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ART IN REVIEW: John Bradford

By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 10, 2003

55 Mercer Street Gallery
55 Mercer Street, SoHo
Through Jan. 18

Working in the well-plowed field where figurative tradition and Modernist abstraction overlap, John Bradford makes abstracted, near-Minimalist paintings of biblical narratives. Mr. Bradford, a founder of a group called the Biblical Painters, is in his early 50's and is given to such contentious declarations as one prepared for this exhibition that reads in its entirety: "These paintings are about the politics and poetry of the Bible. Psychology has been eliminated."

In contrast with painters like Giotto and Rembrandt, who fleshed out the bare bones of biblical stories, Mr. Bradford takes the abstraction of Old Testament prose as a source of inspiration and works to match it with schematic, linear compositions painted with wide brushes on flat expanses of muted color. Joseph at the threshold of Potiphar's wife's boudoir is a stick figure with a rectangle for a body; she, sitting naked in bed, is made of just a few strategic curves.

The paintings have a persuasive if not very exciting severity. What is intriguing is the artist's conceptual purpose.

In another exhibition handout, he says, "Even if we are reluctant to acknowledge that the modernity of the West owes a fundamental debt to Judaism, our enemies see the link very clearly. The Hebraic roots of our American heritage are worthy of celebration, now more than ever." This is a refreshingly far cry from the usual Postmodernist rhetoric.

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