

There is a rich tradition of artists who draw upon mystical themes or content. This one would expect, given the foundational importance of theology upon art. Mysticism is a phenomenon of the religious sphere, referring, in broad terms, to the individual's experienced loss of the sense of his or her distinctness from the divine. The term mysticism in this way indexes a union or fusion, the eradication of the perceived distinction between the subjective "self" and the objective "other," the latter standing for God. Many years ago I ran across what I took to be affinities between my approach to painting and some Jewish mystical themes. Since then, I've pursued my endeavors in these two fields to a certain extent independently from one another. That is to say, I have been cautious to avoid creating some kind of concatenation of the two. My paintings provide no clear clues concerning my studies, and my studies (even when they concern mystical themes in art history) make no reference to my painting. I reserve my overt discussions of the interconnections between these two pursuits for the context of an artist's statement or a gallery talk, and in this way I hope to allow my work in each arena to stand (or fall) on its own merits. For those who are interested in investigating the relationship between the two, this brief discussion provides one such opportunity, while, for others, the two pursuits can just as easily remain distinct.

My recent book, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life; the Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Response to Christianity*, concerns the spiritual strivings of a singularly influential medieval Jewish mystic. Abraham Abulafia sought to erase what he saw as a dichotomy existing within himself, one which troubled him greatly. The two poles of this dichotomy Abulafia characterized as divine and profane, as the immaterial and the material dimension of his being. Abulafia believed that overcoming this internal dichotomy would give rise to a state of *devekut*, of "attachment" to the divine. In this we can see the relationship between Abulafia's view and the understanding of mysticism more generally mentioned above. By achieving an internal unification of the divine and the profane, Abulafia sought to eliminate the divide between himself and God. Abulafia devoted more than twenty years of his life to this effort, which he wrote about at great length.

One of the chief tools employed by Abulafia in this effort was a set of traditional techniques by which to explore hidden meanings within texts. These were based primarily upon the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Abulafia applied these interpretive methods toward

the discernment of what he took to be Scripture's encrypted dimensions. Through his methods of textual analysis, Abulafia elicited mystical revelation from Scripture. Most often, such revelation took the form of teachings regarding the dichotomy between man's sacred and profane, immaterial and material components. These revelations represented, for Abulafia, experiential springboards to communion with the divine. Abulafia and his disciples have left us detailed descriptions of the nature of the ecstatic states that they achieved through these explorations of Scripture.

At the same time, Abulafia's interpretive procedures, he wrote, could also lead to the mystic's ruin if he allowed himself to be misled by demonic forces, which sought to confound the mystic's intellect and steer him into heretical conclusions. Abulafia prescribed a kind of exegetical tightrope walk. In order to achieve the internal unification of the sacred and the profane, one must engage both one's higher and lower, spiritual and carnal, natures. One's lower or material nature Abulafia described in terms of the idolatrous or the demonic. Thus, Abulafia's mystical techniques required of the mystic that he grapple with his own demonic nature. Success, as Abulafia described it, resulted in a virtual self-divination, while failure could result in death or damnation. Abulafia's writings evince a virtual fixation upon engaging the forbidden or the transgressive in his effort to surmount it.



Contemporary Western secular culture is a world away from the medieval consciousness. Nevertheless, I tend to observe a certain parallelism between the medieval conceptions described above and the transcendentalist underpinnings of much all-over field painting. It is within this parallelism that much of my thinking about my own work finds its place. The extent to which an all-over painting reflects a minimalist ideal is the extent to which that which is actually rendered is "nothing." There is no observable subject and little in the way of compositional structure. There may be only an atmosphere or ambience embodied in the work, a veil garbing nothingness. Beyond this, there is only the material itself from which immateriality is constituted. Field painting has always seemed to me to have elicited, through the material of paint and canvas, a substratum of immateriality. In this, there is a tension latent in field painting. The painted "something" is what the painter has at his or her disposal to invoke the "nothing." For myself, this dichotomy between means (paint) and end (nothingness) has been thrown into

ever sharper relief over the years. I consistently pursue immaterial ends, but my work points more and more to paint's rich sensual potential. Though not in a premeditated manner, I have increasingly come to emphasize the dichotomy between the material and the immaterial. As I have maximized paint's sensuality, I have caused the underlying immaterial element to recede progressively further from view. It has become ever more elusive or esoteric – that is, secret. At the same time, the all-over quality of my work persists in the face of paint's sensuality, continuing to point to nothingness and thereby to undermine coexistent materiality. My recourse has been to a painting process that plumbs a seeming conflict between means and end, materiality and immateriality. My process is a kind of a meditation on these two poles, and on what I take, ultimately, to be the illusory nature of the distinction between one and the other.

My goal, then, is a reconciliation of opposites which escapes easy apprehension. As much as upon the sensual enticements of the physical artwork that remains on the wall, my work focuses upon the tracking of my own explorations with respect to the dichotomy of which I've been writing. Within this arena, ever new interpretations arise, for me, of my activity and its objective. Often, my familiarity with Abraham Abulafia's thought and practice provides a useful framework for this process. For many years now, I have kept ledgers to accompany each of my paintings. These consist, among other things, of the numerical tally of the number of marks for each color that make up a painting. This data has come to serve as the exegetical starting point of my effort to liberate my work from the concrete confines of oil and canvas, an effort, ever in orbit around my painting, that has also included video and web manifestations. The numerical byproducts of my painting, I have discovered, actually lend themselves to those same techniques employed by Abulafia centuries ago. As well, they stand as the immaterial essence of my work, signifiers of an artistic process whose aesthetic by-product, the painted object, I hope to have function, in its own right, as an experiential springboard.