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Kiyomi Baird: A Way of Seeing

Kiyomi Baird's art is both evanescent and transcendently beautiful, qualities not found so easily in today's art. As a Japanese-American painter, Baird holds on to her Asian origins, and produces art of unusual grace and quiet eloquence. Educated at Berkeley, the artist retains some of the openness and exploratory nature of Western culture, but as she found out after an extended stay in Tokyo, her deepest allegiance is with Japanese art. For the Western viewer, it also becomes clear quickly that much of her inspiration comes from a Buddhist recognition of the transience of life. The combination of spiritual awareness and exquisite imagery results in an art that lingers in the thought of the viewer, who may be startled by the extent to which the mixture succeeds. An art as devotedly spiritual as Baird's maintains a dignity and wealth of purpose that lifts communication between the artist and her audience. With titles like *Zazen II* and *Spirit Guide*, Baird makes it clear that her outlook is resolutely mystical, being intent on the inner realities of life.

As part of her visionary outlook, Baird refers to imagery of the sky—or, we might say, of the heavens. The diptych *Soulmates* (2015) consists of two moons—a yellow moon on the left and a gray one on the right; in the upper left-hand corner, one can see a bit of sky cover or clouds, and on the bottom right, there exists a profusion of foliage, mostly dark green in color. The background is gold. The dialogue between the two heavenly bodies suggests a conversation between friends, just as the name of the painting indicates. The surface of *Soulmates* is also pebbled slightly, adding visual interest to the work. One senses that this world is an entrance to another, equally important in nature. But the conviction is quiet to the point of silence; we remember that “zazen,” a word used for the title of one of her paintings, means meditational sitting, usually in the lotus position—it is a practice also taken in silence. The wonder of the image and the contemplative nature of the painting join in wordless joy.

Spirit Guide (2015), a gold figure against black with an embellished circle for a head, is exactly that: an escort intended to lead a person into the realm of the unknown. The otherworldliness of the image is accentuated by the abstract pattern of the head, as well as the gorgeous formality of the robe the guide is wearing. Spirit guides are part of a spirituality even larger than the Japanese understanding of the intangible; they show us how to manifest the deepest part of ourselves. Baird's emphasis on internal insight is also clearly evidenced in the mandala-like painting *Within* (2015), which is composed of a grayish-blue circle with a white center. The form is ancient and known as a spiritual image in many cultures; it reminds us of some of the sculptures by Isamu Noguchi, the outstanding Asian-American sculptor. Baird shows us, in subtle and profound ways, how we can reach within ourselves and find out who we truly are. This is a genuine achievement.

Jonathan Goodman