

**“Jamali’s Surface” By Donald Kuspit<sup>1</sup>**

Jamali is a mystic, and I think the surface of his paintings are emblematic of merger with the divine. That is, they represent the state of selflessness necessary to experience a sense of sacredness. One is in effect invited to lose oneself in the painting's surface, thus replicating the ecstatic state in which it was made. This involves what Jamali calls his Fresco Tempera technique. Ground pigments are applied to a prepared canvas, which Jamali dances on. The pigments are then chemically bonded to the canvas. The result is a highly textured, intricate surface, simultaneously esoteric and erotic, intimate yet peculiarly forbidding and inscrutable. It is an essentially monotonic surface -- a particularly dense all-over surface -- but also sufficiently varied and complex to suggest an embryo-like process of self-differentiation, as well as, more generally, what Alfred North Whitehead called the creative flux. In other words, Jamali's surface is rich with implications and affinities.

Jamali's dancing is related to that of the Sufis, whom he first saw in the Rajasthan desert, where he spent five years. Carried to an extreme, dance can induce trance, particularly the swirling, repetitive dances of the Sufi mystics. Jamali's canvas dancing is no doubt carried out in a trance-like state, but the important point is that the residue of this state is alive on the canvas, in the form of the marks of his movement. The pigments are in effect the desert sand, and the marks are memory traces of the trance. Attuned to the painting's surface, one finds oneself dancing in the desert of one's mind-nimbly moving over a painterly surface.

From time immemorial the desert has been a place of vision: an abstract space of meditation and self-communion, far removed from the world. It has always been a kind of spiritual testing ground, a place where being has to prove itself, as it were: where the fundamental existential question whether to be or not to be is experienced with great urgency. Withdrawn into itself in the desert, with no practical concerns, the self searches for its *raison d'etre*, more particularly, a "higher," general principle of being to justify its own existence. In other words, the desert experience has a double dimension: on the one hand, unworldliness, involving annihilation of the worldly self; on the other hand, otherworldliness, involving transcendence toward a different order of self (if it can still be called that), which brings with it awareness of a general principle of being. This "higher" self, with its "higher" awareness, can be felt in Jamali's surface, as both a diffuse idea and a specific presence -- as its unbounded intention and in dwelling immediacy.

If, as D.W. Winnicott has written, the mystic disengages from the world in order to engage his or her introjects, thus recovering a sense of vital self forgotten in daily commerce with the world, then one can say that these introjects are diffused throughout the vital self that is being re-experienced, recognized. One might say that Jamali's dancing invokes these "divine" introjects or inner powers, each one a distillate or quintessentialization of being: they spring from the canvas, as it were, which is not unlike the traditional sacred circle in which otherworldly spirits can be made to appear, with the proper method. Jamali's surface can also be regarded as a

kind of dream screen, or what Andre Breton called Leonardo's paranoid wall: but Jamali's introjects are benign, not vicious and sinister, like those Max Ernst and Salvador Dali saw in the textures of that wall.

Jamali's dancing is, then, magical in import, and the elusive visionary faces that often emerge on the surface of his paintings are sacred introjects: good internal objects that keep away the bad external objects of the world. These faces are generally schematic -- radically simplified -- as befits spiritual beings. Sometimes they surround an overtly angelic figure, as in *Butterfly of Kathmandu*, 1993. This work opens up another dimension of Jamali's paintings: their Tantrism. The Tantric practice of sexuality, like Sufi dancing, is a mystical practice. Jamali's butterfly is a female body in an ecstatic state, and thus spiritualized. Orgasmic nirvana is simultaneously spiritual transcendence, that is, transformation into a higher state of being, which the delicate butterfly represents. The butterfly's flight is not unlike the Sufi dance, in that it seems to be carried out in a trance. The visionary faces inhabit a higher, spiritual space; their presence indicates that the female butterfly has reached it-flown high indeed. Does the butterfly represent Jamali's own female side? Mysticism argues for the possibility of harmonious (however momentary) merger of seemingly irreconcilable beings, which necessarily involves reconciliation of all the disparate beings in the mystic's own psyche.

Many of Jamali's surfaces have leaves, twigs, even the remains of insects embedded in them. As he acknowledges, they were made outdoors, subject to the elements -- rain and sun. Lizards sometimes crossed them. Clearly, a temporal process is involved, and the heavily encrusted result has the rich patina of an archeological find. Indeed, Jamali has spent much time at such archeological sites as Harappa, Mohenjadaró, and Taxila. One can regard his paintings as archeological sites of irreducible sensation, their surface as a field of archaic sensations exposed, as though for the first time, to the light of day and the mind. What one might call the mysticism of time is involved: the peculiar way in which a timely sensation suddenly becomes a timeless feeling: the peculiar way in which a temporal signifier becomes, with the passage of time itself, a timeless mark, fraught with more meaning, however unspecifiable, than it had when it was a worldly index. Thus another merger of seemingly irreconcilable opposites: the marking of time and the duration that seems eternal because it is experienced as an indivisible event, like Jamali's surface.

But what perhaps is most involved in Jamali's surface is a mystical sense of being as such, that is, a sense of the unity of the inorganic and organic. At its most intense, his surface seems simultaneously both. This is not simply because the leaves and twigs are in effect petrified, or because the way Jamali has danced on the pigments seems to have brought them to life. Rather, it has to do with the overall substantiality -- the peculiar materiality -- of the paintings.

They often have the look of prehistoric cave paintings, indeed, of the stone walls on which such paintings were made. They often have the same crude, lush energy and imploded mass and monumentality of rough, raw material, which we experience as peculiarly elegant just because it is so primitive, and for which we feel a

strange affinity, even empathy. Like the cave painters, Jamali's paintings show the same ambition to make contact with primordial being -- to experience the sheer urgency of being. Thus they return us to perhaps the most archaic rationale for art, the rationale evident in the cave paintings, the rationale that has become explicit in modernist abstract painting: to make marks and gestures and images, not simply in order to show that we have the intelligence to do so, nor to record our presence for posterity (a dubious immortality, since anonymity comes with it), but rather out of wonder at being. Jamali makes art for the deepest of reasons: to try to grasp what it means to be by creating a new being. Or, less grandiosely, his paintings are a demonstration of being at its most esthetically fundamental: being as rhapsodic texture and delirious color.

Source: Jamali Mystical Expressionism / Paintings, pp. 187-188, Rizzoli International Publications, Italy, 1997.

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