

# Master in Depth

*The multidimensional Makoto Fujimura* BY DAVID GELERNTER

In a small but magisterial show that stopped in Paris and then (late last year) at the Dillon Gallery in Manhattan, Makoto Fujimura emerged as a major artist, one of the dozen-odd most compelling painters at work today. Fujimura is a Christian who paints within the Nihonga tradition of a limited palette of natural pigments; his brooding, soaring abstractions often rhapsodize on religious themes. His paintings were interspersed at the show with pieces by Georges Rouault (1871-1958), whose Christian images fit almost as badly into pre-World War II Paris as Fujimura's do in modern New York. The exhibit has closed, but the Dillon Gallery continues to show Fujimura's work, and a small catalog called *Rouault Fujimura Soliloquies* is available from the gallery.

At their best, Fujimura's new paintings have the depth of the night sky, and seem to blend as you study them into a sort of cosmos. Most of these new paintings make striking use of gold leaf. Gold for gilding is ordinarily prepared and sold in small squares, several inches on a side. Fujimura uses the squares themselves as a motif. Often he assembles them into grids aligned with the edges of the painting; sometimes the squares balance on point, or coalesce into secondary grids at odd angles to the main one. The sheer gold leaves are caught at a moment of flutter, as if in a mild breeze. Sometimes they dissolve into powder and become as translucent as ancient cloth. Fujimura exercises impressive control over translucence: We see a black void through a golden grid, or square leaves superimposed on one another three or four deep. Fujimura's golden grids of fluttering leaves give

*David Gelernter's Judaism: A Way of Being, published late last year, is illustrated with his paintings.*



*'Soliloquies-Joy' (2009)*

these paintings the lapping rhythm, the serene and fascinating aliveness of gentle waves in a large, deep harbor.

His colors collect into clouds with a slightly gritty feel, like sparkling tiny ice crystals; color-nebulæ drift sometimes in front and sometimes behind the planes of gold. Scanning the cosmos of these pictures you spot a lovely pale cerulean blue made bright by surrounding gold;

a vermilion turned hot and luminous by the cool brown underneath; a pale gold on salmon pink, a turquoise over cobalt blue—subtle and lovely color-chords.

One large painting includes several lines of biblical text in tiny loopy letters running like a golden flute-trill across the surface; but otherwise the pictures are pure abstract. They resemble the color-field paintings of a Morris Louis

MAKOTO FUJIMURA

or Helen Frankenthaler, or the work of Gerhard Richter, more than the gestural abstraction built around eloquent brushstrokes in which the greatest abstract painters spoke. But Fujimura's gold, his characteristic palette, and the spiritual depth he builds out of his drifting color-clouds make these paintings original and powerful.

Depth of field is a rare quality in abstract art. Abstraction emerged, after all, when the rear plane of the picture-space (like the back wall of a giant aquarium), having moved steadily forward over half-a-century, finally collided with the front plane—leaving a flat field to be decorated rather than a volume to be filled. This gradual squashing of the picture-space was evident in Manet and urged forward by the startling, nose-pressed-to-the-glass immediacy of van Gogh and Cezanne. The cubists were left with staved-in, flattened figures inhabiting the narrowest of gaps, and the conclusion was inevitable. Most abstract paintings are accordingly flat—but Fujimura gives us a surface with a vast space opening behind it. In this respect he brings Mark Rothko to mind, and the Jackson Pollock of *The Deep* (1953)—an atypical and stunning painting.

Garden-variety abstract painters give the impression of having hit on some pattern almost at random and then pressed it into service as their own trademark style. Then they repeat themselves like a child persevering until you give up and look. Fujimura is one of those rare and superior abstract painters whose visual language seems as natural, inevitable, and uncontrived as his own speaking voice. His paintings speak of his personality like the surface of a pool expressing the motion of a deep-gliding swimmer. The artist who emerges in these paintings is a man of spiritual depth and impeccable taste, and the visual language he speaks is enchanting.

One admires the paintings all the more for the strict rules Fujimura has set himself. Nihonga calls for a limited range of binders and natural pigments—sometimes based on powdered minerals or semiprecious stones. Fujimura's pigments all seem to be opaque; translucence and lightening are achieved by controlling pigment densi-

ties, and overlapping rather than blending colors. A powerful personality operating within strict limits has produced much of the greatest art we have: Bach's sublime achievement in (say) the *Art of Fugue*, and in the even more restrictive *passacaglia* or (equivalently) *chaconne* forms; Beethoven's in the fugues of the gloria and credo of the *Missa Solemnis*, or the variation-form last movement of the final piano sonata. And so on. But important art must surprise us as well—without trying; not by PR hucksterism.

*It is fair to speak of ideas conveyed by paintings only in the special sense in which ideas are conveyed by Bach fugues. A painter does not use images to convey thoughts; his thoughts are images. Successful art makes a direct sensual appeal.*

(If your art is not inherently surprising there is nothing you can do about it, any more than you can make yourself be inspired or fall asleep.)

Fujimura does surprise us. And a significant artist must drive his language as hard and far as it will go, and then burst that barrier and go farther. Think of the coda of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or the closing theme of the first movement of his final piano sonata, or the end of the *Grosse Fuge*. Will the Nihonga technique Fujimura has chosen give him enough breathing room to surprise us repeatedly, and go farther and farther as his art evolves? There's no telling. But we can say that

Fujimura is a major artist, and his paintings are serenely beautiful.

You won't have read much about Fujimura in the art world's prestige press: a hopeful sign. The establishment (now and forever) is incapable of recognizing important new art—although it is doomed, Sisyphus-like, to try and fail again and again. Often its attempts are honest, and once in a while they even succeed. More often the reigning experts make themselves ridiculous, and wind up with such P.T. Barnum-style masterpieces as Damien Hirst's shark carcass slowly rotting in translucent blue jello (or whatever the stuff is) now wowing visitors at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

But in the modern art world, the relative neglect of such masters as Fujimura is more complicated than the old story of the pompous Academy *versus* the rebellious outsiders. Only a couple of generations ago, the official New York art world had achieved the marvelous state of recognizing great contemporary art and enforcing no style or party line. That idyll was celebrated at the Met 40 years ago in the epochal *New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970* exhibit—a show that marked the end of an era with the urgent brilliance of a dying, frying light bulb. (In some ways it resembled the 1939-40 New York World's Fair.) But why did the idyll die? Can it ever be re-created?

Look back at that exhibit and you see the sky blaze as the sun sinks. Inevitably the show was dominated by de Kooning: As the 20th century falls back, we see de Kooning, Matisse, and Giacometti emerge as its presiding geniuses. But the Met's show included great art by a strikingly varied and original group: Edward Hopper's powerful realism, Stuart Davis's jazz cubism, the profound and moving microcosms of Joseph Cornell, along with other abstract expressionist masters, and the brilliant pop draftsmanship of Jasper Johns—and for good measure, the wit of Claes Oldenburg, among other important artists.

What happened to that movingly brilliant art world? Art for its own sake has always been an irresistibly juicy peach of a target to ideologues and

intellectuals. By the 1970s the established museums, newspapers, and universities, fresh from the triumphs of the Cultural Revolution, had an agreed political message to deliver. And the Academy had always been uneasy about art as an end in itself rather than a delivery truck for ideas. The 1960s, '70s, '80s saw the dark blossoming of "conceptual art," which usually amounted to snide and bitter political message-flaunting, as primitive as Socialist Realism. "Conceptual art" equals "conceptual cupcakes" equals nonsense. Cupcakes don't exist to convey concepts. You can hear the characteristic false note of modern art-talk in the first sentence of an (otherwise fine) essay on the Wilton Diptych, published by London's National Gallery in 1993: "Who could have devised the complex interplay of ideas which makes the Wilton Diptych so intriguing?" (The late 14th-century diptych shows Richard II and patron saints addressed by the Virgin and Child and a crowd of angels.)

But "the complex interplay of ideas" does *not* make this piece so intriguing. It is intriguing because of its sensual appeal: because of its drawing, colors, and the rich, superfinely knit textures of its intricate patterns and counter-patterns. They give this small diptych the intensity of a spot-lit diamond, and make it commandingly lovely.

It is fair to speak of ideas conveyed by paintings only in the special sense in which ideas are conveyed by Bach fugues. A painter does not use images to convey thoughts; his thoughts *are* images. Successful art makes a direct sensual appeal. In his famous, century-old essay on the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, Bernard Berenson wrote of "the heightening of vitality which comes to us whenever we keenly realize life." That is what art seeks, and what great art achieves.

Fujimura's thought takes the form of images that, at their best, are deep and captivating. Those who are unwilling to be moved by sensual appeal will see nothing in them. And many of today's reigning art-intellectuals fall into this category. But for the rest of us—call us "art lovers" for short—these paintings are a revelation. ♦

BCA

# Marriage à la Mode

*Why the cake remains an essential ingredient.*

BY CHARLOTTE HAYS



*The wedding of Tiny Tim and Miss Vicki, December 17, 1969*

**W**hy a "surprisingly" dignified wedding? Well, because weddings—unlike funerals, which are impromptu by nature and therefore less likely to become vulgar extravaganzas—have come to resemble Oscar night performances rather than mere gatherings of friends and family to witness and celebrate an important moment in a couple's life.

This points to another way in which funerals are superior to weddings: A funeral is forever, a wedding is not. The decline of marriage, ironically, has been a boon for wedding planners: The bride may not be married forever, so why not make a day of it? Miss Manners notes that the contemporary bride

thinks of her wedding as "my day" and is likely to demand a limousine ("there is no polite word for distinguishing pretentious automobiles from ordinary ones"), insist upon a dozen bridesmaids in hideous dresses of her devising, and devise a theme right out of Hollywood.

Bad ideas all: "Don't worry about developing a 'theme' for your wedding," cautions Miss Manners. "The theme of a wedding is marriage."

Many brides would disagree. A syndicated etiquette columnist, Miss Manners reveals that she frequently has received distraught missives from brides-to-be saying that they can't afford the wedding of their dreams unless they hit up the guests to contribute, often referring to something called "a money tree." To one bride-to-be who wonders about the proper way to say "no presents" and ask for cash instead, Miss Manners

**Miss Manners's Guide to a Surprisingly Dignified Wedding**

by Jacobina Martin and Judith Martin  
Norton, 320 pp., \$24.95

*Charlotte Hays is coauthor of Southern ladies' guides to hosting perfect weddings and funerals.*

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