

## The Painting that Took the Place of a Mountain: Letters to Tsibi

David Shapiro

There it was, word for word, the poem that took the place  
of a mountain. – Wallace Stevens

To Tsibi Geva from D. Shapiro  
Riverdale, New York  
January 2, 2008

Dear Painter,

Or should we say architect, or sculptor, or video-artist, or thinker, teacher? Or should we say dear brother, father, colleague? I write to you from Exile on a little computer that I disdain, but it brings us closer, or does it stretch us further away? You grew up on a kibbutz, and we should never forget that. But your real address is Israel, and I would like to say my own, before someone in the States accuses me of being an ambiguous American. I often describe myself as a Russian poet, and this is partly how I see you. It is true that when you filled a wall with automobile tires, I was probably less aware that these had other and secret meanings. Your displacements of space honor conflict by awareness and attention and tensions that cannot be merely from the American world of business and late capital. We might think of you, as Walter Benjamin did Baudelaire, as a secret agent in the enemy camp, but we also agree with the man who said: the only enemy is the word "enemy." In your lattices, adorned and pierced and laden, we are given a special form of Eastern calligraphy. Your work, like the great Jewish poets of ancient Spain, is written in Hebrew and Arabic. This bilingual communication makes your work very close to a sacrifice of idols. Both of us know how our tradition is iconoclastic; we are the ones who should menace the world of mere images. But this is also a relative proposition, because we know from students of Israeli art, like Meyer Schapiro, how synthetic, how syncretistic Israeli mosaics are. And who could look at your terrazzo work without being filled with the joy of the mosaic?

We may raise the specter of Benjamin once again, a man of Galut and of the tragedies of Homecoming, the man of no luck, who is always with us, nevertheless. Benjamin said of the essay and the mosaic that they were peculiarly the modern form – the peculiar gaps, the idiolects of discontinuities, and the sharp edge, like sudden low words in the poetry Benjamin traced, from Proust through Kafka. And we may add, if this work of yours does not contain Proust’s rage for decoration and horror of all snobbisms, then we do not have a foundation-stone to lie upon. Our God must include in the new prayer book Proust and Kafka, or we cannot pray. We pray in the dark light of your darkest birds, trees, and flowers, because we are aware of the starless heaven above and the starry disorder within. In this sense, your work may look like Basquiat’s but cries for other interpretations, and is not unraveled until those multiple doubts emerge. Your badge of courage is to unite this method of revelation and concealment, as Bialik had it.

Now I want to praise you in the highest form of my pluralism and the purity that Meyer Schapiro told me cannot be forgotten, because no pluralism can contain such purity. Your great work of black and gold mountains is for me a leap beyond the painting and poetry of our time and scene. Your work in the mountains reveals, like Rothko, a lack of complaint or even ejaculatory demonism. Your mountains are also not the literal, though we know they are also the landscape of your life in Israel, mountains of Justice and Injustice, to adapt a poetic title. Your mountains emerge also as allegories of a surrealist summit and depth. But we also can only expect to glimpse in them their maximalist force and demand by understanding the Maimonidean levels of interpretation and suspicion. As the Zohar says, if it says anything, the stories cannot be mere stories or we could have thousands of entrancing stories. Jewish art is not Scheherazade. The art that you propose in each mountain is an art splashed by a mystical intuition that makes it sacred when we are immersed with the profane. I cannot forget that it is Gershom Scholem who proposed in one speech the antinomian habit of finding God, as in Whitman, in a blade of grass. The more we read the tormented early diaries of Scholem, the more we see how entirely turned to revelation and mystical Zionism he was. Your work, for me, cannot be understood as realist, socialist, symbolist, or allegorical. It combines in a syncretistic fashion to launch images that are indeed clear darkness.

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Riverdale, New York  
February 13, 2008

Dear Tsibi,

I look at your flowers and trees and am struck by what a colorist you are. The critics have had a problem with Jasper Johns's *grays*, which are not *grey*. For you and for Jasper, as Schapiro described cubist analytic tones, these are the colors of thought. Your way is nobly to find out then the rhymes between brown, white, and a variety of passages between. Thus, a hundred rainbows of modulations can be seen in your least aggressive forms. And as Picasso told William Rubin, it is not always an object that one finds, but it is perhaps more like the flavor or "fragrance of an object." Your long skinny blossoms are thus uniquely your own, even less symbolist than Mondrian, but also, at the same time, those flowers that could be described as "beyond" flowers, as they achieve a density that is not always naturalistic. Your elongated flowers also often have the "glamour" of Pollock's *The Deep*, which staggered the poet Frank O'Hara with its Melvillean strength. Somehow, your birds, trees, and flowers always demonstrate your fine draftsmanship, so that the clear edges of these "figures" fight with any tonal diffidence. You have broken here with the quarrel between line and color. Your white – something true of Robert Ryman – is filled with a palimpsest and *pentimenti* of color. These figures must be understood, I would assert, before your mountains to have an adequate sense of your mastery. I observe, for example, how a liquidity of sepia and brown and foggy grey can make the flower echo within itself and be falling upward rather than in scientific grammar like so many Mondrians.

A bird perches on a branch. You have reminded me of how often these are your true country kibbutz branches and birds and blossoms. Still, it is impossible for me not to remember Poe's ravens often and other portents rather than country particulars. Perhaps the best way to meditate on these is again to use the four-runged ladder of interpretation, from literal and symbolic, to allegorical and anagogical. Isn't there a way in which we must remember that the very word "surrealist" was invented by the poet Apollinaire, who risks misunderstanding by inventing the name for a whole century of works that are unreal, unreal, or relatively more-than-real, uncanny? "Uncanny" is the word for those things that Freud says we are frightened by, not because we know them – country birds, symbols of lament – but, because we cannot know them, except as codes and more than codes of an accelerated grimace. Each mountain is as terrifying as Rilke's angels. Your birds are so thin and filled with lamentation that we remember them as if a

special *niggun*, a wordless hymn, were given for the sadness or melancholy studied by Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

As I look at the desperate flowers, whose petals may resemble, after all, the spiders of Louise Bourgeois, we recall her uncanny way of saying what her art was about: “The spider is my mother.” Your work is never bland or desiccated as a mere dream-world, because you are insistent on a kind of erotic uncanniness. We are at home, and we are not at home; we are frightened, because of the paradox of primary antitheticals. Shalom: hello and goodbye and peace, but as if war were already trying to be comprehended inside our greetings. One way to see these monstrously beautiful blossoms is to note that they come forward as Mannerist giant hands floating in a Parmigianino. The blossom is bigger than the sky. The petals are more damaging than the scythe. The whole is calligraphic and speedy as Chinese ink.

What do the Chinese call the perfections? Painting, poetry and calligraphy. Your work is always an accompaniment of the sacred texts. This is what keeps them from being decorative. Whereas Mondrian fights with the vagaries of Theosophy, I find a direct Hebrew in your motifs. That is what must disturb those who find in your barbed wire and in your *keffiyeh* too much timeliness for comfort. Kafka’s cold comfort is underlined with every line: “There is comfort, infinite hope – but not for us.” These are indeed prayers without hope, as Derrida and I once formulated, with Michal Govrin suggesting another formulation: “Prayer in a time of hopelessness” or “The Body of Prayer.” We cannot be comforted with anything less than this utter refusal, in Kant’s terms, to grovel.

Your flowers are as filled with movement as a Calder mobile. Whereas we might have suspected the painting without hope to give us stable scientific specimens, we get in you the surrealist slice of impossible libido. There are chrysanthemums which I have seen grow to forbidding heights of ten feet. Then there are strategies to make ten of these flowers burst into bloom at the same moment, like an ecstasy of birth. That is perhaps the best way to see your series paintings. Not to see the flowers, trees and birds as happening in a narrative of Monet-like change and flux. To understand these blackened buds and uproar of ground and quasi-collage – to comprehend all this – is to understand the *niggun* of painting itself, painting which creates simultaneously a cinema of itself. They are dancers; they are prayers; they are everything multiple and exposed. They have the most doubt and the least unity. There is no difference between the impact of a bird’s concave eye and the openings of the Hebrew language and the alphabet of the body. This eroticism has been noted in Francesco Clemente’s work, and you accomplish it wisely without

recourse to pastiche or parody. Your birds are vascular and bleed. They are part of the vast world of Israeli mosaic with clear discontinuities. In profile often, your birds are what Meyer Schapiro subscribed to in the semiotics of profile: they refuse mere frontality and become the shifting shifter seen in a poet's favorite word: *it*, *he* and *she*.

The foundation of the sacred texts of Judaism is the mountain. It is where the voice of God can be heard, and it is also the place for prophets and extremity and starvation and vision and law. There is every reason to suspect that this is the great example of the Hebrew sublime. The terror of mountains in the Western tradition actually supports this rhetoric of the mountain-God. It is not for nothing that we learn that the first walk in the mountains for pleasure, not vision, was with Petrarch, a paradox and permission. When we see the blue mountains of the Renaissance, all stippled and soft, we know that indeed we have come a long way toward the landscape of pleasure. But in the work of the mountain, we see something that Barnett Newman was raging toward in his tall sculpture, tall zips, so-called, and the mountainous sense of his "Stations." The false messiahs, all of them, must be tilted toward the mountain. Art history has many profane mountains, many attempts at the mountain: the mountains of Georgia O'Keeffe, the mountains of Caspar David Friedrich, the mountains of Brueghel, the mountains of the Southern Song masters, the fantastic mountains of the Chinese including the sacred Yellow Mountain with its disappearing mists, the mountain of Fuji climbed slowly by Matsuo Basho's snail, the rivers and mountains of the American Hudson River school, and the blue poles of Pollock, and the sacred mountains of the American Tribes, Sinai, Horev, Carmel, Mt. Eval, Mt. Nevo, Mt. Ararat, the Mt. of Olives, Mt. Zion. Mount Analogue, I call your gold impossible landscape.

What do we find in a mountain but the antonym of the mosaic? The floor we lie on like a flickering essay is perhaps the lowest, the humblest of aesthetic attempts. The personal essay may be later the Romantic crossing of the Alps. But in our tradition the mountain is the place of the irreducibly holy and the place of refuge. When the Chinese place a rock as a Buddhist brother, and the mountain as the scale of the Tao, they are closer to the Mosaic tradition. The rock is alive: bones of the earth they are called, kernels. We find our volcano-God the terrifying true beginning of *the Sublime* we are never able to bear. These are the mountains that Rilke tried to limn and could not, at the last, transform into something labile as lamentations. These are Rilke's petrified rocks and rage. But there is your further range.

Riverdale, New York

April 13, 2008

Dear Tsibi,

You may begin with the essay, but you end with the achieved mountain. In your mountains we find what all the branches, birds and blossoms have been tending. We find something stronger than barbed wire and prisons of the mind, something stronger than a single bewitching tree. In your mountains you have created finally a wall without windows, the place where the dove returns, the ship rests, and the wild God speaks, if we would hear. And Minimalism gave birth to this...

We might start with the Sublime, according to Quintilian: "And God said, let there be light; and there was light." The intense immediacy that Newman desired and that Rothko achieved and that you have lent your hand to – this is the "one-ment" of the mountain according to our most severe rhetoricians, who are inside and behind and within you. So the blossoms predict this in their anguish, like a bush that is never consumed, in incandescent fury and obligation and law. And so all the fury of a blossom. Remember: the mountain is not a motif, it is the mode. The mountain is never beautiful; it is the terror of being one who cannot cross over or hear the future. The mountain is the macroscopic cosmos unadorned. The mountain of the law-giver is a boundary and an architecture indeed without license. The mountain *disappears* us, like so many deaths. The flower is almost decorative; the mountain is the sublime face transformed into adamant. The mountain is a Remembrance movement.

As we approach the Mountain, some are aware that we are approaching the Analogue of René Daumal. The mountain is another way of beholding the Voice, whereas a flower is a part, the mountain is the anti-metonymic whole. There is the tradition of taking the part for the part. There is the nominalist path of taking nothing but that: Johns, Duchamp. But the mountain of Cézanne is the analogous distance that we will never cross except in ritual and disaster and hopelessness. Cézanne not only makes the apple his gift, but he returns to the giving Mountain, as if to say, one hundred times is not enough for me to understand the motif of majesty. Mount Sainte-Victoire is well-named, because it always defeats us. One inch, says Cézanne, and there is a new motif.

The bloom is alive in the blackness. A kind of monochrome predicts the worst nights on the valley side. Tsibi, your blossoms in the caliginous night are preparations for the magisterial darkness. Johns once told me that he was not involved in the eclipse of form; he was hoping for his own hand to signify that

the presence of his body was his only guide: "My hand was there." Your work indicates that such heights are extravagant temptations, as in the architect of Ibsen, always ready to fall. Too much excess, even for the mountain, which was created in number, weights and measure.

I have observed in the poetry of a young Venezuelan, the call of the heights, the song of the mountain. This youthful poetry was always singing of the Fall from the mountain. This is the "falling upwards" of Ludwig Binswanger, where the sick human in trouble has not yet learned to balance the things of the world, the world of relations and the world of the relations with ourselves.

Flowers are instances of our body and are not beyond the body. The mountain is an indication of where the body is *in extremis* and perhaps finally transcended. Kant was perched against, he wrote, the groveling religions. Mountains do not make us grovel, but they do lead by Joyce's "commodious vicus of recirculation" toward our recognition of frailty. The weak poet is also part of the contraction or *zimzum* of the tradition toward and including Barnett Newman's inverted, thus weak, *Obelisk*. Our mountains grow with difficulty, and we return because, like Cézanne, these changing inches give us entirely new homes.

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Riverdale, New York  
May 1, 2008

Tsibi,

Your flowers are black and are indeed sacrifices to the tradition of Van Gogh, who said he wanted to paint religious paintings but then went out and painted the night sky.

You have decided, it appears to me, to go beyond your essays in your terrazzos of the floor, in your lattice patterns, toward a world that has the absolute minimum of adornment. The mountain is like a problem for the conceptual child. We know that the mountain is larger than us, but how do we make it larger than the canvas itself? You have solved this problem. You have created, after a long preparation as the architect's son, an immanence of the mountain, a solitary home in the poet's phrase. You have gotten beyond the clichés of height, to what Pablo Neruda was trying for in his epic *The Heights of Machu Picchu*. Neruda was only marred by the clichés of Stalinism. You have gotten away from the too-facile poles of our politics today, a politics which might have seemed to be the ultimate barrier toward a large

and enlarging art. You could have rested with your fundamental lament. Instead, you moved from the crippled symmetries of the flowers and terrazzos and the allusion to the seemingly never-ending wars surrounding and within – toward a mountain of reconciliations.

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Riverdale, New York

June 1, 2008

Dear Tsibi,

There is always the danger of too much esotericism. You avoid it. Now I will.

At my class at The Cooper Union, you spoke of yourself being *a collection of pressures*. In each of your mountains, I feel this collection of pressures. You have said to me that the series of mountains may have begun years ago with a panoramic landscape series onto which you projected place names in different languages. Your accomplishment is not one of piety, but of the international fabric of art and history. Thus, Cézanne is inside these mountains as much as they are also the mountains of Moses. There is a certain pathos in realizing that we live in a world that is threatened by this learned aggregation.

The paintings are so large that they continue to allude to the gigantic, mural-like space of the Mexican painters and their students, the Abstract Expressionists. Your accidental touches may remind one of the intimate suggestions in Pollock's gigantic landscapes. Or are they universes? In your case, the mountains, with lattices sometimes added as delicate as shadows, traces or cobwebs, are shrouded in a snowy pallor. The gigantic scale is the scale that we find successfully held in only a few artists. One thinks of the verticals of Rothko and his Chapel; one knows the landscapes too big for the eye in Newman and Pollock, and one thinks of the narratives of Philip Guston and even of the new scale of German photographers and Jeff Wall, seemingly named for scale.

But your gigantic anti-landscapes are never infantile or illustrations. They are bounded by black, and they have the grave flatness of Cézanne, who wanted an art as durable as the art of the museums. The Poussinist in you makes these also works of geometry and drastic diagonals that balance through disequilibria. You have never given up the hand, and your most colorful collage-like terrazzos show this. There is a kitsch of reproducibility today, and there are artists who have worked to deny hand and gesture all their lives – our own grave salon of

smoothness. But these mountains are wet and alive. Shadowed and present with an aura that can never be deleted, they are not in love with preordained geometry. They have an illogical fire about them. The accomplishment of Pollock, it is often suggested, is his combination of the mural size and the inclusion of intimate caress and touch. The philosopher Derrida concluded a long history of skeptical close readings with a series of volumes on radical refuge: the city of refuge, the forgiving of the unforgivable, the religion of paradoxical despair, and the eccentric relations of touch and sight. In your work, touch is once again a dominant theme and crisis. Your work is not for the color-blind, but it is tactile to the last inch of its largesse. It will accept the readings that might include it as narrative art. (I have been led by my own misreadings to see parts as sacred as a prayer-shawl, but this may be the ultimate misreading.)

The mountain suddenly stained with blue is an unforgettable nocturnal glimpse. There is the man who goes away, and the man who stays, says the unlucky Benjamin about storytelling. Are you the man who went away or the man who stays, with a collection of pressures, or both? These binary codes, these eruptive anti-semiotics must be seen not as possible worlds, as the philosophers have it (describe a language without body words, for example), but impossible worlds like the impossible loves in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, in the shadow of catastrophes. Derrida stunned some of us by his late-in-life conversion, one might say, to love that is never buried if what we love is radical singularity. Painting is such radical singularity, with your touch and your seeing, and the mountain that is a place perhaps of awakening, not the place of danger and law. Here, the mountain, painted with mortal care, is the place of desire and concern. The painting, as Wallace Stevens almost has it, that took the place of a mountain.

Thank you, dear Tsibi.