

The Lure Of Metal And Color

The Uzbek-Israeli artist Nathan Slate Joseph has had a life-long engagement with metal and color. For Joseph metal is something that is alive, something he relates to. Combined with his astute understanding of color, Joseph's art speaks to the nuances of the environment and his rich memories of time and place.

By Payal Uttam

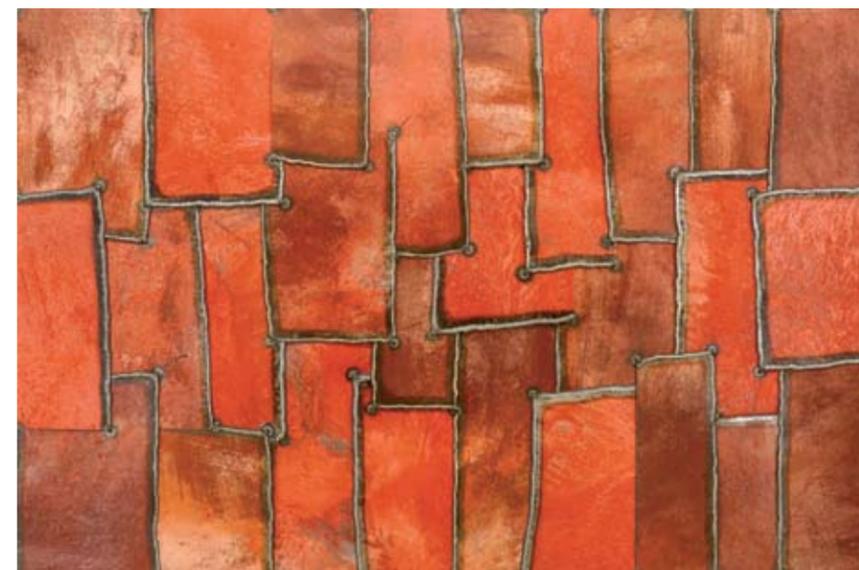


Nathan Slate Joseph, **Kimono Kimono**, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 51 x 51". All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

During the past 50 years, the Uzbek-Israeli artist Nathan Slate Joseph has fashioned one of the most intriguing careers in contemporary art. He is certainly one of the most notable individuals to emerge from the New York School of Art. A wide range of personal and professional influences have shaped his career, among which are the sights, sounds, and colors of his childhood in Israel and his experiences of Mexico and the Caribbean. His relationships with artists such as Larry Rivers and John Chamberlain were crucial to his development as an artist. Joseph says, "They opened me up and I was ready to be opened. It's not about the materials we share but it's about the mind. Even though we were from different parts of the world, we looked at things in a similar way. They talked art all the time and they showed me different ways of looking at things. They were very educated in a way that I wasn't. I brought a different [kind of] education with me."

Contact with the work of such artists as Frank Stella, Claus Oldenburg, and Carl Andre also played an important part in Joseph's education. And there was the drama of New York's wild side, too, to inform his art and life. "You had to meet people in person, hang out in the same places and go to the same parties. So you had hand-to-hand combat or hand-to-hand love," says Joseph. "It was the golden era, from sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, but in that context you had to create art. There was a lot of freedom and we tried to change the world." This lifestyle fitted Joseph well as did the new art movements that embraced assemblage art, gestural sculpture, and junk art. This creative freshness helped Joseph to come of age as an artist.

Above all, however, Joseph's artistic output has been formed by his choice of materials, his keen understanding of color, and his concern for the environment. Scavenging for metal junk, from old typewriters and air-conditioner ducts to stove parts and scraps of steel on the streets of New York, as a 16-year-old just arrived in the city, taught him a great deal about the urban environment in which he lived and about the value of metal as an art medium, something which



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Punjab Mist**, 2008, pigment on galvanized steel, 48 x 73".

resonated with his Mediterranean past. "I grew up around metal. I don't relate to paper and canvas in the same way. Somehow they're too precious," says Joseph. "Metal is alive in a sense, you can have a life and a relationship with it."

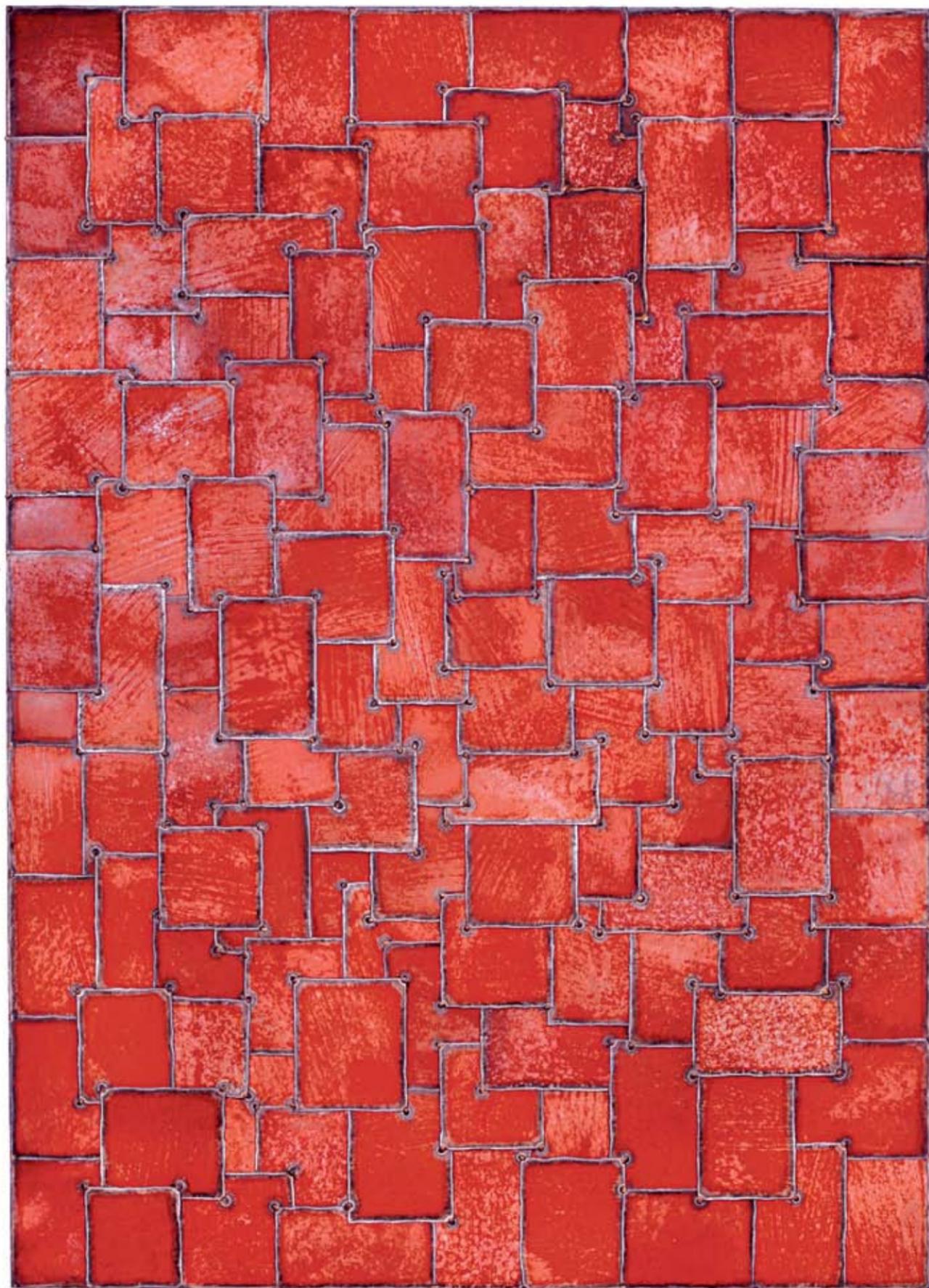
While other artists around him assembled untreated metal or found objects into sculptures, Joseph took a different path. He stained scraps of steel with

vibrant pigments inspired by his childhood in Israel. He then weathered the colored metal with earth, fire, water, and ether. By the late 1970s, Joseph had created his own singular identity within the junk art movement. His vibrant metal wall reliefs and paintings were unlike anything his peers produced. His engagement with nature, too, as well as his growing understanding of the nuances of color, set him apart and characterized his important contribution to the new art world in which he moved.

Nathan Slate Joseph was born in 1944 in Israel but his art education did not really formally begin until 1964, when he entered the Arts Students League in New York where he studied painting and sculpture. To pay the rent, he worked as a stringer for news agencies Agence France Press and Deutsche Presse-Agentur. Through this experience Joseph acquired a basis in photography, an art form that he continues to explore. He also attended the New School for Social Research, the International School of Photography, and the Pratt Institute. This varied background and his intense interest in New York's street junk triggered Joseph's early assemblages. Yet, Joseph is skeptical about junk and how it is perceived. "I don't believe there is 'junk' or 'found objects,'" he says. "For me



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Blue**, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 24 x 20".



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Bukhara**, 2007, pigment on galvanized steel, 84 x 60".



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Spices and Silk**, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 5 x 15 feet.

it's all chosen material—what one discards, I can use." And so he has, as is clear from the various metal objects that he has assembled into raw, robust compositions.

Joseph's initial experiments were wall collages, for as he says he wasn't ready to make freestanding sculpture. He was more interested in inserting the grittiness of the urban world into the home—the rusted, worn objects within the sterility of domesticity. He focused on people's estrangement from the natural world. He questioned people's discomfort with outdoor elements inside their living space. By reclaiming abandoned materials, he prompted viewers to ponder their own footprint on the planet as well as to develop his own relationship with the environment, which became more central to his art.

By the late 1970s, Joseph moved away from recognizable objects and into more abstract, color-driven work. A visit to Larry Rivers's studio in the coastal city of Zihuatanejo, Mexico, spurred this shift. In Mexico, Joseph discovered pure-mineral pigments. In an effort to give more depth and texture to his painting he folded mineral-pigment granules into oil paint. He began to experiment with pigments, mixed with water, on scrap metal, engaging the natural elements in his process. Joseph

was fascinated by the unadulterated color of inorganic pigments. Even more compelling was that the pigments entered the metal's surface without the aid of linseed oil or a binder.

Joseph began curing scrap metal with intensely colored pigments. Working in his outdoor studio, he laid sheets of steel flat on the ground and showered pure mineral pigments and water onto the surface. He brushed color gradually into the support. Once saturated, the plates were exposed to wind, rain, and sun, which yielded unexpected patinas and surface details. In the course of several weeks, he doused the steel in water and occasionally introduced further pigments. Coaxing the process with acids, Joseph changed the metal. "I cut the metal with oxyacetylene torches, simple equipment that is used all over the world. So both the material and the process become universal," says Joseph.

In early works such as *Looking It Over* (1981) and *Rust Cut* (1983), he experimented on roughly cut metal scraps, assembling them freely into vague geometric compositions. Often he used just three to four metal plates on top of each other. Initially, he focused on the texture of rust and the cuts made by the oxyacetylene torch. By the



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Looking it Over**, 1981, pigment on galvanized steel, 72 x 140".

late 1990s, he had refined his technique, cutting the colored metal into squares and rectangles, which he riveted together into tightly framed geometric compositions.

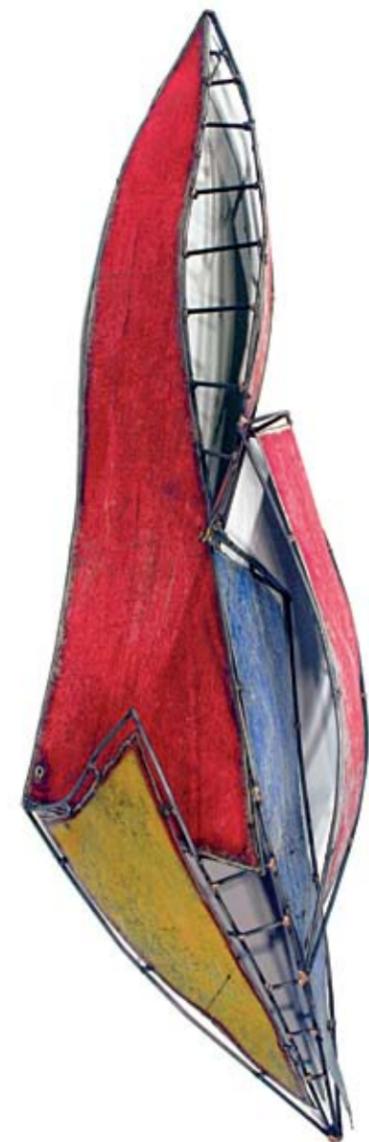
In recent years, Joseph has amplified the effects of pigment and rust on steel. His works have become increasingly three-dimensional with their patinas assuming a newfound sensuality. Venturing beyond the confines of his signature grid-like



Nathan Slate Joseph, **Rust Cut**, 1983, pigment on galvanized steel, 72 x 24".

works, Joseph has opened up to a more sculptural approach. Unlike previous compositions, his new works either leap forward into space or renounce the support of the wall entirely. Among the artist's latest explorations are wall-mounted, boat-like vessels and spherical floor sculptures made of intertwined scraps of metal. Each of his new forms is kinetically charged, implying movement and transformation. Grappling with ideas of recycling, his vibrant metal sculptures and wall reliefs successfully call attention to the fragility of the earth and the unwelcome reality of global warming.

One of Joseph's most compelling recent works is his 4.5-meter-long *Spices and Silk* (2009). Clouds of cobalt blue unfurl across a landscape of layered squares and



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Night at Kimono*, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 67 x 17 x 12.5".



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Kimono Evening*, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 97 x 28 x 14".



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Baby Kimono*, 2008, pigment on galvanized steel, 42 x 15 x 13".

rectangles. Passages of burnt sienna and chromium yellow seep gently into the metal. It is as though the work has arrested the very process of oxidization—fleeting colors are trapped as they turn into rust. Mounted on a support that protrudes about two inches, the metal sections are unevenly cut and held only by spot welds at each corner. Joseph deliberately left the welds raw and edges rough, as if inviting the viewer to be part of the action of making and transformation. Joseph makes no attempt to conceal his process. We are reminded that these are scraps of abandoned metal. There is an unremitting honesty about the work.

The title of the work itself evokes Joseph's Silk Road roots. His mother was originally from Bukhara, Southern Uzbekistan, and his father, although born in Frankfurt, settled in Israel at a young age. The color-infused metal of *Spices and Silk* recalls an ancient, worn tapestry or weathered fabric. The metal's

powdery surface looks deceptively soft.

Joseph's paintings also allude to recent times. In works such as *Punjab Mist* (2008), *Kimono Kimono* (2009), and *Taj Silks* (2009) the patchwork of variegated metal resembles the shantytowns the artist encountered during his travels through China, India, and Indonesia. Even closer to home, they reference the refugee transfer camps Joseph helped to build as a boy. The manner in which he layers the squares and rectangles in dense clusters suggests an aerial view of the corrugated metal shelters of refugees and slum dwellers. The metal pieces are scratched, worn and rusted. Pigment is distributed unevenly and the panels are fastened together so loosely (only one weld at each corner) that there is a sense of instability. In *Punjab Mist* and *Kimono Kimono*, each fragment is branded with a white border—a 'wound' created by the heat of the oxyacetylene torch. The use of this outline combined with the colored patchwork reminds one again of the haphazardness of temporary shelters.

Joseph's experiences in Mexico also inform his recent pieces. While working in Rivers's studio, he began to investigate the façades of homes washed in bright colors and the manner in which these colors intensified over time. "In a sense, this is what happens with my work, the pigment gets deeper and more saturated with time," says Joseph. "They have already been exposed to the sun and they retain their purity. It doesn't go any further than that. Their colors remain that way and this is essentially what intrigues me." In the painting *Blue* (2009), the various shades of lapis lazuli are so pronounced that it hardly seems possible that they might fade with time. The support has fully absorbed the pigment and almost every piece of metal appears to have reached its maximum capacity for saturation.

In recent years, Joseph has continued to pursue environmental themes while veering toward more sculptural forms. In 2005, he noticed the steel shavings that gathered on the floor of his studio. The piles of scrap metal triggered his memories of *khamsins*, the hot desert winds that would sweep across the Middle East in spring. "Where I was raised, *khamsins* would move across the desert and all the leftover weeds would gather and begin to roll around creating balls," he says. "I started seeing these tumble weeds or balls in my studio." In works such as *Urban Tumbleweed 66* (2009) and *Urban Tumbleweed 67* (2009), Joseph makes leftover strips of metal into unwieldy ball-like forms. Not only does he become more transparent in his process here but he also pushes the notion of recycling one step further. In essence, he

is reusing scraps from already scrapped metal found on the streets, once again urging people to reassess their wasteful habits. The sharp edges of the metal and the disheveled nature of the forms represent people's unwillingness or resistance to change.

Joseph's time as a child at the edge of the Mediterranean, playing atop upturned ships washed onto shore from war, also informs his art. His interest in boats grew while in Mexico and the Caribbean, where he observed old fishing boats lying in the sun peeling, aging, and oxidizing. Moving from generation to generation, the hull or belly of these boats would be scraped and repainted—their patinas growing increasingly complex. For Joseph, the bottom of a boat is like an ancient rubbing rich with narrative. "We came to know the new world on boats—they are interesting modes of discovery," he says.

In 2006, Joseph's boats emerged as a series of wall-mounted vessels. Tempered by time and nature, *Baby Kimono* (2008) is a richly hued example. Large fragments of colored steel are curved into a fluid amphibian form that recalls an upturned ship. The vivid patina colors of the metal are at once energetic and weathered. Long scratch marks stretch across the surface and patches of rust suggest the passage of time. Two pieces of rusted orange metal unite at the top creating the bow. A seam runs roughly down the center of the form like the keel or the spine. Toward the bottom, the pieces of green-blue steel fly in different directions quickly steering the imagination away from the idea of a boat. It is as though Joseph is deconstructing one of his wall reliefs. Twisting and turning the



Nathan Slate Joseph working in his outdoor studio, New York City, 2009.



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Urban Tumbleweed 66*, 2009, 28" diameter.



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Urban Tumbleweed 67*, 2009, 21" diameter.

metal, he lets it break free from a flat grid and assert its presence as sculpture.

In a boat such as *Kimono Evening* (2009), Joseph ushers in larger areas of negative space between the metal plates. Despite the freedom of this form, the armature of the work remains crisply defined. *Kimono Evening* is at once lithe and aerodynamic. Joseph is recalling the structure of airplanes here from his time on air-force bases in Israel; as early as age 11, he began training as a pilot where he first gained exposure to unpainted aircraft riveted together in panels. The curved metal plates of both *Baby Kimono* and *Kimono Evening* are indeed forms that might be found in a small aircraft.

Joseph's process is constantly evolving. New memories are continuously being given new three-dimensional form. As seen in his recent works, Joseph's exploration of color continues to deepen. "I have conversation with color like I have conversations with people. It's almost like when I talk to someone, and I am trying to color them. Are they blue, red, or green?" Defying boundaries, Joseph's art lies in the interstices of painting and sculpture; the natural and the manmade; East and West. As he says, "Art is not finding one thing you do and cashing in on it. You move on, otherwise you are stuck in one square. Those squares can engulf you." Δ