

**“Time in the Art of Space On the Abstract Paintings of Moshe Kupferman”. The article is derived from the Catalogue “Moshe Kupferman The Rift in Time”. The site contains the first part of the article, in Hebrew and in English. (Givon Art Gallery, 2000).**

## **Time in the Art of Space**

### **On the Abstract Paintings**

#### **of Moshe Kupferman**

By Benjamin Harshav

# I

## Moshe Kupferman: Life and Art<sup>1</sup>

“Moshe Kupferman’s œuvre invites interpretations time and again.”

Yona Fischer, 1984<sup>2</sup>

Kupferman was born twice.

Physically: on August 12, 1926, in Jaroslaw (pronounced: Yaroslav), Poland.

Spiritually: in the seminar for Kibbutz artists conducted in Kibbutz Na’an by the painters of “New Horizons,” Yosef Zaritsky and Avigdor Stematsky in 1953 and again, by Stematsky in 1955.

Between those two dates, life was in brackets (Europe and Central Asia in the 1940s!) – or perhaps, vice versa: the world was put in brackets and the person built a cocoon, a thick, private shell to protect himself.

The rebirth did not occur all at once. There was activity in the Zionist-Socialist movement on the roads of Europe after the Holocaust, immigration to Israel in 1948, training in Kibbutz Ein-Harod, marriage to a daughter of the Kibbutz, participation in the foundation of the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, learning the building profession of a molder (a constructive as well as a symbolic trade, and a possible source of the painter’s imagery), and the joy of raising children -- an overall “rehabilitation,” as he used to call it.

Yet the establishment of an individual and creative personality, confident of his own value and his own hesitations, came with the acceptance of the discipline of abstract painting and the slow and persistent development of a private language and a private fictional world.

Opting for abstract painting meant joining the world of modern art, the renewal of high Modernism that faded around 1930 with the rise of the totalitarian regimes in Europe and rose again from the ashes of World War II. It was not an imitation of the new American center, which matured during the war, but a continuation of the local tradition of art for its own sake that emerged as part of the “Modern Jewish Revolution.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, creating art was seen as part of building a full-fledged Hebrew secular society and culture in Israel. Yet modern art required individual creation – beyond the commune and agriculture and national purpose and “Progressive Culture” and “Socialist Realism”; i.e. art that was

not prepared to make any concessions to the most rigorous international standards in painting.

Modern art meant making an intensive art object, complex and multi-dimensional. It was artistic expression without semantics, molding the painterly material of painting, and discovering the inherent values of color, lines, local and global formations on a canvas, as well as the values of clashes and interactions between contingent forms, clusters and patches of painting. It was “Non-Objective Art” (as heralded by Kandinsky and Malevich), non-figurative painting that had the power to evoke spiritual values (as theorized by Kandinsky) and presented a pure, yet mute painterly world.

From Kupferman’s personal point of view, it meant a rift, cutting himself off from the world of the past, the life that was, and the destruction that was. It was an entirely new beginning, as if there was no past and there never was any thematics. Zaritsky, refugee of an earlier Holocaust, said that, as soon as he emerged from the sea, he never looked back. Kupferman invented a language that could not look back, a language that would prevent a priori any mention of a private memory.

The curator of Kupferman’s exhibition in the National Museum of Modern Art (Centre Georges Pompidou) in Paris understood it when he wrote:

If Kupferman’s work deserves serious attention, it is because it seems to benefit from its isolation, retreating to its own pictorial system and pursuing it with an authenticity revealed only by the canvas, an infinite search for the picture, in the style of Bram van Velde, who gave up the power of colors.<sup>4</sup>

The painter’s life in a “remote” Kibbutz reinforced the myth of intentional isolation. This image was furthered by his stubborn stand against following the changes and innovations of various contemporary trends and waves that emerge now and then in the centers of world art; and by the slow, persistent and organic development of his own language, with all the repetitions, limitations and liberation involved in such a stance. Kupferman told me once: “If we run after the trends fashionable in the great world that emerge every five years, we will always be behind, epigones. I let the waves run over my head and continue my own work.” This is not entirely true: Kupferman has a quick and selective intuition, he saw things in Paris and New York and drew elements from there that fit his own conception. Indeed, he never succumbed to any trend or –ism, but integrated selected elements he found into his own unique conglomerate.

Within a schematic narrative of the history of art, we might place Kupferman with American “Abstract Expressionism” of the nineteen forties and fifties. But his work saw a great deal of ramification and complication – either because he was influenced by later trends or because he discovered for himself a new vocabulary that evolved from the internal logic of his own work. In essence, he is very far from the New York School: for him there is not just expressivity but intensity, not just abstraction but high internal complexity, not just a two-dimensional painting but multi-layered depth.

Eventually, his “own pictorial system” has expanded and branched out. However, from here, from his private fortress, came the sudden leap into collective memory and confrontation with historical “Time.” In the past, Kupferman made several statements about “Time,” our times, which the painter is bound to respond to. In the series of black-and-white paintings *With Beirut – After Beirut – With Beirut* (executed in a short spell during the Israeli war in Lebanon in 1982)<sup>5</sup> there was a direct political message, an immediate response to the shock of the slaughter in the Sabra and Shatilla camps – not far from his Kibbutz in the Galilee – whose magnitude was still within the bounds of human comprehension. That shock left traces in his paintings, and a line of bodies spread on the ground could even be imagined. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin evoked similar direct responses.

But now, as he has accepted the “social commission” of paintings dedicated to the Holocaust for the Katzenelson Museum in his Kibbutz, he made the daring leap from the private to the public, from his rebirth to his first birth, and from abstraction as an escape from history – to abstraction as the only way of expressing that this is something that cannot be expressed.

### Stages of Kupferman

*The Rift in Time* is a series of eight large oil paintings: 2`2 meters, exhibited at the Givon Art Gallery in Tel Aviv (March 2000). Three of the paintings were made for the “Children’s Memorial,” an institution

for teaching children and youth about the Holocaust, built in his Kibbutz and attached to the “Yitzhak Katzenelson Ghetto Fighters’ House for the Heritage of the Holocaust and the Revolt.” Kupferman called the series at first *Di Kriye* (in the language of his childhood, Yiddish), i.e. “the Rip” that Jews traditionally tear in their clothes in mourning for a loved one (such “rips,” with a real or imaginary knife, indeed, appeared in Kupferman’s early paintings). It is meant both as a concrete gesture of defiance, a ritual of mourning, as well as an abstract concept, an irreparable, unbridgeable rift, like the “Syrian-African Rift,” the result of a geological catastrophe, which the Hebrew poet Avot Yeshurun introduced as a metaphor for the rift in the consciousness of many Diaspora-born Israelis.

It was not a direct response to a direct invitation, but years of dragging out an answer and even more years of carrying the theme in his head – until the dam broke. These paintings fulfill a role in Kupferman’s oeuvre similar to Picasso’s *Guernica*: a political commission that did not turn out any transparent political realism, but rather a summation of the artist’s work. It is an effort of political and didactic communication by means of the artist’s complex private language, fully mobilized.

And precisely through this commitment, the effort at “explaining” the Holocaust to children, Kupferman opened up in a symphony of colors and shapes. Finding peace with his own biography has liberated the restraints and camouflages of a great talent. The ascetic artist, who was restrained in his use of languages and colors and was immersed in the process of making an art object and the emotions invested in the making, has now accepted the point of view of the spectator.

I think that here, a new Kupferman has emerged. The antecedents can be found in a variety of ways, i n f l u e n c e d b y t h e c o n s t r a i n t s a n d o p p o r t u n i t i e s o f t h e n e w m e d i a t h a t K u p f e r m a n – whose artistic origins are in oil paintings on canvas – chose to work in: the demands of order and color in works on paper; then the simultaneous work on a series of parallel papers; and their continuation in the *Megillot* (Scrolls), exhibited in the new Museum for Jewish Art and History in Paris.<sup>6</sup> Those are narrow strips of paper, less than 10 centimeters wide and 70-100 centimeters long, that demand a sophisticated balance between regional and global integration, to keep the scroll from disintegrating into a set of attached pages. The technical “industrialization” used in his work, like the projection of the negative on the positive side of a paper or the series of parallel bars produced without the individual, free movement of a hand, strengthened both order and seriality.

But in recent years, a new open style has evolved in several directions. On the one hand, there was a leap into a new transparency and orchestration of the whole composition, as evident in the *Screenprints* ( 1 9 9 6 - 1 9 9 8 ) , w h i c h K u p f e r m a n produced in the Harel Printers workshop in Jaffa (see fig. h, i, j, pp. 64-65).<sup>7</sup> And on the other hand, an orchestration of autonomous color regions that can be seen in several oil paintings of the eighties and nineties, reaching their peak in the new series, *The Rift in Time*.

For restraint and asceticism had gone on too long and the opening was imperative. Colors, first perceived as a decorative threat now became autonomous and self-confident vis-à-vis other color areas. And the vertical layers, overlaid on top of one another (going into the depth of the oil painting) were now placed also next to each other, in a tense balance, horizontal and asymmetrical, as heterogeneous centers of gravity, competing with each other for dominance in a painting.

This opening – not yet a “new poetics,” for it may be too early to draw conclusions, perhaps “a new tendency” would do better – emerges from the ripe, “classical” Kupferman. Yet there is a shift of attitude: no longer an ostensibly total surrender to the feeling of the master’s hand, to automatic painting, repeating the same gestures over and over again, but openly assuming responsibility and dominance over the painting as a whole. And no longer one global principle of working the surface, but a polyphony of such principles in the autonomous regions of one painting.

This new opening heralds a visible transformation of Kupferman’s world, a renovation of all principles of composition, a triumphant liberation of individual colors and variegated forms, and a strong and musical expressive energy. The same shift occurs in the realm of representation: three-dimensional perspectives are opened -- not in a mimetic-realistic distance but into the depth that lies between the forms -- and even hints appear of possible objects and spaces, half-revealed and half-abstract.

All those features had precedents in earlier works. Like everything else in Kupferman, change is fluid, a flow in time, merging the old and the new. He often exploits “mistakes” and random events and turns them into discoveries, later transposed from the accidental painting to other paintings and from the periphery of his poetics to its center. But now, the dominant impact is new.

Kupferman always drew something, even in childhood, in his school in Yaroslav. There is no better introspection and flight into oneself than painting without words – especially when you grow up in a Babel of languages. And I remember figurative drawings, in fine lines and a sense of depth in space, which Kupferman did as illustrations to books we published in the Zionist youth movement in Germany after the Holocaust (1947).

But since that art seminar in Na’an, where he served as an “apprentice” with the artists of “New Horizons” – only to depart from them in his own direction, more severe and uncompromisingly abstract – an authentic Kupferman emerged. It was a totally devoted Kupferman, who labored meticulously to work out the special technical methods he would use for each mode of work separately, and to puzzle out the specific relations between these techniques and the final, “interrupted” product. It was not easy for the spectators and not easy for him -- that search, for better or for worse, through stuff piled up and absorbed in layer after layer, which could be seen from the outside as gray and monotonous and hermetic – toward the “true.”

We may distinguish three periods of this authentic “Kupferman”:  
1) The unique Kupferman: the elucidation of a private style, a private voice, and a personal color (the famous “Kupferman’s purple,” but not just purple) and the development of a private modular “vocabulary” accompanied by a maximal restraint of effects on the spectator (roughly, the nineteen fifties and sixties); 2) The classical Kupferman: the virtuoso master of compositions -- in changing variations of graphical “words,” a kind of grammar of his painterly language (the seventies-eighties);  
3) The open Kupferman, who orchestrates the global painting: sometimes in a festive, global order (as in the Harel screenprints) and sometimes in a counterpoint and tense balance between heterogeneous centers, dominating competing regions of one canvas – as we see it in full bloom in the series *The Rift in Time* (the nineties).

There was organic and incremental growth from one stage to the next, ostensibly in transformations of the same language, but the distance from a point of departure to any point of arrest on the road is significant, and the impact on the spectator is quite different.

I have written several essays on Kupferman’s “poetics” in the past,<sup>8</sup> all related to the classical Kupferman (though here and there I hinted at possible new openings). And now he has turned it all upside down: the suppression of colors has turned into a symphony of colors, the intense expressionism has given way to a global and harmonious organization of the whole and has become a “structured expressionism,” and the monolithic impact has opened up toward a multi-centered orchestration.

And yet, to understand the new paintings, we have to discuss his art in its classical stage. I shall first describe the principles of Kupferman’s “poetics” as seen by spectators without the aid of the artist’s words – a structural reading of painting. After that, I shall raise topical questions about the relations between the “objective” painting, as fixed on canvas or paper, and the artist’s utterances about “Time” and Holocaust and memory, i.e., the spiritual and conceptual dimensions. That will be a constructive reading, analyzing the constructs, both certain and hovering, which the reader is invited to construct in his mind to bridge the gap between the hermetic painting and the world of history, biography, and meaning.

### Interpreting Abstract Paintings

Abstract paintings strive toward pure painting. Like “pure poetry,” the language of art in general, and the unique language of a specific painter are that “thing” that cannot be said in other words. As Northrop Frye wrote, “Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb.”<sup>9</sup> In a figurative painting depicting Jesus Christ or olive trees in Safed, the spectator has direct access to something represented, a topic that exists outside the painting and known in the memory of the culture. There too, art does not consist of the representation of known figures alone, but in the tension between the modes of representation

and the represented figure, on the one hand, and the formation of the painting on canvas, on the other. But in abstract painting, in a period after canonical culture, there is no such convenient identification of figures, topics and stories. Hence it is amenable to either a formalist analysis or to spiritual, psychological or expressive interpretations.

Criticism of art tries to explain the visual impact in familiar terms. Thus, in an important article on Kupferman, Nili Neuman saw in his paintings: “transformations of mental, psychological states, as in Pollock and Rothko.”<sup>10</sup> But every artist (indeed, every person) has “mental states” – how is Kupferman or Pollock different from other artists? From other people? And how do they differ from each other? And how can we identify such mental states (except for proclaiming their existence)? For it is not by accident that the critic did not say: “such as Max Beckman or Egon Schiele,” because then she would have had to discuss the differences in the formation of the painting or differences in the modes of representing such mental states. Comparison with Rothko and Pollock appears to forsake the discussion of their style, which seems to be self-evident, but this is precisely where their difference lies. For without a strong and original artistic text we wouldn’t have thought about the artist’s psyche.

What we have is a painting, on the one hand, and the artist’s words, on the other. A painter is not a specialist in the production of verbal texts, he is neither a philosopher, experienced in precise definitions, nor a novelist, versed in precise and detailed descriptions. His most differentiated and complex language is the language of art. To be sure, a painter has profound intuitions into his work, and even when he uses metaphors or generalizations, we must be attentive to what he has to say. But what he is saying is couched in words, and those are influenced by words of others: ideologies and public moods, encounters and accidental influences, and critics’ observations about his art – yet the critics themselves are influenced by the language of philosophy and the humanities and the public currents of their time.

In fact, the semiotic domain of a painting (its modes of signification, its uses as a set of signifiers) results from the interaction between the physical painting and the language relating to it. But that language participates at the same time in both the semiotics of the painting and the language system of society: the trends of discourse, world views and ideologies of culture in a certain period. There is an open and dialectical dialogue between the painter and his critics: the painter speaks not just from his personal experience in making the painting, from what he has at his fingertips; he, too, describes his creative experience using concepts he adopted from the language of his time. The critics try to adapt their explanations to what the artist told them, or to what they induced him to tell. Yet they are also steeped in the ideology of culture and see the painting through its eyes. Hence, critics will focus on formal analysis in a structuralist age, and may foreground the ideological conclusions and blur the boundaries of painting and other texts, in an age of “Political Correctness.” And the painter himself changes his discourse and shifts the emphases under the influence of changing moods in society and his own consciousness changing in time.

Abstract painting is also situated in a world of words. The painting is autonomous – in some view more, in another less – but it is created in a specific historical context and by a painter with a specific physical and spiritual biography. When the spectator or the critic is interested in such mutual relationships, he will erect constructs to bridge between the painting and the world. In the absence of direct imitation of objects in the world, the safest way for such constructs lies in a metaphorical reading of the painting, its elements, and the process of its creation. Thus, Nili Neuman writes about “That process of concealing which he employs” – and if we know something about the process of Kupferman’s work, covering one layer of paint with another layer, until the earlier layers disappear and leave few traces, we may ascribe to this covering process communicative values of “concealment” in both senses. “Concealment” is a polysemic word, it has both a concrete sense, descriptive of a physical activity, and a metaphorical sense, referring to a mental mode of behavior. Thus, through the semantic structure of the word, shifting from the concrete sense to the metaphorical, we can read the painting as a projection of a mental state.

But this is not the whole story. For covering up the earlier layers (and especially, partial covering) also entails exposing the multi-story work process. There is covering as well as discovering, both concealing and revealing. In his works on paper, it is conspicuous when the colors pressed from the negative side of the page impact and qualify the colors up front. The incessantly changing quivering texture of his serial parallel strips is a result not of covering but of interaction between overlapping systems, often with no clue as to which came first.

As for the mental state that caused the “covering,” Neuman reports: “He has a hard time explicitly confessing that he touches directly such sensitive matter, and there is always a suspicion that his words might be interpreted in a biased manner.” Ever since Freud, the psyche has often been seen as a primary domain; the making of a painting is seen as a therapeutic process; the psyche is “such sensitive matter” that one may not touch it; and art reveals or conceals this sensitivity without words. But perhaps the opposite is also true: at first, a complex and ambivalent attitude towards the painterly material itself, in the very process of making, gets entangled and crystallized; and when that succeeds in catching our attention, we build a psychological interpretation on its foundations. Thus seen, the psyche is not the source of a painting but a construct of a source, erected from the existing painting – whereas the physical painting is the primary domain, both in the painter’s working process and in the spectator’s perception.

Moreover, the painterly material itself is also “such sensitive matter” in the artist’s perception; it is not easy for him to speak about that either, especially since a considerable part of the creative process is subliminal. Precisely because there is no obvious thematics in his paintings, and because the language of painting cannot be translated into discursive and logical language – the critics resort to psychologizing and ideologizing. What they see as the “deep structure” appears to me as schematic reduction. I have no easy solution, for natural language has no words for such a wide gamut of nuances in a painting; indeed, in this essay I also use generalizations, metaphors and hypotheses of various constructs. I just wanted to expose the problematic of translating painting into the concepts of psychology, philosophy, or Jewish history.

The Dutch curator Ad Petersen, who knows Kupferman very well, wrote:

This is particularly true of Kupferman’s works which give the impression of being internalized and closed but which, in fact, demonstrate a great desire to communicate. Perhaps this is why such a remarkable intensity emanates from them. These drawings are definitely non-figurative and always have been, even though one sometimes finds in them a vague trace of elements that might be figurative like grids, barriers, or some landscape. Kupferman does not refute these associations but maintains that he never intended to stimulate them. In fact, his works express especially and incessantly an internal reality, a state of soul, avoiding all concrete association. The terminology that wants this to be “lyrical abstraction,” “fundamental painting,” “process art,” or “conceptual art” has no understanding of these works because their center of gravity is outside these kinds of generalizations. Some of these terms can certainly be attributed to them, since process, for example, is very important in Kupferman’s work but in no case can they account for its essence.

The impression of beauty created by the drawings seems to be determined by the subtle, elaborate and sensitive treatment of the materials, themselves very simple.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike his critics, Kupferman himself is very cautious and is not prepared to reduce his paintings to mental states or ideological statements, but he is sometimes tempted to allow for such a construct as well, as one horizon of meaning, that exists and doesn’t exist at the same time. As he explained to Nili Neuman: “I do not deny the component of destruction (in my work) but one must understand that I do not need any (artificial) process of recollection to preserve it [Neuman’s interpolations – B.H.]. The presence of Destruction beside the need to Build, for me, those are facts of life.” These words sound like the ideology of the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, and have a justified biographical motivation. They are relevant because parallels for them can be found in the paintings: “Kupferman’s plastic thought, entailed by his world view, erects metaphorical stories for the concepts of Destruction and Building, as necessary ‘neighbors’ in the platform of his work.” (ibid.)

Indeed, if we put on glasses in two colors -- Destruction and Building -- we can find both in the paintings. But in this explanation, the painter’s world view is primary and his “plastic thought” is merely derivative. Furthermore, the painting is seen not as a free, creative activity, discovering and renewing itself in the process, but only as an application of the “plastic thought,” which is preordained; and the latter is a necessary concomitant of biography or ideology. This is a determinism widespread in contemporary literary and art criticism, a heritage of a kind of Marxism (that went bankrupt in its deductive and totalizing models, and remained a favorite of literary critics). It provides the reader with tools for generalization and a global conception, but misses the richness and polyphony of art, the intrinsic value of a painterly object, the importance of the internal context, and the autonomy, even

randomness, of the creative process.

The methodological assumption here is that there are such bare essences in the world, “Destruction” and “Building,” which reside in the artist’s soul as well, essences that are prior to painting and manifest themselves on the canvas, are translated into its language. What actually happens, however, is a complex constructive process. The painter works, in a stubborn, labor-intensive manner, immersed in a state of awareness that is partly conscious and partly subconscious yet precise in every detail. He uses a highly critical internal censor, that prevents weakness, fuzziness, figurative stories or ideological statements. The critic, observing the finished work, applies to it a binary opposition, available in the semiotics of natural language (Destruction vs. Building) and abstracts from the chaotic textures of the painting certain patterns that allow us to derive (on a second level of abstraction) the language concepts “Destruction” and “Building.” This is a two-story abstraction which finds a homology in the binary semiotic opposition available in language. And this binary opposition itself is reinforced in a two-level abstraction: from the infinite continuity of events in the world, we select such events that match the concepts of destruction and building, and from those constructs we generalize about destruction as a global principle, often vague, perhaps historical, even metaphysical.

In fact, the kinds of “Destruction” are as numerous as the kinds of “purple” in Kupferman’s paintings. Literature and art are unique because they can actually show this immense variety – and leave the generalizing concepts to philosophers and art critics.

Furthermore, seeing the world through concepts like destruction and building is most convenient for bridging the painter’s life and art. But this is a semiotic and conceptual schematization and cannot convey the whole range of phenomena, even in this particular domain. For in between building and destruction (or vice versa) a person’s life also includes birth, growing up, love, pain, threat, failure, work, repair, scaffolding, compromises, overcoming, etc. etc. – and we could read all those into the story we construct from Kupferman’s paintings.

Kupferman himself understands that his painting is not a projection of a mental or ideological state. Even in his most “utilitarian” statement, his explication of the direct commission he received for the institution commemorating the Holocaust, he demands of himself:

To avoid any constricting thinking (which, in my view, is confining and limiting) and thus encumbers the open process characteristic of my way of painting, which contains surprises, confronts them, repeatedly attempts to make constructive use of them, and finally results in a personal and qualitative painting. (See Kupferman’s letter to me, Appendix A).

Thus, the origin of a painting is not in “constricting thinking” but in the creative process, which is in part sub-conscious yet rigorously controlled. The achievement of a painting results from confrontations and interactions between conflicting elements and systems, which emerge from one another in the course of creative activity on a canvas or paper. The painter checks soft points, “mistakes,” weak areas, and surprises – and exploits them for new developments and new constructions, perhaps surprising and revealing new possibilities. It is like writing a poem without an advance master plan. Kupferman’s insight into the reflection of his consciousness in his painting is clearly stated in the Japanese catalogue:

The canvas of a painting is for me a field, a field for all that has accumulated, all that has occurred, all that is weighty and valuable, as I am able to absorb and express it. The painting is that “all,” as it is condensed in a moment of concentration, effort and grace. (Appendix C).

The canvas is a field, the various forces intersecting in the painter’s life are like vectors; they operate in it, crisscross it and clash in it, but the painting is a painting because of the internal coherence of the field, which emerges from the creative process itself, from the network of relations and juxtapositions composing the field.<sup>12</sup> Hence, we must not construct any direct link between one detail or another in a painting and specific imaginary representations (a fence of a concentration camp, railroad tracks, Jacob’s Ladder) or any explicit statement.

Kupferman did not discover the Holocaust or collective memory, but he succeeded in building a unique painterly world – in his colors, gestures, his private modular vocabulary and changing compositions. And only on this base, using various verbal expressions, does he confront us with an interpretative challenge. In the field of his painting he has provided both a system of internal relationships and a network of hovering constructs, visible-and-invisible tensions between the painted field and meanings outside it. This is the ambiguous and double-directed reference of poetry, as described by Roman Jakobson.

A recent book on Conceptual art opens with the following definition: “Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings.”<sup>13</sup> Kupferman’s work is essentially modernist painting, he is directed toward an intensive elaboration of “forms and materials,” yet based on this “objectification,” his work places before us a conceptual challenge transcending the internal beauty of forms and materials. The painter himself, in various utterances, takes us in that direction.

#### The Poetics of Classical Kupferman<sup>14</sup>

A typical Kupferman painting is multi-layered (there are considerable differences between an oil painting on canvas and works on paper or other media – but we must postpone that issue to another occasion). The layers represent the creative process and also serve as filters for partial concealing and partial revealing of earlier layers. The layers often do not cover the whole surface but form partial systems in different regions of the painting, which do not overlap but relate to each other: large areas of a color that shifts its shades; color clouds as amorphous, flowing bodies; bands or daubs of an opposite color, cutting across; doodles and concentric ellipses or serial lines drawn by pencil or by sweeps of an arm; typical Kupfermanian objects (brackets, grids, ladders etc.), and series of straight, parallel lines or long rectangular strips in shifting colors. All these systems are placed on top of each other or partially overlapping, thus creating confrontations and oppositions between different color elements or different forms (e.g., a line vs. the daubing of a brush).

The relations between such co-textual forces constantly widen and change, like a kaleidoscope. For example, a tangle of lines appears, drawn by pencil or pencil-like gestures, lightly hovering from one color area or spatial form to another; and simultaneously, in the same area, wide bands of color crisscross like a woof and warp and change each other’s color gamut; and on top of all those, or inside them, shapes appear in space that look like objects in an internal fictional world. Thus, Kupferman’s treatment of texture and color creates a multitude of nuances, shades and tensions, confrontations and self-quotations – and all this within the restrained range of colors and shapes.

No doubt, Kupferman learned some basic lessons from various artists of the twentieth century, yet he is not a follower of any specific trend. His works contain elements of geometrical modernism (cognate to Mondrian’s straight strips of color or Agnes Martin’s pencilled grids) combined with the free floating color clouds reminiscent of American “Abstract Expressionism”; a belief in the spiritual force of abstract painting along with the free movements of the arm in a kind of “automatic painting” – and all that in works that foreground the process as well as conceptual challenges. But the language of his compositions is “organic” rather than eclectic – the different “components” cannot be separated out with impunity – and is uniquely his own. By yoking together such seemingly incompatible styles as the geometric grid and the free expansion of colors reminiscent of some “abstract expressionist” works, he has created a world of tensions and paradoxes, an impossible unity that raises his formal compositions to a level of spiritual or intellectual expression. It is authentic modern art in a post-modern condition because it relativizes different modernist styles; it appropriates their principles for a private, individual language, even a meta-language developed in Kupferman’s own work; and it activates the constructive mind of the spectator.

Kupferman’s intensive process of putting layers upon layers of heterogeneous forms and gestures, exposes the process itself, the stubborn attempt at breaking through to an expression; it is a process of gains and losses, of things irretrievably hidden and covered by the road taken, by the overcoming itself. Yet it is not Performance Art, because the process also creates an object (an old-fashioned term in post-modernist eyes), a polyvalent painterly object that invites the spectator to relate the heterogeneous, incompatible elements to each other, to perceive the drastic contrasts and the enforced unifying molds. Here, constructivism is transferred from the painting to the reading process. The same is true for the reader’s need, and the artist’s urge, to construct a bridge -- an impossible bridge -- between the

expressive values of the formal kaleidoscope and the spiritual values of our time, the painter's biography, and his verbal utterances. This spectator constructivism foregrounds the impossible conjunction of the abstract and the historical.

Classical Kupferman typically employs a range of gray (from extreme white all the way to black that looks as absolute) and a gamut of "purple," interacting with each other. In natural language, "gray" or "purple" are individual colors with clear, separate identities. The painter exposes this linguistic fallacy by displaying an exuberant richness of palpable shades and variations of shape within one sway of "gray" or "purple" – these variants could have been seen as different colors if language had a plethora of words for the differentiation of colors. The famous "Kupferman purple" is the result of mixing all colors on his palette. He himself mythologized this feature with an anecdote, that in the days of poverty on the Kibbutz he saved all remnants of colors on his palette and mixed them together on his canvas.

Indeed, gray was considered the optical result of mixing all colors (as in the psychological experiments of the late nineteenth century that spun a circle containing a rainbow of colors at a speed that would reach a unified perception of gray in the viewer's eye). Kupferman himself uses various color combinations that result in almost gray. Yet from the beholder's point of view, pure gray seems colorless, all colors were annihilated in it; whereas the world of his purples hides all colors underneath it, much as the later layers of his painting cover up the earlier ones. While gray works as an absence of color his purple is a saturated indeterminacy of color, where all colors want to burst to light and never can.

The early Dostoevsky wrote in a style replete with metaphors and similes; in his later, great works, however, he suppressed this colorful style, in favor of direct, purposeful speech, typical of his characters. Similarly, the early, semi-abstract Kupferman (a stage often suppressed in his self-presentation), still under the influence of his teachers, the Israeli painters of "New Horizons," used several distinct color areas in each painting as well as shapes of buildings and landscapes; later, all this was suppressed, indeed amalgamated in the mature Kupferman style. This is not minimalism but condensation, not exhibition but suppression, not well-shaped structures but an improvised symphony of remnants. And though the rules of the game are relentlessly repetitive, each improvisation is a new, laborious, painful, and celebratory discovery.

No area of color here is monolithic, and each has a life and history of its own. The constantly shifting mode of Kupferman's surfaces is not created by nuancing the texture of the color area itself, or by the parallel shadings of similar quasi-geometrical shapes, as in Analytical Cubism; but rather by the action upon each area exerted by other colors, shapes and gestures working on the same canvas. Each autonomous area is already the result of all the other forces interfering in it, leaving their mark on it. And thus transformed, each autonomous area interacts with other areas and forms crisscrossing the same territory. There are ubiquitous tensions and oppositions between the serial grid and the local cloud; the vertical lines and the horizontal expanses; the elliptic sweep of the painter's arm and the penciled-in lines and knife scratches; seriality and randomness; order and chaos; the various painterly means and techniques; the rainbows of purple, black and white, the rare and surprising green, and remnants of other colors. They all seem to be both massive and transparent, moving under and over each other.

The two-dimensionality of abstract painting is supplanted here by a layering of many partially-covered surfaces, a "thick culture" of multi-layered depth, a painter's fictional world of vibrant abstract systems beyond systems beyond systems beyond.

Thus, the impression of an endless multitude of changes and clashes results from the coexistence of several systems (of shape and color areas) that overlap and penetrate, obstruct and highlight each other. Compare this to an abstract expressionist painter like Jackson Pollock, who has one system dominating the variations of texture on each canvas. Here, each new intersecting system exponentially raises the number of points of contact, interpenetration, and contrast. Thus, in their very co-textual heterogeneity, seemingly simple color areas or forms create an almost endless number of possibilities of interaction. This is a maximalist treatment of minimalism: the vocabulary is minimal, the syntax is maximal.

At each point, we are at a junction, an intersection of several systems that can be abstracted as independent forces in the field of the canvas and its memory. Yet the very seriality of those systems, their ostensible "predictability," produces an unlimited variety at their points of intersection, at the

level of the local context. Eventually, order overlapping order overlapping order creates chaos. For each parameter is imprecise and may slightly deviate from its course. It is like a weather forecast: we have scientific knowledge of all the parameters, and yet a random shift in the margin of a cloud may send the whole system half a degree to the east – and we get rain in our town. Indeed, Kupferman often feels the need to harness that chaos by yet another layer of order: first, a sweep of different color; finally, a band of parallel lines -- which are again subverted in their “geometric” shape by the organic boundaries of a human hand.

### Indeterminate Signification

The advantage of art and poetry vis-à-vis philosophy and ideology lies both in the uniqueness and concreteness of its dense texture as well as in the open-ended, multiple suggestions of “meaning.” Kupferman’s painting evokes a horizon of meanings, hovering between the oppressive and the exuberant, the confined and the harmonious, the disturbing and the triumphant. It is not neutral or devoid of signification, but the significations are ideologically unresolved and indeterminate.

In his new series of paintings, *The Rift in Time*, Kupferman belies the old opposition between political and “escapist” art. True, he is intensely conscious of the autonomy and celebration of painterly qualities and thick texture in their full differentiation and heterogeneity; he is a master with a labor-intensive attitude toward his medium. Yet, simultaneously, he strives toward an expression of his/our TIME -- a key word in his verbal vocabulary.

In his famous and still relevant book *Laokoon*, the eighteenth century German literary critic and aesthetician made a distinction between arts of time (literature) and arts of space (painting, sculpture). Arts of time present their signs one after the other, in arts of space, the signs are placed next to each other. It was a major effort of Modernism to blur the boundaries between all genres and modes of discourse: prose and poetry, poetry and painting, and more detailed transgressions. In a classical essay, Joseph Frank discussed the nature of modern narrative fiction under the title: “Spatial Form in Literature,” arguing that modern fiction abandoned the structure of a novel as unfolding in time but used forms of space instead. Kupferman attempted the opposite: the representation of time in the art of space, and it was not an easy challenge at all.

Kupferman’s concept of “Time” has specific embodiments and a larger signification. First, each painting foregrounds the process in time of its own creation. It is clearly a layering process that could have stopped earlier or later; as he says himself, the painting is *i n t e r r u p t e d* rather than finished -- a direct affront to the harmonious, complete and static “object” of art. Second -- and following from the first -- each painting is part of the artist’s own unfolding in time; a conscious reunderstanding and recombination of a basic, slowly developing painterly vocabulary.

These two senses of “time” – the fluid time of one painting’s creation and the flow in time of his growth as a painter – underscore the fluidity and dynamism of the painter’s work, a perpetually unfinished state. And both represent the larger, metaphorical “Time” Kupferman refers to -- “our Time,” the historical era we live in. Yet this historical Time is not a chronological process, not time moving and changing, but, on the contrary, a static and total essence. Kupferman’s “Time” is a timeless concept, a metaphor for the comprehensive, mythological nature of human history, specifically, the twentieth century. It is not history in all its detail and contradictions but a generalized, horrible face of humanity, and in particular, the Holocaust of the Jewish people.

Wilhelm Worringer, an early philosopher of abstract art, distinguished two basic types in the history of art: *Abstraction and Empathy*, as the name of his book of 1908. For him, abstraction represented escape from time and from the mortality of the human figure. Here, abstraction and time are paradoxically merged.

### The Contexts of Kupferman’s Life

Kupferman was born in Yaroslav (Polish: Jaroslaw) in Eastern Galicia. Centrally located between the major parts of the great medieval kingdom of Poland (Poland proper, Ukraine, and Lithuania) and on the river San, a tributary of Poland’s major river, the Vistula (Wisla), that flows through the capital Warsaw, Yaroslav was a convenient site for great fairs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

During the great autumn fair, Rabbis and Assessors of the Committee of Four Lands – the “parliament” of Jewish autonomy in Poland and Lithuania – gathered here. This was the institution that collected the taxes paid by the Jews centrally to the Polish King, and that settled various religious issues. The language of the Jews was Yiddish and the chronicles and documents of the Committee of Four Lands were written in Yiddish with a heavy dose of Ashkenazi Hebrew.

The burghers (Christian city dwellers) did not want Jews settling in their city. A permanent Jewish presence in Yaroslav emerged only in the seventeenth century and by 1738, there were only a hundred Jewish families living there. At the end of the eighteenth century, when Poland was dismantled by its neighbors, Galicia was appropriated by the Austrian Empire. In the nineteenth century, Jews obtained full citizenship rights, and the Enlightenment flourished along with religion and Hasidism. Jews developed a special affection for the Emperor Franz Joseph II, who ruled until World War I. After disappearing from the map of Europe for almost a century and a half, and after a series of failed rebellions, Poland regained independence in 1918. Now the Jews shifted their cultural orientation from German to Polish. Thus, Polish and its culture were relative newcomers in Kupferman’s context. Kupferman studied in a Jewish school in the Polish language and had one year in a Polish Gymnasium. He grew up in a traditional home, his father had a store, and one grandfather was a coppersmith. Moshe insists on the German spelling of his name, Kupferman (rather than the Yiddish: Kuperman), indicating a coppersmith or copper products salesman. This was the grandfather that represented the tradition of folk artisans for Moshe.

Yaroslav was basically a small Polish city, rather than a Jewish *shtetl* (where the majority of the population would be Jews). In 1921, 6,577 Jews lived in the city, a third of the city population, though they played a central role in trade and commerce. The Polish language was the magnet that attracted them to European culture (and German was still in the background). Yet Polish nationalism, curbed after a long period of oppression, burst out after the liberation of Poland, generating nasty anti-Semitism and influencing national, Zionist sentiments among Jews. Three months before Moshe was born – and barely eight years since the creation of Poland -- on May 12, 1926, the liberator of Poland, Marshal Josef Pilsudski, a former Socialist, at the head of several regiments, moved in a “March on Warsaw,” and effectively destroyed the young Polish democracy. It was a Fascist coup, imitating the “March on Rome” by another former Socialist, Benito Mussolini in 1922. An omen of times to come.

It is hard to tell how much of that background was absorbed by the boy Moshe. What remained is a rather blurred memory, abstract yet intensive, of a lost home, a tri-lingual culture, and intimations of fear. Childhood was interrupted three weeks after his Bar-Mitzva. On September 1, 1939, the German army moved into Poland in its first Blitzkrieg, and World War II began. Poland collapsed, the Germans occupied Yaroslav on September 10, took Jewish hostages, humiliated and shot Jews. The trauma of that short German occupation is still vivid in Kupferman’s consciousness. On September 28, the Germans gathered some ten thousand Jews and transferred them to the eastern side of the San river, then in the Soviet zone (according to the agreement between Stalin and Hitler to dismantle Poland). Yet the Red “Liberators” were no benefactors either. In the Summer of 1940, they assembled all Yaroslav Jews, including the Kupfermans, and deported them to labor camps in the Ural mountains. Eventually, the Kupfermans were freed from the camp and migrated to Kazakhstan, in Soviet Central Asia, where the cold was less severe and the food was scarce. Both of Moshe’s parents died of starvation and disease and he remained with his older sister, roaming around and working on ships, until the war was over and they could return to Poland -- not to Yaroslav, however, but to the new territories Poland acquired from Germany.

As we learn both from Polish Jews who returned from exile in Russia (including Kupferman) and Jewish partisans coming out of the forests, the shock of confronting the fact of the Holocaust was unbelievable: though on the whole, they had known about it, they did not understand what they knew. The images of “liberated” Auschwitz were horrifying. And then came the horrors of the pogrom in Kielce and the slaughter of individual Holocaust survivors who tried to return to their home towns – in “Communist” Poland. And suddenly, his sister took her own life.

Ostensibly, Kupferman was not in the Holocaust itself, but he did see the Nazis, the humiliation and terror they inflicted, and for seven years, day in and day out, he experienced the uprooting from home, from his people, city, and language, and as a young boy he personally lived through the loss of his entire close family. Kupferman lost his first language, his second language, and his third, along with the cultural world they bore and the intimate family corner expressed in it. This, too, was a holocaust,

the holocaust of those who lived in the shadow of the more famous, great Holocaust, even if they survived.

Moshe remained alone and joined the Zionist-Socialist youth movement, "Dror-HeHalutz Ha-Tsayir" (affiliated with the major Kibbutz movement in Palestine, HaKibbutz Ha-Meuchad). With members of the movement, he illegally crossed the Carpathian mountains and joined the six-month intensive World Seminar of Dror in the American occupation Zone in Germany. After he completed the course, he was active in the movement in Germany, working with youth in the D.P. camps. In 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, he immigrated to Israel, joined the "nucleus" of activists from the movement in Europe, led by the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Yitzhak Zuckerman (Antek) and Zivia Lubetkin, who finally founded the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz (Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot) in the coastal valley of the Western Galilee. Moshe learned the building profession of a molder and, in the first, hard years of the Kibbutz, worked as a builder. Only gradually, with the rise of public awareness of the importance of artists living and working in a Kibbutz, and the relaxation of slogans about "Socialist Realism" among the Israeli left, did he get more and more time for his creative work. Since then, his career of a major Israeli artist is well known.

Kupferman built a large atelier on the slope of a hill in Lohamei Haghetaot. In front of him, towards the east, a wide expanse of fields spreads as far as the eye can see, orange groves in straight rows and silhouettes of Arab villages in the distance, framed by the mountains of the Western Galilee. On his left, next to the atelier, is "Tivol," the industrial plant that has contributed to the economic prosperity of the Kibbutz. And above him looms the classical, severe building of Katzenelson House, the temple of memory that serves as a Holocaust archive and museum. From here you can see the Mediterranean Sea in the west, a few miles away. To complete this multi-cultural junction, south of the Museum lies a valley, crossed by a "Roman" aqueduct on high pillars (actually, a structure from Ottoman times). Thus, serial lines frame Kupferman's atelier in the Zionist orange groves and in the pre-Zionist pillars and arches. And between the Holocaust Museum and the aqueduct, an Israeli amphitheater is built on the slope, lined with semi-circular seats of stone. Here, annual commemorations of the Shoah and the Heroism are held, where thousands of Israelis gather, symbolizing the opening of the Kibbutz from the isolation of the remnants' memory -- to the collective memory of Israeli society as a whole.

Yitzhak Katzenelson, bilingual poet, playwright and educator, ran a private Hebrew Gymnasium in Lodz, Poland, before the war. Under Nazi occupation, he fled to the Warsaw ghetto, where he taught in the underground Gymnasium of "Dror," organized by Yitzhak Zuckerman. During the Holocaust, he wrote a long narrative chronicle in Yiddish, *Poem of the Slaughtered Jewish People*, and in Hebrew, the *Diary of Vittel*, the camp in France, where he was interned before he disappeared in Auschwitz. It contains a poem in Hebrew that is hair-raising in its stark simplicity:

חלמתי - חלום  
נורא - מאור  
עמי - איננו  
איננו - עוד

I dreamt a dream  
Of horror and gore,  
My nation, my people  
Is no more.

The Katzenelson House breathes down Kupferman's neck. He was close to its long-time director, the late Zvi Shner. A survivor himself, Shner lived with his wife, the former partisan and scholar Sarah Neshamit-Shner and their children, next door to the Kupfermans; indeed, they share a small house.

It seems to me that the sense of a raw, open wound was internalized by Moshe from his own personal-biographical trauma, while the content and awareness of the larger Holocaust was reinforced by his constant proximity to the Katzenelson House and people who carried its memory. In the catalogue of the large Kupferman exhibition, held in the two major Polish museums in Warsaw and Lodz, he wrote:

How can art express the murder of millions, tell about the industry of death?  
Who can know what my Jewish people went through when they were murdered?  
We shall never be able to grasp that this could have happened.  
I paint. I miss them. Always will.

The memory is the resonance chamber where the artist lives. "To be with memory" is one of the titles he proposed for this series of paintings. It is a kind of existential "being" the painter was immersed in when painting these canvasses. Yet it would be wrong to confine Kupferman's paintings to an expression of the Holocaust. There is no identity between the art and the artist's verbalized experience, only an interpretive tension between them.

### Representing Time in the Art of Space

Kupferman's paintings are not "about" the Holocaust in any thematic or directly representational sense. On the contrary, they may also be read as hymns to creativity, as the great joy of complexity, as confrontation with overcoming. Though ostensibly written in the same private language, his work has transformed itself several times, both in its forms and painterly vocabulary and in its overall spirit. The typically drastic, disturbing gestures of his earlier works are now more harmoniously harnessed and confined. The monotonous seriality on the surfaces of his great oil paintings, covering up disturbing depths, gave way to poetic polyphonies, flights of the imagination in a multi-centered horizontal rectangle. In the last few years, even a certain range of colors and an autonomous geometry of several centers of gravity have emerged. The great changes, which may be seen as reflecting his shifts of mood, his maturity and self-confidence, as well as thoughtful painterly evolution, occurred especially in the domain of syntax: both the local syntax, the interaction between local co-textual systems, as well as the global syntax, the composition of a painting.

In recent years, a new, "Open Kupferman" has emerged. In the screenprints produced in the workshop of Jacob Harel in Jaffa in 1996-1998, we see a newly acquired sense of harmony and global or partial symmetries. The prints exhibit a depth of perspective and a hymnic jubilation to the form itself. And the huge paintings, 2.2 meters, of *The Rift in Time* seem to carry a poetic polyphony, a soaring imagination, framed in the absolute symmetry of the precise square. This symmetry, breaking with the dominant painterly tradition of the rectangle, in the direction not of freedom but of rigor and deliberate order – produces a formal frame, larger than human size, that confines rage within the boundaries of art.

We may recall Ernst Cassirer's statement: "The horrors of Dante's *Inferno* would remain unalleviated horrors, the raptures of his *Paradiso* would be visionary dreams were they not molded into a new shape by the magic of Dante's diction and verse. [...] Art turns all these pains and outrages, these cruelties and atrocities, into a means of self-liberation, thus giving us an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way."<sup>15</sup>

These words were written in America by a German Jew, after he was thrown out of his chair at Hamburg University in Nazi Germany and got to the US at the very last moment. The belief in the power of art is amazing (though we can sense his personal empathy with Dante's horrors). But if we overlook the naïve optimism which may not be shared by many at the end of the twentieth century, the conception itself seems to be close to Kupferman's spirit. Cassirer offers one version of a Formalist aesthetics which assumes that artistic form (e.g., Dante's rhyme and meter) bestows aesthetic value and provides aesthetic distance to the most horrible subject matter.

But there is also an opposite, Expressionist aesthetics, which ascribes to form not civilized framing and aesthetic distance but expressive values. It assumes that the form of a work is here to represent not the traditional institution of art but either the specific content of the particular work and its spirit or the spirit of the time. Such expressivity by means of shape, gesture, color, and composition is embodied in Kupferman's exuberant texture inside the formal frame. Yet the symmetrical frame is important too, for expressive texture alone might have gone wild and dishevelled. Moreover, formalized restraint is also planted inside the paintings, notably in the systematic series of parallel bars, sometimes dominating the whole painting and sometimes occupying only part of it and serving as a counterbalance to expressive form. Thus, formalist aesthetics and expressionist aesthetics dwell together. An artist is not a philosopher and does not have to be systematic and accept either one argument or the other. On the contrary, he makes conspicuous the tension between those two conceptions of the role of form in art.

Kupferman has always used many colors, but most overlapped and merged with each other into his purple-gray gamut. Now the colors have gotten out from under the purple amalgam and clustered in

autonomous regions, even separated from each other by straight lines, as in hard edge minimal painting. He always had various systems of color or lines and shapes, that covered only parts of a painting – yet other systems crossed over and thus the regions merged with each other. Now, not just a system imposed on a certain region, but the region as a whole has obtained an autonomy of color and geometrical form, even separate poetic principles.

If so, how is the Holocaust related to it? For Kupferman, the Holocaust itself is such an enormity that it cannot be figuratively or thematically described in art. What we can express is our inability to express it, the incomprehensible nature of it all. And, perhaps, also the swings of our emotions confronting Time. What seems important is that this “Time,” the age of the Holocaust, looms above the horizon of his work.

While reading Kupferman’s paintings, we must take seriously both his biography and his own utterances. As Marcel Duchamp’s work would be a heap of junk unless read through the often-cryptic verbal texts he himself provided, as Max Ernst would lose his Surrealist and grotesque impact without his imaginary titles, so must we read Kupferman’s paintings through the age he lived in and the words he provided.<sup>16</sup>

To me, the paintings themselves are not about the Holocaust; at most, they are paintings in its honor: a “homage” to the Holocaust. And yet, there can be no doubt that they were created in a trance of the artist’s immersion into its memory. The “being with memory” was the negative impulse for his positive creative energy.

Now it is the reader who is encouraged to construct a bridge between the two, an uneasy tension and unresolved signification. The concept of “Time” as projected on the art of space, creates hovering constructs and hovering meanings. We keep them in our consciousness as a horizon, without making an ontological commitment to their existence in the fictional world of the painting. By evoking the topic and denying it at the same time, the reader is placed in that state of heightened awareness triggered by Kupferman’s work. And in this perspective, he can enjoy the subtle complexities of this maximalist minimalist who belongs to no “school” but to the moral imperative of his own private language.

This is the victory of an artist, confident in his art, who has produced works of summation that are, at the same time, breakthroughs into possibilities of a different future.