

## FIRST DIASPORIST MANIFESTO

R.B. Kitaj

Diasporist painting, which I just made up, is enacted under peculiar historical and personal freedoms, stresses, dislocation, rupture and momentum. The Diasporist lives and paints in two or more societies at once. Diasporism, as I wish to write about it, is as old as the hills (or caves) but new enough to react to today's newspaper or last week's aesthetic musing or tomorrow's terror. I don't know if people will liken it to a School of painting or attribute certain characteristics or even Style to it. Many will oppose the very idea, and that is the way of the world.

My embarrassment at pressing upon my dubious pictures<sup>1</sup> and upon you the case of the Jews, against the advice of wiser heads, begins to feel less uncomfortable. It is, of course, a universal art, something which speaks to the world, to the common reader, which every painter desires, as religions and poetry wish to speak of and to our world. The world being what it is, like our art, it's a poor listener and it remains divided, but artists at least tend to gentler, less killing divisions. For a while, I will presume to bore you with pictures of an imperilled world you may know only as imperfectly as I do, if at all . . . or I should say – pictures of part of my world just now. My case is built on a cliché which may also be an insightful art lesson. It is that the threatened condition of the Jews witnesses the condition of our wider world. It is a radical witness. One hundred and fifty years ago, Heine warned that where books were burned, human beings would be. Keep in mind that art and life get quite conjoined (art-time) in our modern tradition and sometimes blur. Later, when we are dead, the art is (life-less?) alone in the room.

For the moment, Diasporism is my own School, neither particularly unhappy practice nor proud persuasion. I would simply say it is an unsettled mode of art-life, performed by a painter who feels out of place much of the time, even when he is lucky enough to stay at work in his room, unmolested through most of his days. His Diasporism, to the extent that it marks his painting, relies on a mind-set which is often occupied with vagaries of history, kin, homelands, the scattering of his people (if he thinks he may have a people), and such stuff. Is that not a general meaning of Diaspora? More particular meanings may leave deeper marks or even scars on painting. It's not for me to

spell out the quite various Diasporic conditions proliferating everywhere now, except to say that Jews do not own Diaspora; they are not the only Diasporists by a long shot. They are merely mine. As if they were not in enough trouble right now, as usual, the Israel-Diaspora problem is as difficult to contemplate as the more usual problem of Jewish survival itself. Keening to seismic readings now that Israel is reborn, the awful historical problem of Jewish political impotence is lessened, but I would greatly fear the consequences if most Jews were concentrated in the Holy Land, where it would be easier than ever to finish them off in a place the size of Greater Indianapolis, with a bomb or two! Being Jews though, there's energy enough left over, while enduring siege by a billion enemies, to argue the very finest points among ourselves concerning the question of Diaspora – not uninteresting arguments you can look up yourself, which I won't rehearse here except to say that the Jewish problem, which never seems to go away (*pace* George Eliot), gave birth, about a hundred years ago, to a serious Palestine-Diaspora equation which was to have delivered a "normalcy" to the bloodied Jews and which now looks as elusive as the Messiah and the End of Days.

Since this is a manifesto, albeit not a very aggressive one (I haven't read Breton or Lewis or Marinetti and such since I was 18), I want it to be somewhat declarative because I think art and life are fairly married and I think I owe it to my pictures to put their stressful birth with some idiosyncratic precision.

What I owe to my pictures, I guess I owe to my readers, mostly to those few attentive or curious enough to interest themselves in the peculiar genesis of these disputed works I call Diasporist.

Like an aging bear, I am not often brave or cunning. I try to proceed from my cave with caution because I tend to blot my copybook, as the English say. Out I come at the wrong season, when the world is bemused daily by Jews and their Holocausts, past and pending. As if that were not enough, I just read in an art column that the time for manifestos has passed. So I thought I'd write one, the Belated Bear stumbling forward, brandishing his paintbrush, into the tunnel at the end of the light . . .

In my time, half the painters of the great Schools of Paris, New York and London were not born in their host countries. If there is nothing which people in dispersion share in common, then my Diasporist tendency rests in my mind only and maybe in my pictures . . . but consider: every grain of common ground will firm the halting step of people in dispersion as surely as every proof of welcome has encouraged emigrés before in cosmopolitan centers. Rootedness has played its intrinsic and subtle part in the national art modes of Egypt, Japan, England, Holland and the high Mediterranean cultures and city-states. I want to suggest and manifest a commonality (for painting) in dispersion which has mainly been seen before only in fixed places; but, not unlike painters who leave those centers or those modes, such as Cézanne, who left Paris behind for his epochal old-age style at home, or Picasso who left

(classical) Cubism in the lurch, Diasporists also exchange their colors, for instance, to the extent that they begin to really feel at home somewhere, or practice within a School, or indeed, refuse what I say here . . .

If a people is dispersed, hurt, hounded, uneasy, their pariah condition confounds expectation in profound and complex ways. So it must be in aesthetic matters. Even if a Diasporist seems to assimilate easily to prevailing aesthetics, as he does in most currents of life, the confounding, uneasy side of his nature may also be addressed, that deeper heart, as magical as anything the Surrealist or Mystical-Abstractionist ever sought within himself. I can only posit a new aesthetic for myself (to recreate myself) because I don't want to become a mouthpiece for the traditions of general art, and because some things in dispersion (ancient and modern) have come of age now for me. As the quasi-Diasporist Gauguin said, "I wish to establish the right to dare anything."

Aside from the always still endangered Jews (in a Masadic Israel and in Diaspora), there are other resounding Diasporists – Palestinians prominent and suffering among them. Israel Zangwill (1864–1926) placed the Armenians at "the pit of Hell," and in 1920 bowed before their "higher majesty of sorrow." There is a Black African Diaspora as terrible and outstanding as any other, which has disturbed my thoughts since early boyhood. Murderous Stalinism and Pol Potism must have all but unsung Diaspora trails of their bloody own. What is left of these dispersed peoples finds as little peace as Ahasuerus himself. If the art of these Diasporists, as they emerge from historical fog, is not touched by their separate destinies, God help them. He has so often not.

Like most human events, Diasporism is not clear-cut, hard or fast (many movements in art are not), neither in its usual and historic explications nor in the meanings I have begun to feel for myself as a painter. As a Diasporist painter, like the Realist, the Cubist, the Expressionist and other painters, I would resist exacting codification (rightly). Nor can I speak cogently for even more complex and speculative realms of the painter's make-up, for "internal exile," the condition of the self-estranged sexual Diaspora and such. The Diasporist appears among emigrés and refugees, among the heirs of Surrealism, Naturalism, Symbolism and other aesthetics, among the home-grown, among nationalists and internationalists, pariahs and patriots, in every polyglot matrix, among the political and religious as well as those who do without politics and religion or are uncertain. *In the end, the Diasporist knows he is one*, even though he may one day settle down and sort of cease to be one. Many do not settle and that is a crux which will affect and, I think, effect the art. If human instincts for kin and home are primordial, as they so often seem, the Diasporic condition presents itself as yet another theater in which human, artistic instinct comes into play, maybe not primordial (?) but a condition, a theater to be treasured. As I write these words, I also know that if Diasporists become treasured, their theater will close, and open under a new sign and name, maybe with a curse upon it.

Diasporism is my mode. It is the way I do my pictures. If they mirror my

life, these pictures betray confounded patterns. I make this painting mode up as I go along because it seems more and more natural for me, so natural that I think I've been a Diasporist painter from the start without knowing and then slowly learnt it in a twilight period, until it began to dawn on me that I should act upon it. Diasporist painting is unfolding commentary on its life-source, the contemplation of a transience, a *Midrash* (exposition, exegesis of non-literal meaning) in paint and somehow, collected, these paintings, these circumstantial allusions, form themselves into secular *Responsa* or reactions to one's transient restlessness, un-at-homeness, groundlessness. Because it is art of some kind, the act (of painting) need not be an unhappy one. Although my Diasporist painting grows out of art, as for instance, Cubism or Surrealism did, it owes its greatest debt to the terms and passions of my own life and growing sense of myself as a Diasporist Jew. I have spent half my life away from my American homeland, that most special Diaspora Jews have ever known. Until now, I've only rarely painted there and I set down these first exilic ruminations still from a bittersweet abroad, but written in my homesick, Americanist tense, haunted by the music of Diaspora.

I've always been a Diasporist Jew, but as a young man I was not sure what a Jew was. I was unaware that such questions were debated within Jewry, even in the Knesset itself. Jews were Believers, I thought, and I assumed you were whatever you believed in, that if you became a Catholic or an atheist or a Socialist, that's what you were. Art itself was a church, a universalist edifice, an amazing sanctuary from the claims and decrepitude of modern life, where you could abandon self and marry painting. My friend Isaiah Berlin says: "A Jew is a Jew like a table is a table." Now, that interests me greatly, but the thing was blurred in my youth. This was, I learned later, a classic assimilationist pose. My maternal grandfather had been a Socialist Bundist in Russia, on the run from the Czarist police. He passed on his religious skepticism to my mother, who brought me up as a freethinker with no Jewish education. Ours was a household full of secular Diasporists who seemed to be Jews only by the way. It would be many more years before I learned that the Germans and Austrians who did what they did in that time, when I was playing baseball and cruising girls, made no distinctions between Believers or atheists or the one and a half million Jewish infants who had not yet decided what they were when they got sent up in smoke. One-third of all Jews on earth were murdered in my youth. It is well known that a Silence fell upon our world for some years after what Winston Churchill called "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world." It was *the* break with traditional evil, its own archetype, someone said. The classic texts on the Holocaust are fairly recent and as I got around to them and the paradox of Jewishness began to enthrall me, the Diasporist painter in me started to grow alert, after a numbing, morbid period. The mystery of dispersion now seems to me as *real* as any located School known to art. I didn't know it at first, but I had stumbled upon a tremendous lesson, taught long ago by many conflicting

personalities both Jewish and Gentile (Sartre, etc.), by such absorbing figures as Ahad Ha'am (1856–1927), that it is Jewishness that condemns one, not the Jewish religion. It became reasonable to suppose that Jewishness, this complex of qualities, would be a presence in art as it is in life. In Diaspora, life has a force of its own. So would Diasporist painting, never before particularly associated with pariah peoples. For me, its time has come at last.

Diaspora (dispersion in Greek) is most often associated with Jews and their 2,000 year old scattering among the nations (longer by other accounts). What the Jews call *Galut* (Exile in Hebrew), had become a way of life (and death), consonant with Jewishness itself, even though Israel is reborn. I am one of those who are possessed by the consonance of art and life. Some are not. I think that memories, events and beliefs are sacred dreams for painting and so the mode of my life is translated into pictures. In translation there is not ultimate accuracy, only an illusion of truth, as in art. Because neither Diaspora nor Israel can live really happily ever after anyway (or so it increasingly seems) and a normative co-existence replaces the “normalcy” once wished upon the state, many of us who make our lives in dispersion follow *its* peculiar, various, often very homelike (America), very complex destinies where, as someone put it, Jews have achieved emancipation without auto-emancipation. The compelling destiny of dispersion is one's own and describes my Diasporism, which describes and explains my parable-pictures, their dissolutions, repressions, associations, referrals and sometime difficulty, their text-obsessions, their play of differences, their autobiographical heresies, their skeptical dispositions, their assimilationist modernisms, fragmentation and confusions, their secular blasphemies, their longing allegiance to the exact art-past which corresponds to the historical moments when Jews became free to pursue a life in art (I mean from the late nineteenth century on).

Diasporist art is contradictory at its heart, being both internationalist and particularist. It can be inconsistent, which is a major blasphemy against the logic of much art education, because life in Diaspora is often inconsistent and tense; schismatic contradiction animates each day. To be consistent can mean the painter is settled and at home. All this begins to define the painting mode I call Diasporism. People are always saying the meanings in my pictures refuse to be fixed, to be settled, to be stable: *that's* Diasporism, which welcomes interesting, creative misreading; the Zohar says that the meaning of the book changes from year to year! And now as I come to life again after 50, the room in which I paint becomes a sort of permissive *cheder* (room, the room or school where one studies) in which art becomes what I *think*, dramatizing my mind's life, while the ancient religion itself whispers its Covenantal, mythic, Midrashic, ethical, exegetical, schismatic, Zaddik-ridden, arguments. There is a traditional notion that the divine presence itself is in the Diaspora, and, over one shoulder, *Sefirot* (divine emanations and “intelligences” according to Kabbalah) flash and ignite the canvas towards which I lean in my orthopedic back-chair, while from my subconscious, from what can be summoned up

from mind and nerve, and even after nature, other voices speak more loudly than the divines, in tongues learned in our wide Diaspora. These are the voices I mostly cleave to. Listen to them. They will tell you what a Diasporist has on his mind (Michelangelo said you paint with your mind) as he strokes his canvas.

The voices speak nervously about things unheard in painting (or long forgotten) – of *ethnie*, of historical memories and cultures, of ancestry myths and of heroes. Abraham's journey from Ur becomes, in the name of “good” picture-making (at my own easel), Joe Singer's secret lives, escapes, deaths and resurrections, reconstructed from Diasporic myths which began when I did in 1932 and will die with me – or live on, as for instance Daumier's Ratapoil has, as Cézanne's mountain has. Those art models were not only radical patterns representing spatial enquiry (which they also are) but profound *ethnie* (belonging to Paris, Provence, shared history). Yes, Cézanne's mountain represents shared *tribal* (French) history – the history of a bitter old Provençal genius wrestling with his art angel on his own sacred southern ground. That's what I want to be, a tribal remembrancer, wrestling with my Diasporic angel; I feel a great affection for this emancipating muse wherever I am at my painting. She is my favorite model. She suggests my frail entitlements and shaky destinies and let's-pretend art aspirations.

One of the most recent of my hundred negative critics wrote in his review of my 1986 exhibition that it was “littered with ideas.” Heavens to Betsy, I hope that's true. My poor Diasporist mind urges me to wander among ideas without rest, always the false-scholar, which is often how we painters make our mark. The pursuit of ideas, both religious and secular, at any cost, is often attributed to Jews by both well-wishers and doubters. Hitler is said to have accused the Jews of inventing conscience. Ideas and painting are inseparable. The Diasporist pursuit of a homeless logic of *ethnie* may be the radical (root) core of a newer art than we can yet imagine . . . those of us who think we can relate our past experience of Diaspora to a present understanding of it in painted, hopefully universal, pictures which may speak to many people.

Speaking of homeless logic, I must declare or confess my most complex credential – one of the outstanding facts of my life and Diasporic condition: utterly American, longingly Jewish, School of London, I spin my years away from both my heartlands, up to now anyway (age 54). I suppose a case could be made for a Jewish heartland of the mind (the case of this text in fact), rather than Jerusalem or even New York. But the Americanist credential has another pedigree, surely touched upon by James, Cassatt, Sargent, Pound, Whistler, Epstein, Eliot, Stein and all my other forebears. Joyce and Lawrence were early hero-exemplars (art and life) and must have suffered/enjoyed a same confusion, but it is not my intention to drag all that expatriate weight across my present Diasporist musing and open up the membership. What did Groucho say? Something like he wouldn't want to join a club that would let people like him in?

In one of its self-definitions, Diasporism, *my* sort of Diasporism, has been lived and acted out in the free, Western, privileged, uninhibited, uncensored, permissive, élitist cloud-cuckoo lands of Modernism. Diasporism in art has been largely Assimilationist and Modernist, played on a diffuse stage with few constraints. Assimilationism is the prevailing mode in the art of our time. Young people are taught that they must strike chords which agree with *art* ("advanced" or not) without much regard to origin, milieu or creed – and so they may in our very few democracies. My own Diasporist mode resists (gently) the absolute wisdom of assimilationism in art. I would rather find the energy to do for Jews at least what Morandi did for jars. Then I could take summers off like he did and paint landscapes or something. The Diasporist in me would deny neither painting, as it asks to be continued, nor the themes and obsessions which quicken my mind and heart. Looking back before my own time, I'd like to identify a First *Aliyah* (ascent) in Diasporic painting, which, in *its* time, accorded with a faith in Modernism and which was assimilated to it more than to any idea of one's origins. These Diasporists, aside from those Jews who ascended to Paris, may include honorary Jews like Mondrian, Picasso, Beckmann, Hofmann, the Surrealists and the Bauhaus people, many of whom escaped the Enemy of the Jews, often to find refuge among Diasporist Jews themselves, especially in New York. Painters like Picasso, Bonnard, Matisse and Munch who did not have to flee, were touched and encouraged throughout their lives by what may even be called a (Jewish) Diasporist aura of friends, collectors, dealers, writers, audience, explainers and colleagues, some of whom were to go up the chimneys (another ascent in Diasporist destiny). Although Diasporism in refugee Gentiles may be my own speculative construct, it is very real for Jews.

And what is real for Jews is real for Jewish painters. I suspect that even those who go out of their way to isolate art from the imagined merits or demerits of being Jewish are, in the very doing, anointing art with the troubled wand of Jewish Diasporism. To my mind, something instinct with one's culture enters into one's art. And so the lost and soon to be murdered world of East European Jewry cultured the art of many Jewish painters, even as they assimilated to the powerful charms of the new Modernism. We know that from the School of Montparnasse. These early modern Diasporists lived and worked outside my own experience. The Kingdom of Death they left in the Pale, and the bittersweet Paris of their brief freedom is not for me to reconstruct. Nor is the amazing American sanctuary from 1900 to the present moment, where Diasporism achieved its Golden Age according to many people, and Diasporist painting reached its *second* modern coming (in my little history lesson). Before 1900 doesn't concern me here because Jews were only just preparing to arise from a Diasporic sleep of dreams and one-third of them would (in the last days of humanity) unknowingly sleepwalk into an oven. After 1900 begins to touch my own pictures, first of all because my Yiddish- and Russian-speaking grandparents fled to America. So did my father. Then, after the Anschluss, so did my

stepfather Kitaj and, after the war, my grandmother Kitaj. I am not only a Diasporist but a Biographical Heretic, among other things, and so I have a peculiar faith and interest in the influence not only of past art acting on one's pictures – everyone agrees about that – but also of one's youth, upbringing, friends, milieux. Can anyone doubt that we are fatally rooted in the first part of our life? I am given to my time in art as any painter is. It *tells* in our pictures. Our pictures speak our particular culture and the languages of general as well as tribal cultures which interest us most. That picture-speech is uttered through personality, which is something perceived in its very achievement, like all cultural stuff. I'm not content that the vivid marriage of forms and contents in painting be known aside from our particular, even singular cultures and predicaments. I like to think this cultural marriage drama may be seen to be done up in pictures. Picasso said it: "It is not sufficient to know an artist's works. It is also necessary to know when he did them, why, how, under what circumstances."

Post-Holocaust Diasporism then. I can't speak for the Jews or Gentiles of the Abstract School of New York and their explainers, Diasporists though many were, except to express a hunch that they kept to only *some* avenues of their creativity, large scale though it was, nor for any of my comrades in what I have called (in *The Human Clay*, 1976) the School of London, some of whom are Diaspora Jews and some of whom may wander in a sexual Diaspora. I will only say there is no doubt in my mind that this Second Diasporic Aliyah (pray God will forgive me this impertinent usage), roughly from Rothko to Auerbach, has been touched by its destiny, a destiny which is *driven* and driven to remember (like some great art before), the worst thing imaginable.

Diasporism didn't exist in painting until I invented it, but it has antecedents, like Surrealism had in Dada and Symbolism, and Abstractionism had in, say, theosophy and ornament. Since we artists tend to create our precursors, as Borges said, Diasporist painting now, for me, began in the great art of the West which nourishes all painters, including those of the briefly fluttering congeries of modernist styles, Yiddishkeit and doomed café freedoms which ended at Drancy and the Eastern railheads. Using the Hebrew term, the present Pope, John Paul II, just said: "This is *still* the century of the Shoah." Indeed, my own Diasporism turns on my century still, both in the sense the Pope meant and, as a painter, in the cosmopolitan (and early Diasporist) moments in a modern art which was to live on and flourish, after Paris, mainly in the English-speaking world, my world. For the Diasporist Jew and Gentile (as for the Israeli) it is a world in the making and fraught with danger and mystery. For me, art is in the making in *that* world. Some years ago, I thought this might be a period I would pass through, but Diasporism, one's Jewishness itself, changes all the time. Any exciting life of the mind will keep changing one's art. The more I throw in my lot with the Jewish destiny or cultural tribe or nation or whatever it is, and the closer I get to my own death, the more a vision of Diasporic art draws me forward.

