

**"Times of Collapse", 1983 by Sara Breitberg – Semel. The article is derived from the catalogue aforementioned. Appears on the site in Hebrew and in English.**

"Times of Collapse", 1983 Sara Breitberg-Semel

The development of abstract art after the Second World War is partly linked to that very war, to the bankruptcy of the concept of the "human". A discussion of Kupferman's oeuvre, however, will not expose the escapist aspect implied in this statement, quite the contrary. The abstract offered Kupferman the possibility of an emotional and ethical confrontation with the war experience and with life in its aftermath.

His work shifts the emphasis from the visual aspect of the scenes to their implications on the consciousness of the individual confronting them, i.e. to abstract processes.

"Times of Collapse" (cat. no. 87, photograph p.11) offers a rare opportunity to test the non-formalistic approach to Kupferman's oeuvre. It was preceded by a number of events, whose connection with the painting confirms the refusal to consider his work as a manifestation of art for art's sake and provides a unique possibility of tracing the evolution of an abstract motif in his art.

About a year before the creation of this painting, in the wake of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, Kupferman drew a series of figurative drawings depicting the scenes which had become imprinted in his memory ("To begin with I only recorded automatically visual scenes that were shown on television and elsewhere, but these accumulated within me into images associated with the past.") The Sabra and Shatila series is the first and only group of figurative drawings created by Kupferman after decades of abstract painting. At about the same time, following the murder of Emil Grünzweig, he produced an additional series of drawings, some of them figurative.

The present, abstract picture, was painted a year after the figurative drawings. It is one among a large number of works created during the Lebanon War and jointly entitled "Times of Collapse". The picture evidences a precarious situation, reiterating the "routine" of Kupferman's quintessential layered painting, but not yet taking it for granted. The effort to recapture the abstract system which makes for order and sanity, and the assimilation of the latest events, take place within the picture. Its surface does not reach a state of integration but contains a number of conflicting situations and forms. The clue to an understanding of the picture is found in the most conspicuous part: a kind of white frame from which irregular, linear forms spread haphazardly upwards and to the foreground, a violent and unrestrained motif among numerous more controlled and modified images organized on horizontal-vertical axes. This chaotic motif, appearing for the first time in Kupferman's oeuvre with great compositional boldness, marks an exceptional disruption of harmony in his work.

I found the source of this abstract motif in the Sabra and Shatila drawings. It constitutes a complex repetition of a small section in the drawings of rows of corpses and can be seen, in a more primary form, in the right part of the first Beirut drawing (see photograph p. 10). The passage of time has blunted the edge of the original forms and facilitated the abstraction and partial moderation of the form and its integration into Kupferman's regular compositional scheme.

The ability to trace the new form from its inception to its integration into the compositional scheme as one among several legitimate images bears out intuitive attempts made in the past to establish a connection between life factors and compositional elements in Kupferman's work. The abstract forms that populate his painting, particularly complex and numerous in the picture under discussion, can now be more clearly ascertained as glimpses of visual scenes and conscious reactions implanted and digested into a deliberate, Sisyphean process of self-renewal.

In contrast to periods of routine and tranquility, in which Kupferman's work is characterized by the preoccupation with a single formal motif and its integration into the existing system, "Times of Collapse" evidences the urgent enlisting and handling of the accumulating experience from various stages of his oeuvre in order to compel the canvas to transform into a painting, to achieve an inner equilibrium.

In retrospect, the resulting picture constitutes a résumé comprising processes and motifs which have characterized Kupferman's paintings for the last ten years.

Like the remainder of his work, the picture is composed in layers, one layer reacting to another. It is as if it accumulates "life experience" in their very

accretion. In order to examine the painting one has to delve into it past the covered areas, the special violet-greyish colour of his paintings, completely detached from reality, directing the eye to penetrate inwards, below the surface, to an inner realm of consciousness and memory, to cerebral and emotional material.

In this deliberate atmosphere the drawn motifs unfold, supported by the gestural brush-work, as in American Abstract Expressionism, and by the alliance between the dynamic movement of the hand and inner sensations. In Kupferman's case, there is no "automatism" in the pure sense of the term but rather an application of modified and controlled forms which have already become known as the elements of his consolidated pictorial language. The difference between each picture lies in the kind and context of the combinations. The motifs and the process of work are interlinked and may be described as elements of construction and destruction. The elements of construction are linked to the concept of routine as a coveted aim, mainly expressed in a pseudo-mechanical repetition of lines and forms, and in the use of supporting, solid and stable elements. The elements of destruction disturb the continuous creation in chaotic outbursts which threaten to break up the recurring rhythms, to "destroy the beautiful prose of routine".

In the present picture we are closer to a situation in which the external events begin to penetrate into the process of layer formation. Balance and order are threatened. All the same, the time that elapsed since the figurative drawings were created is present as the factor which has made it possible for the new motif to become assimilated into the "system" and has afforded it the power to mobilize the constructive elements alongside it. A characteristic compositional aspect of the picture is the two main, conflicting motifs on which the entire picture converges, the constructed grid side by side with the new, chaotic motif. Among the elements of destruction in the work one may mention the scraping off of paint (a technique typical of Kupferman which invests the accumulating layers with a peeled-off quality and also heightens the sense of an inward penetration, to the core of things), diagonal lines, cut short, which tend to collapse before reaching their terminal point, scratches on the remaining layers of paint, the erasure of constructive motifs, the application of paint that looks like the scab of a wound, and the inclination of the characteristic, lavender-greyish hue to a lifeless grey of dead tissue.

Among the constructive elements one may mention the tendency to stabilize the motifs in straight angles which constitute a static and solid element, the grid scaffolds comprising a constructive power, the collapsing forms which are thrust inwards, into the depth of the picture, the fresh layer of paint as against the peeled off layer, and the colour tending to the more "healthy", purplish hue of a living organism.

All the elements of the picture populate it simultaneously, from the inside out, with Kupferman's consciousness wresting harmony from a complex web of destruction and construction; an aesthetics conveying an ethics.

The conversion of ethics into aesthetics, or (as it occurs in Kupferman's painting), the translation of ethical into aesthetic principles, seems to me to constitute one of the possible characteristics of a Jewish painting, as does the anti-iconic nature of Kupferman's oeuvre, emphasizing process rather than the final and conclusive situation.

His devotion to the discipline of work as a *raison d'être* creates an affinity between the painting and the fact of Kupferman's belonging to the collective of a *kibbutz*. This is also true of his preference for *arte povera* ("to stick to the essential and necessary") and his sense of responsibility, as an individual, for the fate of the community at large.