



Jewish Art in
America

AN INTRODUCTION

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Israeli-born and California-based Bruria Finkel has followed a different mystical path to approach the Godhead. Paradoxically, she is among the least religious but most mystical of spiritual artists. Her point of entry is through the Spanish kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia (1240–c.1291), who in order to connect to the flow of Divine energy emanating throughout the universe advocated mediation on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that spelled the various names of God.

Finkel has spent several years translating Abulafia's writings into English and has found in his observations on the chariot image as described by Ezekiel a fertile source of imagery, particularly the passage (1:28) describing the chariot as "the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord." Ezekiel's descriptions are part of what is called *merkabah* mysticism, probably the earliest form of Jewish mysticism dating from the first century B.C.E. and is concerned with the ascent of the soul to join the heavenly chorus singing praises to God. Combining her interest in Abulafia with images of Ezekiel's chariot, Finkel created in 1985 *The Divine Chariot*, a sequence of sculptures consisting of four chariot wheels each embellished with hands, Hebrew letters, and various religious images that has been exhibited together with a series of wall drawings entitled *Permutations on the Letters Alef + A*, an installation meant to suggest Abulafia's contemplative practices (figure 9.6). The bronze wheels are meant to function as a bridge to the ancient past insofar as the chariot is considered to be "a symbol of the highest form of human attainment toward grace and [the] Divine influx."⁴

Finkel's work is to be read metaphorically and—she is very clear about this—in an open-ended mystical spirit. She feels that organized religion controls one's spirit through structure and dogma, and that it imposes, as



Figure 9.6. Bruria Finkel, *The Divine Chariot*, 1985–1997. Bronze, patina, 8 feet x 31 in. x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist.

he has said, "a system of compliance to God and a Temple." But "in prayer, religion sometimes enables one to reach states close to a spiritual pace. The major aspect of the spiritual experience is to reach a state of bliss when one follows certain processes that bring you to that state." To that end, she meditates before beginning to paint or sculpt and finds spirituality in the act of artistic creation itself. She is closest to a state of bliss

when working or when thinking about creation. It is a solitary process that she is then happy to share with her viewers—similar to feelings expressed by Max Weber, Hyman Bloom, and others over the course of the last one hundred years.

Tina Spiro who lives in Florida would probably agree with Finkel's assessment of organized religion. She has said, "Spirituality is a direct connection to the central power and intelligence of the universe, with no saints, prophets, or hierarchies. These intermediaries strike me as reflecting a human need for communication with something familiar, a fear of embracing the unknowable." Religion can provide a framework, she insists, but spirituality is the higher goal. She sees herself as a conduit accepting "the energy of the universe as a guide in an effortless and almost unconscious way," and as the co-creator with a higher force in the creation of her works. In a way similar to that of Finkel and others, Spiro asserts that her sense of spiritualism is abetted by her conscious effort to reclaim her soul through the making of art.

Spiro has said, like Michael Somoroff, that she finds in Kabbalah connections "with the light of the life force through the suspension of the ego." Here, she has put her finger on one of the tricky and paradoxical issues all spiritual artists face: how to resolve the matter of losing oneself in the One while at the same time asserting one's ego in the act of creation. Clearly the task is difficult in that the artist's ego is employed in completing ego-less activities in the desire to make statements of authentic being and self-revelation that reach beyond the self to the world that lies beyond appearances and invokes submersion in the mystical stream.

There is no single answer to this dilemma except to say that those artists, aware of the problem, have said that when in the proper frame of mind their impulses or a nameless force directs them, that forms emerge unconsciously, or, as Spiro has indicated, that they are only coauthors of their own work. Those who hold to this position are in fact stating in their own language a version of an old Hasidic tale which states that the individual is not separate from God but rather is only a very small part of God and that the self is merely one indication that God is present in the world. According to this logic, the artist's creative process and the resultant work, the immaterial and the material, are conjoined with God, but are only a part of God.⁵

Another dilemma that challenges spiritual artists lies in the physical presence of the objects they create. These are, after all, forms bound to the particular space they inhabit but are intended to reveal or suggest spiritual and therefore immeasurable trajectories of feeling. But spiritual artists nevertheless persist, using the material to visualize the immaterial. Again, whether they know it or not, they invoke the Hasidic notion that their activities are part, a small part, of God.