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Sacred Space Explored in Fall Exhibit at MOBIA New Works by Tobi Kahn on View Beginning October 16

NEW YORK, June 17, 2009—The Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) will present ***Tobi Kahn: Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century***, an exhibition of 30 recent paintings, sculptures and objects by the noted New York artist, from **October 16, 2009 to January 24, 2010**. As the first exhibition to explore Kahn's notion of sacred space, it marks the public debut of a complex new work – a visually cohesive environment Kahn has created for the interior of a synagogue, the Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (2008). Anchored by eight magnificent six-foot-high abstract murals in shimmering tones of gold and white suggestive of a limitless grandeur, this elegant artistic ensemble draws upon Kahn's rich awareness of history to create a place of worship that departs from tradition, even as it is informed by it.

Arising out of Kahn's fascination with shrines of varied cultures, and inspired by the artist's roots in German Jewry and his own observant Jewish identity, these unified works catapult the viewer into a state of heightened reality, inviting contemplation of life's mystery and majesty. Drawing upon such diverse artistic influences as the American abstract landscape tradition, the New York School and German Romanticism, Kahn has executed a fully imagined, finely wrought environment that contains cultural references ranging from modernism to mysticism. His new sanctuary evokes the most ancient rites and universal spiritual yearnings, speaking to all, while honoring the questing philosophy, prayer and ritual at the core of Judaism's 3000-year tradition.

"Kahn's work is arresting, ambiguous and distinctly original," comments Dr. Ena Heller, Executive Director of MOBIA and curator of *Tobi Kahn: Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century*. "It counters the prevailing view that art and the sacred are permanently divorced. Only a courageous few have ventured along this path, searching for an 'authentically modern religious art.' The best-known examples are the Rothko and Matisse chapels; both are clearly influences. In today's art world, Kahn stands out."

Exhibition Highlights

In addition to the painted murals, Kahn's meditative, transformative new synagogue ensemble includes a pair of carved wood doors, painted silver, for the Ark, which houses the Torah scroll. Among the objects he has created are the Eternal Light, in the shape of a pomegranate, as well as a wooden menorah, a memorial light, a set of mezuzot, a charity box for tzedakah, Shabbat candlesticks and a Havdalah set. Also in the exhibit is Kahn's newest work for the Plaza Jewish Community Chapel in New York City, including a wall sculpture, a painting and a memorial light.



Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century is the first museum exhibition to display one of Kahn's most dramatic works, *SAPHYR II* (2004), a rugged wall of dark pewter blocks that recall the Asian



abacus, used for counting. This is one of Kahn's "Omer counters," a type of calendar used to count sacred time. The imposing sculpture, a ritual object that Kahn invented, is designed to mark the transition of the Jewish people from a condition of slavery to one of freedom. Intended to be touched, moved, and rearranged, day by day, it actively counts off the 49 days between the Jewish holidays of Passover and Shavuot. Like much of Kahn's work, *SAPHYR II* is biblical, inspired by Leviticus 23:15-16, which

commands the Israelites to count seven weeks from the day after the first night of Passover, ending when the Israelites received the Torah after their exodus from Egypt. The 49 changes parallel the 49 permutations of divine attributes referred to in the Kabbalah. Together, the sculptures take on the ethos of the community.

Also on view is a set of remarkable chairs intended to be used in a ritual first conceived by the



artist when his wife, the writer Nessa Rapoport, was expecting their first child. Over twenty years later, Kahn created a new set of Shalom Bat chairs (2008) on permanent loan to New York's Abraham Heschel School. They are ceremonial, with seats designed for women family members, in order to welcome a newborn

baby girl into the world, and to name her. "The Shalom Bat chairs are meant to elevate the girl baby-naming ritual," notes Kahn. Like all of the artist's works, which may each take up to a full year to complete, the chairs are meticulously crafted and exquisitely refined. They are painted with layer upon layer in bold contrasting hues, in a pattern reminiscent of an aerial view of islands, or a family of related forms. The chairs were one of eleven projects undertaken by Kahn after the death of his mother and conceived as a visual *kaddish*, or prayer for the dead. The empty chairs resemble opulent high-backed thrones that await the return of an absent regal spirit.

Artist's Profile

There have been more than 40 solo exhibitions of Tobi Kahn's work since his debut at the Guggenheim Museum's group exhibition, *New Horizons in American Art* in 1985. Kahn was named for an uncle who was one of the first Jews to be killed by the Nazis, in 1933, and is a descendent of Holocaust survivors. His ardent Judaism carries with it a celebration of life against a backdrop of grief and death; his often riotous, jubilant palette and joyful sensuous forms derive from a family history acquainted with erasure and obliteration. He began his artistic explorations of sacred space as far back as the late 1970s, when he started to construct works that he refers to as shrines. He has been creating Jewish ritual objects since the early 1980s. In the view of Klaus Ottman, a contributor to the fully-illustrated color catalog that accompanies the exhibition, Kahn's approach is ecumenical, all-embracing and inclusive. "There is an indelible bond between art and religion," Ottman writes. "Religion is here understood not as dogmatic doctrine, but as the pursuit of the indefinable or the invisible."

Kahn asks the viewer to engage in an active dialogue with the work as it shifts in meaning and mood, igniting memories and questions while, in the tradition of Romanticism, instilling a sense of wonderment. Kahn melds abstraction with references to the natural world, landscapes and biological organisms, creating a poetic commentary on life, creation and eternity.

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The Museum of Biblical Art

Located near Lincoln Center at 1865 Broadway at 61st Street, MOBIA presents critically acclaimed art exhibitions while offering an array of affordable arts enrichment programs to visitors of all ages. MOBIA celebrates and interprets art related to the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian traditions through exhibitions, education and scholarship. Past exhibitions have ranged from "outsider" art of the American South and medieval liturgical art to the works of Marc Chagall, Albrecht Dürer and Georges Rouault. Upcoming exhibitions will feature work by Jewish artists in medieval Spain, by Louis Comfort Tiffany and by Andy Warhol. Admission to MOBIA's exhibitions is free for members and children under 12 and pay-what-you-wish for adults, with a suggested admission of \$7; Sundays are always free. Museum hours are: Tue., Wed, Fri., Sun.: 10:00 AM-6:00 PM; Thurs: 10:00 AM-8:00 PM; Mon: Closed. Visit www.mobia.org for information on public programs, including workshops led by Tobi Kahn, offered in conjunction with the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan.