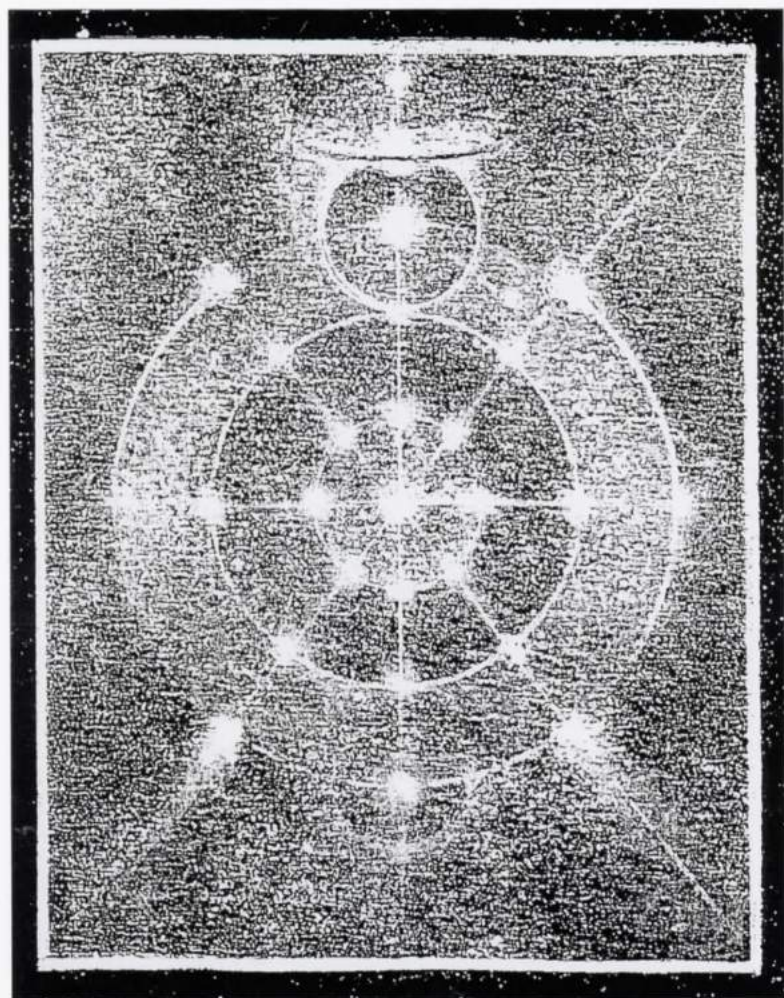


ANIMATION

JOURNAL



Spring 1999

ANIMATION JOURNAL

SPRING 1999

JORDAN BELSON, LAST OF THE GREAT MASTERS
by William Moritz
4

THE UNKNOWN ART OF JORDAN BELSON
by Ying Tan
18

**THE "DIVERTIMENTI":
AN INTERVIEW WITH CLIVE WALLEY**
by David Ehrlich
30

THOUGHTS ON PAINTING AND MOVEMENT
by Clive Walley
52

WHY I WORK DIRECT ON FILM
by Stephanie Maxwell
56

THOUGHTS ON ABSTRACT ANIMATION
by Bärbel Neubauer
58

ANIMATION LITERATURE REVIEW
by Maureen Furniss
63

NEW BOOKS
by Maureen Furniss
and Annalee R. Ward
94

ANIMATION JOURNAL

EDITOR

Maureen Furniss
Chapman University

EDITORIAL BOARD

Jerry Beck

Mark Langer
Carleton University

David Ehrlich
Dartmouth College
ASIFA-International

William Moritz
California Institute of
the Arts

J.B. Kaufman
Independent Historian

Linda Simensky
The Cartoon Network
ASIFA-East

Marsha Kinder
University of Southern
California

Gaylyn Studlar
University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor

Animation Journal is edited by Maureen Furniss at the Chapman University School of Film and Television, 333 N. Glassell, Orange, CA 92866 USA. Tel: 714-744-7018. Fax: 714-997-6700. E-mail: furniss@chapman.edu. Articles are copyrighted by their authors unless otherwise indicated, and all other information is copyrighted by *Animation Journal*. Reprinting is not allowed unless permission is obtained from the copyright holder. Requests to reprint articles may be sent to the author at the above address. Submission information is published on the *Animation Journal* web site: www.chapman.edu/animation.

On the front cover: *Wheel of Life*, by Jordan Belson (1998), mixed media on paper. On the back cover: *Scenes from the Afterlife: Same Time, Same Place*, by Jordan Belson (1998), mixed media on paper.

Animation Journal is printed on acid-free paper.

© 1999 *Animation Journal*
ISSN 1061-0308

THE UNKNOWN ART OF JORDAN BELSON

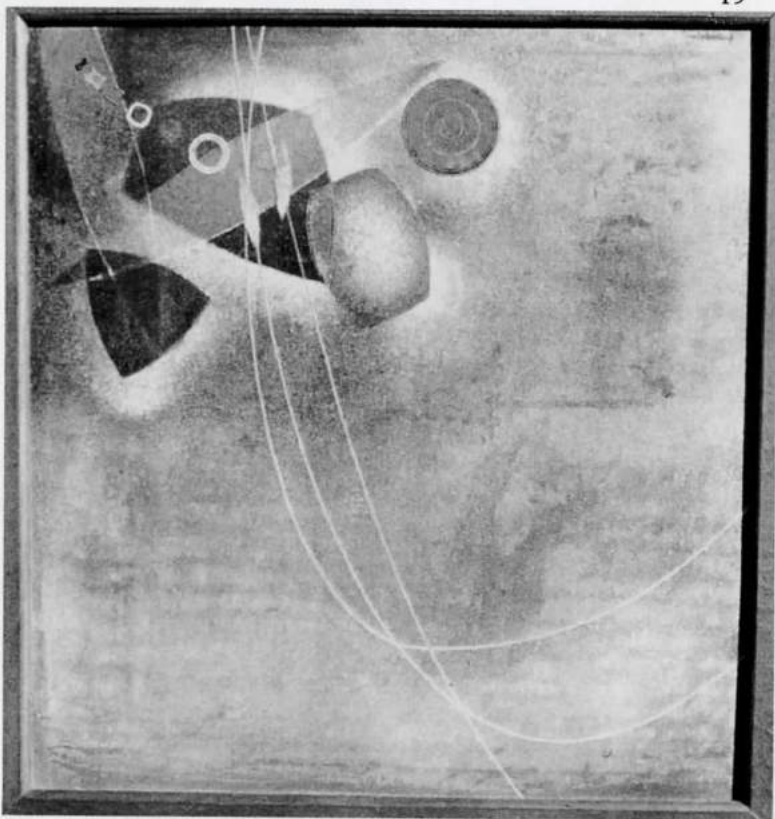
by Ying Tan

Jordan Belson is known as one of America's most celebrated non-objective film artists. Since his first film, *Transmutation*, in 1947, Belson has made 33 short films; one 22-minute program and one 30-minute program on video; special effects for Hollywood feature films (including *The Right Stuff*, 1983); and footage for the documentary, *The Creation of the Universe* (1985). A Guggenheim Fellow and Ford Foundation Fellow, Belson also twice received American Film Institute grants. Belson's latest production, *Mysterious Journey*, a 30-minute program on video, was finished in November 1997, at the age of 71. It is very much 'autobiographical,' a special work of art that reflects and summarizes Belson's lifelong experience. Structured into four sections in a most sublime and poetic visual form, this piece unfolds over time a journey of his spiritual quest for understanding the universe and the human condition within, a journey as deeply personal as it is profoundly universal.

In my search for his rarely accessible film materials, I was delightfully surprised to find out about Belson's still graphic art world. The long history of its making, its intense soulful quality, its massive amount, and the unique beauty of its various visual forms all won me over, evoking great respect and interest. His still images are mysteriously beautiful and powerful, no less than his film work, if not more. The subject of this paper is this often overlooked part of Belson's art—his drawings, paintings, and graphics—made throughout his life. The world of his non-film art is important to a more comprehensive understanding of this visionary artist. It not only provides cross-references of Belson's film and video work, but also may further reveal Belson's inner realms and creative visions.

Belson has talked to me about his techniques and objectives as an artist, but he also expresses reservations on whether or not to have his thoughts seen in print. He explains that verbal discussions may not fully encompass the meaning of his work and it may be better to let his work speak for itself. Nonetheless, I will try to relate a number of significant principles that may help viewers to fully appreciate his artwork.

Starting out as a painter, Belson exhibited large scale artworks at the Guggenheim Museum in the late 1940s. For a few years he was among those artists supported by Hilla Rebay, the founding director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Although most people only know him as a filmmaker, Belson has never stopped painting, even when he was no longer making films composed of animated paintings and drawings.

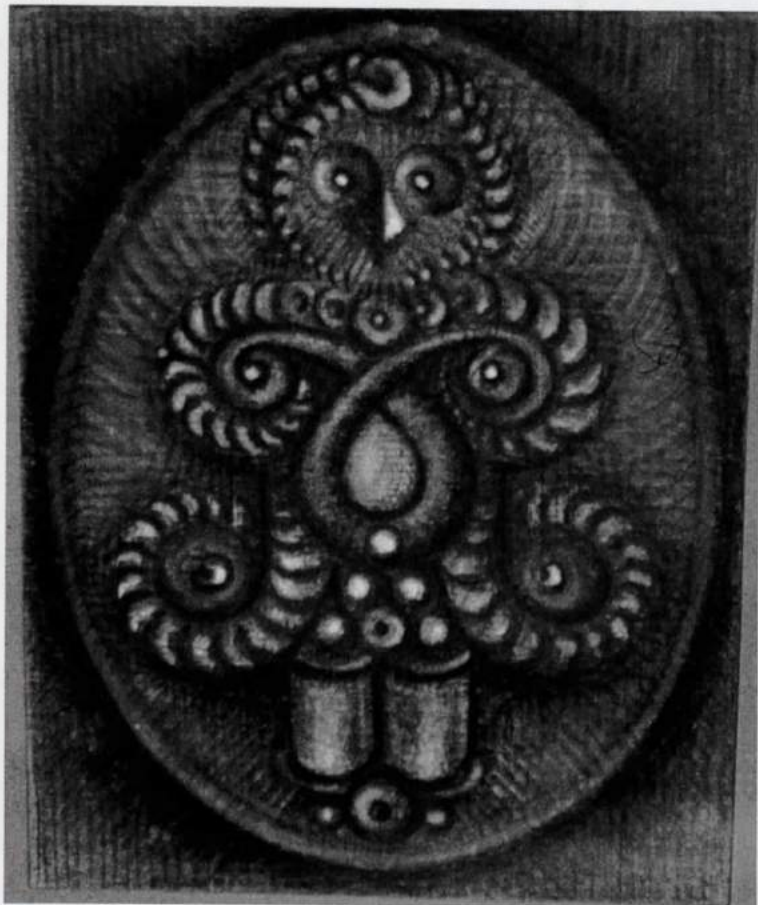


Early painting by Jordan Belson, date unknown. Courtesy William Moritz.

To Belson, his films and graphic art mirror each other: they are all about sacred art, about a spiritual quest. His film and graphic art also influence each other and reflect each other. Sometimes his graphic art enters in his film, and other times images of a film became a new starting point of his graphic art. And often this cycling process continues between the two media and generates infinite evolutions and manifestations.

Not long after he finished the 22-minute program *Samadhi and Other Films* in 1989, Belson suffered a severe illness that lasted for about two years. He stopped making films and expressed his artistic vision in still graphic art—he rediscovered the joy of drawing and painting. This new focus on still graphic art is truly an extension of his filmmaking. Belson believes that his current graphic art goes deeper and further into life experience and will achieve what filmmaking will never be able to achieve. Now in his seventies, Belson finds small scale image work very

Animation Journal, Spring 1999



Early painting by Jordan Belson, date unknown. Courtesy William Moritz.

rewarding and satisfying—it is always there to look at, no need for projection, viewing is easy and direct.

During my many visits to his studio, Belson showed me works from several periods in the past, only a fraction of those many boxes of drawings and paintings he has done over fifty years. Among them were a group of image variations reworked in 1990, from frames (original drawings on index cards) of the 1948 film *Improvisation*. They are rendered using subtly-tinted colored mist over very definite geometric shape structures. These images are musical and poetic, delicate yet with powerful clarity, clearly influenced by a combination of Kandinsky and J.M.W Turner. In another set of drawings, Belson extensively

Animation Journal, Spring 1999

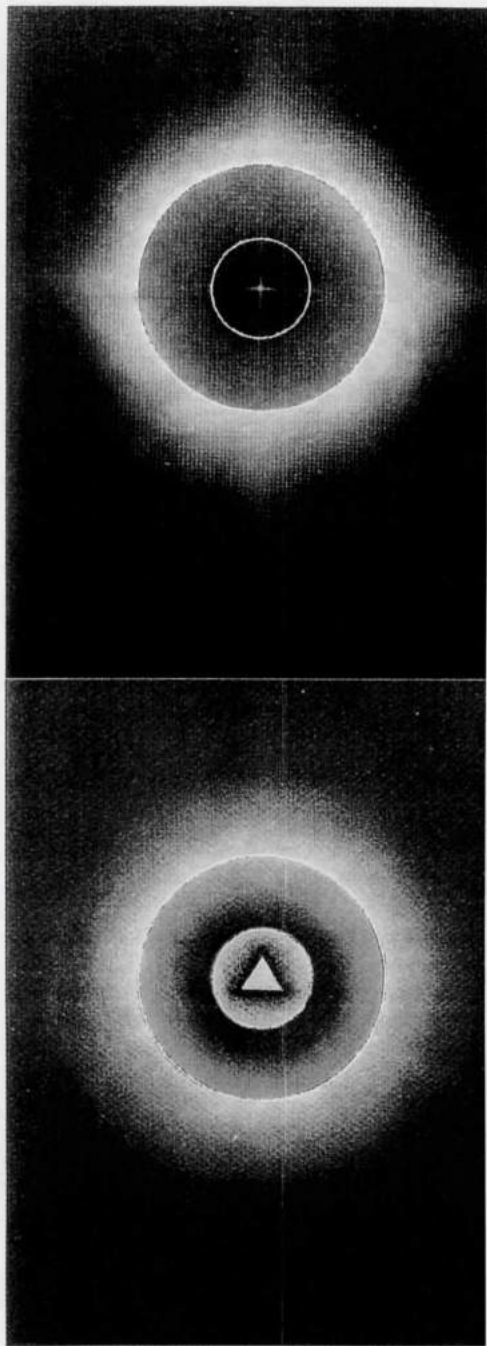
reworked images from the film *Mandala*, bringing them to a totally new level of perfection. Each image in this group carries with it infinite weight and depth. Those variations of *Mandala* graphic art affect viewers like a magic energy re-charger, centering and renewing the audience.

Among Belson's early works is *Peacock Book*, 'rhythmic drawings' made in a 100-page book of Chinese paper around 1952, at about the same time he was making scroll paintings for early films. Rhythmic drawing is a style that Belson has employed widely in his work; it is intuitive, almost in the manner of 'automatic' techniques, striving for an 'uninhibited' creative process (abstract filmmaker Harry Smith also did quite a lot of these types of images, which he called "brain drawings"). As Belson points out, the production of such energy-packed images requires a special mental state. Belson's rhythmic drawing *Peacock Book* consists of countless colored circles/dots/lines woven into super complex forms. They seem to mimic an infinite universe, or 'Tree of Life'—a concept seen in Jewish Cabala, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity

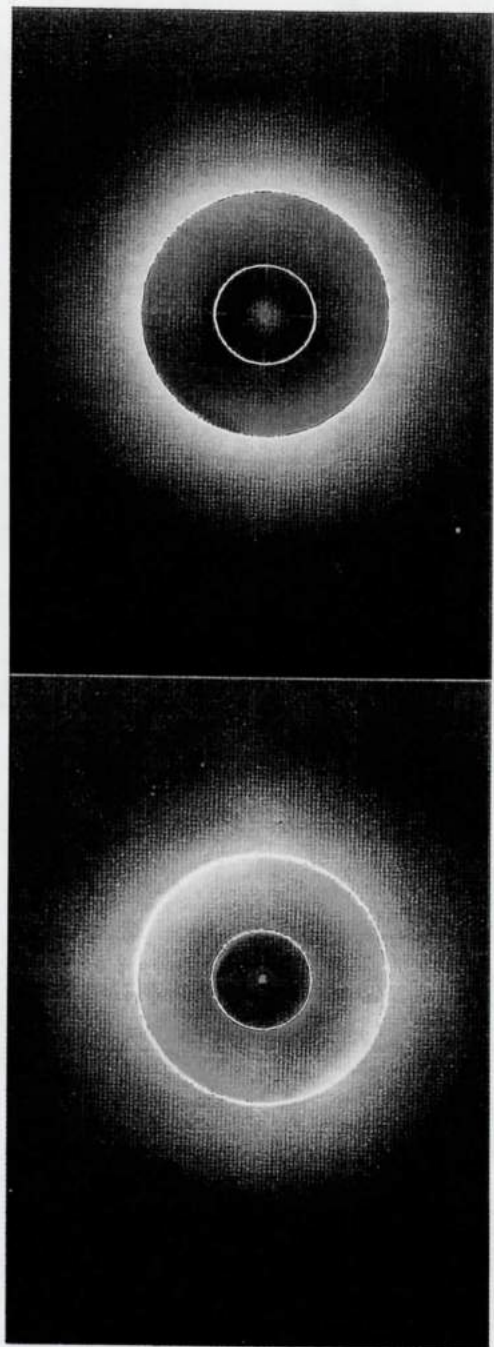
According to Belson, his very spontaneous rhythmic drawings actually constituted an important development for him. Many reduced and refined abstract forms of his later works were developed from his rhythmic drawings. An example is the *punctum* (a Latin word for 'point'), or 'celestial disk,' a donut-shaped double circle image. That form appears quite often in his many films, as well as his still graphic art and represents the human soul.

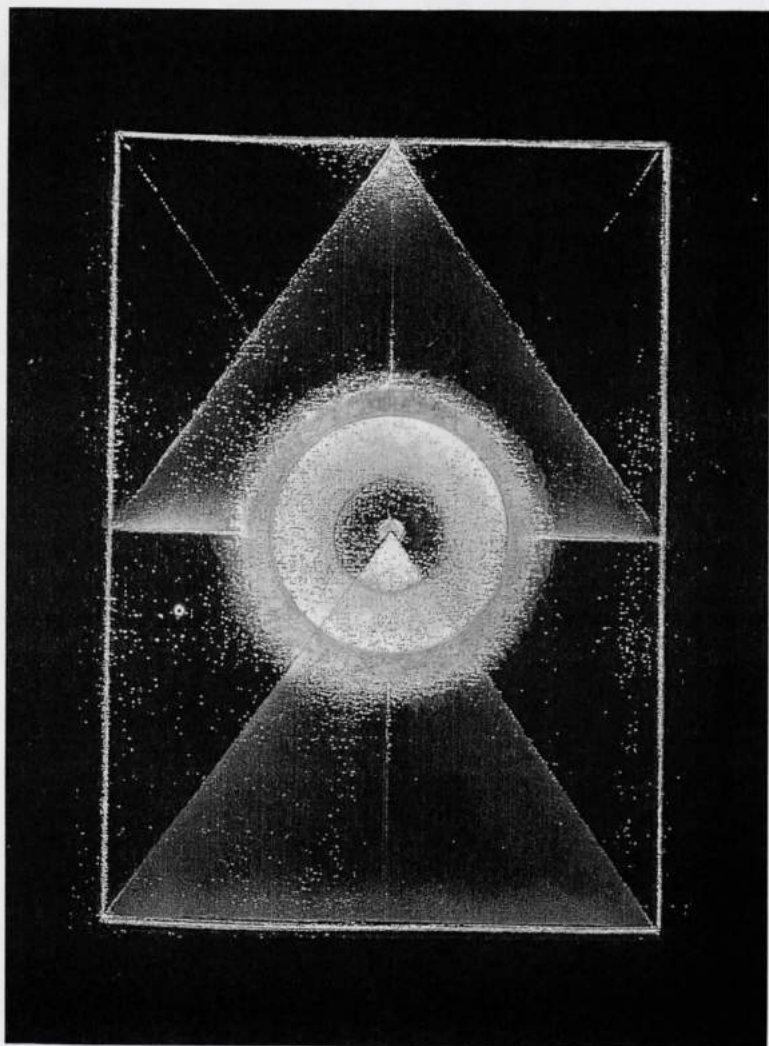
In my collection of over 150 image prints from Belson, I find that some represent new ideas and new images, some seem to be improvements or new stages of his past print work, and some are reworkings of images made for films forty years ago, but in any case they often appear in groups or series. Early works are in various sizes: index cards, 12" x 6", 8" x 10" The most recent works are more or less in the size of 6" X 8", pastel on paper, and vertically oriented.

Since Fall 1997, I have received in the mail about 5 to 8 image prints each month. Each new set of prints Belson sends me seems more beautiful, filling me with surprises and new levels of excitement. Powerful and peaceful at the same time, they seem to reach out to pull me out of a disoriented busy life reality and lead me to a calm and pure state, a harmonic reality. These modestly-sized images are very magical. According to Belson, each image should be viewed long enough to allow the image to unfold over a period of time because, as he says, "they are much more complex than they may appear to be."



4 *Punctums*, by Jordan Belson (1994). Pastel on paper. Courtesy Jordan Belson.
Animation Journal, Spring 1999





Predestination, by Jordan Belson (1998).

Like his films, Belson's graphic art is constructed around mystical ideas. He seems to possess special sensibilities that allow him to see what others are not able to see and he is eager to share his vision through those mysterious images; through image abstraction he reveals his understanding of the universe. Around Winter 1997, Belson made the "Cabala Mandala" series (for example, *Diagram*, *Wheel of Life*, and *Mother Universe*). In this graphic image group, Belson combined the

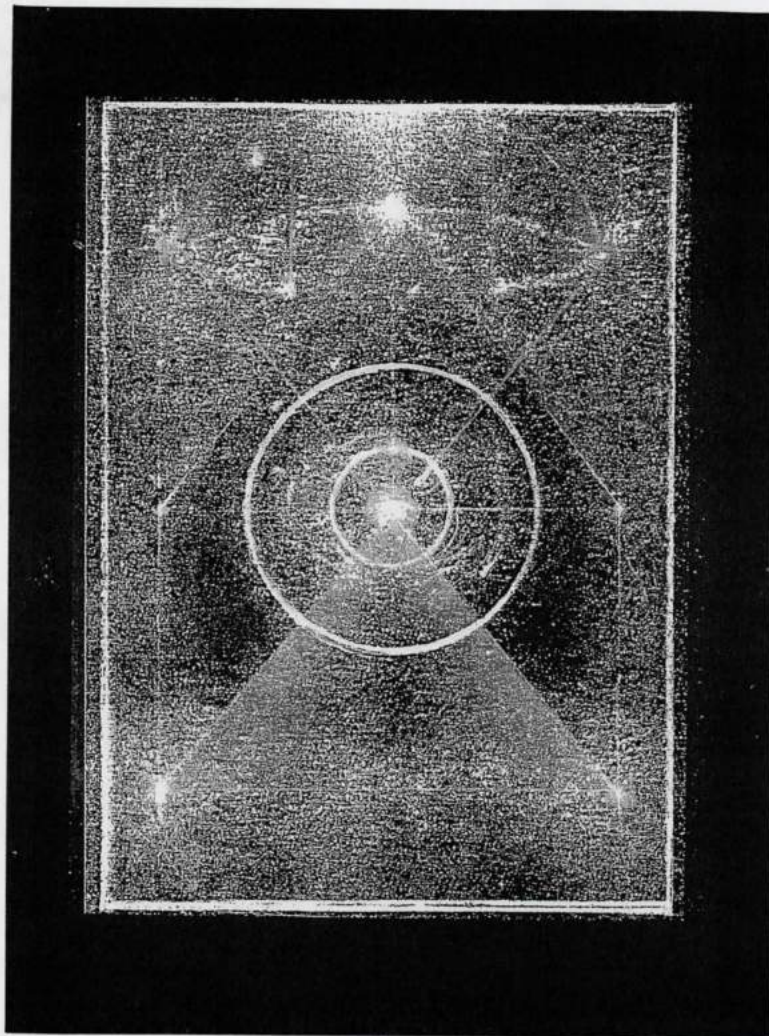
Animation Journal, Spring 1999

knowledge of different religions (Jewish Cabala and Tibetan Buddhism) in a united visual form, seeking the universal truth of life. In his recent double triangle composition, *Predestination*, he explored the path through different realms and the connections between the material world and the spiritual world, current life and after life.

Belson has worked with the distinct 'two triangles pointing up' structure in quite a few images. He considers it a very important structure; in it he has worked out many things. The two triangles represent the two realms: the above is the spiritual or sacred and the below is the profane or worldly. The two realms meet at the center and are united into one, which suggests a way of getting into a higher state of consciousness, to become one with the universe while being still here on earth. These triangles are shapes of many functions: a beam of light from above, a path to the higher realm, a roof of protection. It is a design that tries to create an understanding of the divine cosmic nature of all things.

It is not altogether surprising that Belson prefers to create his graphic art in series. He explains, "I always have worked that way. It ties in with my film work. It is like animation in a way, frame by frame." Belson's series of images also provide a record of evolving imagery, which is very significant to the artist's work. He believes in working in a series to probe deeper into whatever he is doing, rather than approaching everything as a single, isolated, separate event. In recent times, he also likes to keep his images the same size. He points out that part of the creative unfolding is exploring all the various ways of dealing with the same problem. The series under the title "Creation: A Work in Progress" has a total of five image stages as its first sequence, starting with the cosmic egg shape. In this series, you will see the shell of the egg gradually gets more and more transparent to the point where it finally disappears as a kind of a ghost—it is just an outline or perhaps a memory. In the end, the egg has hatched and it has given birth to the stars in the galaxy and the universe.

Belson's creative process is truly experimental in nature. Ideas are just a starting point for him. He does not preconceive a piece of art and then execute it. Instead, he creates a situation that would best allow possibilities to happen and reveal themselves. He usually generates great amounts of materials first, with the subject matter becoming clear to him as he goes along. His inspiration comes from broad diversity and he tends to work intuitively, in whatever manner seems appropriate at the moment.

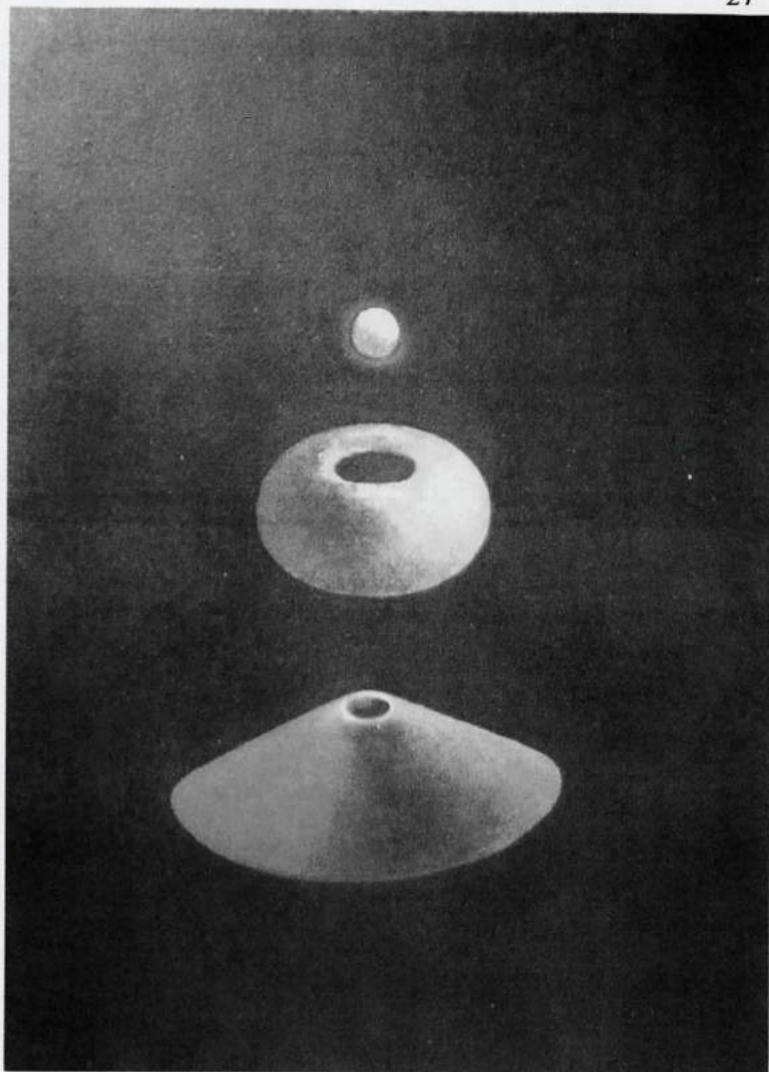


My House, by Jordan Belson (1998).

Many of Belson's images have a symmetrical structure and are centered in his compositions. He believes that it is important to reach the point of centeredness in image making, and explains that finding centeredness is not as easy to do as it might appear. I wonder if it is this centeredness that creates the sense of order and the joy of harmony in his work.

I noted that most of Belson's still images are in a vertical orientation, including his reworked film stills that originally

Animation Journal, Spring 1999



Painting by Jordan Belson, date unknown. Courtesy William Moritz.

were horizontal. This vertical orientation is at least partially an intentional effort to separate his still image art from his film work. To me, the vertical composition also enhances the association with spiritual experience, because it evokes the sense of vertical relationship between the above and the below, Heaven and Earth.

Animation Journal, Spring 1999

From Belson's point of view, geometric images represent things: things that are invisible (too small or too remote to see with the naked eye) or things that are internal and cannot be seen with the physical eye. The idea of juxtaposing non-objective and geometric imagery with realistic imagery is an idea that Belson is taken with right now. For example, in *Apparition* he includes the San Francisco skyline. One of my favorite images is called *My House*; it is composed of non-objective shapes that suggest the outline of a house. In different ways, both images reflect Belson's concern with humanity on the face of this planet. He is interested in the spirituality of a living being and its earthliness.

Belson often employs film stills, from works he made as much as forty or fifty years ago. He explains his desire to do so by saying, "I can bring a more informed and mature awareness of possibilities than I had at the time I did them." Recently, Belson has been working on a new series, "After Life," developed from still image prints from his film *Samadhi and Other Films*. Those images from films only serve as the starting points from which he creates new visions. He reduces these images to black and white, then introduces new elements into them and brings out their hidden forms and possibilities. Belson's recent exploration of the theme 'after life' comes in part from his advanced age, as well as his reading of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which he has done for many years.

Often in our conversations, Belson would share with me books he was reading and thoughts related to them. He talked to me at length about reading the biography *Hilla Rebay: In Search of Spirit in Art*, by Joan M. Lukach. He attributes his accomplishment in non-objective art making to Hilla Rebay's support during his young abstract painter years, and especially to shows of his work at the Guggenheim. He acknowledges that works of J.M.W. Turner and Kandinsky have had a big influence on him. Belson quotes Turner's phrase, "vagueness is my forté," as a supporting statement of his own images' character. He also appreciates works by some surrealist artists and has debated the different approaches of non-objective art; his tendency is to be relatively inclusive.

Belson's openness to technological advancement impresses me. Copiers, inkjet textures, and computer-generated effects all are welcome. I find it special that no matter how long he has been creating art work, his mind is always open to new possibilities, to what they can bring to art making. For instance, copy machines have contributed a lot to his image-making process, especially for working with a series. They permit him to work with multiple copies of one image idea, either in black

and white or in color. He can bring out different possibilities and develop many new stages or generations of images while still preserving the early ones. He defends the status of his color copy images by comparing their nature to reproductions made by traditional printmaking. He believes that we should move on with the technology of our time to accept a color copy as a valid art reproduction, just as we accept printmaking prints. He says, "I consider prints the final products of my image work."

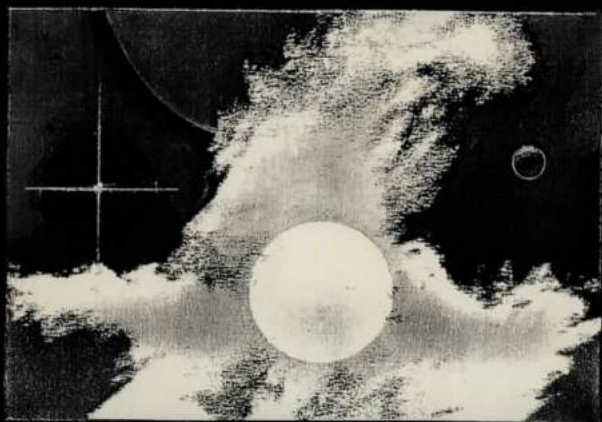
Here are some points to sum up my readings on Belson's graphic art:

- (1) His work emphasizes the universal and general, rather than the personal and specific.
- (2) Sacred Art is the nature of his work. Sri Ramana Maharshi's statement "God, guru and self are synonymous" lives in Belson's images, in his compositions where everything fits together in multiple perspectives, the micro and the macro.
- (3) Belson's work speaks of spiritual experience as an earthly human being. He emphasizes humanity and the very place where humanity resides.
- (4) Belson's non-objective artmaking is inclusive, not exclusive. He absorbs all that has something to contribute to art—all religions, cultures, science and technology
- (5) Belson strives for the intuitive and not the intellectual in art making. He looks within and lets the Universe present and reveal itself.
- (6) Despite its calm exterior, Belson's imagery is full of life.

Like his films, Belson's still graphic art also is capable of magically transforming the viewer. Few people who walk into my office do not sense the existence of Belson's graphic art on the wall, with its quiet power that grows over time. Like his films, his graphic art brings aesthetic, spiritual, and sensual experiences to the viewer. Both personal and profoundly universal, Belson's artworks—motion picture and still—are philosophical reflections on life, death, and the universe. However, his inner most visions are explored deeper and expressed most strongly through the unique visual language of his continued graphic art making.

Ying Tan is an Associate Professor of Art at the University of Oregon, teaching computer animation and communication design. Her creative work and research interests are in the realm of non-objective media arts.

© 1999 Ying Tan



Like his films, Belson's graphic art is constructed around mystical ideas. He seems to possess special sensibilities that allow him to see what others are not able to see and he is eager to share his vision through those mystical images; through image abstraction he reveals his understanding of the universe.
— Ying Tan