

ALEXANDRE

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

A Walk Along the Boundaries of Faith and Flesh

By Ken Johnson

Aug. 29, 2013

The contemporary art world is a forgetful place. It can stay aware of only a limited number of artists, so as exciting names emerge, formerly celebrated phenomena fall down the memory hole. They don't necessarily disappear, though. Many continue to make interesting art and enjoy lives of quiet fulfillment. Hyman Bloom (1913-2009) was one of those, and an exhibition of paintings of rabbis that he made late in life, at White Box gallery in Lower Manhattan, offers surprisingly much to ponder.

Born in Latvia, Bloom moved with his family to Boston in 1920, where he lived before moving to Nashua, N.H., in 1983. Dorothy C. Miller, who was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, discovered him and included his work in "Americans 1942," one of the museum's regular roundups of talent. In 1949 he was included in the Carnegie International, and the following year in the Venice Biennale. His 1954 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art prompted the critic Thomas Hess to call him "one of the outstanding painters of his generation." But, by the 1960s, he was a forgotten man outside of Boston, where he exhibited regularly and had a devoted circle of friends, supporters and admirers. He continued to make his expressionistic, mystical paintings into his mid-90s.

Traditional Jewish themes preoccupied Bloom from first to last. All but 2 of the 20 paintings in this show, which was organized by the artist Jan Frank, portray a rabbi, seated, bearded and wearing more or less elaborate headgear. In each, the rabbi cradles a Torah in one arm, its scroll handles projecting from its sacklike cover. The paintings date from the mid-1980s to 2008. The dates on most indicate that Bloom devoted two decades and more to painting and repainting them. (A selection of drawings from the last seven decades is displayed on a shelf, under glass.)

From one canvas to another, the balance between generously applied paint and human image shifts back and forth. Some are almost impenetrably muddy, while, in others, murkiness is relieved by smoldering, sometimes incandescent color. There are windows, columns, stairs, banisters and other elements of synagogue architecture. Wavering lines of charcoal or chalk remain on paintings that are clearly unfinished.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE



The third in a series of rabbis with Torahs by Hyman Bloom, in oil and black crayon from the 1980s-1990s, at White Box. White Box

You get the sense that Bloom, with Rembrandt looking over his shoulder, was always deferring closure — not because he was a perfectionist, but because he had some metaphysical notion about an ultimate resolution that could be approached but never achieved in this material world.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

It's a bit of a shock to encounter Bloom's rabbis in an exhibition in Lower Manhattan, where most galleries track the latest trends. Sincere expressions of traditional faith are rare to nonexistent in contemporary art. Far more common is a strain of anti-religious imagery, from Francis Bacon's screaming pope paintings to Andre Serrano's inflammatory "Piss Christ."

But viewed in a certain way, Bloom's paintings are not as irrelevant to contemporary art discourse as they may seem. Prompted by the Jewish subject matter, a winding train of thought leading to this perspective might begin with the biblical injunction against graven images. In Exodus, God instructs the Israelites: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God."

But, of course, the people begin to lose faith when Moses, their leader, is away communing with God. In their anxiety, they take to worshipping a golden calf sculptured by Moses's brother, Aaron, and they dance around it with decadent abandon, much to the displeasure of Moses when he returns.

What's at issue in this story, and what makes it relevant to today's art world, is the overvaluation of the material object, to the detriment of art's spiritual mission. The tremendous expansion of the art market over the past half-century has been naturally accompanied by countless Moses-type critics, denouncing its spectacles of conspicuous consumption and calling for moral and political corrections. Conceptualists from Duchamp to Marina Abramovic have advanced the dematerialization of art in the interest of mental elevation. Nevertheless, most artists of modern and postmodern times, including Bloom, have sought to reconcile vulgar materialism and high-minded idealism.

Observers have seen Bloom's rabbi as a self-portrait, but it would be more accurate to view that figure as the artist's alter ego, his spiritual frère. While Bloom the painter created works of enticing sensuality, his rabbinical self harked back to a transcendental dimension that no visual image or physical object could contain (though it could be invoked by the Torah's verbal content). Maybe that's why he spent so long working on these paintings and left so many of them unfinished. Not that he was tortured by the irreconcilability of his twin selves. By most accounts, he was a happy old man. Perhaps he enjoyed the rhythmic swing between body and soul and just never wanted it to end.

"Hyman Bloom Paintings 1940-2005" continues through Sept. 23 at White Box, 329 Broome Street, Lower Manhattan; (212) 714-2347, whiteboxny.org.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996