

## Reuven Berman Kadim: Towards Pure Perfection

My art is not meant to mirror or interpret reality. I regard it as an antidote to reality. My reaction to such almost daily phenomena as violence, danger, ugliness, and ineptitude is to try to establish ideal states of purity, order, and perfection. In the context, one might describe the intent of my paintings as recuperative.

Reuven Berman, 1975

Throughout his creative journey, Reuven Berman Kadim (1929–2014) walked almost alone, at least as far as the Israeli art scene was concerned. As someone who was intimately familiar with the artists and major trends in Israeli art – being an art critic in the 1960s and early 1970s, a curator and artistic director of projects, as well as a lecturer in the Art Department at Bezalel in the 1980s and 1990s – Berman the artist's choice to create through calculated and precise planning, which he preferred over intuitive and emotional expression, was a conscious choice to act as a "one-man school" against the current. "I realized that self-expression is really not very interesting, nor very original," he said. "[when] I gradually moved from organic forms and concentrated on geometric shapes, then I found myself in an atmosphere that truly suited me."<sup>1</sup>

Berman's aesthetic conception was anchored in a solid worldview about art, reality, and the intersection between them. He rejected the idea that the artist is the hero of the work and that it reflects his inner world and his interpretation of reality – concepts associated with Romanticism and Expressionism, or the Dionysian in Berman's view. He identified with the Apollonian, classical, constructivist ethos, based on constant laws and order according to which the work is built. The decision is clear for him: "We are bombarded almost incessantly by high-strung emotions. I didn't see the point of extending all that into art. The intellectual side of art – how things are made, from color to composition, when related to forms and proportions, and history seemed much more fascinating to me than and emotional self-expressive role."

Nevertheless, Berman the person did not disconnect from his artistic perception in his personal life, for instance in his external appearance: dress as an aesthetic statement. As his acquaintances and students knew, in winter he always wore black while in summer he wore white, almost without intermediate shades between the extremes. The connection between the choice of clothing and the cycle of the seasons is consistent with Berman's overall view of the connection between order in nature and art: "Nature, throughout the continuum from the microscopic to the galactic and probably to the cosmic, is organized in geometric systems. The 'organic' is merely the thin external covering of the universal geometric matrix." For him, the distinction that was common in the art discourse on abstract painting of the mid-20th century between the geometric and the organic (or biomorphic) is completely invalid. In the organic world, as in ancient architecture and art, there is order, one of whose well-known expressions is the "golden ratio" (or golden section), a harmonious mathematical ratio that Berman adopted in many of his works.

Another link of the personal and the artistic occurred following an ideological identity crisis that led to the understanding that his art should stem from the place where he actually lived: the Middle East. The artistic expression of this move was works inspired by architecture from the ancient East that continued and developed into paintings and digital works inspired by Islamic art. The personal expression of this realization was the addition of the name Kadim (east, ancient) to his name in 1991.

The exhibition at the Givon Gallery marks a decade since Reuven Berman Kadim's passing (November 2014) with a display of a selection of works from significant periods throughout his career, including works that have not been exhibited for many years, and seeks to reveal the conceptual and formal diversity of his works and the various experiments that characterized his path. As art that exists outside the chaotic and painful here and now, it offers, as the artist wrote 50 years ago, also an attempt at healing.

1966 is the year in which Reuven Berman entered the Israeli art scene with a consolidated presence as an artist in solo exhibitions and numerous group exhibitions and was well received. In semi-abstract black and white acrylic paintings, he examined the relationships between line-stain-surface, the shades between white and black, and the relationships between the free, organic image and the geometric forms penetrating the paintings. Within a few years, black and white were replaced by contrasting colors, the world of geometric forms became his main language along with dedication to the mathematical research that guided the paintings. At the same time, Berman began to challenge the rectangular format typical of painting with other shapes, circles, triangles, hexagons, and other non-rectangular formats.

The selection of paintings from the "Radiant Tondo" series demonstrates how the meeting between the planned, precise, and objective form with color – which is relative, influenced by its environment, and stimulates subjective response – creates variations with different expressive powers. When first exhibited in 1975, Berman wrote that he tried "to use color in a controlled and even systematic way, against the natural and limiting symmetry of the circle. In other words, a given form and a color law that tries to break and expand the properties of the form." However, he discovered that even in a controlled process, nothing is predictable when it comes to the final result; sometimes he was pleasantly surprised and sometimes he had to throw away the work and start over.

"For me the prime concern of art is perfection. That is, perfection so pure that it becomes an independent, tangible value." Berman wrote in 1975. Its importance, as he further claimed, is beyond its material essence: "Contact with pure perfection is life-enhancing. That is the crux of 'artistic communication', art's social value and the artist's role in society."<sup>2</sup> From his perspective, as he repeatedly emphasized years later, his art is not merely formal and should not be regarded only as a result of mathematical calculations and physical explanations, because it "takes place on another sphere, related more to a kind of meditation, a feeling of order, of oneness with nature and the cosmos... it provides a spiritual experience." Berman thus invites us to an experience of deep observation that always involves internal contemplation, slow surrender to color radiation, beauty of form, harmony of proportions.

In the 1980s, a new direction began to crystallize in his work, and this occurred parallel to its appearance among other artists, albeit in different modes of expression: turning to the East as a source of inspiration, belonging, and identity. In 1983, Berman initiated a course at Bezalel on "The Near East as a Source for Contemporary Art," and about a year later he began to implement these ideas in works in which he examined geometric principles, including the golden ratio and the golden sequence (Fibonacci sequence) as embodied in ancient structures, mostly temples, from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia to Italy. Some of the works offer an aerial view of the plans of the temples that have survived and which illustrate the order and proportions of the structure. Others present a frontal view of architectural

details such as a column, arch, or keystone after formal and coloristic processing and styling. In 1991, during a five-month stay at the Cité des Arts in Paris, Berman Kadim developed ideas for new three-dimensional works with a connection to concepts he studied in antiquity: Tel, temple, ark, etc., and created models for them. As someone who studied architectural design in his youth, Berman Kadim's attraction to architectural themes was natural and continued into the 2000s. But at some point, the territorial space to which he turned as inspiration converged on a more specific source: Islamic art.

In the Islamic ornamental patterns covering mosque architecture and relying on developing and flowing geometric motifs, Berman Kadim found the right combination between science and order and beauty. In the Islamic tradition, the geometric order of the expanding pattern constitutes a visual metaphor for the infinite transcendental creative power. "A unique art that matured in the Middle Ages manages to connect contemporary science and metaphysics and continues to be valid and of special beauty even today."<sup>3</sup> Berman Kadim's works are not a copy or reconstruction of Islamic patterns but new creations, mostly in layers of patterns on a different scale placed one on top of the other, a development he could create using computer software. In 1995, he began using a computer while diligently self-learning the possibilities (and limitations) of the new tools, and in 1999 he succeeded for the first time in making a large digital print.

The use of a computer enabled the development of the painting series "Islamic Fractals" in which he used the pentagon shape, common in Islamic patterns, according to the principles of the fractal – a geometric shape that, as it is enlarged, retains in all its details a similarity to the original shape. Due to the possibilities of expansion of fractals, each work in the series, in different sizes, is actually a detail from an infinite sequence. This principle is the basis of the series of fragments, each presenting a form or initial idea before it becomes a complete pattern and final composition. The more than 50 fragments, some of which are displayed in the exhibition, were created between 1996 and 2010 as digital images intended for edition printing.

In his pioneering digital art works, Reuven Berman Kadim showed that works based on mathematical tools can be relevant to time and place without slipping into the everyday and changeable; and like the geometric and minimalist works of the past, constitute a focus for contemplation, interpretation, and aesthetic and spiritual experience.

Dr. Dalia Manor, Exhibition Curator

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<sup>1</sup> From a dialogue with Gil Goldfine from the book *Reuven Berman Kadim: Geometric Art, the Hidden Order of Nature*, edited by Gil Goldfine, Yedioth Ahronoth, Chemed Books, Tel Aviv, 2010 pp. 222-223. Later quotes from this book from Reuven Kadim: Key Concepts, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Reuven Berman, *A few Personal Beliefs and Methods*, March 1975. Artist's statement from the artist file, Tel Aviv Museum of Art Library .

<sup>3</sup>Reuven Kadim, "Dialogue with Islamic Art," *Digital Art*, The Magazine for Computer Art for PC and Macintosh, Issue 94, January 2003, p. 14 [Hebrew].