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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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LOUIS I. KAHN *Building a View*
STEPHEN ANTONAKOS *Spaces*

by Aldrin Valdez

Louis I. Kahn (1901–1974) saw the architectural plan as "a society of rooms," in which each individual space is connected to the other in a dialogue of light and shadow, intimate and sensitive. The ideal place, he said, is one where it is "good to learn, good to work, and good to live" in. In *Louis I. Kahn: Building a View*, in the main gallery of Lori Bookstein Fine Art, the 60 drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings, from 1920 through 1951, of trees, ruins, hills and villages attest to Kahn's curiosity and inventiveness with form. They record his travels through the diverse topographies of Italy, Greece, and Egypt as well as New England, upstate New York, and California. The framed drawings and paintings were arranged more to fit the wall than to convey a sense of chronology, so that Kahn's shifting styles seem to move fluidly from one country to another.

Like many Americans before him, Kahn learned much of what he knew by travelling abroad (1928 and 1951 mark extensive visits to Europe and Egypt). The works of early American Modernists like Georgia O'Keefe, Marsden Hartley, and Arthur Dove, with their fertile mix of the abstract and the representational, are progenitors of Kahn's animistic forms. It's clear from the work on view how much those painters influenced his way of depicting nature's varied structures. In moody drawings of Italian mountainsides and coasts from 1929, marks made with the side of a pencil point create a schema of fractal patterns that follow the form of a branch or a rock, reminiscent of Dove and O'Keefe, with their bands of color radiating from a moonglow or a flower's core. What Kahn called monumentality—a spiritual and eternal force—exists in the landscapes of early Modernist paintings. There's a lot of it in Kahn's small works.

He was a gifted draftsman with a sensitivity to touch. And although he had been trained in the Beaux Arts tradition under Paul Cret in Philadelphia, his first trip to Europe in 1928 helped him develop a freer, looser hand.

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Take “The Oracle, No. 2, Delphi, Greece” (1951), for instance, with its smoky line-weight drifting from dark cascades to faint traces. A valley of trees, heavy footed with kneeling trunks, could be a ring of clunky dryads in mid-metamorphosis, surrounding the site of a former temple. Above, a few curved lines are all that’s needed to create the dense, folded mass of a mountain.

In three modestly sized charcoal drawings from the same year, the granite quarries of Aswan, Egypt, stand or lean in the center of the page—clusters in a stark desert with the rough outline of a distant city behind them. Kahn’s bold lines lend the stones weight, yet they appear so precarious that they seem ready to tumble down with a strong breeze. Philip Guston’s cartoonish figures come to mind, but these drawings are nearly two decades earlier than the painter’s infamous 1970 show at Marlborough, where his late-style paintings debuted. The self-contained, interiorly cumulative composition of Kahn’s monolith also recalls Giorgio de Chirico’s “The Great Metaphysician” (1917), an artist also important to Guston. Kahn spoke earnestly of seeking the “unmeasurable” in nature, and he defined light with dark strokes of ink or pencil. A form defines its negative simply by virtue of being drawn. It’s the unmeasurable and the measurable brought together through eye and hand. Kahn saw in this action a metaphor for conversation, a way of discovering the self’s singularity: “There are as many meetings as there are people, and there must, in a way, almost be as many meetings as there are leaves on a tree.” In the smaller gallery, the works of Stephen Antonakos (b. 1926) also play with negative and positive spaces, deploying the color red to grab the eye. Whereas Kahn’s landscape are subtler suffusions of medium and image, Antonakos’s red-and-white compositions stay resolutely on the surface of the paper as a unified whole. His red painting on MDF, lit from the back by neon, pulses on the wall like a shadowy after-image. There’s also an architectural model for a “Meditation Space” (1998): a glass structure with red circles on its surface. Formal elements as material metaphors of focus, clarity and reflection.

The experience of Antonakos’s work can be as much a commune with nature as Kahn’s, I suppose—not the outside world, but rather the inner nature we encounter when we sit alone with ourselves, the curved mirror of our retina at rest, and our thoughts as present and tangible as a clearing in a forest.