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**MAN BETWEEN ANNIHILATION AND REDEMPTION
IN THE ART OF**

J a n M e n s e s

In this review of drawings and paintings by the Montreal artists Jan Menses I propose to touch on the following questions:

- a) Must an art with obsessive content fall prey to the two first categories of aesthetic fallacy?
- b) Can trans-cultural meaning be derived from idiosyncratic expression?
- c) Can figurative art communicate on conceptual levels?
- d) Can such contents as subjugation, torture and horror be expressed through aesthetic sensibility and beauty of form?

The artist: Jan Menses

At the end of World War II Jan Menses was 12 years old. His family belonged to the mercantile bourgeoisie of Rotterdam, the holocaust passed them by. But Jan's playmate and best friend, a Jewish boy of the neighborhood, was taken away before his eyes, never to return. The trauma of this departure was to mark Jan Menses for life.

His adolescence passed conventionally enough, leading him from the Gymnasium to obligatory military service in the Dutch Air Force. He discovered his talent late, and became an artist by unconventional means. Mostly he taught himself. His stints in art schools were brief, motivated by the desire to acquire some specific techniques, such as in printmaking. The most important lessons were learned from an old hermit painter with whom Menses apprenticed to learn some basic technology on pigments and applications. His field practice was served on junkets to Spain and North Africa, punctuated by brief returns and exhibitions in Holland.

The best encouragement for Menses came from the critic Dolf Welling, who was kind enough not to review Jan's early shows. Instead, Welling told the young artists: "Now you have a voice, but you must still find your own song". On another occasion, Jan was told that "a man must be behind his work, not in front of it." In other words, the artist ought not to make a performance out of his art, but stand up for it and be counted.

Jan Menses took the critic's words seriously, indeed. At the age of 25, his trauma, his inclination toward mysticism, his need for identity, led him to convert to Hassidic Judaism. It seemed to be all that he needed for the incantation of his own song.

Although we have not seen works from the artist's earlier periods, we know from his testimony that there were years of visits to the Prado, and of paintings of Spanish landscapes and African portraits, of colorful impastos of oversized gladioli, and of growing distance from the family traditions that he was expected to continue.

Instead, Jan Menses immigrated to Canada. Here, his first works to be seen were dashing paintings in unbroken colors, close to the style of the KoBrA-painter Karel Appel. (KoBrA stands for Kobenhavn-Bruxelles-Amsterdam, and the group of artists from the Low Countries, who exhibited together

after World War II). How could any young artist in the Low Countries have escaped the spirit of the KoBrA group, with Director Sandberg of the Stedelijk Museum fanning the fires of this explosive movement! It stood for liberation from empty traditions and conventional restraints, liberation from rosy sunsets, windmills, and juicy pastures with cattle at the watering hole. At that time, Holland was no longer, or not yet again, the country of Piet Mondrian. The chrysanthemums yes, the apple trees perhaps, but Boogie-Woogie certainly not! This the Americans could keep in New York, where Mondrian had gone to work and die during the war.

Retrospective Exhibition at the Don Stewart Gallery

On the November / December 1982 calendar of Montreal art shows, a small retrospective exhibition of works by Jan Menses was presented by the Don Stewart Gallery. It reached back to the artist's production of 1963, with a fair number of paintings in his KoBrA-inspired style.

In their nervous brushstrokes in unbroken yellows, greens and reds, these are terse paintings of optimal intensity, engendered by the high frequencies of their hues. In semi-abstract configurations Jan Menses peoples his pictorial space in juxtaposed groups, which are held in interaction by a sensitive occult balance. Or, to put it differently, they are made cogent by their dominant spatial tensions, achieved by composing on diagonal tangents.

Yet, beyond their purely formal qualities these early paintings already hint at a phenomenon which will become omnipresent in the artist's later work. Through relationships and contrast, significance and insignificance of shapes, these configurations spell out: dominance and submission.

In another cycle of this period, Menses conjures up proliferations of softly rounded bodies that fill up the pictorial space in dense clusters on collision course. In mixed-media techniques, dominated by harmonies on the warm scale, from soft yellows through broken earthen hues towards reds, from delineations in blacks with specs of icy blues as miniscule portions of cold ground between warm bodies.

These enigmatic configurations are the last of the artist's colour paintings. Since 1963 he has touched nothing but black and white chiaro-scuro, from the pristine whiteness of his paper, left out the way Rembrandt would have

done it, to the deepest lamp black. If his song was to be austere, it became a spine-chilling incantation of man's inhumanity to man. This world had no use of color. As the artist's attraction to kabalistic mysticism deepened, his art became the somber expression of his preoccupations.

The drawings, gouaches and oil paintings of the ensuing years remained limited to three main cycles with various series within each: 'Diabolica', 'Kaddish' and 'Klipboth'.

The Diabolica are graphic works of sizable format that literally "set the stage". On first glance these dashing wash-drawings could be taken for stage designs. Temple-like buildings, agora-like squares, monumental daises and colonnades provide exquisite tectonic settings for their scenarios. Again, the juxtapositions and configurations happen on diagonal tangents that heighten the dramatic tension. The protagonists are divided into distinct groups, as the aggressors and as the aggrieved, the oppressors and the oppressed. There is no overt conflict, no trace of violence, just the constant presence of opprobrium. The postures alone express the totality of these pernicious relationships.

These works are a tour de force of aesthetic reality impregnated with meaning. The expressive devices are limited and fully integrated into the pictorial logic, yet their communication is immediate and unequivocal. For example: The oppressors, who are fewer in number than the oppressed, populate the picture planes closest to the observer, or they congregate on some elevated plateau. The logic of perspective thus demands that they become larger in size, and thus dominant.

The artist ascribes to them specific postures: a sinister countenance, a twist of the shoulder, a draping of a cloak, a lifting of the chin, an ominous pointing in a certain direction by the show of a grim profile. These gestures suffice to characterize their role. One does not have to transpose any of these personages into an Iago to understand his sinister design.

The body language of the menaced grouped is no less eloquent: the figures huddled together, the heads are inclined or drawn close to the shoulders, arms hang limp along the body, or may be lifted to hide a face. Fear has frozen these human shadows into passive anticipation of their doom.

One of the most effective devices at the artist's command is the creation of a kind of demarcation line which separates the two groups. In some works it is of topographical nature, an embankment or a chiasm. In others, it is part of the architecture, a retaining wall, the edge of a piazza. In every case it places the endangered ones of the 'other side'.

With these sparse means Jan Menses conveys a message of grave foreboding. By 1963 he had become a superior draughtsman, who could employ elegant shorthand to simplify the human figure. His brush could be painterly and gesture, or structural and bony, his gradations could be subtle, or his contrasts abrupt, always informed by the demands of the content cum dictates of its inevitable form. And the result?

George Santayana in "The Sense of Beauty" (pages 144/45) has come close to the essence to the aesthetic experience of evil and its mystical meaning. He calls it "unity by exclusion, opposition, and isolation (which) gives us the sublime". And Santayana continues: "...the evil may be felt; but at the same time the sense that, great as it may be in itself, it cannot touch us, may stimulate extraordinarily the consciousness of our wholeness." About the work of Jan Menses, Santayana would not have hesitated to use his concept of "Beauty of Expression". This is by no means equal to hedonistic beauty. Rather, it approaches the beauty of scientific insight in the sense that it delights in the appropriateness of an expression, or solution.

Two more cycles of Jan Menses' awesome oeuvre were represented in his Don Stewart retrospective. The 'Klippoth' and the 'Kaddish', each with a good number of characteristic works. It is interesting to note that their distinction is not only in subject matter and theme, but also in each cycle's unique approach to form, its own distinctive style.

Menses' art first captured my attention in the early sixties, when the vast majority of contemporary works seemed drained of content down to the last drop. Among the few exceptions were some magic realists and some anachronistic survivors of this or that other "ism". Jan Menses will be known as a survivor of a different kind. Long after the art waves of the mid-century will arouse but some polite nodding and knowing smiles, the oeuvre of Jan Menses will be recognized as a shattering monument to one of humanity's darkest conditions.

Since I have reviewed the 'Klippoth' and 'Kaddish' cycles when they were

first presented, the following passages will include excerpts from some of my previous descriptions.

'Kaddish' in Judaist ritual means a prayer for the dead. The works in this series are linear pen-and-ink drawings of angular, sparse figures, partly clad or nude, mostly dead or dying, or waiting their turn to be exterminated. There is no goriness in these scenes; there is just a bone-chilling, unspeakable horror. Obviously, this cycle of works was engendered by the memory of the holocaust. A most difficult and demanding subject with grave dangers to the aesthetic sensibility. How Menses does it without ever infringing on the province of tact and taste would deserve a study of its own. Actually, the artist no longer deals with individual suffering or individual death. Each one of his works becomes a universal accusation and a common mourning for the six million victims.

To his 'Klipoth' cycle the artist muse have contributed for the last 18 years. All paintings are black and white, all are in black tempera. Some are organic, rounded, and painterly with soft edges and finely graded transitions from dark to light, to dark. Others are harsh, hard-edged, approaching stylization. All could be described as semi-abstract figurations.

In literal translation 'Klipoth' means shell. It symbolizes the good enveloped by evil. During this period the 'good' remains hidden, is never revealed in Menses' work. That which is visible is evil, or rather, the effect of evil, causing us to peel our way to our better selves, or, in terms of the kabala, to 'Klipoth's' hidden heart.

In these paintings, the victims appear as solitary captives or in couples. They are confined behind walls, fences, dams, passively suffering the terrors they cannot escape. Humans with blank, hypnotized stares are placed into all sorts of degrading positions, placed under all kinds of indefinable machines and gadgets that symbolize the anonymous threat. Often the victims are enclosed by corrugated walling, sometimes very close and screen-like, at other times as backgrounds in greater distance, always denoting captivity. Whatever horizons and spaces are not thus closed off from the outside world, appear as impenetrable black vacuum. Now and then a sharp ray of light may cut through these pictorial spaces, or some part of the scenario may be illuminated as if by spotlight. But the source of light remains mysterious, its origin untraceable.

What gives this artist's austere work such expressive force, what makes symbols rooted in an obscure religious mysticism touch upon the deepest levels of our awareness? In the first chapter of "Symbolism of Evil", Paul Ricoeur states as his Leitmotiv the aphorism "Symbols give rise to thought." And later in the same chapter he writes that "Man enters into the ethical world through fear and not through love." He speaks of the transformation of physical fear into ethical dread. The philosopher calls it "...dread of a danger which is itself ethical and which at a high level of consciousness of evil, will be the danger of not being able to love any more, the danger of being a dead man in the realm of ends."

This echoes Santayana's aesthetics, and points to the closeness of aesthetic awareness and ethical thought. By transposition to the art of Jan Menses, it brings on in us a strong ethic arousal. Is dehumanized humanity not a universal threat to the human condition, one which art can identify beyond such mystical thought as informs the Kabala?

In the art of Jan Menses there are no shortcuts, no D-days with sudden liberation. The "Klippoth" cycle is outdrawn until there is no trace of man left at all. Its spaces become emptied except for vestigial mementoes of his technological inventions, some mysterious without apparent function. The last threat is the sterile, clinical environment itself, a horror vacuum, fear of nothingness.

Now finally, epiphany has happened, a cycle on the theme of Redemption is begun. Today, it contains some forty large works, none of which have been on public display so far. In these new temperas, the calm of the last "Klippoth" works pervades the pictorial space, but one immediately feels that this is a calm of a different order. The artist refers to these works by the Hebrew word for Restoration, it is Tikkun. Tikkun is animated by the redemptive process of charity to others and restoration of the person, its symbol is the rebuilding of the temple. How does an artist achieve such transformation of expression?

Every new mood, every new vision demands its own appropriate form. Technique, design idea, and composition down to its last element, must all flow together to yield the expressive means that will best develop the engendering image, and serve the artist's intentionality, express his idea.

The beauty of expression in Jan Menses' latest works is first signaled by the

calm dignity of their style. Gone are the sweeping gestures, the billowing softness, the nervous écriture of the “Kaddish” drawings, the clinical hardness and the sharp edge of the late Kliploth” paintings. Gone is the diagonal composition with its dramatic tensions, gone the sudden contrasts of tonality, gone the irrational spaces of slanted planes. In short, gone are all the formal elements of disharmony.

Now, the chiaro-scuro is toned down to well temper gradualism. Suddenly, structural elements, like posts and beams begin to appear in these noble classical compositions, the temple is to be rebuilt. Faintly at first, but in gradually more insistent plasticity, an image of a human figure makes its appearance. It is a figure that stands tall, serene, and majestic. The observer is captivated by its spell. It is the presence of a Redeemer.

Lionello Venturi writes in the concluding chapter his “Painting and Painters” that “The problem of theory in art is connected with the problem of knowledge.” And he continues: “There is no doubt that it contributes to the knowledge of mankind.... It is different from both scientific knowledge and mystic knowledge. Scientific knowledge deals with types and categories, with generalizations seeking to approach universal truth. Mystic knowledge jumps at universal truth without bothering about verification of its process. Artistic knowledge is essentially individual, but implies the universal is, thus, the knowledge offered by art.

It is this relation that makes the art of Jan Menses intelligible, which endows it with its expressive beauty and its moral validity.