

# The Light of Yehoshua Grossbard

by Sanford Sivitz Shaman

## *Absorbing Negative Energy*

Consider the suggestion that flowers absorb negative energy. Filling our space with flowers at grievous moments like sickness or death, we sense that flowers ease some of the unhappiness and pain. And when we have hurt or wronged another, we turn to flowers as the traditional expression of apology, feeling that they will help to elicit forgiveness. Flowers are used at new beginnings like weddings and births, as well as in conjunction with many religious ceremonies, when we want to protect ourselves against negativity. The quintessential symbol of love, flowers enhance positive feelings and hope. As we understand that they can chase away "the blues" and other bad feelings, we can stretch the idea a bit further to see this as absorbing negativity.

Whether or not one accepts this, it is useful in beginning to understand the quiet spiritual power of Yehoshua Grossbard's subtly colored paintings. For these works with their gentle floral palette (reminiscent of the color of gladiolas) are very much like flowers. The calmness and serenity with which they leave the viewer is suggestive of the process of absorbing negative energy.

The paintings which have this quality form a specific group of works within the total oeuvre of the artist. Accounting for the major percentage of Grossbard's works since around 1961, these soothing pictures first began to appear among Grossbard's more traditional landscapes as early as 1952. They can generally be described as soft abstractions of the houses of various areas of Haifa as well as of other Israeli sites such as Jerusalem, Tiberias, and the Dead Sea. (There are, however, other subjects such as still life paintings [p. 22 ] which also fall into this category of work). Although this group is also typified by highly geometric and well-balanced compositions

(the result of focusing upon windows and doors), it also displays a quality of freeness and spontaneity – particularly in the handling of the paint.

But it is Grossbard's unique approach to color that especially empowers these works. Here the artist demonstrates his prowess of mastering the implementation of potentially sweet pastel colors. And so the compositions are formed exclusively from soft yellows, soft oranges, pinks, and soft blues. Obviously employing significant quantities of white in his colors, Grossbard's simple palette helps to achieve an unusually notable spiritual effect.

To begin to understand how this palette functions on a spiritual level, we can turn to a New Age spiritual technique of visualization called, "radiating the love". Put forward by Lazaris, one of the most noteworthy voices of today's New Age spirituality, "radiating the love" plays upon the importance of color in the process of spiritual realization (i.e., vibration is color; color is sound; sound is Light, and Light is God). "Radiating the love" is a technique of giving off positive energy (rather than negative energy) by visualizing oneself surrounded by a glow of pastel color. It is based upon the principle that certain colors, such as pastel colors, vibrate on a higher spiritual frequency than do colors like reds, browns, grays, and blacks. Specifically, Lazaris describes it as follows:

*If you choose red, then it becomes pink. If you choose orange, then it becomes a very pale orange color – pastel orange, sort of tangerine... If you choose a deeper color... yellow, then it becomes a very buttery sunny yellow-green – very lime green etc. – very pastel. Because you're taking the primary color and mixing in white.*

*And then what you do is radiate it out of you. You sense yourself like you're glowing this color. It's just out of you all over. And you're just in the bubble, just glowing it all over wherever you go – you don't shut it off – you leave it on. You just sense yourself walking around with this glow of light.<sup>1</sup>*

This is very much the same effect as Grossbard's paintings. His paintings of houses use only the colors Lazaris describes, and as a result their energy is especially positive. This is why people find it pleasant to be

around these works, and this is why they have a tranquil effect. (One would suspect that in his work as a house painter, Grossbard must have connected with the effect colors have upon people – especially pastel colors which are more frequently used for painting homes.) One work in fact, *House at Tiberias* (1971, p. 16) painted completely in "buttery sunny yellows" and yellow-greens seems to personify Lazaris' words.

Whatever spiritual power flowers have, obviously it is not solely attributed to color – so too with the spiritual quality of Grossbard's paintings. Another factor is Grossbard's well balanced compositions which have a reassuring effect. This is combined with the softening of the symmetry, which provides a rounder, gentler view of the world.

Grossbard's characteristic compositions are the result of the artist focusing only upon a part of the subject he is painting. Providing us, in effect, with a blowup of a detail, often there will be a second version of the same painting, or the artist will pick up on an even smaller detail of a painting and enlarge it into subsequent works. Thus one work flows into another, and a painting can be inspired by or based upon one that was painted many years previous, rendering dates irrelevant – as if to underscore the spiritual principle that time does not exist.

Not only does time not exist, but neither does matter. Grossbard's paintings of houses are essentially paintings of walls, and walls potentially serve to symbolize barriers that block entry. On another level, walls are the barriers that block communication as well as the deeper levels of self exploration. Many of us construct walls that hinder true self knowledge and ultimately self acceptance and self love. Such walls also keep out those around us, and stand in the way of what is truly love. But such are not the walls of Yehoshua Grossbard. His walls break down matter. His walls are penetrable. They do not block, nor are they barriers. Rather, they are well balanced vibrations of gentle color. The artist's unique use of windows and doors throughout these compositions further negates the wall as a barrier, and emphasizes the openness and vulnerability of these structures and the illusion that is matter.

The subject of the house, like the wall, is also a potentially charged symbol in Israeli art. For many Israeli artists the house is a political symbol suggesting references to Arabs who have lost their homeland and their homes as the result of the Arab/Israeli conflict. An ironic theme, the house further refers to the persecuted homeless Jew who now finds himself in the

role of persecutor. But Grossbard, in his handling of this subject, transcends political messages. Never revealing the inhabitants, Grossbard creates a home that is universal. His houses, actually inspired by Arab homes as well as Jewish homes, are hopeful within the context of Israeli art. This is because these are not structures of fear and domination, but rather they are structures of trust and love. Their posture is that which Lazaris would describe as "dominion". That is to say, they define themselves – not others; they are strong, but do not impose themselves upon others; they do not dominate.<sup>2</sup> Thus – within an Israeli context – these works can be seen to have a healing quality.

In the Arab/Israeli struggle the home – as symbolized by the house – is everything. And in a Yehoshua Grossbard painting it is universal, neither Jewish nor Arab. It is neither Black nor White. Rather, the house is the home for everyone. Grossbard paints a house that radiates love. Penetrable, vulnerable, and not a barrier to outsiders, Grossbard's home does not exist in time. Nor does it exist as matter. Time and matter are an illusion. Thus the home – symbolized by the house – which is everything, is really nothing. And this brings us to one of the greatest of all spiritual realizations – everything is nothing, and nothing is everything.

There will be those, who according to today's mainstream criterion for judging art, will see these works as "overly romantic" or perhaps sweet. For others, perhaps there is too much of a stylistic connection to Reuven Rubin's early scenes of Jaffa, which many "savvy" Israeli artists view with a jaded eye. Today we want our art to be hard, tough, and aggressive, and thus it becomes difficult to simply appreciate works that rather seeking to dominate, exist in a state of dominion.

## *Yehoshua Grossbard and "The Enduring Spirit"*

From its earliest beginnings the *raison d'être* of art has been spiritual. But the road from prehistory to today is a long one. On this road we have lost our connection, and our art has become progressively less spiritual as it has moved toward modern times. Nevertheless, art is still thought to have some sort of undefinable spiritual meaning. Almost always the term "spiritual" is used in reference to art as something positive. Vague terms that sound impressive are frequently bandied about in art rhetoric. These are

expressions like: "spiritual refreshment," "spiritual nourishment," or "spiritually uplifting." But in spite of the fact that much lip-service is paid to the spiritual significance of art, it can be said that for the last half century, the Western art establishment has cultivated an art that is increasingly free of the spiritual connection it once had.

Among the few contemporary artists who stand alone for an oeuvre that is undeniably spiritual is the American artist, Georgia O'Keefe. Not only is O'Keefe's work universally appreciated for this quality, but also its art historical importance is unquestionable. Georgia O'Keefe's paintings are timeless: their spirit overrides attitudes of taste and fashion, and those works which were painted in the earlier half of the century appear as contemporary and as new today as do the most up-to-date works of art. Moreover O'Keefe had the ability to be able to approach a subject like flowers – a subject which is potentially overly romantic and sweet to the twentieth century eye – and instill into it a freshness and power – in effect, an "enduring spirit."<sup>3</sup>

There is an interesting connection between Georgia O'Keefe and Yehoshua Grossbard. Curiously, there is a stylistic connection. If one turns to O'Keefe's landscapes and paintings of houses dating from as early as 1926 and continuing well past the 1960s, one finds much more of an affinity between these works and Grossbard's paintings of houses, than one finds between Grossbard and other Israeli artists. Both artists share a similar softness of line and form. And although O'Keefe's "viewfinder," may sometimes be set slightly back from that of Grossbard, both artists basically view the world from the same vantage point. Moreover, Grossbard's distinctive use of gentle color has its parallel in many of O'Keefe's paintings of adobe houses and churches of the American Southwest.

This stylistic connection is curious because there is no evidence of Grossbard ever showing the slightest interest in Georgia O'Keefe. There is not one book or catalogue on O'Keefe to be found among Grossbard's library of books on contemporary artists. Nor can Grossbard's daughter remember her father ever expressing any interest in, or reference to O'Keefe.

In attempting to explain these concrete stylistic similarities, one cannot overlook the spiritual nature of both bodies of work. That is to say, each artist employed similar stylistic qualities, and obtained similar spiritual results. It can be said that although O'Keefe's work is much more

metaphorical than that of Grossbard, her paintings also radiate the same gentle vibrations that Grossbard's do. Thus there is a spiritual connection between the work of Grossbard and that of O'Keefe.

### *A Unique Universal Vision and the Albatross of the Art Establishment*

But Grossbard was never appreciated in Israel the way that O'Keefe was appreciated in America. Like O'Keefe, Grossbard stood alone. And like O'Keefe, Grossbard quietly forged ahead amidst mainstream movements and developments that shouted for attention. Perhaps it was his aloneness, his singularity, that kept Grossbard from receiving the recognition that was his due. That is not to say that Yehoshua Grossbard was not recognized as an artist in Israel. Indeed his works are included in the collections of the important museums of Israel, he has had a very active exhibition history, and he has received his share of awards. But there was never *that* solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art or the Israel Museum, or the historicizing book, which leads to others.

Thus it may be appropriate to pose the question, "why?" Why is it that the Israeli art establishment has never fully explored and recognized this artist who has put forward such a unique and universal vision? Part of the answer to this question, I would suggest, lies in the fact that the unique spiritual quality of Grossbard's works have not been recognized. Here in Israel, where spirituality is a particularly loaded subject, one senses a certain resistance among the art world to entering too deeply into the spiritual role of art. Moreover, although there are certain aspects of this condition which are particularly Israeli in nature, and which can be seen as connected to attitudes that have manifested themselves as the result of a complex sequence of events in Jewish history, the art world's distancing itself from its spiritual role is in fact universal throughout the Western World.

Ever since the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the embracing of the Duchampian tradition, art has become increasingly confrontational. This confrontational posture has put the artist, and ultimately the art object, at odds with the public, thus rendering any spiritual communication between the artist and the public almost entirely impossible. In the 1980's art moved

to a new stage of decadence, prompting critic Douglas Davis to observe at the close of the decade that, "Art has never been more vulgar than now."<sup>4</sup> Already crumbling standards of artistic technique became virtually non-existent, and the door became opened to graffiti and "fun art," as the borders between art, play, and entertainment became more and more obscure. A kind of "leveling" started to take place that caused critic Barbara Rose to observe, "There's a generation now that feels ... Mickey Mouse, Henry James, Marcel Duchamp, Talking Heads, Mozart, Amadeus... all kind of mean the same thing. And for that you have Andy Warhol to thank."<sup>5</sup>

With the coming of the 90's, the artist moved from a confrontational posture to one that can be described as non-communicative, as art began to be more and more private. A tendency now has arisen toward an art that can be seen as the private exercises or explorations of the artist. This is an art the public cannot understand and makes little, if no attempt to communicate with the public. Also today there is a tendency toward art that is camouflaged or hidden. And, of course, many artists want to see how far they can bend the meaning of the art object by creating works that are not recognizable as art objects.

Thus the art world of the twentieth century has moved further and further away from its spiritual mission. As John Gardner noted so poignantly in his book, *Self Renewal*:

*... modern art has succeeded magnificently in shattering the rigidities of traditional art. It has also fastened on the field of painting a mystique of rebellion and innovation which has hung around its neck like an albatross ever since.*<sup>6</sup>

This albatross is far-reaching, limiting the critic and curator, as well as the artist. Thus it is difficult for the art world to "see" an artist like Yehoshua Grossbard. The emphasis is so strictly limited to "rebellion and innovation," that the *raison d'être* of that very rebellion and innovation has been forgotten – lost. And so if "rebellion and innovation" cannot be found, we don't get any further – and the spirituality of the work is completely missed. This is "*domination at work*."<sup>7</sup>

Grossbard's works are not confrontational, rather they are communicative. Nor can his works be described as the private exercises or

explorations of the artist. He doesn't try to camouflage or hide his art. And he doesn't ask, "What is art?" Rather he shows us what art is. At odds with what has been fashionable and typical of mainstream tendencies, Grossbard's paintings are meditative. They require one to be open to them and to receive. Set against contemporary trends, these works are conservative, but nevertheless, timeless. They transcend the criteria of what is fashionable.

Dominion, according to Lazaris, is the opposite of domination. Domination, he says, is hard, static, and manipulative, while dominion is soft, quiet, gentle, subtle and empowering. Those who see the world through a vision "calibrated" to domination will not "see" those who approach the world from a state of dominion.<sup>8</sup> Clearly today's art world – the art establishment – sees the world from a point of domination, while the paintings of Yehoshua Grossbard come from a point of dominion. And so the "albatross of modern art" has kept the Israeli art world so busy looking for "rebellion and innovation," that it has passed by one of its brightest gems.

## Notes

1. Lazaris, *The Magic of Relationships* (Audio Cassette). Palm Beach: Concept: Synergy, 1987.
2. Lazaris, *Making Dominion Real* (Audio Cassette). Palm Beach: Concept: Synergy, 1992.
3. "Enduring spirit" comes from the title of the book: Katherine Hoffman, *An Enduring Spirit, the Art of Georgia O'Keefe*, Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1984.
4. Douglas Davis, "The Billion Dollar Picture?" *Art in America*, vol. 76, no. 7 (July 1988), p.23.
5. Barbara Rose, quoted in Janet Malcolm, "Profiles, A Girl of the Zeitgeist – I." *New Yorker*, vol. LXII, no. 35 (October 20, 1966), p. 60.
6. John Gardner, *Self Renewal*, New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 42.
7. Lazaris, *Making Dominion Real*.
8. Ibid.