



Beatrice Mandelman: Taos Modernist. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995; pp. 96-100, 161.

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and collages in elaborate tin frames traditionally reserved for devotional pictures. These images correlate with Clive Bell's theory that "All artists are religious. All uncompromising belief is religious."¹⁰⁷ To the question "Why does the artist choose to imply meanings through abstraction rather than depict them directly?," Mandelman has responded enigmatically, "White memories . . . The painting should be more like a dream, disquieting and concealing. . . . I don't preach at the observer."¹⁰⁸

But since Modernism has often been conceived as an unforgiving style, the radical amputation of form from narrative meanings often causes the act of interpretation to assume the features of a snipe hunt in which both the artist and the audience are left holding the bag. As Mandelman herself recognized, forms can assume contradictory meanings in abstract art. "I seem to work from the long, confused emotions, which is my life," the artist has mused. "I have a constant dialogue between opposites."¹⁰⁹

Poised on ambiguity, Mandelman's works at times rest on watersheds of difference. Meanings trail in different directions, bifurcating content into polar opposites, making one a mockery of the other, or at the very least an inverse mirror. Too often we expect Modernist art to resolve contradictions and offer solutions that can be described in a discursive fashion. But what these works of art do best is to keep the contradictions in suspension and allow viewers the opportunity to view them aesthetically. Meaning in Modernist art is not subject to straightforward ratiocination as in philosophy, but is a poetic construction of possibilities that can easily devolve into seeming contradictions of slipping signifiers. Not just propaganda, this art manifests or symbolizes a range of feelings and is not simply a vehicle of persuasion.

Art may be most effective as a political tool when it allows us to come to terms

with the ideological construction of reality. Since ideologies are special ways of masking contradictions according to the needs and attitudes of specific groups and since artists may be marginal to their public, ample opportunities exist for both subtle and blatant contradictions between the ideologies of artists and their public. In Mandelman's art this rift is manifested formally in terms of her use of white to bridge a number of binary oppositions including presence/absence and space/wall.¹¹⁰ The polarities are indicative of unresolved tensions in modern society—tensions which are exacerbated in Mandelman's work because of her desire to belong to the fashionable realm of the international vanguard in which the major formalist critic of the 1950s and early 1960s Clement Greenberg was championing Color Field painting for its way of forging an inextricable bond between painting and support (such as canvas or linen) and for permitting this support an eloquent role in the completed work. At the same time that she wished to keep abreast of changes in the art world, Mandelman wanted to remain true to her early liberal upbringing and need to regard humanity as an extended family. These contradictions in her art function as artistic koans—contradictions that allow viewers to come to terms with the contradictory nature of reality.

Although it is impossible to assign a specific iconographic meaning to the drips in Mandelman's paintings or to the color white in her art, one can defend their high import by pointing to the fact that the Modernist style is an elevated discourse even if a mysterious and at times confounding one. While Modernists originally intended to distill a host of associations into an essence that could be understood in the then supposed universal languages of color and form and found instead that their works were open to a host of interpretations, the serious and committed tone of this style

indicates its significance, even if that import cannot be channeled into one unequivocal meaning.

The difficulty of comprehending and accepting the ramifications of Modernist art is a challenge that faces artists as well as their audiences. Mandelman has struggled with the significance of white over the years in poems and notes written primarily for herself. Her dilemma is similar to that of many artists who are intrigued with colors and forms that keep recurring in their work even though they do not understand them. Although they succumb to the power of the muse, they remain perplexed about the meanings of their visions. Mandelman has tried to characterize this dilemma by saying, “I am a believer in the poetry of the unconscious moving into the realm of abstraction . . . my work could be called ‘subjective abstractions.’”¹¹ In one undated note she writes of “icing white with blood of thunder and regret.” Recognizing that white is often regarded as the opposite of black, Mandelman ponders their conspiracy in the following prose poem:

Destiny, rides
a horse, so white,
in moonlight-etched in black
As tar paper—
nailed, to clouds,
Formed by rigid formation
Broken, by desire
and the night’s silence

A similar fascination with the ways that light can be intermeshed with darkness is evident in the following poem which also refers to the fact that cultures over time take on the qualities of the natural landscape:

The day is dark,
heavy with
clouds
hanging
like chandeliers
crystal
cut from broken glass
patterned
with an intricate design
Of a forgotten culture
far away—
As time
rendered out a moment
to tell day from night
An echo of movement
So clear
That bells ring
softly
In my tears.

At another time, Mandelman is unambiguous in her use of white to indicate death and emptiness:

This Day
I am frozen in space
My coffin is white
The crosses are placed in uniform

But she still continues to ponder the illimitable silence and space with which she is working. She wonders about her need to allow this great void a role in her art. Per-

haps she is providing a voice for something that transcends speech or is presenting, as the Zen koan asks, one's face before one was born:

The paintings are my feelings about silence—
In cracks, corners—
It has to do with memories.
White memories.
Creation of the World,
Death of the World—
The end of a generation
beginning of a new Half way

In Mandelman's work the poetics of white depend upon its plethora of references. White might be associated with clouds, light, snow, purity, the canvas itself, the void, with beginnings and with endings—meaning death—with mysterious signs painted on rock walls centuries ago, with the background of many Native American pots and Hispanic santos, and with the flesh color of the Christ figures from Arroyo Hondo. White can be a symbol of the primordial which is reenacted in art by the awesome and immutable canvas or sheet of paper facing an artist before her first mark is made. Although the Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell finds the initial white surface intimidating and consequently associates it with Herman Melville's chapter on the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick* and with poisonous titanium white oxide, Mandelman equates white with the mystery of the unknown which might be the yet uncreated force of the universe or its ultimate end.

After initiating the discourse on the poetics and problematics of white in her works of the early 1960s, Mandelman began in 1964 to investigate the formal prob-

99. General brochure advertising the stable of artist in the Kress-Sonora Gallery, Taos, 1977.

100. Mandelman, Letter to Hobbs, September 24, 1993.

101. Mandelman, Notes, c. 1990s.

102. Mandelman, Random notes, c. 1990s.

103. Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," 1908 in Chipp, p. 134.

104. Hobbs, Interview with Mandelman, June 9, 1992.

105. Mandelman, Letter to Hobbs, September 24, 1993.

106. Mandelman, "About Painting 84," notes in the artist's archives.

107. Bell, p.68.

108. Mandelman statement in *B Series* catalogue brochure.

109. Mandelman, Notes, c. 1970.

110. This opposition between modern and ancient worlds would appear to belong to these oppositions that indicate rifts in modern society but this seeming polarity has actually been unified in modern art under the desire (1) to initiate the archaic phase of a new order, (2) to deal with essences so profound and pervasive that they occur in ancient art, and (3) to proclaim a universal language that coheres all art, even the most primordial, into one large family of readily identifiable forms.

111. *The New Mexican*, October 23, 1977.

112. Mandelman, Unmarked and undated newsclipping in the artist's file, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe. According to this clipping Mandelman showed a series of fifteen small works in mixed media based on the Vietnam War. It is worth noting that, according to DeNardis, p. 11, Ribak exhibited in 1969 an oil painting of