

THE TWICE-SIGNED PAINTING OF MOSHE KUPFERMAN
by Marcelin Pleynet

In the context of modern and contemporary art, Moshe Kupferman's work draws our attention with an exemplary force and rigor. I do not think that Moshe Kupferman is the least bit interested in the world of changing trends and styles which demonstrate the hazards of artistic creation, for good as well as bad. But, as far as we are concerned, it is impossible not to be struck by the way his work is used to establish the framework of an ethical order so strongly lacking everywhere else. In this hurried flow of information binding the most variegated interests in New York, Paris, London, Milan and Dusseldorf; in this day of charter tours from California or Texas to exhibitions of contemporary art in Paris, London, Milan or Dusseldorf, is it not surprising that Moshe Kupferman's work is rigorously executed in a kibbutz somewhere between Akko and the Lebanese border? Does this mean that a certain form of reflection and artistic realization implies isolation today? I do not think so. A kibbutz is certainly not an ideal place to isolate oneself and, anyway, everything in Moshe Kupferman's biography indicates his active presence in the most important (and often dramatic) events of the second half of our century.

Born in 1926 in Jaroslav, Galicia (an area of Eastern Europe now divided between Poland and the Ukraine), he studied in a local school and later in a Polish high school. In 1941, he was exiled along with his family and spent the beginning of the war in a camp in the Ural mountains in the Soviet Union. In 1946, he returned to Poland and, in 1947, managed to get into a German transit camp. He immigrated to Israel in 1948 and, in 1949, participated in the founding of Kibbutz Lohemei Hageta'ot (The Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz) between Akko and Rosh Haniqra on the Lebanese border. Thus, since 1949, Kupferman has lived, worked and painted at Lohemei Hageta'ot in the complete opposite of isolation and it is no wonder that some of his works are titled "Paintings in time of war."

Considering Moshe Kupferman's paintings and drawings, what is striking at first is to ascertain to what extent the objective distance from the atmosphere (or atmospheres) of artistic milieu tends to emphasize the presence of the work in the precise reality of the life experience and in the literal realization of the (technical and professional) means capable of transforming it. In his introduction to the catalogue of Moshe Kupferman's exhibit in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv Museum, Yona Fischer stresses that, for Kupferman, "painting is a moral activity" and that "the daily discipline he imposes on himself is part of a moral model specific to the social structure of a kibbutz." We must insist on this point if we want to understand what determines the particular presence, the qualities and often the striking beauty of Moshe Kupferman's works. Creation here is totally bound up with a social structure which it assumes fully and which it uses (through osmosis) to produce subjective interpretation and plastic transformation. Thus we can argue effectively and exceptionally

that, for Moshe Kupferman, "Painting is a moral activity" or, more precisely, an ethic.

Initially Kupferman's work evokes a plastic language that seems familiar and in which we recognize various pictorial experiences somewhat manifest, everywhere in the world, at the end of the 1960s. This is particularly true of a group of drawings on paper where formal abstraction is established from the strict literalness of a vocabulary composed essentially of quantitative determinations and the unusual qualities of its materials. The foundation -- paper or canvas stretched on a frame -- is most often rectangular and presented in its width so that, if we were to reduce the creative activity of the artist to a position of principle, we could say that it is established, as drawing and design, from a cleanly infinite line. This line, emphasizing the horizontality of the sheet by repetition from top to bottom, will thus have -- initially and paradoxically -- the function of frustrating the plane and surface it constitutes, sending us back to a plane constructed of a linear division open on all sides (in height as in width) and limited elsewhere by the repetitive presence of the unity that constitutes it: the line which -- in the perfect segment of it presented by any given drawing -- has no beginning and no end other than a decision which, if you like, is arbitrary.

If we stop here, keeping in mind the role of the line with respect to the whole of Kupferman's graphic and painted work, we must consider its quasi-didactic function. Unlike the work of Kandinsky and many who followed him down the path of abstraction, the line here is not drawn in the trinomial order of "point, line, surface" but rather, assuming all possible precise determinations and plans, it functions to express the drawing and design of significant mass. Thus, along with apparently frontal grand realizations of paintings, the artist in his atelier prefers to present his drawings on a slightly inclined plane rather than on the walls where there are surprising little structures (wooden or cardboard boxes) which organize graphic elements in their manifestly three-dimensional structures. After all, Moshe Kupferman's technique itself (the practical realization which ultimately gives his graphic works their exceptional factual qualities) is an indisputable testimony to the arrangement and organization of his objectives.

Most, if not all, of his works on paper are worked on both sides (front and back) of the sheet. This implies a manipulation of the material (paper) in space (turning over a sheet of paper of 70 X 100 cm requires some movement of air) and inevitably engages a tangible perception of the mental mass the operation assumes. Although the results are ultimately incomparable in every way, the systematic techniques of Moshe Kupferman working his designs on the front and back of the sheet can be compared with Matisse lifting the papers up to eye-level to cut them out better. Aren't Matisse's big, cut-out gouaches ultimately pasted, laid flat and reduced to the thin relief of the collage which is overdetermined by their vast frontality? It is the same with the supple reversal of the paper by Moshe Kupferman when he goes from one side of a sheet to the other. What the artist ultimately proposes

we see is manipulation; the real and mental handling of the front and back of the same sheet, a double plane; turning it over ultimately preserves nothing of the magnitude of the operation except the trace of a relief which constitutes a drawing.

In fact, the lines drawn on the back of the sheet with especially hard graphite are inscribed in relief on the front, reliefs that play a determining role in the way they restrain, lighten or darken the uniform passage of the black graphite. Thus the piece of line, open at each end of the sheet and masking its horizontality, is part of the outline of the mass, not at first, but essentially (and evidently by its relief). It is as it assumes mass that Kupferman's line is defined as a drawing and defines his designs. And it is also thus that the artist treats the plane when he prepares it as the significant background of a chromatic expression. What gives Moshe Kupferman's graphic works their dark, gilded, silver, black and luminous richness and a sumptuous and secret depth is precisely the fact that the treated (smoothed) sandpaper assumes a (slightly shaggy) relief which cancels its surface and traps the picture of waves of light in its micro-thickness.

From line to mass, the works on paper display the semantic richness of their plastic function -- a function they fulfill with such mastery (in some cases, even virtuosity) because they unite intelligence and formal sensibility closely with intelligence and technical sensibility. As proof, we need only mention the rigorous internal logic which, from line to mass, accumulates the elements of his presentation and representation. Thus, note that the double work on the front and back of each sheet in somehow not only present in the various reliefs that engage the motion and chromatic emotions of the work but also that the division into equal planes of several of these works acts (horizontally or vertically) as a demonstration of the folding and unfolding of the total mass of the operation. There is one tradition that requires Cubist painters trying to present each of the sides of objects (masses) frontally to display them flat on the surface of the picture. It certainly seems that Moshe Kupferman's works on paper are part of the construction of an implicitly theoretical position which overturns this Cubist tradition. That is, symbolically, the mass can be represented by the exhibition of the planes that constitute it but that is possible only insofar as every plane is then in and of itself, thought (sensed) as mass, and first, especially the initial plane of the canvas, the picture (the surface which inevitably receives the projections of the reversal, the space, the back and front, the mobile turnstile of the sign it invokes which actualizes it and traps it). In other words, every surface, every plane being at least double, the suggestion of depth is no more illusionary than that of "surfaceness." The quality, value and moral code are based on intelligence, like two languages, two sides of the same coin.

This lengthy discussion of the more explicitly demonstrative character of the works on paper (even if singularly in Moshe Kupferman, the works on paper often have the force and dimension of painted works) was necessary before approaching the painting itself since the works on paper -- in their

unique handling and techniques -- more easily allow us to reveal the rules determining the creative gesture and the artist's decisions. If this is a good course, Kupferman's work on paper and his paintings no doubt indicate and create an event in the history of contemporary abstract painting. To prove that, we need only take account of the amazing freedom with which the painter treats elements which would seem at first glance to constitute the basis of a kind of formal vocabulary. From one painting to another, as well as in a single painting, nothing ever constrains the painter artificially.

The subjective position which constitutes the work on paper in the passage of the line from front to back as space, mass and relief of the tangible givens of the experience is a full part of the pictorial event through transformation of a formal structure (which might have the superficial appearance of a grid) into what I would call a "factual" structure; with the paintings as with the work on paper, the logic of the subject overdetermines the formal logic both quantitatively and qualitatively. And it is certainly not by chance if, more or less regularly in the course of his work, Kupferman takes pains to set up and thwart the apparent constraint of a solidly built construction whose thick mass seems as if it should bstruct all the space. Clearly in such a situation the qualities of composition, associated with their chromatic respondants, will produce the determination and subjective emphasis capable of responding from the place of the painter in a process which counts what is real by its dimension of tangible and symbolic (hence artistic) expression. We will see the same thing in reverse produced with the disappearance (or appearance) of a formal structure in an open and fluctuating atmospheric space. In any case, the factual qualities of the painting participate, with their chromatic respondants, in the reaction to their setting in a situation, with excess, recovering, discovery, smoothing, opacity and transparency. Practice and experience are not opposites (in that the latter serves to petrify some dogmas) but the tangible movements of situations, always multiple, by definition (even when they seem to be reduced to the front and back of a simple sheet of paper) as Kupferman admirably demonstrates. Finally, even the absolutely special colors the painter uses have a strong justification in the actualization of a pictorial space (mass) which blends rigor and setting in a situation of a concrete experience in a specific execution. From white to black, violet, dominating the whole of the paintings, is not located at the end of the visible spectrum, at that point of reversal whose precise limit can never be recognized; a passage from the most blinding burst to the darkest red and blue burst that plunges day into the lights of night; a chromatic line of a space always begun over and indefinitely established by the measure of experience and the free arrangement of the painter who transforms it indefinitely.

What gives Kupferman's large paintings an incomparable stamp is that, at every point, front and back, they realize the double signature (as well as the signatures in the Latin and Hebrew alphabets which appear on almost every work) of end and means in a space of transformation (of infinite dialogue) in which, as close as possible to his convictions and genius,

the artist establishes a language whose singular rigor communicates especially the ethical imperatives of art (of his art) to hold all plastic, technical, graphic, chromatic, intelligent and tangible propositions in the space, in the mass that realizes their potentials and concrete qualities.

Thus art converts, bears and transcends the emotion and motion of a painting signed at least twice and, if you like, at least twice legibly.