ARTnews

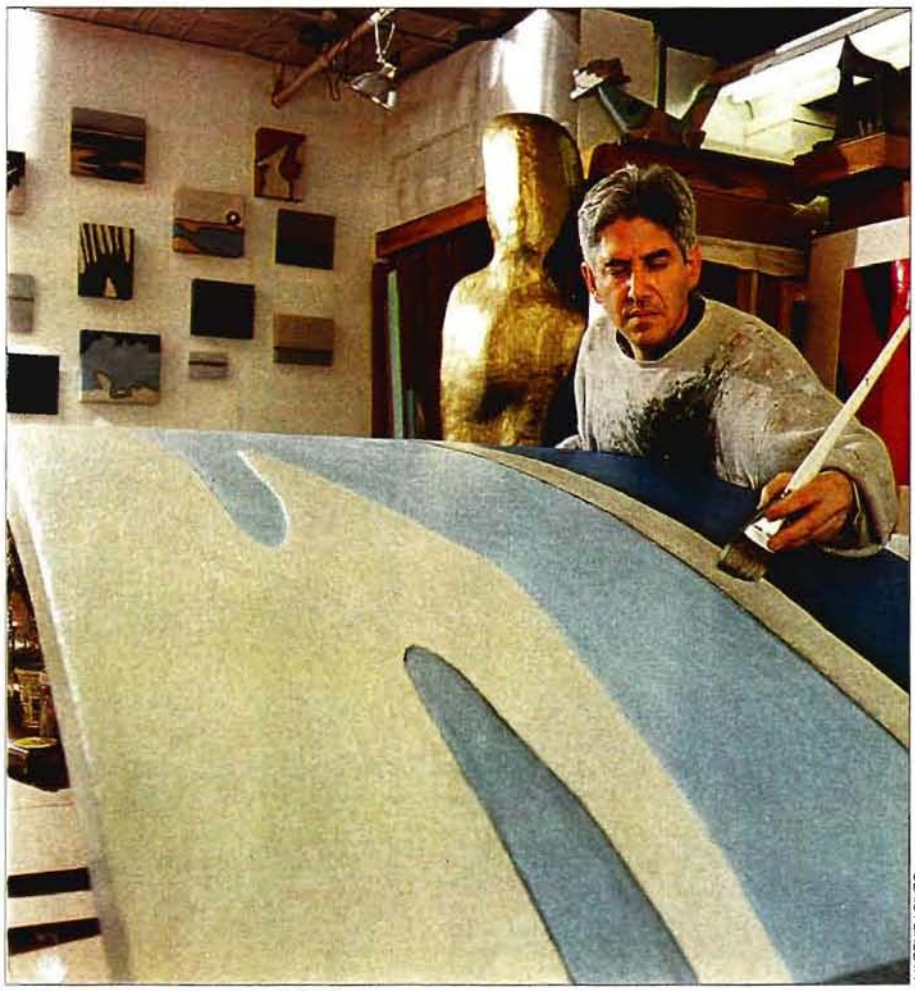
Spaces for the Spirit

Tobi Kahn makes memorials to the dead and meditation rooms for the living

BY MARGARET MOORMAN

One evening last spring, Tobi Kahn was the guest of honor at the Schafler Gallery at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, where his exhibition, "Heads," included paintings and sculptures from 1977 to the present. The recipient of Pratt's Alumni Achievement Award, he took his place at a long table to talk about what it had meant to him to be a graduate student at Pratt in the 1970s, what he tried to offer his students at the School of Visual Arts, where he has been a professor since 1985, and what he thought student artists should do to "learn the vocabulary of the language" in which they had chosen "to communicate." Although he is approaching 50, his dark hair going gray, Kahn has an enthusiastic, slightly disheveled air and an open, almost boyish face.

On the wall behind him were several paintings by the late George McNeil, Kahn's mentor at Pratt, an idiosyncratic elder statesman of the Neo-Expressionist painters of the 1970s and '80s, whose works pulse with color and movement. McNeil was one of several artists who, like Philip Guston, ultimately settled into figuration after long careers as abstractionists, confounding and alienating doctrinaire modernists.



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Tobi Kahn at work in his Long Island City studio. "Don't worry about trends," he says. "Trends change every ten minutes, but you're in this for life."

Kahn noticed some of his own students in the crowd. He asked for a show of hands: How many had seen the Damien Hirst show? Ten or 12 hands went up. The Vermeer show? Just a few. "But you have to look at *everything*," he urged them. "It's easy to think that art is two minutes old, but I don't believe you can look only at last month's shows to know what's important."

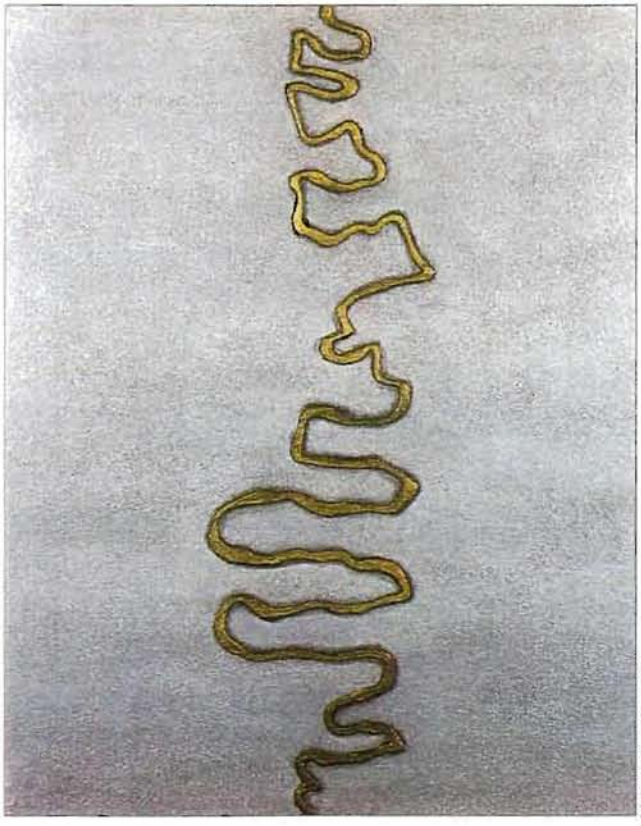
At the time of the Pratt opening, two traveling museum exhibitions of Kahn's work were circling the country, including "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit"; he was finishing a model for a "meditative room" for New York's Health Care Chaplaincy; and he was planning a small chapel ("like the Rothko chapel") with New Harmony, Indiana, philanthropist and patron Jane Blaffer Owen and the Blaffer Trust. A dozen private and public commissions for meditative rooms and sculpture gardens were in various stages of planning and execution; and the last touch—marble cladding for a wall to be filled with victims' names—was settled on for the Holocaust Memorial Garden of the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center of San Diego, a large public project for which Kahn "chose every pebble," alluding to his obsessive attention to detail.

Kahn was represented by the Althea Viafora Gallery during the 1980s and the Mary Ryan Gallery in the 1990s. Now, he says, he has no time for gallery shows, because he is too busy preparing museum exhibitions, including an upcoming show at the Yeshiva University Museum in Chelsea, and working on commissions for sculptures, paintings, and meditative spaces, both private and public.

One recent morning, Kahn led a visitor through the warren of rooms in Long Island City where he has worked for two decades. In an old brick commercial building on a busy street

***Clarusa*, 2000, acrylic on canvas over wood. The images remain deliberately open to interpretation.**

one subway stop from Manhattan, the rooms are crammed with tools, shelves of polymer and pigments, file cabinets bulging with correspondence and slides, flat files of drawings, and overstuffed bookcases. There are ceramic lamps and a pack rat's collection of odd treasures hung on walls, stuffed atop cabinets, and piled on tables. And there is art, a great deal of art, much of it in process. Small bronze figurelike sculptures occupy a neat, contained shelf. In one large space are ceremonial sculptures that look like rustic thrones, from the "Avoda" show. Paintings hung on white walls are illuminated by skylights. In a front room, sculptures occupy horizontal surfaces, from sawhorses to the tops of cabinets to the floor. Several carved shapes crowd one corner of the room. Smaller than human-size but clearly figurative, these were the models for a group of six bronzes for a Holocaust memorial installed in 1997 at the Jewish Community Center of the Palisades in New Jersey. Leaning against another wall are a dozen of the thick, plywood-on-stretcher-frame rectangles on which Kahn usually paints. Stacks of handmade paper lie on tables. "You probably think this is messy," he says. "This is neat, for me."

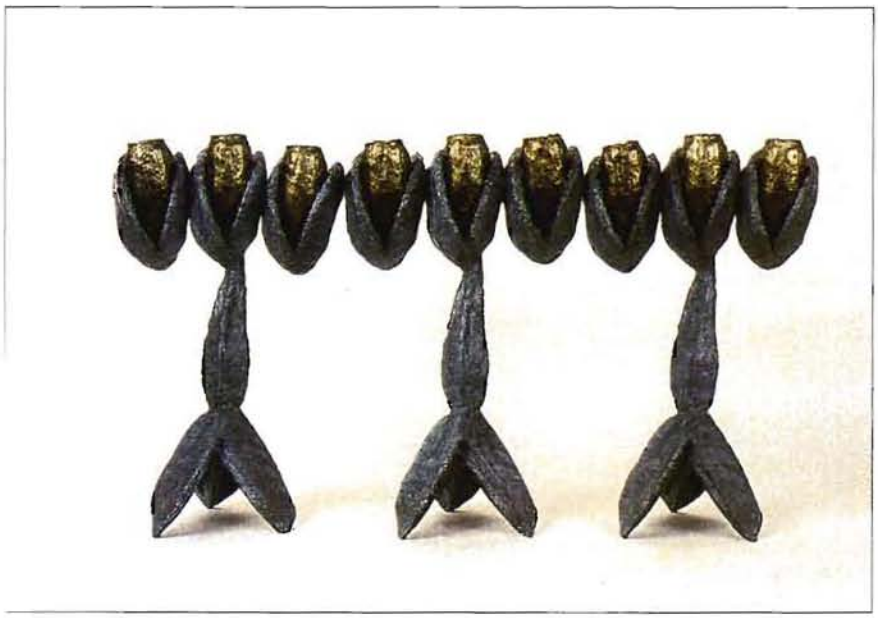


COURTESY THE ARTIST(2)

***Sefa*, 1996, acrylic on wood. "I don't want you to look at this," Kahn declares, "and say, 'Oh, that's the Great Wall of China.'"**

Kahn the artist has evolved within the late-20th-century vocabulary of ambiguous abstraction developed by such New Image artists as Susan Rothenberg and Joel Shapiro. His art education, a bachelor's degree from Hunter College and a master of fine arts from Pratt Institute, was thoroughly mainstream. But Kahn the human being is a first-generation American whose grandparents and parents escaped the Nazis. He is named for an uncle, a university student who dared to protest Hitler's policies and consequently became one of the first three Jews murdered in Germany. As a child growing up in a refugee neighborhood in New York City, Kahn was keenly aware of his family's loss but also of their comparative good fortune, for, unlike his friends, he had grandparents. Everyone else's had perished in concentration camps. From such a perspective, the point of life is life itself. Life and family. All other blessings—career success, professional recognition, material comforts—are secondary.

And so, while Kahn's work is widely exhibited in group shows having to do with landscape, and in exhibitions of paintings and sculpture that are abstract but have not quite relinquished reference to the physical world, he is one of a number of successful artists who also regularly exhibit in places where spiritual content is the common denominator, such as the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York or the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in St. Louis. Kahn's work was not included in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1985 exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985," but art historian Peter Selz wrote in the catalogue for Kahn's 1997–99 traveling exhibition "Metamorphoses" that after the



***Quya*, a Hanukkah menorah made of polyester resin painted in acrylic, was included in Kahn's "Avoda" exhibition, along with other family ceremonial objects.**

Kahn's sculptures are composed of timeless biomorphic shapes, referring to such ancient antecedents as pre-Columbian terra-cotta figures and to early modernists like Brancusi. *Shalev*, a 14-foot-tall granite sculpture commissioned by Jane Blaffer Owen for New Harmony, owes its elemental arch to Stonehenge. Kahn's range is broad, from whimsical rolling wood toys made for his three children to small "shrines" (temple-like boxes, most less than 18 inches tall, that enclose small wood or bronze figurines) to bronze sculptures, four to eight feet tall, for Holocaust memorials and other complex installations. Kahn's site-specific projects that include paintings and sculpture go for as much as $360,000. Small works on paper start at $1,800.

Kahn's largest pieces are carved from poplar before being cast. "It's very forgiving," he says. "If you make a mistake, you can always attach another piece of wood." When the final forms return from the foundry, Kahn works assiduously on their patinas. "I don't want anything to look like it's fabricated," he says.

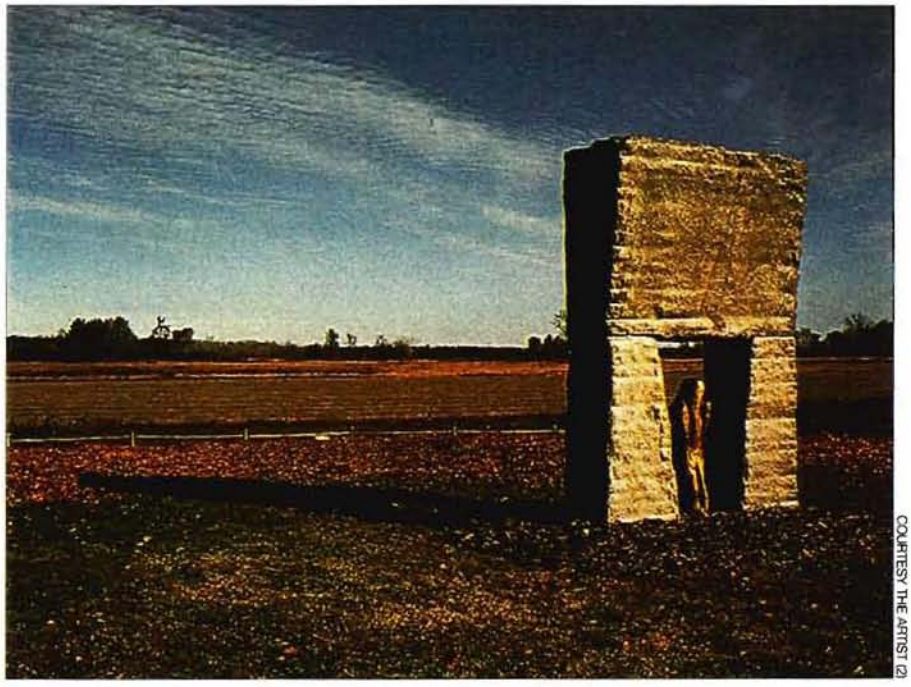
Kahn's paintings have a sculptural solidity and a rare aura of certainty. Their plywood surfaces, attached to three-inch-thick stretchers, are loaded with dense, layered, textured grounds. Their glazed colors vary from jewel-like reds to dull, lowering grays and whites, "irradiated by a secret light whose source is just beneath the surface," as critic Dore Ashton has written. A study for a piece called *Pahdil* is typically pared down to a few elements. There is a red shape, a green shape, and a white field. Is the red shape a shofar, the biblical ram's horn, emanating from the mouth of the green shape, which might be an embryonic human? Is it blood? Is it a scream? Or is it nourishing the

Los Angeles show, work like Kahn's could be more easily placed within a broad framework of "art that affirmed a spiritual perception of ultimacy and universality."

Kahn was reluctant to exhibit the 58 personal ceremonial objects he had made—his family's Hanukkah menorah, their charity box, the chairs for his daughters' naming ceremonies—in the "Avoda" collection, for which his wife, author Nessa Rapoport, wrote accompanying prayers—until after the "Metamorphoses" show confirmed his place in the mainstream art world. And yet because the "Avoda" show and his Holocaust memorials have led to other ceremonial pieces, he has become pigeonholed by some as a Jewish artist.

"When people say, 'Are you a Jewish artist?' I say, 'No, I'm an artist who's Jewish,'" Kahn explains. On the other hand, he freely describes how important his religion is to him, and how it infuses his life. "I think the spiritual part of me is the strongest, but I do not think Judaism is the only way. I believe in bringing something pure and spiritual to art. For me, art is a meditative act; it can be a redemptive act, but it makes me nervous when people think of me as Jewish. I'm not like Chagall—a real Jewish artist. . . . I would like to think I'm a spiritual person in the tradition of artists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

"I love art that takes you to a different place, a better place," he says. "Howard Hodgkin, Susan Rothenberg, Agnes Martin, Vija Celmins. When I look at their work, I know they are being totally honest with me. I guess you could call it esthetics with a soul. It's the same experience I have of Giotto, Goya, van Eyck."

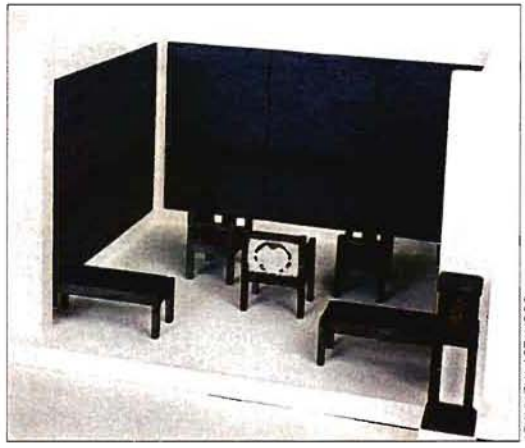


COURTESY THE ARTIST (2)

Kahn's sculptures are composed of timeless forms. *Shalev*, 1993, a 14-foot-high granite sculpture in New Harmony, Indiana, owes its elemental arch to Stonehenge.

green shape rather than emanating from it? Many of Kahn's images that seem at first to be landscapes reveal their figural roots only gradually, slowly evolving into heads or hips or bellies. With *Pahdil*, it is possible to see the figure as a map of an isthmus and a bridge.

By the time Kahn is finished with an image, no matter how ambiguous, it is final, committed, fixed. "I do tons—I mean tons—of black-and-white drawings," he says. "All my works start off as paper pieces; I've never done a painting for which I didn't do a work on paper." Only about a third of these pages will yield an image that Kahn will develop. He pulls several drawings from a foot-high stack of rippled pages. Dark, islandlike images show the marks of his tinkering, their edges whited out, redrawn, refilled with black. "By the time the shape comes out, I *believe* the shape totally," he says. The undulating freedom of the shapes that emerge contrasts with the clarity of their outlines, the dark edges Kahn etches into built-up layers of modeling paste. At the same time, the imagery remains deliberately open to interpretation. "I'm interested in the feeling of water and sky, for example, not in the landscape per se. I want the paintings to be completely believable, physically real, but not *realistic*. I don't want you to look at this"—he points to a meandering golden line that bisects a vertical painting—"and say, 'Oh, that's the Great Wall of China.'"



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Model for a "meditative room." Kahn has designed a number of such rooms as well as Holocaust memorials, and is now working on a chapel.

Kahn is at a stage in his career when his life and art seem effortlessly entwined. In accepting the Pratt award, he told the gathering that McNeil had encouraged him to "never be scared to find your own voice, even if that voice doesn't exist yet. He said, 'Don't worry about trends—trends change every ten minutes, but you're in this for life.' I'm living proof of someone who had teachers who really pushed me to find my own way."

The late Juan Gonzalez was another mentor who urged Kahn to follow his personal vision. "Juan always talked about the importance of honesty in art," Kahn said. "Well, my truthful thing is that I'm religious. My art is totally about who I am." ■

Margaret Moorman, an ARTnews *contributing editor, is the author of* Waiting to Forget *(W.W. Norton, 1996).*