

LONGINGS AND HIGHER SELVES

*All that you are I am.
All that I am you are.
We are one.*
—ISA MAFU

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.*
—WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF"

"I'm really an Abstract Expressionist," says Hedy Klineman, "and I keep wanting to do abstract painting, but all this keeps getting done instead somehow, before I have a chance to."

"All this" has resulted in Klineman's first solo exhibit in four years, an idiosyncratic yet balanced marriage of Pop and Abstract sensibilities that seems as overdue as hitherto unimaginable, and which represents a fitting destination to the course she's been charting throughout her involvement in the world of art. Critics might argue that Klineman, in silk-screening images of Tibetan, Japanese and Indian statues, is expropriating Asian symbolism to her own questionable ends, or further mixing and matching these emblems in a way that is from the purist's standpoint objectionable. And were not Klineman operating in the conceptual spirit of her earlier "Fashion Portrait" paintings, with an acute awareness of the peculiar historical backdrop of the American (and in particular the New York) art scene spelled out in the dramatic interplay of dichotomies in this lustrous work, there might be merit to such demurring.

Klineman has succeeded in tugging Pop back in the direction of Abstract Expressionism's moral seriousness, as if in part to answer Clement Greenberg's still resonant complaint that Pop is retreating from the high aesthetic of what's arguably the first originally American school of painting. At the same time, she seems to have intuitively grasped a difficult point, that for all its visceral power American Expressionism really did suffer from being an elitist boy's club that deserved to be undone by Pop's anything-goes, in-your-face and at times scatological impulses. And Klineman's done "all this" with candor and originality, in a manner that's entirely without academic pretense, and without sacrificing the energies that drew audiences to the works of both movements in the first place.

"When I'm asked if I'm a Buddhist," Klineman continues, "I say, 'I'm not exclusionist.'" It's an elusive answer in the spirit of Abstract Expressionism's duality: not to be pinned down by an identity or concept, yet to be inclusive with regard to random impulses and the merest flickers of intuition. Yet it's Klineman's engagement with paint, especially her vivifying brushwork, that truly distinguishes her as an affiliate of that painterly mid-century clan. And defying Pop, her gestural language electrifies the silk-screened images of such Eastern deities as Hinduism's elephant-headed Ganesh, and the lovers Shakti and Shiva; the thick-faced yet razor-featured Japanese Buddha; and Tibet's Tara and

Yamantaka. While Klineman might not be a Buddhist per se, there is a particular Tibetan emphasis to her work overall, sustained especially in the paintings *Contemplation*, *Happiness* and *Faith* that feature His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

While there are a few works in the exhibition, such as the oil paintings *Gopta*, *Guru* and *Heart* that don't employ silk screen, most of the others do. These acrylic paintings such as *Cherish*, *Reflection* and *Faith* typically start as broad, nearly uniform fields of color, and function as minimalist platforms or, to extend the metaphor, altars. These vibrant panels suggest radiant sources of energy, each having an entirely distinct pitch, one that's almost aural, if such a thing is possible. Their combinations evince a tonic, reveling clamor.

"With me it's all about color," says Klineman, pointing to the nacreous white and near-primary tones in her works that shimmer with a metallic, iridescent intensity that seems, if the generalization may be allowed, distinctly feminine. Her use of normally taboo textures is similarly endearing. In *Black Ganesh*, for example, she's added, in mercifully un-ironic fashion, a velvet flocking that lends a dreamily vaporous quality to the god's image. And the texture of the paint in much of her work reads at once as wet and dry, smoothly molten perhaps, and seemingly blended with powdered gemstones. Given such elaborate preparation, the application of the dark or royal purple silk-screen images to the canvases (or paper) seems anything but vagarious. Rather, it makes the forms of these sacred manifestations tremulous. Applying metal leafing to many works accentuates aspects of the figures as well as the texture of the brushwork, creating a staid alchemical allusion, which in pieces like *Guidance* is especially inspired.

Klineman seems at home with the canonical intensity of the figures she portrays, and her hesitancy to modify their essential forms is consonant with her feeling that she learns from them as she paints. It's a point on which she's adamant. "My purpose in this existence is to make this work," she says. While meditation upon these incarnations and deities, which Klineman regards as "reflections of our higher selves," is certainly one level on which these paintings can work, less important is any didactic insistence upon their roles beyond what is suggested by each person's position and expression. What interests Klineman are their (and our) "interchangeable natures" as well as "the forms and shapes" of these figures "without the absolutism of identity." Yet this is contemplation underlined by a chaotic energy accentuated by the faintly blurred effect that Klineman achieves by applying images to the canvas repeatedly. If she's slightly off in one silk-screen application, the result is a rudimentary optical illusion, a sort of double vision through which the icon appears to hover in front of the canvas. Thus through the repetitive process, what Klineman refers to as the "mantra quality" of her work, there occurs by chance an effect that's all the more pleasing for its being obviously illusory.

Beyond the dichotomy of Abstract Expressionism and Pop, Klineman suggests other more fundamental dualities. It's as if she has intuitively arrived at something like the vexing conclusion suggested by the achievements of the physicist Heisenberg and mathematician

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“WHEN I’M ASKED IF I’M A BUDDHIST I SAY, ‘I’M NOT EXCLUSIONIST.’”

Mandlebrot: that we live in an existence that from the standpoint of logic is paradoxical. That is, our existence is explained with equal validity from either of seemingly mutually exclusive points of view: freedom and determinism; chaos and order; randomness and form; or material and spirit. Her work is also reminiscent of computer models of fractal mathematics, in which endless variations of a central form create images of entrancing, hallucinatory beauty. Tellingly, these mysterious shapes compare to the outline of classical sculptures, like the rotund laughing Buddha of prosperity and other deities of much classical Buddhist art.

Like her artistic heroes de Kooning, Pollock and Kline, Klineman is energized by paradox. She’s at home amid these figures so calmly occupying the scrimmage of opposites, and who appear at once to be rooted and floating. The function of the Eastern “gods,” as Jung understood them, is to represent archetypes of the imagination, the potentialities of our own minds and beings. “The images are historical,” Klineman adds. “They belong to the world of forms and shapes that resonate in our unconscious. They bring forth knowledge of our connections to the universe beyond our cultural and religious boundaries.” Somewhat in line with the parallels between her works and the revelations of 20th-century mathematics are the geometrical shapes that playfully abound in them, from the squares, rectangles and triangles they often feature, to the contours of the paintings themselves. These seem to reference lightly the canon of sacred geometry in which the circle, with its implicit ratio pi, an infinite number, is emblematic of the divine or eternal; while the square, which breaks down into neatly divisible, terminating numbers, is representative of humanity or mortality. While Eastern religions might not speak of God in the normative Western sense, the divine is intimated not so much through faith as knowledge and practice, intuitively exercised in the ritual of mandala-creating. A tondo such as *Joy* plays off of the paintings emphasizing the square, like *Reflection* or *Surrender*, in an interchange reflective of these works’ subject matter, between the voice of the one unifying or eternal force. In the case of *Joy*, it’s Tara, the female counterpart of Chenrezig—the bodhisattva of compassion and “the one who crosses over”—who helps us from *samsara*, the cycle of suffering and illusion, into *nirvana*, and that of the individual, whether the artist or His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

Part of Klineman’s accomplishment in the present exhibition (which includes works spanning the decade of the ‘90s) is to have come up with a polite though forward riposte to much artwork taken up with materiality and/or social or scientific theory, or that’s conceptual to the point of hollowness. While conceptualism arguably has made the only substantial nudge against Pop’s centrality, it too often reads as academic or bloodless by comparison, even while seemingly licensed by Warhol et al.’s initial brashness. It often seems to have left any religious concerns behind, as somehow antiquated, or to have addressed them only coyly, often as political fodder.

She also opens the ascendant schools of Western art in a non-elitist, committedly clear and even elementary fashion, to precisely that to which the West remains so largely closed: the East. It’s a broad gesture

of apotheosis befitting our simultaneous environmental, ontological and spiritual crises. Too typical of the Western encounter with art is the intermediary, lurking yen for a particular dramatis persona, that of an artist we can think of as somehow greater, more passionate or tragic than the rest of us—one, that is, who might live out the more difficult areas of life. Klineman’s bold use of classic imagery from Eastern spiritual traditions stumps this notion as surely as Duchamp’s *Readymades* or Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* did. Slighting Klineman as riding to artistic recognition on the back of another culture’s masterpieces ignores the insights that went into articulating the appeal of Warhol’s work, of which Klineman’s seem a sort of jousting cousin. She points out that she is making paintings that employ silk screen, not silk screens that achieve painterly effects, a style Warhol mastered. Unlike his, Klineman’s works are not copies but individual and prolonged encounters of the images in them. If anything, her project is not as smugly narcissistic and cynical as Warhol’s could be. It’s the sort of extension of his native energy that Klineman as an insider and friend of “The Factory” seems uniquely qualified to have made.

Given its antecedents, Klineman’s works operate freshly in that what she is directly referencing is a vast, ancient and heterogeneous tradition that’s only barely become familiar to us, whose icons often seem alien, whether in their peaceful or fearsome incarnations. Such works have only begun to reveal the store of physical, philosophical and spiritual knowledge that went into making them to a West that, due to a complex of historical reasons, is proving—ironically or aptly, depending on how one looks at it—their sanctuary. Even so, their meanings must usually be sought through a fog of New Age wishful thinking (which tantric imagery and the Tibetan visions of judgment should be enough to give the lie to) on the one hand; and an hysterical and condemning conservative religious reaction on the other. Glib commentators sometimes dismiss Buddhism as friendly nihilism, or as practiced in denial of the distinctly material economic conditions influencing our lives. Even a cursory reading of sacred texts such as the *Bardo Thodol* (“The Tibetan Book of the Dead”) should evidence a solemn and elaborate discipline that’s transcendent of such objections, one dedicated to exploring transformative potentials that are only now, out of necessity, being seriously considered and embraced by Western science, especially in the field of medicine. That Klineman mixes her religions shouldn’t rankle, as doing so is intrinsic to both Buddhist and American styles. The 12th edict of the Buddhist emperor Asoka of India, for example, declares that, “One should not honor only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others’ religions.” One cannot help but be impressed by so democratic an appeal to logic.

In an age swerving between doctrinal secularism and grim religious orthodoxy, Klineman’s vivid works mark out a more rarified sacred space. They are examples of the difference, even while some would argue there is none, between the fetishized object and the sacred one. Their dignified and celebratory nature draws from fertile sources. In this, her most serious body of works to date, Klineman uniquely addresses the ineffable longings that are best termed spiritual and which only art—however fleetingly—might assuage. — TOM BREIDENBACH