

Critics' Forum
Visual Arts
Joanne Julian: Concerning the Spiritual in Art
By Adriana Tchalian



The title of my article, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, comes from a book written by twentieth-century Modernist Wassily Kandinsky on the subject of art and spirituality (1910). He, along with others such as Piet Mondrian, was strongly influenced by religious and spiritual subjects of his times, and as a result created art that reflected this awareness. Compared to the charismatic, angst-ridden artists of today, these early twentieth-century Modernists were sage and poet in one, creating works that reflected their inner life rather than generating “art for art’s sake” or imbuing their work with social or political purpose.

In fact, ever since Paleolithic man began sketching crude renderings of animals on the ceilings of the Lascaux caves (France, 13,000 BC), art has become an expression or a reflection of one’s creed—for these renderings were not meant for decorative or social purposes but rather as some type of ritualistic magic. Assuming that one agrees that art has a purpose—whether cultural, political, or otherwise—and is not merely “art for art’s sake,” empty of meaning or purpose, it is clear that the most significant role of art has been the expression of one’s religious or spiritual creed. The centrality of the spiritual in art is undeniable, be it in the art of India or the art of the Italian Renaissance, the interior of an ancient cave or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or to offer a more contemporary example, the open-air ceiling of James Turrell’s Roden Crater, an extinct crater that has been excavated to function as an open-air observatory just outside of Flagstaff, Arizona.

And although some contemporary western artists do not offer much by way of the spiritual in art, even they are keenly aware of its absence. As art critic and historian Suzi Gablik writes, “the real crisis of Modernism, as many people have claimed, is the pervasive spiritual crisis of Western civilization: the absence of a system of beliefs that justifies allegiance to any entity beyond the self.” Galib goes on to say that even twentieth-century Abstract Expressionists were closet spiritualists, quietly revering the early Modernists’ efforts to distill their spiritual explorations into fine art.

Having made this argument about art and spirituality, then, how do we apply it to contemporary Armenian art? Enter the likes of Joanne Julian, a Los Angeles-based Armenian artist who is a virtual unknown in the Armenian diasporan community, yet one whose work is well-recognized amongst mainstream art circles.

There is nothing intrinsically Armenian about Julian’s graphite and ink drawings. The critic Robert McDonald describes her work as possessing “the discipline and spirit of Taoist painting.” It is this proclivity towards things spiritual that is the driving essence behind her work. Having traveled throughout Asia, Julian has cultivated an extensive Asian visual vocabulary, which is reflected in the simplicity and beauty of her drawings—immense brushstrokes, reminiscent of Asian calligraphy, are set against the glistening sheen of the graphite, forming an exquisite contrast of color, texture and shape.

In February of this year, Julian, along with William Amundson and Robin Dare, participated in an exhibition—*Drawn to Scale*—at the Spokane Falls Community College Art Gallery in Washington. The exhibit was co-curated by Louise Lewis, gallery director and professor of art history at California State University, Northridge.

According to Lewis, “The juxtaposition of a delicately drawn silver braid entwined within a vibrant circle of crimson or gold suggests an unusually exuberant Zen exercise, ironically made more intimate by the all-enveloping scale. In Horizontal Braid, the intricately drawn tress stretches within the bottom portion of nearly 3’ high gold and circle, provocatively inviting the viewer to contemplate the secrets within the circle.”

The presence of someone of Julian’s talent in both the Armenian diasporan and American contexts suggests that the yearning for the spiritual is alive and well, even among the most avant-garde artists in our communities. In an earlier article, I had posed the question of whether or not there was an Asian aesthetic in Armenian visual art. It appears as if Joanne Julian’s work more than answers that call, while transcending the limits of even that description in the process.

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