

WORLD IN PROGRESS: DAVID BAILIN'S MIDRASH DRAWINGS

WARREN CRISWELL

David Bailin is famous for alarming curators and museum guards by altering or attempting to alter his own works after they've been installed. One minute David is busily rubbing out and redrawing, the next he's being strong-armed out of the place. But this is a perfectly natural thing to do, as far as David is concerned, since his drawings are never really finished. They are left unfixed and open to revision—even though they flaunt their incompleteness on a grand scale. Eight by twelve feet is a typical size for a Bailin drawing. They're like studies for large paintings, to be transferred directly to the canvas when they are done, except that they never are. It seems inevitable now that the charcoal drawing would become his favorite medium of expression. By its very nature charcoal is tentative and transient. It expresses an essay—an initial attempt, a venture into the unknown. The central characters in these narrative drawings express this same uncertainty and hesitancy. They—both the drawing itself as an object and the characters depicted in the drama—are like Moses looking across the river toward the Promised Land that he will never reach.

There are other aspects of David's work that tie in with the Moses story in particular and with Judaism in general. One is the fact that his pictures are text-driven. That is, they are inspired by ideas, not images. For one thing this gives them a very Jewish character and seems to be another element which integrates his working techniques with his thematic material. But in attempting to convert into images a text which is opposed to images, it also sets up a tension which I think is one of the most important elements in his work.

In the Torah images are idols, like the Golden Calf. Historically, idols represented the religion of the goddess

"...the nature of the Labyrinth is such that it entertains dreams that include the dream of the Pyramid."

Bernard Tschumi

Asherah of Canaan which the patriarchal Israelites had to suppress at all costs if their migration into Palestine was to succeed. But psychologically they represent the natural and intuitive in opposition to the transcendent and intellectual, and it's this opposition that is felt in all of David's work, especially in the *Midrash Series*. "Midrash" means interpretation and refers to a collection of ancient exegeses of the Torah. Except for the ancient part, this is a pretty good description of David's drawings.

In *Rock [Abraham]*, 1995 (figure 4), God appears as a cubical boulder—huge and rough-textured but definitely geometrical. Set against this irresistible force is the immovable object of Sarah's motherly protection of her son. This looks like an alternate version of the Bible story, in which Abe would rather get plowed under by God than go up against his wife. In *Breath [Expulsion]*, 1996 (figure 5), the same square boulder seems to be driving a loudly protesting Adam (with the Snake) and Eve (with a baby) from Paradise. Opposing the boulder is a small superimposed drawing of a circular labyrinth motif, which in the pre-Judaic mythology of the Middle East was usually a symbol of the Goddess, or Mother Nature. It's interesting that David also used something like the labyrinth motif, bent into a heart shape, to symbolize the magical man of clay in *Golem*, 1991 (figure 8), a drawing in the *Holocaust/Kaballah Series*. Golems, after all, are created directly from Mother Earth, who in the Kaballah is called the Shekhinah, the exiled female component of God. Another version of the labyrinth occurs in *Kaddish (for Vincent Foster)*, 1993 (figure 9), superimposed over what appears to be a Viking burial ship (a ship of state?). The rational Word struggles to dominate the

labyrinthine Image. It's a futile struggle that can never be resolved, because it represents the basic duality of human consciousness.

A deeper connection with Moses may be found in the story of the breaking of the Tablets. In Exodus Moses seems to throw down the Tablets in a sudden tantrum, but in his opera *Moses und Aaron* Arnold Schoenberg sees a symbolic significance as well. Moses wants *no* idols, only the Idea, pure and abstract. But Aaron points out to him that even the tablets are a concession to this fixation—so he smashes the Word as he would smash the Calf. It's sort of like David going into a gallery and effacing his own work—denying the sacrosanct status of the physical work of art. Of course in the end Moses, like Bailin, has to deliver the goods.

I kid David about his dislike of art materials. He has a horror of my practice of making my own paint. David is as appalled by my grinding slab as some people are by spiders. It's a joke, but there's some truth to it. He himself has gotten rid of as many materials as possible, leaving only a stick of charcoal and a sheet of paper. Like Moses, David is a conceptualist who has accepted the necessity of a minimal amount of existential impurity. The irony is that all pursuits of the eternal must take place in the field of time, as David's works in progress bear exquisite testimony. Drawings, music and texts all finally belong to the labyrinth. This is perhaps the central irony in a body of work full of non sequiturs.

Instead of opposing the labyrinth with a cube, Georges Bataille uses a pyramid—an even more fundamental Platonic solid. This metaphor has intrigued both David and me. Every pyramid, says Bataille, is built on a labyrinth.⁴ The labyrinth represents the prison of time—the cycle of birth and death as we experience it—and the pyramid represents escape from it. The Mt. Sinai of Exodus is a reflection of the Egyptian pyramid where the mortal communicates with the divine. At the point of the pyramid time stops and eternity begins. It's the *axis mundi*, or what T. S. Eliot called “the still point of the turning world.”⁵ The pyramids of the pharaohs, says Bataille, “transcend the

intolerable void that time opens under men's feet, for all possible movement is halted in their geometric surfaces: IT SEEMS THAT THEY MAINTAIN WHAT ESCAPES FROM THE DYING MAN.”⁵ The pyramid is the transcendental signifier, the Absolute, the Idea which is supposed to liberate us from death.

But Hegel makes a remark in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* about how easily the top of the pyramid is knocked off in our time. For Nietzsche this was the death of God, cutting off the last means of escape from reality. For Bataille it meant that, with the still point gone, we are trapped in the labyrinth.

As I write this, David has been working for months on a drawing of Aaron in the moment after Moses has opened the chasm which swallows up the naked revelers of the Golden Calf orgy. (This vision evidently derives from Cecil B. DeMille's movie *The Ten Commandments* rather than the Bible, where Moses simply orders those who stand with him to slaughter three thousand of those who don't, but the labyrinth symbolizes that act.) As he described it to me, Aaron is struggling under the weight of a huge topless pyramid which threatens to crush him. At his feet is the open labyrinth, crawling with images of life and death. The question is, What is Aaron going to do? Is he going to take his brother's side and cap the pit as a firefighter would cap a burning oil well? Or is he going to let the labyrinth swallow up the pyramid? . . .

Of course I haven't actually *seen* this drawing, but that's the way I imagine it. The Aaron I've described would be typical of the players in David's dramas. They may be about to do something, or have something done to them, like the woman in *Salt [Lot's wife]*, 1994 (*figure 1*), in the moment before being turned into a piece of salt sculpture. Or they may have just done something, like the murderer in *Skin [Cain]*, 1997 (*figure 7*), or had something done to them, as in *Road [Job]*, 1995 (*figure 2*), but we never see the act itself. As in the Book of Job, all the disasters happen off-stage. A servant always returns with the report: “I only am returned alone to tell thee.”

David's figures are usually motionless but often full of the tension preceding an act, or stunned by the irrevocability

of an act they have just committed. Lot's wife has turned to look back at look at an actual act of God, supposedly in progress. Our only indication that she has realized her mistake (too late) is that she has dropped her purse. But even here the falling purse seems motionless, hovering between the woman's hand and the ground. Similarly, the only thing to indicate that Cain is having second thoughts is the blank, distant look on his face as he holds up his brother's transparent skin. We see the evidence but not the crime. In each case the point of the pyramid—the moment of contact, or climax—is missing. We see only the interstices between events, not the events themselves or their meaning. Like David's Aaron, these drawings hover between time and eternity.

This uncertainty is not just a postmodern phenomenon, although it's true that Modernism had its elements of transcendental optimism. But the point got knocked off the pyramid a long time before the last quarter of this century. To take the long view, modern art really began with the Mannerist crisis of the sixteenth century. As it happens David is a great admirer of some of that art, especially the paintings of Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo, as well as the late works of Michelangelo. The sense of social and metaphysical alienation that can still be felt in Cinquecento paintings can also be felt in David's drawings.

In the same way that the mannerists (some of them) painted "after the manner of" the Renaissance masters before them, David draws after the manner of magazine ads. He has *archives* of this stuff. He told me once that while I seem to need some kind of personal relationship with the people I paint, he wanted to avoid that completely by selecting pictures of total strangers from printed media. In this way the Idea can be preserved, unpolluted by individual personalities. Using images of images of strangers is also a way of expressing alienation, isolation. Look at the solitary figure in *Sea*, 1996 (*figure 10*), and in *Footprints*, 1999 (*figure 11*). In the latter drawing no one else is in sight, only their tracks are visible, and even the figure itself is a borrowed image, a shadow. In all of

David's work we see only the traces of people, not the people themselves. This is not only a device to express alienation from society but from oneself as well. It's a mask that depersonalizes, abstracts. Cain wants to reorganize Abel's body into its constituent parts in a logical (that is, "textual"), rectilinear pattern—something he can make sense of. He also wants to please God by disguising himself in Abel's skin—but there's a problem. The skin is transparent! A nice twist—the failure of disguise.

This might sound like an approach to self discovery, except that the only thing revealed by the transparency of the mask is another mask. We are nested deep inside the labyrinth and can't get outside it to see the whole picture—if there can be a whole picture in this Austeresque universe of infinite regress.⁴ This view is expressed perfectly by the architect Bernard Tschumi:

"But remember, Icarus flew away, toward the sun. So after all, does the way out of the Labyrinth lie in the making of the Pyramid, through a projection of the subject toward some transcendental objectivity? Unfortunately not. The top of the Pyramid is an imaginary place, and Icarus fell down: the nature of the Labyrinth is such that it entertains dreams that include the dream of the Pyramid."⁵

David's characters step out of a book written 3000 years ago to find themselves suddenly in this brave new world. What do the old words mean in this world from which God has vanished? Behind every mask is another mask. Noah (*Bone [Noah]*, 1994 (*figure 3*)), a thinker like David, looks puzzled—and oddly guilty—at having been jerked rudely into the future and dressed in funny clothes. Standing among the skeletons in his pullover sweater and what looks like a cape from another period of history, he looks more like a survivor of the Holocaust than of the Flood. His wife looks far less puzzled. She sprinkles the dry bones with a watering can. "So what else is new?" she seems to say. To me, she is the Shekhinah, goddess of the labyrinth—but I'm not suggesting that any of these readings of mine are what the artist had in mind. To say that

there's a single meaning to any of these works would be to deny its complexity and deliberate obfuscation.

* * * *

At his lecture here at the Arkansas Arts Center in May 1999 the Russian artist Victor Koulbak, in answer to a question about symbolism, said flatly, "I don't like it." He said that drawing or painting was a matter of the eye and the hand, bypassing the brain entirely. Thinking could only distract the artist from his work by interrupting this feedback circuit going on between the eye and the hand. This is one extreme, the other being pure conceptualism. By pure conceptualism I mean art work that stops with its concept. The work of art as a physical object is done away with entirely, as in some of the work of Sol LeWitt. David has never gone that far, but his work falls somewhere near that end of the art theoretical spectrum. Where Victor starts drawing the left eye with no preconceptions about the rest of the face (or so he says), David starts with an idea, a conception, arising from a text, usually the Torah, and must then discover or invent the image which will express this idea. He will discover the "left eye" only after a long and tortuous search. In a way, the work *is* this search. So that the outcome of David's drawing is no less uncertain than Victor's.

David studied with Robert Morris in New York, was influenced by David Salle—though he will never admit it—and a lot of his thinking about art began with his performance work under the avant garde director Richard Foreman.⁶ But we're fortunate that David has assimilated and survived all that, stripped his work of all gimmickry and contrivance and found his own unique direction. As I've tried to demonstrate, his working methods reflect the deep structure of the work: He has an idea for a drawing; he tries to keep the idea fixed while searching for the images to express it; but the images attack the idea and inevitably change it. Look closely at these drawings and you'll find some with several different light sources in the same drawing. Often the figures are almost absorbed by the background, as if the differentiation between the two hasn't quite been decided. You can see old marks

under recent marks, recording the shifting images. Everything is in flux. The pyramid is undermined by the labyrinth. At the imaginary still point of the pyramid nothing moves. No new information erodes the idea. But the world the image must come from is a treacherous swamp of information being continuously revised. As Noah's wife understands, the dead bones are endlessly recycled. In that drawing the pyramid and the labyrinth are personified.

Whether we want to think of the search for the image as a search for self, or for God, or for understanding, it's a search that is never concluded, resolved or abandoned. Which set of footprints do you follow? You just keep working on it. This is why David's drawings are never finished and why they always seem to be alive, endlessly searching the labyrinth while they dream of the Pyramid.

Recently, I was telling David about how Schoenberg never finished *Moses und Aaron*. It was supposed to have a third act but he never got around to writing it. I saw this as an obvious link with Moses himself, but David saw something else in it as well:

"That's a wonderful ending to the opera isn't it?" he said, "—that it *isn't* ended because the creator died before he could finish it. A powerful correspondence to Nietzsche's 'God is dead!'"

In other words, it's one thing to say that God is dead, but quite another to say he died before he finished!

Notes

1. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), quoted in Taylor, see Note 4.
2. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 1943.
3. Georges Bataille, "The Obelisk", in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Cited in Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.231. In 1998 Kathy Holder introduced David and me and a lot of other local artists to *Hiding*, and later we had a chance to meet Mark-also thanks to Kathy-when he came here to give a lecture at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. This amazing book of postmodern pop culture and philosophy suggested to us many writers we hadn't read before, like Paul Auster, Bernard Tschumi, and most importantly for this essay, Georges Bataille. It was Taylor, in *Hiding*, who laid out Bataille's thinking about the Pyramid and the Labyrinth, which I've used as the framework of this essay.
4. I'm referring here to Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (New York: Penquin Books, 1990). I'm not saying that this postmodern attitude is universal. It's probably more than balanced by fundamentalist movements, New Age, Fu-lan Gong, the various hate groups, occultism, not to mention the official religions-all reacting *against* the enlightened uncertainty of postmodernism, which nevertheless defends all these zealots' rights to their beliefs with vigorous condescension. But it's just this polarity that David's characters try to deal with. It's also the kind of situation the mannerists were up against, the difference being in degree, not in kind.
5. Quoted in Taylor, p. 231. See Note 3.
6. Richard Foreman's theater in New York City, where David worked in 1978, is called The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Foreman uses randomly chosen bits of dialog to construct a play in the same way David uses clippings from magazines to construct a drawing. Also like David, Foreman looks for "situations of tension" rather than "story and resolution." He explains his technique on his Web site at <http://www.ontological.com/>. Unlike David, however, he does *not* begin with a thematic idea.

WARREN CRISWELL

Warren Criswell is an artist and writer who lives and works outside Benton, Arkansas..