

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art

Kami's 'Perspectives': A State of Being That Transcends Cultural Boundaries



The towering 2005 portrait of a meditating man at the Sackler Gallery reflects a world of influences. (Alberto Spallanzani)

By Paul Richard
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There are lots of ways to do it. Dervishes whirl ecstatically. Quakers sit in silence. Holy men in India (never sleeping through the night, or wandering very far) might keep a fire alight for months or even years. Religions of all different sorts have found, through meditation, ways of nearing the divine.

"Perspectives: Y.Z. Kami," now on exhibition at the [Arthur M. Sackler Gallery](#), is itself a meditation -- a meditation in three paintings, big ones from New York.

Will Kami's three big oils-on-linen lead you toward the numinous? Maybe, maybe not. Are they Eastern art or Western; old in mood, or new? Yes, all of the above.

You see: a figure of a man. He's wearing a fleece jacket. His identity is not given. His portrait is nearly 10 feet high, and since it shows only his upper half, he's a lot bigger than you. He seems to be, he is, meditating deeply. His eyes are closed but not squeezed shut. He's half-humble, half-exalted.

Kami's seated figure isn't in sharp focus. The light about him seems to tremble. It isn't hard or crystalline but as soft as rabbit fur.

First that figure stops you with the weightiness of his presence. Then he calms you. All he has to tell you is seen in his expression. He seems utterly unhassled, entirely at peace.

Kami's portrait of a woman, displayed across the room, isn't quite as large or wonderful. She's meditating, too.

Between them is an image of a very different sort. This one is not a portrait. It's sort of a mandala or a diagram suggesting the inward movement of their thoughts. The painting seems to spin. At its center is a spot of light continually receding. What is this a picture of? For some, it might suggest that tunnel of white light that people are supposed to see at the instant of their deaths. For others, it might represent what T.S. Eliot called "the still point of the turning world," a good theme for meditation. I, myself, saw bricks. Peering at that picture is like standing with your face upraised underneath a punctured dome, say, the Pantheon's in Rome, or that of some Turkish mosque, looking through the oculus, which interrupts the masonry high above your head and lets you see, beyond, the brightness of the sky.

I might have thought of bricks because that light-point is surrounded by rings of longish yellow rectangles. Inscribed on each in ink, in fine Persian calligraphy, is a couplet from "The Song of the Reed," a lyric by the poet Rumi (1207-73).

The reed is singing plaintively of how it has been cut from the reed bed, as if it were a lover torn from the beloved, or a soul yearning for God.

Listen to the reed and the tale that it tells,
How it sings of separation . . .

Some forms of quiet meditation are meant to free your thoughts from their flibbertigibbet dardings. Kami's paintings do the same.

The painter, 52, grew up in Tehran but left at 17. You don't have to read Persian to see what he is getting at. The verses he has chosen might be 13th-century Sufi, but nothing else about his show suggests one tradition only. He's also lived in Paris and in Northern California, as well as in Manhattan, and his art suggests that, too.

It's not easy to imagine pictures better suited for the difficult and stony pavilion at the Sackler. Radiating outward like the brick-rings around that point of light, Kami's centered images seem to take unto themselves, or bring into your mind, other powerful images elsewhere on the Mall.

The Lincoln Memorial, for example. Like the man in the fleece jacket, Daniel Chester French's mighty marble president, absorbed in contemplation, is a figure so compelling you can almost feel his spirit pondering what has been and what is yet to come.

Kami's meditating man also sends a wave of half-fraternal thought out to the "Big Man" (2000), Ron Mueck's much more anxious statue who cowers naked in the corner at the Hirshhorn Museum nearby.

All three of those big works of art accomplish something very rare. They aren't just paint or stone or stuff -- they seem to be inhabited. Some part of your being accepts them as alive.

Also, they're enormous. If they rose up, they'd be giants. Unscary as he is, Kami's seated figure makes you feel your smallness as he looms up in your sight, and also in your mind.

His posture is familiar. It's the posture of the Buddha who sat under the Bodhi tree absorbed in meditation until he found enlightenment. The galleries at the Sackler, as well as those next door at the Freer Gallery of Art, are rich with Buddha figures from India and China, Thailand and Japan. The man in Kami's painting is linked to them, as well.

But his materials are not Asian. Made of oil paint on canvas, that meditating man is a Western work of art. Kami doesn't seem to drag his paint strokes across the canvas. Instead, he seems to paint with stiff-bristled brushes, which he stabs against the cloth. The light that fills his paintings feels fully Western, too. Powdery and palpable, it's the sort of light one sees in the 18th-century French still lifes of Jean Siméon Chardin. Carol Huh, the curator who put this focused show together, says that the painter paints from photographs, rather than live models. Usually it's obvious when portraitists copy photographs, but here you'd never guess that a camera was involved. Kami's overcome that, too.

Perspectives: Y.Z. Kami will remain on view in the pavilion of the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Ave. SW, through Oct. 13. The museum is open daily, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Admission is free.