

Publication in Ali Kaaf's book Paper & Glass, Moontower Foundation 2013

## **Representation and Abstraction: Ali Kaaf's Seductive Paradoxes**

Modernism reached a unique apex of achievement in the 1940s and 1950s when Abstract Expressionists revealed how thoroughly self-referential and non-objective an art object could be. In the United States, the critic Clement Greenberg and his colleagues extolled this path - driving home the point in terms at once strident and inspiring - that art's divorce from concrete or experiential realities was, or should be, all artists' solemn goal. This viewpoint took hold firmly in the Euro-American art world, developing into an orthodoxy that marginalized what is arguably a fundamental characteristic of artistic practice throughout human history, that being to depict, show, illustrate, describe, parody, or otherwise treat a place, thing, person, culture, experience, or emotion...in other words, to express through physical, sensory means something that is extrinsic to the physical art object and its aesthetic freight.

As artists and art world observers began to sense an endgame to the Formalist doctrine and the chill of academism began to descend on the medium of painting in particular (indeed, critic and philosopher Arthur Danto wrote in 1984 of the "end of art"), the tide began to change. In the face of abstraction's apparent refusal to be comprehensible, rebellion simmered and not just among the reactionary element. Formalism received a much-needed re-think. Art began once again to be about something. The figure returned. Narrative returned. Politics returned. As Picasso said, "There is no abstract art. You must always start with something." The art world had come full circle, although it now possessed a historically unprecedented understanding of the breadth and potential of abstraction.

Abstract artists continued and still continue to work in evolving modes, and it is at this historic juncture that Ali Kaaf's work enters the story. Not yet burdened by a stylistic moniker, twenty-first-century abstract art is a heterogeneous practice. Gone is the mid- twentieth-century flight from the messiness of modern life, and in its stead abstract artists embrace both the raw

tangle of life as lived *and* the striving for varying interpretations of purity. Now that one no longer feels outré or out of touch for noting that an abstract work recalls concrete forms or deeply felt non-aesthetic realities, we can speak of abstract works like Kaaf's that meld idea and substance or that symbolically evoke deep human experience. It is now that we can revel in the forceful images in Kaaf's work, the purposeful choice of materials that gives shape to these images, as well as the connotations and linkages to lives we know. We have given ourselves permission to recognize and to counter the "nothingness" of pure abstraction. To identify is to validate the visibility of the image. It is a quest to clarify and, often, to escape the shifting sands of ambiguity.

In Kaaf's work, we sense allusions to external realities in both the formal content of the work and the physicality of each piece. A smoldering oval of irregular stippling the color of charcoal suggests aftermath—the quiet remains of something perhaps quite harrowing. But to see as well the delicate burnt edge of the paper that bears this image suggests that the object is more than a record of experience; it is perhaps even a relic. Kaaf's blacks are very black, deeper than mere color, reaching into the realm of substance. They are dense, muscular non-colors. Kaaf's imposing glass helmets possess an imprecise biomorphic character that a viewer might be excused for seeing as symbolic of the vulnerable nature of the absent human wearer or the mutable nature of power and coercion. Images of centuries-old excavated artifacts flood the mind simultaneously with the memory of the tense and lively moments that occur in the creation of a work in free-blown glass. Here, too, a fragment stands in for an epoch: an item of headgear evokes the struggle of an unnamed historic people. Kaaf's elemental forms lend themselves to such sweeping interpretation by their very simplicity. Works that suggest a human figure with the face blank or physically cut out of the sheet are startling: erasure, concealment, fear, anonymity ... all such references are called forth. In still others of his works, we see the sgraffito-like detail of a tree, the featureless contours of a disembodied head, or the plank-like suggestion of a house. Yet, none of these is definitively tree, head, or house.

The ambiguity impels one to look again and perhaps identify the echo of something else altogether.

The strong, uncomplicated forms that Kaaf develops are so familiar that they bring to mind anything from atoms to universes. The viewer finds herself giving free rein to the persistent, virtually unstoppable drive to identify content, to pin a concrete referent to an abstract image and mentally assigning its identity as a cloud, a swarm of insects, a film of condensation. Kaaf's works - these distillations of experience - suggest his striving to give visual form to the essence of a thought or the memory of a specific tactile experience. Whether on paper or in three-dimensions, Kaaf's works invite the touch, with each work an alloy of solid material and ethereal content. In many of the works on paper, an engulfing textile-like regularity of surface must be deliberately bounded within the paper's edge or risk losing any suggestion of "objecthood" or "representation." Such is the sense of consuming atmosphere that is evoked.

Another layer of activity is also at work in Kaaf's output. Works employing a grid-like composition or a central vertical split establish a symmetry that injects calm into what otherwise might be an agitated composition. All-over patterns of multiple nameless shapes similarly set up a chant-like, calming cadence. The patterns, like a biological cell structure that divides repeatedly, may envelope or shroud other layers within the image, with all of the paradoxically comforting and unsettling implications that such forms can convey. Like letters in a language we cannot read, these repeating shapes express the kind of satisfying beauty that only a regular pattern can achieve, while leaving us without a sense of explicit meaning. At times, this precarious calm is deliberately disrupted by a tear in the sheet, a bold discordant mark, or a spidery and crippled line clawing its way across the sheet. These marks disrupt the flatness of the image and introduce an underlying layer that reminds the viewer of the - perhaps dangerous - unseen.

Recent events unfolding in Syria, where Kaaf grew up, prompt a further level of reflection. Using the inherent starkness of black and white, Kaaf taps into the directness and poignancy that Jacques Callot found in a similarly monochrome palette in his *Les grandes misères de la guerre* or that Käthe Kollwitz used with searing impact in works explicitly protesting war. Ragged edges, blade-shaped forms, voids suggesting faces, and slashing gestural marks appear in works that permit interpretation in terms of commentary or critique. Kaaf does not offer explicitly political messages, but it would be naïve to imagine that an artist working in Syria, Beirut, Berlin, and the United States has been uninfluenced by the tensions and divergent viewpoints stemming from these regions. He remains open to wide-ranging interpretations of his work and to what others see in it.

Contrary to popular opinions still too prevalent, abstraction does not equate to formlessness. However, abstract art is often very open-ended in its embrace of interpretive possibilities. Kaaf's work ultimately expresses this degree of flexibility and "unknowability." Kaaf revels in the exploration of material possibilities, yet does so within the self-imposed confines of a bold and highly personal aesthetic idiom. Ultimately, it is in the social arena represented by his viewers that his works find their specificity, meaning, and significance.

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