

A PASSION ¹

That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, obey thyself.

– Emerson

I have long since resolved to be a Jew ... I regard that as more important than my art.

– Schoenberg

Paintings are supposed to be self-contained things. Well, as almost everyone knows, they are and they're not. These well-wrought urns contain ashes guarded by demons. Nothing about them is to be taken for granted. Paintings matter only insofar as you and I matter. They are born in our conditions and pathologies. It is this self-sentiment, and maybe a new form of virtue or drama of which that sentiment is a measure, I should like each picture to argue, I think, and here is a very short account of how some of the paintings in this exhibition came to be made, as if new, with myself as their text ...

I think I started to give myself (back) to myself about 15 years ago, when I began to draw again, around the same time I met Sandra, about the time I knew I was becoming an *interested* Jew of some kind. When Emerson says that is always best, he takes the words right out of my mouth because I, also, want to say, maybe especially to young painters - dare to picture your own world-view ... It's harder to do than you think, but may be worth the trip because art begins with what you are and the clay you come from.

My own passage has run me through very disputed, tribal, dangerous places, stumbling . . . upon fool's gold, some will say. In certain moods, on some days, I'm full of myself and seem to know where I'm going. More often than not an infirm faith, lacking credentials, barely leads me to the studio room. The subject which interests me much of the time now is vast, and it is as small as I am. I think I can call it – Jews in trouble, or – Jews in danger. The trouble with Jews is that we are an endangered nation, almost always. Also, the still hotly debated question - What is a Jew? has never been resolved, except perhaps by murderers. Others with tragic histories are also endangered, I believe; the Black nation for instance, but in different ways, under different sufferances. I would only be able to give me and my pictures up to myself, but, if there are lessons in the wake of my own obsessions, for people who are not Jews, that would please me very much because I have been much influenced by those who found themselves and their art in their own backyard. Art "about" Jews does not appear much among painters, although a new "German" art has appeared with a big bang, has it not?

Novelists, especially in America, happily write about Jews or Blacks or Catholics or whatever they know best (and some even manage to be very funny), but our art of painting is mostly silent because only fools will go where angels fear to tread. There are many people who say where you

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can tread and where you can't in art and the murder of the European Jews is still embroidered in such numbing exchanges among writers, year after year. That epochal murder happened during my youth, and now, after the greatest trouble they were ever in, Jews find themselves in peril again. I found I could not proceed as a painter without that heightening sense in myself, in my pictures.

Emerson was addressing young Christian ministers when he spoke those words with which I began this, and it was the Christian Passion of the painter Rouault which helped me determine to embark on a Passion (1940-1945). I made a startling discovery ... There seem to be no representations of the Crucifixion itself in art for hundreds of years after the event. Peter Lasko suggested to me that the earliest known one may be on the wooden doors of S. Sabina in Rome, dating from the fifth century and that the subject was not a familiar one for hundreds of years after that. I found that astounding. The reasons may have had to do with a vestigial Semitic injunction against idolatry. Anyway, I thought - why wait 400 years after our (Jewish) Passion? The appearance of the chimney form in some of my pictures in this exhibition is my own very primitive attempt at an equivalent symbol, like the cross, both, after all having contained the human remain in death.

I'm not a scholar, though I have become what used to be called an "amateur" of recent history - right up to yesterday's news for instance, of a certain gent lecturing thousands of cheering people at Madison Square Garden and warning the Jews yet again of the day "when God puts you in the oven" (ovation, delight). For some of us, you see, that may just be a greater threat than the nuclear one, believe it or not. Or maybe it's best not to paint about such things as Crucifixions and Passions in art because one is bound to fail?

R. B. KITAJ