QUESTIONING PERCEPTIONS OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE WORK OF ARY STILLMAN

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Looking for signs of Jewishness in Ary Stillman’s abstractions is a matter of conjecture. There is no overt symbolism, nor direct engagement—even assuming, that is, that there could be a consensus on what Jewishness actually is. As a boy in the Russian shtetl of Hresk, Stillman received an Orthodox education. After he emigrated to the United States he was involved in the Jewish community in Sioux City, Iowa. He went to synagogue, supported Jewish institutions such as the American Jewish Congress and Sioux City Jewish Federation, and was buried as a Jew. At Stillman’s funeral Rabbi Robert H. Kahn of Congregation Emanu El in Houston described the artist as “a faithful brother.”

Yet, like other Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and 1950s, Stillman kept his professional aspirations separate from his expression as a Jew. Some scholarship in the visual arts has attempted to situate Abstract Expressionism within a Jewish paradigm. This is in part tied to the Holocaust, which has a position in Western modernity that overshadows most other historical events and is a pervasive source of scholarship in Jewish studies. Both Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko have been invoked as the modern Jewish artist par excellence in the United States; “the last rabbi of Western art” was how the poet Stanley Kunitz described Rothko, for example. An important text in this discourse is the much-cited Museum of Modern Art catalogue from 1971 by the curator Thomas B. Hess, which focused on the importance of Kabbalah in Newman’s work, as evidenced in part by such titles as Zim Zum and Hamakom. Matthew Baigell, who has written extensively on Jewish artists in the United States, has recently added to this debate in American Artists, Jewish Images.

The Second World War was pivotal for the work of these artists, including Stillman. It arguably shaped their thinking for the rest of their lives, changing their aesthetic as well as their outlook on life. Stillman’s shift in 1945 to abstraction was based upon a complex range of factors but mainly on his realization that in the raw, postwar light, “nothing is as it formerly seemed.” As Frances Stillman, the artist’s wife, explained, “it was the necessity of forgoing a world in which they had grown up but which had now collapsed.” The critic Clement Greenberg articulated a similar position in his essay “Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism” from 1950, which seemed to sum up the feelings of a generation of artists. Greenberg linked their work to a sense of existential angst as a specifically Jewish response to the Holocaust. “The main struggle at least for us in the US, still has to be fought inside ourselves. It is there and only there, that we can convince ourselves that Auschwitz, while it may have been a historical judgement was not a verdict upon our intrinsic worth as a people.”

The art historian and critic Mark Godfrey has pointed out how Newman, in a radio interview in 1966, retrospectively substantiated this viewpoint: “The feeling I had at the time of the war in ’41 was that the world was coming to an end. And to the extent that the world was coming to an end, the whole issue of painting, I felt, was over because it was impossible to paint flowers, figures, etc. and so the crisis moved around the problem of what I can really paint.”

However, the shadow of future historiographic haziness looms here. By locating his revelation specifically in 1941, Newman would most likely have been referring to the impact of Pearl Harbor. This points to a central dilemma of Jewish artists of the post-war avant garde. For Newman, to cite events in 1941 as his reason for moving towards abstraction may well have been an attempt to distance himself from being read as a Jewish artist through a response to the Holocaust, even while demonstrating an affiliation with Jewish institutions and milieux. This may give us some insight into Stillman’s position and the distinction between his work and life. Stillman demonstrated even less adherence to Jewish ... of Jews, particularly in his early years, and while in Palestine painted self-evidently Jewish subjects, such as Hasidic Jew (fig. 120) and Egyptian Jew (fig. 121). However, it is significant that the Palestine paintings were left undeveloped, an isolated attempt at figuring the Jew, and that on arriving again in Europe, Stillman returned to his secular concerns with a series of nudes.

Between 1946 and 1947 some of Stillman’s work, such as Carnival (fig. 1) and Walpurgisnacht (fig. 85), referenced pagan festivals that had survived and been transformed through Christianity. He continued to introduce other specifically non-Western themes during the 1950s (fig. 119) and Stillman’s late work in Mexico also drew on a varied mix of Pre-Columbian Mexican...
120. Hasidic Jew. 1925
Watercolor on paper
14 × 10 in. (36.8 × 26 cm)
Jewish Community of Sioux City, IA, gift of the artist in memory of his mother

121. Egyptian Jew. 1925
Watercolor on paper
14 × 10 in. (36.8 × 27.3 cm)
Jewish Community of Sioux City, IA, gift of the artist in memory of his father-in-law, Arnold F. Fribourg
symbolism, which had survived despite the hegemony of the Catholic Church. This approach was completely in keeping with the "Modern Man" discourse as rehearsed by Newman, Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and others, all of whom also explored motifs from pre-Christian civilizations. Matthew Baigell has argued that this is a Jewish theme, stating that Rothko, for example, found "in Greek mythology and Christian iconography ways to comment on contemporary events for which he did not need a specific Jewish signifier to create a Jewish-inflected art." I would argue, conversely, that by figuring an Otherness built on primitivism, at a time when Jews themselves were often cast as exotic and different from the mainstream community, these Jewish artists were making a distinction between themselves and Othersness. By painting non-Western forms as exotic and Other, and by conflating the ancient and the non-Western, Jewish artists identified themselves as sophisticated and Western, thus assimilating Jewishness into whiteness.

So, while Jewish artists were making themselves "white," despite having a history in the West of being different enough to be persecuted and murdered, in other contexts eastern European Jews were seen as too white. For Stillman, this bifurcated position may have enhanced his intention to explore non-Western cultures, exemplified through his experience in Morocco. Here he was identified by the Jewish community as "too pale" to be a Jew, to the extent that he was met with "resistance and suspicion" when he attended a commemoration of a revered rabbi at a Jewish cemetery. At the same time as exploring pagan references, Stillman was developing the drawings and woodcuts that constitute some of his strongest work. Their imagery consists of floating shapes, jagged and awkward, that hover against voids, rich in textured darkness. They had been developed through Stillman’s exploration of the technique of rubbing charcoal and pastel over an embossed line. These images have something in common with Morris Louis’s Chained Journal: Firewritten from 1951, which several scholars have related to Jewish identity and the Holocaust.

Godfrey has suggested analogies between the processes of making art and post-Holocaust Jewry. He described, for example, how the act of coating a field of colorful underpainting with a dense black and then drawing jagged marks on it could be likened to the obliteration of a vibrant Jewish culture, or how the layering of ink might represent the strata of time and the generations. We could apply Godfrey’s observations to Stillman’s Lutece series, which he produced in the autumn of 1952, during his first time back in Paris since fleeing in 1933. As in the earlier Priscilla, Brighton, and Sayville series, the paper is scored and the images are "found" by making these almost invisible marks visible. Moreover, in Stillman’s woodcuts from the following year (figs. 122, 123), both the violence of the incised mark and the white surrounding rectangle of the paper’s edge emphasize the depth that the figures inhabit. The floating, unconnected shapes with sharp edges may also be analogous to a community cut off from its roots in Europe. Yet, unlike Louis’s work, there are no “Jewish” titles to assign such a meaning, only the name of a French hotel. Godfrey ultimately posits the idea that the “indeterminacy” of meaning in paint and a “failure to secure fixed meanings” can bind a work to the Holocaust, because the Holocaust itself, he suggests, defies meaning. Thus this indeterminacy of meaning in the bold, charred marks of Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, the “all-over,” amorphous compositions of Pollock and Richard Pousette-Dart, and the ripped-apart forms of Willem de Kooning and Conrad Marca-Relli would suggest that the work of Jewish and non-Jewish artists may be equally linked to the Holocaust.

As keeping as it is to read the works of Jewish artists in the postwar era as particularly engaged with the Holocaust, doing so would misread the times. The art historian Juliet Steyn in her essay “The Sublimeal Greenberg” sees the “individualism” Greenberg trumpeted in his writing as a move away from a collective but particularist-er-microcultural-worldview toward universalism, a drift that opened a path to assimilation in the US. Greenberg and the New York avant-garde had been moving in this direction since 1939, when a faction of artists led by critic Meyer Schapiro resigned from the...
American Artists’ Congress over its failure to condemn the Stalinist position on aesthetics, the Soviet–Nazi non-aggression pact, and the subsequent Russian invasion of Finland. The resulting Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors favored internationalism and what they saw as a new aesthetic freedom. As their constitution declared, “we condemn artistic nationalism which negates the world tradition of art at the base of modern movements.” Stillman exhibited with the federation as a guest in 1944 and became an active member the following year, serving with Gottlieb on the exhibition committee. Since Stillman’s earliest experiments with abstraction coincided with this affiliation, it is likely that the organization’s universalist standpoint on “world tradition” inspired his own turn toward anthropology and psychology to explain the Holocaust.

“Modern Man” discourse had developed in the West since the First World War and was taken up with alacrity in
125. *Lutece No. 46*, 1952
Embossing, charcoal, and pastel on paper
92 x 79 cm (36.3 x 31 in.)
The Stillman-Lack Foundation (519)

126. *Brighton No. 34*, 1951
Embossing, charcoal, and pastel on paper
12 x 11 in. (30.5 x 27.9 cm)
The Stillman-Lack Foundation (564)
It seemed to offer a way of explaining the twentieth century, through a "Family of Man" ideology that not only made ethnic and geographical particularity redundant but also conflated time, positing early man and contemporary non-Western man as equivalents. This also laid a context for drawing from non-Western art forms as a way of exploring the "essence" of man. There was comfort to be had in seeing equivalence between ancient and modern man—indeed, it barbarianism is essentialized as "primitive," this lets the individual off the hook. There was also much to be gained for Jews in adopting family of Man politics. This was not a retreat from politics, as is often suggested, but in fact was the politics of the times. The particularity of Modern Man discourse lay in its expression through other intellectual developments of that time, particularly the influence of Jung.

However, even the assertion of a shift toward valuing the unconscious needs to be examined. Michael Leja has argued vigorously against this view of Abstract Expressionist artists through his analysis of Pollock, suggesting that his imagery constituted the "deliberate construction of a formal vocabulary adequate to the representation of the unconscious and its contents as Pollock was coming to conceive these entities." Michael Leja claimed that there was a deliberate attempt to depict forms that would be seen as intuitive, which itself makes nonsense of the notion of intuition. If that were the case with Pollock, so it would have been for Stillman. Such an understanding of the processes of art-making ties the work to a Modern Man discourse rather than a "Jewish" response to the Holocaust. As I have argued in relation to Newman's statement of 1944, there was a lot of repositioning going on, and for Jews there was much at stake.

The central question about Stillman surely isn't: "Where can we see Jewishness in his work? Is he a Jewish artist? Or does he have a Jewish soul?" But how did he position his work within the discourses of art? In my attempt to address the problem of approaching Stillman's work from a Jewish perspective, I draw again on Godfrey's writing on Newman. As has been noted earlier, Newman used titles from Jewish mysticism and was happy to be considered a Jewish intellectual, but he unequivocally refused to be seen as a "Jewish artist." In response to a symposium on Jewish art that he attended at New York's Jewish Museum in 1965 (while the institution was planning its retrospective), Newman wrote to the director: "To express my disgust at the Jewish Museum's sponsorship of the debate 'What about Jewish Art'? What the Jewish Museum has done is to complicate me as an artist because I am Jewish... you have made it impossible for me to show my work in your museum." More than forty years later, we need to heed Newman's concerns and acknowledge the clear and important distinction between being born Jewish (however that is lived out), being a Jewish artist (whatever that may mean), and making Jewish art. We need to take care to acknowledge the ambitions as well as the aims artists have for their work and to consider the
content of their time. We must be careful about owning culture through claims made on art, to bolster a collective pride and sense of self as a community. Stillman painted at a time when modern painting was posited as an opposition to the particular and often as a vehicle for collective social change. The move into abstraction was not a retreat from this position but was seen as a way of fulfilling those aspirations.

Notes

2. This was Stanley Kantor who according to James E. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 220.


5. Frances Stillman to Norman Podhoretz, Editor, Commentary, February 3, 1982, The Stillman-Lack Foundation. This view has to take into account the shift in sentiment from the 1930s to the 1940s in relation to the Holocaust, as has been examined by Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, Boston (Mariner Book) 2000.


7. This was Stanley Kantor who according to James E. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 220.


9. Frances Stillman to Norman Podhoretz, Editor, Commentary, February 3, 1982, The Stillman-Lack Foundation. This view has to take into account the shift in sentiment from the 1930s to the 1940s in relation to the Holocaust, as has been examined by Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, Boston (Mariner Book) 2000.


11. This was Stanley Kantor who according to James E. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 220.


16. The French philosopher Alain Badiou urges against this position on the Holocaust. He states that unless it is thought through and given meaning, it is likely to be repeated. Alain Badiou, The Century, trans. Alberto Zavattaro, Cambridge (Polity Press) 2007.


18. So Brown puts forward a similar case but goes further, arguing that Greenberg reassessed the priority of one area of identity over another, see below. Naomi, Jewish identities in American Modern Art: Claims of Ethnicity, New York and Alenson (London) 2006, p. 28.


20. Endorsed by partly Edward Said’s The Other in Other: Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955.

21. Writing about Rothko, Matthew Baigell suggests this conflict of time as a “Jewish sense of synchronic time” (American artists, p. 66), but would argue, as I do elsewhere in this essay, that the phenomenon had a much wider reach that Rothko himself and was popularized through the Modern Man discourse.


23. This was Stanley Kantor who according to James E. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 220.

24. The Holocaust in American Life, Chicago and London (University of Chicago Press) 1983, cites Ad Reinhardt as saying that “most painters were reluctant to join a group for fear of being labeled or submerged” (pp. 47 and 217, n. 120).

25. In Juliet Steyn, How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America, New Brunswick, NJ (Rutgers University Press) 1996, Reinhardt is thus subtly using “blackface,” such Jewish entertainers as Al Jolson were not identifying with the black figure but, on the contrary, were aiming to make a distinction between themselves as “wannabe whites and blacks.”


27. This was Stanley Kantor who according to James E. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1993, p. 220.


31. Although the battle lines from earlier in the century between particularism and universalism were more complex than sometimes presented, especially for artists, Modernism saw universalism as a progressive force.