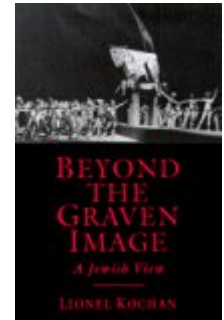


Lionel Kochan. *Beyond the Graven Image*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
vi + 223 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-4700-1.



Reviewed by Robyn Sassen

Published on H-Judaic (July, 1999)

Lionel Kochan's *Beyond the graven image* is a deceptive book. In this physically brief text, Kochan has woven a conceptually vast palimpsest of interpretation and historiography, focussing on both traditional and more contemporary definitions of the concept of idolatry.

This work is accessible to students of the theory and philosophy of art. It also holds interest for the respective fields regarding biblical etymology and the larger areas of interpretation of biblical text. Its focus on the study of the social implications of idolatry in its contemporary aspects would be potentially valuable in the social sciences. From an art theory viewpoint, it holds refreshing angles on the nature and power of representation—dealing with the inherent potency in the material capturing of likenesses of living creatures.

Kochan probes biblical idolatry as an umbrella concept for the multitude of spinoffs and cross-dynamics which it encompasses, beginning with an examination of the traditional graven image. He looks at the primary texts as well as the plethora of commentaries and opinions voiced

upon them, and the loaded nature of the language used, by both Jewish and non-Jewish sages from Biblical times until the present. He then looks beyond the 'golden calf' metaphor, and into the realms of religious symbolism, representation in art, learning, and the concept of time. In this respect, idolatry is considered as an ahistorical construct, where chronology becomes loose and polemic forms an essential part of the analysis.

There are a couple of central theses in the text: firstly, the debate surrounding the way in which the idolatrous transgression "can be committed both in mind and body" (p. 5) and the way in which the internalization of a concept—by ear or by eye, or essentially by heart—may contribute, metaphorically, to being idolatrous. In this vein, Kochan examines the perceivable nature of the space in which one exists and how artistic protagonists have extrapolated it within their chosen medium. Furthermore, he examines if and how cultural orientation affects plastic conceptualization of the perceived.

Another recurring concept is the matter regarding the inextricable relationship of Torah and

idolatry within Man's repertoire of learning, recalling and understanding. This embraces the problematic of language and the implications that words hold by way of their own history as well as the 'magic' inherent in naming things. It also concerns the traditional concept of the man-made artefact as idol, interfacing with the contemporary Jewish understanding and ancient prohibition of three- and two dimensional representational art forms. This is particularly complex, regarding anthropomorphic representation and images of the Deity, specifically concerning "man's iconic status in relation to God" (p. 119). Kochan deals with how prohibitions have been made manifest in synagogal and liturgical decorations throughout history and how the sages have diversely interpreted them. He goes on to examine famous artworks and techniques such as photography, in this context, but also looks to the making of homonunculi such as the Golem of Prague.

In terms of the man-made construct, time and its 'architecturally' imposed structure (p. 143) falls under the author's scrutiny, thus necessitating a closer look at a number of previously held 'givens' and Torah lessons, within the general conception of livable reality and its juxtaposition with a framework of idolatry.

Kochan logically transforms the approach to idolatry by considering the material of which the so-called idol is made. He examines 'constituent matter' as being of base and tactile substance, or as being of a philosophical and Kabbalistic nature, embodying mimesis, communication and recall. This includes the recollection of taught historical values and it links to the role-play of public sculpture in society on representational and non-representational levels. Here the Holocaust memorial comes under scrutiny. Further, remembering the dead, verbally and vocally, is monumentalized in prayer form by way of the *Yizkor* prayer and the books which contain it. Indeed, many artefacts and traditional acts and utterances may be perceived as embodying a mnemon-

ic role in the larger issue of remembering and worshiping. Thus the line distinguishing the holy artefact from the fetishistic idol may become quite fine under different levels of interpretation and relative understanding.

In conclusion, this work presents a vigorous examination of the concept of idolatry, allowing it to spill into a variety of conjoined fields in a dynamic and refreshing manner.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Robyn Sassen. Review of Kochan, Lionel. *Beyond the Graven Image*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3272>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.