship. The exhibit was funded by philanthropic organizations for a year to test the concept, and the exhibit and workshops traveled to museums, universities, and summer camps. More than 1,400 people participated in the workshops, which were not just oriented to Jews. Spinner says, "Students walk away from our workshops tremendously empowered by the experience, whether they are black, Jewish,

Chinese, or Muslim." Now *Avoda* is a five-year traveling exhibit and workshop, and a book on the project with essays about its significance for art, religion, and culture will be published next year.

The number of projects in planning stages, the traveling exhibits (in addition to *Avoda, Correspondences,* an exhibition of paintings and works on paper is traveling throughout 2003), and forthcoming single exhibitions (paintings based on the idea of creation at Yeshiva University will open in September of 2002, and *Sky and Water* paintings will open at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, opening in May of 2003, both in New York) give ample evidence of growing critical recognition for Kahn's work. Tobi does not take it for granted, and tells me, "I know this could evaporate quickly. I've seen it happen." He also takes pains to establish that he is "in this for the long haul," and is working on what is important to him. He recognizes the growing interest in the spiritual and religious in the art world, but is not too worried that this will ever become a trend. "I thought that might happen after September 11, but it looks to me like things haven't changed that much."

Part of the significance of Kahn's work is its relation to this historical moment. If the concept of the spiritual constituted modernity's passage into the rocky terrain where religion and art meet, the interest in Kahn's ceremonial objects may indicate a change in our landscape. The artifacts and practices of Judaism have passed from the private sphere of Kahn's immediate family to a small but interested public. Engaging this work involves a different set of assumptions and perceptions than, say, looking for coded thematic elements of Jewish experience in Richard Serra's work.

Finally, this is a testimony to the *art* of Kahn's work, which is as he wants it. But it is interesting to note that religious identity, particularly when practiced with the hospitality towards diversity that characterizes Tobi's thinking, is no longer outside the frame of art. Kahn's art has been preoccupied with evoking our sense and memory of things that quietly persist even as they defy direct representation. Kahn has found a way to traverse the boundaries that so often keep art separate from the act of living.