

"Kupferman's Layers" by Ulrich Loock. The article is derived from the catalogue of the exhibition in Serralves Museum, Porto, Portugal. Appears on the site in Hebrew and in English (there's also a Portuguese version).

Kupferman's Layers
Ulrich Loock

Readers of the history of art in the 20th century are familiar with the grand narratives that set out and legitimise the movements of art (painting) on the way and towards the goal of abstraction. Accordingly, after the artistic revolutions in the early years of the century, abstract painting reaches a second climax towards the end of the 1950s, in America with the radicalisations of Abstract Expressionism, and its consequences such as 'post-painterly abstraction', and in Europe, for example, with the monochromaticism of an artist such as Yves Klein, as a way to come to terms with the painting of the École de Paris. These movements towards a historical end-point – the realisation of the modern in painting – can be sought and demanded because painting thus reaches realisations that correspond to its essential definition: the exclusion of everything that does not belong specifically to painting, particularly all illusion of spatial depth and thus, in consequence, also the exclusion of figuration and narration – painting in this view is defined essentially by its flatness (although Clement Greenberg allows elements of 'optical illusion' to avoid having to prescribe the end of painting in the form of an unpainted canvas). But one might also react to this analysis of the history of painting as the teleological process of an abstraction that reduces painting to what is specific to it, by diagnosing a 'loss of the centre' and thus ultimate decay.

Much more difficult to understand than the grand narratives is how painters can go on painting, even 'after' abstraction, after reaching an apparently definitive position of abstract painting – if one doesn't decide to consider such practices as a purely private matter or obsolete deviations from evolutionary history. Yve-Alain Bois, in his essay 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' has given an example of the way in which abstraction after abstraction may be understood. The task of painting is to work through the end prepared for it by the appearance of photography as a concise and early example of the industrialised mass production of art. This is a piece of mourning work painting takes upon itself by subjecting itself to the very same photographic conditions that call it entirely into question. The exemplary works are by Duchamp, Rodchenko and Mondrian, each of whom, in their different ways, stage the end of painting: as its approximation to the conditions of the commodity fetish, as the realisation of the facticity of painting and as the destruction of all the elements on which its particularity is based: the destruction of colour surfaces by lines, of lines by repetition, of optical illusion by the 'dynamic balance' of the pictorial elements – finally the destruction of the opposition of figure and ground. Having first reached this historical end-point in the early 20th century, painting has lived on by revitalising its end in constantly new ways. At the time when Bois wrote his essay, the mid-1980s, he recognised elements of pathological mourning, manic or melancholic in form, based on the assumption of simulacrum, on the assumption, in fact, that history was definitively over, and everything that came afterwards was nothing but a sequence of deceptive repetitions of that history: with the assumption of a conclusive end to history, the illusion arises of an unencumbered fresh start. In contrast to this kind of

ahistoricism, Bois desires a new confidence in our ability to act in a historical way, accepting our task of mourning as a constant challenge.

Moshe Kupferman's paintings and drawings belong to the idiosyncratic, non-programmatic, barely definable efforts of painting after the Second World War to create a form of history-conscious abstraction 'after' Abstract Expressionism and the *École de Paris*. His work adopts an unusual position in so far as it is solidly, almost even inseparably connected with readings that place the painterly work of mourning in a particular context of thought, namely the memory of the murdered Jews of Europe. Kupferman himself has not ruled out this context, although he rejects the assumption of unambiguous relationships. How we should think about the referentiality of Kupferman's art, the form of abstraction that he developed, and what its meaning might be, is a significant question thrown up by his work.

Until the mid-1970s, Kupferman's paints works that are sometimes almost monochrome, tending to the neutrality of grey, and whose largely uniform painting almost completely fills the picture surface. Because of these characteristic features, some interpreters have chosen to see Kupferman's works from these periods as being close to Minimalism. But the paintings lack the object character of Minimal art, which Frank Stella has summed up as 'What you see is what you see'. Kupferman's paintings do not have this factuality. It is correct that they do not show anything beyond what is visible in them – they do not reproduce things or situations 'outside' the painting, intellectual or emotional worlds or conditions to which the viewer might be required to refer back. But they also show that something is not – no longer – to be seen: what is to be seen is to be seen under the condition of the irrevocable withdrawal of visibility. Traces and markings, modulations of colour and zones incompletely painted over refer to earlier states that have disappeared under new layers and have been covered by a final level of paint.

Paintings of a different kind from this period give a hint of what could be made to disappear in and through the painting: linear elements, sometimes organised to form a grid. Painted in strong strokes, strips lying side by side covering another system of thinner strokes with a slightly different orientation, which are themselves inscribed in a ground that has been painted openly, as if in loose sweeps. Gestural traces covered by a heavy grid of lines that is in turn crossed out with a broad brushstroke... The elements of the individual pictorial layers are put in place with great resolution, fast, as though in an attack on the picture, without any interest in painterly refinement. The immediacy of the painterly action, barely filtered in any aesthetic sense, gives the individual elements a highly expressive character, but this expressiveness doesn't survive as a defining feature of the picture as a whole. The individual elements are put in place in such a way that they disturb and question one another – not so that they even act against one another. They are held together by the picture-support that they share, and by the boundaries of the picture field, but not by the internal connection of a composition. The picture field is the basic sphere from which Kupferman engages in his painterly activity, but it neither guarantees nor compels the unity of this activity: every painterly intervention results in its own trace, which is connected with the others in such a way that they detract from one another's effectiveness. With the repeated attack on every state of the image, in which a painterly approach is put into effect and determines the character of the picture – the unity of the picture surface, seismographic drawing, constructive confirmation of the

pictorial geometry, expressiveness of gestures, spatial layering – Kupferman brings the disunity of the painting to a point where it is on the brink of decay: with the means of painterly differentiation, he refers to the possibility of a painting that is robbed of the ability to emphasise the differentiated coherence of a painting.

In the apparently consistent paintings, which are sometimes described as minimalist, the separate layers and particles are painted together and into one another: the disturbances provoked by the overlaying of distinct elements appear transformed into processes or amalgams in which the individual is submerged, although without re-emerging into a new unity. Kupferman uses the picture-field as a basis for the dissolution of pictorial connections – stroke by stroke, element by element, sometimes to the point where things reach an entropic identity. Invisibility as a condition for the visibility of uniform paintings from the 1970s is a translation of practices of crossing-through and erasure which define the polymorphic paintings of the same period.

The development of Kupferman's subsequent work acts as an avoidance of the complementary final positions at which his painting is aimed until that point: the formless unity and incoherent multiplicity of the painting. His paintings until the mid-1970s are defined by a kind of satiety, expressed on the technical level by the fact that Kupferman paints with a paint-laden brush that leaves intense material traces. Some of these paintings have a softness that is, however, completely absent from them after the early 1980s. It is impossible to establish precisely when and how this transition occurs, from paint-sated (in terms of material, not colour) canvas to the later paintings, which appear much harder and drier, and sometimes as though they have been skinned. It is not a linear process, since Kupferman moves backwards and forwards in a way that makes it impossible to divide his work clearly into periods on a chronological basis. But the difference between fully formulated paintings from the various periods is obvious. It means that Kupferman frees himself from all obligation to the aesthetic paradigms of the post-war period, and begins to realise something specifically his own.

Many but not all of the paintings from the early 1980s to the early 1990s are determined by horizontal and vertical strips, regularly placed side by side or above one another, and which occupy much but often not all of the picture field – in some of the paintings parts of the painting do not reach the lower edge of the picture. Horizontal or vertical values may be emphasized, but in most cases both orientations occur, so that the grid becomes the dominant figure of these paintings. The grid occupies the upper layers of the painting – but areas left uncovered reveal that less rigorously organised figures lie at deeper levels. Like earlier paintings, the works of the 1980s are organised into layers that cover and in many ways mask one another. But the grid structure of the last layers covers almost everything else and to a large extent closes the painting.

Parallel strips are produced by Kupferman pulling a hard brush or even a palette-knife through a still damp layer of paint – through a process of application and subsequent removal of paint, which can be followed by repeated application of paint. Centrally important to the conception of this painting however, is the fact that the complementarity of the two movements is not symmetrical, but shifted: when the painter draws a hard object through a layer of paint to realise the desired strip or grid

structure, he removes part of the applied material, and at the same time presses the still damp colours of superimposed layers into one another. This never reverses the previous process of paint-application. There is no return to hidden states, it is rather that in its negative orientation the painting is impelled in a direction in which earlier states and results are disturbed, destroyed, but not eliminated. The painting always preserves a reference to its own past, even if this may be apparent only in traces of paint drips at the side of the painting. Through the complementary processes of his painting, Kupferman applies pressure to connect the layers with one another. This produces a strong impression of physicality, density and heaviness which is significantly supported by the largely dark, grey and purple colour of the paintings.

Kupferman has not rejected the concept of automatism for his way of painting. But this cannot refer to Surrealist automatism, which was methodically employed to create graphic traces and figurations through which deeper and otherwise inaccessible layers of the psyche could be reached. Rather, according to what is said above the process of Kupferman's painting in the 1980s consists precisely in the crossing out and destruction of those elements of the painting with which the differentiation of meanings may be achieved. Kupferman's automatism is in fact more one of the mechanical repetition characteristic of industrial production. These two things belong together, the successive destruction and crossing out of elements of painterly specificity and the mechanisation of painting. Kupferman's repetitive way of painting assimilates the form of industrial production, in the face of which the painterly gestures of individual expression seek to assert themselves.

In the 1990s a new type of more open-seeming, polymorphic, more highly coloured paintings comes to the fore. The layers which almost completely cover the picture field and deeper levels of painting in the pictures of the 1980s are now restricted to smaller zones, and the superimposition of the layers is complemented by their juxtaposition. The invisibility of the earlier pictures becomes legible. That is not to say that the new paintings reveal something that was previously concealed. Henceforth the painting is shaped by overlayerings, extreme contrasts and the refusal of possibilities of access. But in opting for a smaller size in the individual layers of the picture, he avoids covering it up completely, and presents the overlayering and invisibility of earlier stages of the picture as its actual object. What he shows as his painterly business is that he is extinguishing, in an accumulative process, what had previously been realised. In contrast to the paintings of the 1980s, however, the more recent paintings do not create the impression of a final layer. The more they present in the form of a seeming opening of the picture, the more they intensify – to the point of discomfort – insight into the withdrawal of visibility.

While the paintings of the 1990s appear significantly more polymorphous than the strip and grid paintings of the previous decade, the process of their production has been mechanised even further. Polymorphousness is linked with technical processes and freed from the desire for personal expression. The chief tool for the application of paint is now the paint-roller, with which Kupferman applies larger surfaces of paint and broad stripes, usually horizontally or vertically. Narrower stripes and lines in all directions and in different kinds of gestural movement, on the other hand, are created with the brush, palette-knife, graphite or white chalk, generally in the form of the removal of paint. Particularly notable is Kupferman's use of the graphite pencil, familiar to him from his work as a draftsman, and with which he leaves marks on the

picture-surface in a rapid staccato or in wide arm movements, later also in the form of idiosyncratic drawings. The graphite is very hard and thus produces scratches in the existing paint layers more often than colour traces of its own – it is a particularly efficient means of breaking the unity of the painting.

A video film shows that Kupferman begins the painting process by covering the white grounded canvas with green paint, applying the paint-roller horizontally – this was also his working method in the condensed paintings of the 1980s, as one can sometimes tell only at the edge of the painting, or even on its reverse. So all his paintings since the early 1980s begin in the same way (other elements of this sameness are the use of oil paint and the format). With the application of green tones he confirms an impenetrable ground for his painterly action, one which he cannot get behind. Since the early 1990s Kupferman has also applied, in a second step, a particular purple brownish red, and thus produces a displaced complementary contrast to the green. This is the other colour with which he prescribes his painting the principle of differentiation. Once more he starts at the upper edge of the painting, but leaves a strip of the initial colour free at the bottom, as a trace of the process. In a third step Kupferman removes large areas of the paint he has just applied with the palette knife and collects the remnants in a container on his painting trolley: differentiation is answered with a process of blending. With these three steps, the basic positions of Kupferman's painting are covered. All actions to this point are carried out with craftsmanlike routine. They remain largely the same for the various works. Only when a picture is prepared in this way does the individual painting begin.

While green and purplish brown – often shifted against one another on the lower edge of the picture – supply the greatest colour range, the other layered surfaces, stripes and strips are chiefly realised in black, white and various tones of a curious purplish-grey colour-blend whose basic material appears to be the paint that was removed at the beginning. Even when he has applied the first layers of paint, Kupferman tends to begin again at the upper edge of the picture, and leave lower layers free. In this way, the upper part of the picture appears particularly heavy and saturated, while towards the bottom the thickness of the construction decreases. This way of filling the picture field recalls a written palimpsest, to which the viewer reacts with his own reading in such a way that he – presumably to a large extent without success – attempts to establish the sequence in which the individual elements are painted: through his method of painting different layers into one another, alternately applying paint and removing it again, Kupferman creates a curiously undialectical mixture and interpenetration of the layers that can barely be dissolved.

Towards the end of the 1990s Kupferman introduces a new element to his painting, sometimes called an 'envelope flap'. These are sharply outlined white overpaintings, generally in the form of an elongated trapezoid, the longest side of which often coincides with the upper edge of the painting. With incredible harshness, this overpainting masks everything that lies beneath it, and thus forms a violent incision into the already fragile whole of the picture. When Kupferman moves this element into the upper zone of the painting, it appears as though his concern is to level out the swollen thickness of the painting in that zone. In a sense he is bringing the grounding to the surface and recreating the situation that prevailed before any painting began: the painting is folded into surfaces of non-painting. To this extent the association with the envelope is actually meaningful. This recreation of the grounding

can also be linked to Kupferman's practice of work on paper, his foldings and the treatment of both sides of the page.

The fact that Kupferman uses a paint-roller for his painting is a clear reference to the idea that the paradigm for his paintings is a wall, not a window as it was for Alberti. Only in a technical but not an essential sense are Kupferman's pictures panel-paintings. The panel-painting is based on the idea of transparency, and thus the illusion that it is possible to penetrate the depths of the picture, in which the individual things are arranged in a lifelike way. The panel-picture also implies the apparent possibility of revealing things that are covered in the given picture by other things, simply by changing point of view. But the wall that Kupferman's paintings resemble is a whitewashed wall that is painted with stroke after stroke, dirtied and damaged in between, scrawled with graffiti, touched up and partially over-painted. That wall is impenetrable, and all traces left successively upon it are superimposed, layer after layer, towards the viewer. The wall is not a place for an arrangement of things like the window or table whose name is related to the name of the painting ('tableau'). Rather it is the place where history emerges – in the German language, the word 'Geschichte', meaning history, suggests a sedimentation of layers ('Schichten'). Kupferman's painting stages 'history' as a layering of zones of painting, that is, in the form of a spatial organisation that is only possible for painting: in Kupferman's painting, the passing of time is not represented, but is realised by what takes place over time. Where we had previously thought that Kupferman's pictures take as their subject matter the layering of painting under the condition of the mutual disturbance and erasure of painterly elements, this painting can now be recognised as an expression of history.

In the paintings of the 1990s, a number of graphic configurations appear, parallel layers of stripes, grids, rectangles and various other figures. There is something of the hieroglyph about them, although deciphering them is problematic if one wishes to avoid being misled into personal associations that can hardly be examined. But there is one graphic feature which is attached to various levels and fields in the picture, and can be deciphered without a doubt: the artist's signature. Curiously, Kupferman often signs his paintings a number of times, or rather: he signs individual zones and layers in his painting, before (partially) painting over them again. Often the signature is inserted into the arrangement of the painting as a pictorial element in its own right. With his signature, the artist confirms the authenticity of what he has done, and assumes responsibility for it. With his repeated signature, the painter Kupferman acknowledges every element of his painting's history, all of the various mutually disturbing, mutually erasing layers. He confirms that he stands by the contradictory and destructive impulses of his painting, and that he wants them, and also that he stands by the destruction of earlier elements already acknowledged in the course of that history. At the same time the repeated signature also confirms that this Kupferman is the only person who can assume responsibility for the course of that history. That is, that this is a history without the involvement of the Other, a history without a genealogy: time after time Kupferman comes back to his own name, as though there were no other. But a history without a genealogy is a history after history. By signing layer after layer of his painting, Kupferman is himself interpreting his painting in layers (the historicity of his painting) as the dissolution of historical development.

The question of the excluded Other reappears once again in the context of Kupferman's signature. Every time he signs twice: with his name in Hebrew and in Latin script, written from the right and from the left, as an asymmetrical mirror writing with the corresponding year in the middle, at the point of the mirror's axis. There are two signatures. But the Other is nothing but the displaced mirroring of the Self. Kupferman does not ignore the reality of the Other, but it seems to be reflexively linked to his Self. This kind of reflexivity characterises the subject of a history after history.

The Hebrew script belongs to the Israeli Kupferman, the Latin script to the Polish Kupferman. The two scripts are clues to the divergent identities that shape the signing person. Between the two signatures, at the place of the mirror's axis between the Latin and the Hebrew script, at the point that is not itself reflected, the date of the signature is visible. The moment when a layer of painting and, where this is the case, the entire painting is signed off, is the absolute point around which the difference of the signatures is organised. Each time Kupferman declares a state of his painting to be authentic, the difference running through his person is decided again.

According to these considerations, Kupferman's practice of signature confirms the history (the sequence of layers) of his painting as history after a history of development and the relationship with the Other, and every moment at which a state of the painting is accepted, becomes the absolute moment that attests to the painter's double identity. With his signature practice, Kupferman reflects upon the historical task that his painting assumes, and which Yve-Alain Bois terms a working-through of its end, Kupferman being preoccupied with the successive, repeated destruction of painterly means for the differentiation of meaning. Kupferman links the painterly work of mourning that places his painting in a line with the most significant works of an abstraction 'after' abstraction in the second half of the 20th century, with a reflection of his own identity, namely the split into a Latin-script and a Hebrew-script Kupferman, which is organised by the each time absolute moment of an acknowledged state of his work. But the true moment, the true zero hour giving rise to the reflection that is manifested in the twofold name, but which remains withheld from it, is the murder of Europe's Jews. The duplication of the artist's own identity is linked to the fate of the Jewish people, and each moment of the painting superposes the moment of the murder of the Jews.

Kupferman himself and the various outstanding exegetes of his work have repeatedly made it clear, in contradiction to different attempted interpretations, that his painting does not refer iconographically to the murder of the Jews – with one possible exception: the diagonal brushstroke that leads from the left top corner of the picture to its centre. Kupferman inserted this diagonal in reaction to the death of a neighbour who fell in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and has previously used it in drawings. It is an annihilating disturbance of the post-Cubist horizontal/vertical pattern that determines most of Kupferman's painting. But it can also be linked to the traditional cutting open of the shirt as a sign of grief. Kupferman confirms this reference by giving eight paintings the title *The Rift in Time*, 1999, with 'Di Kriye' in brackets, the Yiddish name for that cut. With this title, Kupferman opens up the iconographic dimension as a possible reading for his paintings. It is regrettable that he did not live long enough to develop this dimension, to the potential of which his various styles of drawing had referred for a long time, and incorporate it within the

overall context of his painting. As his oeuvre stands before us today, its extraordinary significance lies in the way in which Kupferman has linked the working-through of the end of painting through the agency of his own identity, although not in any form of representation, with the constantly present 'rift in time' in the form of the murder of the Jews.

Author's note: I have avoided supporting my observations on the work of Moshe Kupferman with references to literature. At this point, however, I should like to point out that I am greatly obliged to the research of the various authors who have engaged with Kupferman's work over the years. I should particularly like to mention the writings of Yona Fischer and Benjamin Harshav. U.L.