

Zvi Lachman: Fragments of Meaning

Robert C. Morgan

From "Sculpture" magazine, vol.23 No.6, July/August 2004

Zvika Lachman's passion as an artist is refined, austere, and articulate. He is a self-possessed artist, an artist who comprehends his own sense of being in relation to others. Through an immense generosity of spirit, Lachman is capable of projecting what he knows and understands into the most subtle and intricate components of visual, three-dimensional form. Passion, for Lachman, is less about emotion than the ritual of being. His artistic demeanor is less given to expulsive notions of the self, and more inward, more carefully hewn in relation to the act of seeing.

Lachman's sculptures are not "body art" in the popular sense of performing with the body. Rather than his own body, Lachman arbitrates the body through form and figuration. The appearance of the self is contained by the manipulation of his materials, by the rough surfaces and the handling of the wax that eventually becomes the bronze cast. Even in the bronze stage, Lachman further develops the surface to give it a special tactile quality, a quality that makes way for expressivity, a creative leap that goes far beyond illustration, a leap of faith that enters into the crust of Being, the scent of the self, the interval between Being and Non-Being, where the soul ultimately equivocates in search of its definition.

The concepts in most of Lachman's work are, perhaps, more theological than theoretical. In one of his major works, entitled *The Binding* (1990) or *Akkedah*, the subject matter is based on the struggle between God and man as exemplified in Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Issac. The title of the work informs the spiritual as well as the physical struggle. Yet *Akkedah* goes beyond the narrative. It

becomes the moment in which the sacrificial act appears immanent until the angel impedes the hand of Abraham.

This is a test of faith not only between God and Abraham, but also between Abraham and Isaac. It is Abraham's acknowledgement of the supreme deity, and therefore, constitutes a visualization of faith in Judaic monotheism. Gideon Ofrat describes it (by way of Derrida) as "the language of 'offering one's death', the covenant of sacrifice and death linking man and God." (1) In the two figures of the *Akkedah*, cast of bronze, the tension between father and son and between God and man are deeply embedded. While formally abstract, the figure of the son, Isaac, bent forward in relation to father, Abraham, appears deeply moving and profound. Formally, the distinction between the two figures is relative to the planar folds, the concavities, and the rounded spaces. The diagonal axis of the sculpture is accentuated by position of the knife, shown as a broken rod, between the two figures.

The reticence of Lachman to indulge fully in a realist mode and therefore to employ an abstract manner of working on the forms is explained in the following statement: "Sculpture for me is the breaking of the image, meaning the act of Abraham. 'Thou shalt not make graven or molten images' – this would seem to be the essence of all that stands in contradiction to plastic art ... Hesitating between abstraction and working from nature, I chose nature not from a desire to create its image but in an attempt to grasp the very phenomenon of its existence." (2)

Akkedah, then, is the embodiment of the artist's desire to break the truth, to leave it incomplete, as implied in the poignant portrayal of *Isaac II* (1999). Here the figure sits in an angular space as if had been cut away from its support or, for that matter, isolated from the father, yet in the presence of God, left in the existential wilderness, like Prometheus, bound to suffer within the realm of the

myth. Yet there is one consolation. As Isaac offers his own death, to paraphrase Derrida, he may discover how to represent his conflict in the world as a witness to a truth – a truth that he is not allowed to reveal.

For Lachman, the testimony of the conflict – indeed, a plastic representation of “body art” – is the dialectical push and pull of a figure that moves in and out of space simultaneously. Lachman’s heads exist both as figuration and as architecture. They are both external and internal in their formal desire and are the basis of self-knowledge.

In contrast to a time-based medium, such as performance, sculpture must exist in a separate, obdurate physical space -- a space that evokes its own sense of time, in fact, its own sense of Being (but always in conflict with the metaphor to which it refers, the *Akkedah*). Therefore, the graven image in Lachman is never a direct representation. On the contrary, it is -- in the best sense of figurative sculpture – a oblique representation, a work of art siphoned through abstract ideas capable of inciting the senses toward new variation of sensory pleasure and cognitive understanding. Lachman’s sculpture arrives not in an instant of shock as seen in so many of today’s art world spectacles, but as a subtle re-play of spiritual values that have either been ignored or forgotten in the glut of mindless diversions, euphemistically called entertainment.

The artist has spoken of the manner in which he works with wax and bronze – “of the dynamic plasticity of [his] sculptures, and the way this materiality gathers different layers of time.”(3) But what is this time to which Lachman refers? It would seem that time is a matter not only of history, but of memory – an interplay between the artist’s memory and the memory of his viewing audience. Social memory is the basis of history – an idea that has fallen out of favor in recent years through the acceleration of mass communications and its accompanying academic apologia. In a world inundated with cynicism emanating from all sectors of society, including the art world, it is a welcome sight to experience the

singular sculptures of Lachman. In contrast to the notion of sculpture as existing “in the expanded field,” I would suggest that the tactile, gritty, distant expressionist surfaces of Zvika Lachman have a new relevance, an importance that needs to be rethought and reconsidered. Perhaps, we could say that the “expanded field” of sculpture has its own relevance – in the best sense as a hybrid between sculpture and architecture. (4) However, there is another more intimate side to sculpture that we might allow ourselves to experience in works like

Besieged Face (1990-92) in which a man’s portrait is isolated in relation to an elevated form that suggests a house or habitat that appears somewhat foreboding.

This is also a form of sculpture/architecture but not in the sense of the expanded field. Rather it is a singular sculpture – a contained form -- that holds its own resonance, its own mythological presence, its own spiritual purpose and vitality. *Cycladic Head III* (2000) offers a similar idea to that of his earlier *Besieged Face* – a head in relation to a habitat. In the more recent work, the house is actually built into the same armature that supports the male physiognomy. The head and the habitat belong to the same support. They are different aspects of the same form. Two elements are united as one, thus lending a third element, an expression based on the overlay.

Blinded Eye (2000-2003), a wax work in process, is another striking example of Lachman formal overlay, a powerful study in which the head again is matches against a virtual archaeology. Instead of the separation of head and house, as seen in *Besieged Face*, we witness the full integration of the head as a repository of buildings and ruins. It represents not merely a habitat, but an excavation of an entire city past and present, a combined legacy that is at once historical as well as a powerful myth. Stalwart in its gaze, *Blinded Eye* retains the appearance of an Oedipal warrior, a mask worn out of indignity, a fierce warrior who incites both terror and humanity.

Yet there is more to Lachman than these torn faces and rubble. There is also the gentleness by which he is capable of portraying his family and those who are close to him. Even so, his sculpture holds a pervasive relationship to the theological triumvirate that form the basis of his aesthetic: the *Akkedah*, the *Pieta*, and the *Witnesses*. (5) Somehow the content of the myth that exists within history forms a unity, a coming together of all that the artist believes in. It is the necessary rite of passage in the Judaism whereby man is tested by God, it is the pity that God reveals to humankind in Christianity, and it is the story of those who see and believe and know that the truth cannot be told. The essential meaning of life is never complete. It can only be delivered in fragments. Perhaps, we can say that the role of the artist is to make those fragments as clear as possible in his own time. It would appear that Zvika Lachman strives to be such an artist.