

Hebrew Lettering and Jewish Mystical Art: A Look at David B. Wolk's Scriptural Paintings | 12 feb 2014

by Yehudis Barmatz-Harris

What is it about the Hebrew lettering, and its written word, that makes it so dominant in Jewish mystical/abstract art today? In a parallel vein to artist Mel Alexenberg, who proclaims post digital art requires the inspiration of creative Judaic thinking, painter David Baruch Wolk believes that contemporary abstract painting has true meaning only when contending with intellect and the written word. According to Wolk, where abstract expressionism ends, visual words begin. A look at Wolk's conceptual process provides a glimpse into the function of Hebrew lettering and their words in the visual aesthetics of the mystical Jewish painter.

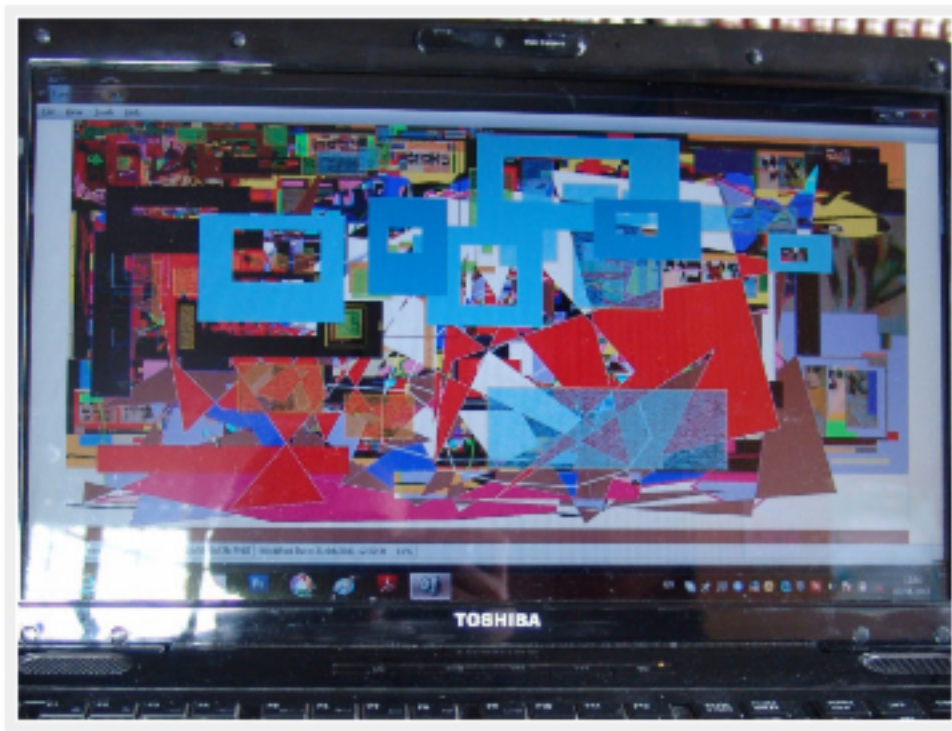
When it comes to incorporation of texts, Wolk, with the rest of the Jewish mystical movement, is in parallel existence with the general contemporary visual art world. The formal inspiration is identical. Text begins being incorporated by neo-Dadaists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns who use cultural symbols to find meaning in their paintings. Post-war artist CY Twombly incorporates text as a sort of personal encrypted communication. Ruscha, pop artist from the beat generation, is famous for text-only paintings inspired by these artists. Words contribute to conceptual art as well, as in contemporary African American artist Glen Ligon who uses text to tackle concepts of race and culture. Wolk too, seems to continue a formal contemporary tradition: "Where Jasper Johns left off," Wolk says, "there I started." But, the use of text in Jewish Mystical Art takes on a very different meaning.

Take the last Heichal Shlomo show called My Soul Thirsts from the Jerusalem biennial, displaying contemporary mystical Jewish artists. There, Hebrew words were predominant, in works by Yossi Arish, Israel Rabinovich, David Louise, Metavel, Asher Dahan, Yudit Margolis, Tal Levi, Daniel Flatauer, David Freidman, Avraham Loewenthal, Baruch Nachshon, and of course, David Baruch Wolk.



An important part of Wolk's answer is the incorporation of Holy Text. Other mystical artists usually incorporate words into the illustration of a phrase or concept. Wolk's paintings, however, progressively break down holy phrases and letters into purely visual form. The letters are his paintings. One does not need to use particular words, he says, the actual Hebraic forms are holy enough.

In scribe work, the negative space is as important as the positive space of the letter formation. This teaches about the combined existence of the written letter, whose meaning is clear, yet hints, to a less understood space existing outside the letter. It seems the more Wolk's paintings accept themselves as "allowed to exist" within the Torah valued world, the more the letters' physical representations integrate into the abstract space. It is as if letting go of known forms suddenly enlightens the eye to the presence of hidden shapes. I am sure that for Wolk this is a very deep metaphysical lesson.



Wolk recently advanced his word refinements beyond sketches and painting and into digital manipulations. On the digital screen he liberates literal form, transforming basic letters and word inspirations into many layers of shapes and textures. The digital paintings mark the movement from statements of literal textual inspiration towards scriptural meanings integrated into abstract forms.

David Wolk believes that abstract art needs holy letter structures for spiritual meaning. Culture is ephemeral, and Torah changes lives. Jewish art must be based on the holy text, he says. I am sure other visual expressions can be spiritually moving. But for men of the book, text is essential.