

THE JEWISH ARTIST: Study of ONE

Bede Yaffe

"I see no barriers between people caused by names, Jew Christian, Moslem or what have you. People are people, part of a whole human family." This humanist constant is a good place to start in the study of one local artist, Bede Yaffe — who has now entered another of her self-described slightly unpredictable "time space flashes".

There have been others but this one results in a decision to leave Milwaukee, to set up studio and life in Los Angeles. Why? "The reasons are all subconscious. I have no rational explanation. It is just the natural thing to do at this time."

Bede Yaffe will also sell her collection, works of other local artists and some collected on world travels. "ACCENT ON

ART" is presenting a Retrospective Exhibition and Sale at her studio, 4836 North Bartlett, starting August 11, continuing through the week.

A positive humanism and her preoccupation with **time** make some interesting configurations in her work: elaborate titles, faceless figures, use of positive and negative screens, calligraphy, combinations of colors with varying degree of force and fancy, and content that ranges from a Biblical Egyptian Jew carrying ornaments . . . to a painting called, "Awakening of Consciousness as a Series of Spaced Flashes".

I was impressed with this picture, which best characterizes Bede Yaffe. A watch face with one (movable) hand forms the center of a series of vibrat-



Bede Yaffe
and time flashes

ing concentric shapes. Although the colors are subdued, purples and blues primarily, the experience is vivid, penetrating, revealing the artist.

I had come to her, seeking the singular influence of being Jewish and manifestations of that identify in her work. We

talked at length. It was there.

Bede was a talented teenager attending Washington High School. Her teachers urged her father to allow Bede to pursue art as a career. He disagreed however, in fact, discouraged her. "Hardly the life for a nice Jewish girl." Bede recalled visiting the old

Layton Art Gallery, alone and yearning. It was a time space flash.

Later, married, still enthusiastic about art, Bede became the decorations chairman of every women's organization she had joined. Throughout the Jewish community, she had left her artistic mark on many programs, parties, bulletins — organizational decorations. This too will change with another flash.

Bede enrolled in art classes at Cardinal Stritch College (1962) and found form for her feelings amid this atmosphere of "loving people". The sisters, particularly Sister Mary Thomasita, influenced her point of view and her work. "They had their religious heritage and it helped me to find mine." She became more aware of her Jewishness in the contrasting Catholic environment. "I discovered that Old Testament. I now think of books of the Bible, such as Genesis and Ec-

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clesiastes, as sources of inspiration."

Convinced being Jewish cannot be separated from the artist's expression, I looked for the picture that would prove my point. It was there. I liked what I saw, called, "Each man in all men. All Man in each man."

The picture had movement and meaning; groups of men, most of them wearing hats, in many varied physical expressions of active emotion. One's head bowed and beaten, another in full stride and aggressive, a group against a wall — oppressed, others separated from one another by blocks of color. Men on the move, some full front forcefully facing you, others moving away with as much strength. Done in shades of blue, white and shadowy grays, with continuous use of positive and negative screens. "Monochromatic, silk screen on canvas" she said. (Continuous narrative, I thought, with individual figures subordinate to the whole — and that feeling of similarity found in much Jewish art.)

Many other pieces reflect direct Jewish influence: the use of raised Hebrew letters and numbers to form a racing image of unrelated meaninglessness, forcing time to move relentlessly without reason or clear idea. Except one. In the jumble, the letters S I N emerge at least two or three times. Bede points them out. Hardly intentional however. "I work intuitively. The medium takes over. Decisions are made subconsciously."

Another silk screen on canvas features a faceless Moses repeated in negative. The lines of the figure's costume have a traditional schematization, linear terms, oriental. It is a

pleasing picture. But the viewer must find his own meaning. Bede only initiates the probe.

Titles dominate, unduly. "The Prison of Time is Spherical and Without Exits." "The Beginning of Reflective Consciousness" and "Sails Full Set Await the Wind" . . . sometimes cloud the impact of the image with a wordy vagueness.

Bede's experience studying art at Cardinal Stritch has to be one of the most influential of her time space flashes. "There I found a beginning", she says, "but when it came time to separate myself, I just jumped. From that point on, I developed by myself."

"Barriers between people are no good. There is an underlying thread unifying all people. There is one God in all the beautiful patterns in nature. There is one word, one feeling, one creator. And no matter what people want to call others, I will not put walls between people, walls called Judaism, Christianity or whatever."

"Can a Jewish artist say a Christian thing? Yes, of course. Why not? And she showed me a picture called, "Imagination — the Supreme Delight" . . . a montage of symbols, crosses, disciples, Jesus, Mary, faces and forms distinctively different from anything else shown previously. "The symbols are pretty."

Bede Yaffe confesses she has taken a little bit from a lot of people and a lot of different philosophies. Indeed, influenced by a Jewish father, sisters at Cardinal Stritch, a bit from Jung and a thing from Yoga, something from the organizational woman and much more from the liberated NOW group. "All of it is combined in me."

Although Bede Yaffe appears composed of combinations of philosophies, there is a

strong thread of humanism that holds the patchwork together.

At times her work seems a bit superficial, sometimes it captures a deep artistic anxiety, as obscure as it is open, a mixture of adolescence with active awareness of greater truths. She seems to be — and maybe we all are — different people when caught in different time space flashes. There is no simple way to summarize her approach — who knows what direction her subconscious will lead her next.