

# TALKING WITH THE WALLS

**Nathan Slate Joseph**  
at Sundaram Tagore  
Gallery, Hong Kong

**TEXT: CATHERINE HESSE**

## Standing in a room of Nathan Slate Joseph

works is a meditative experience. One is drawn into a tranquility that seems at odds with the expected dissonance that such a variance of colors could create. Joseph surprisingly presents us with a playful and joyous symphony of colors. The vibrant patinas of his steel collages and sculptures embrace you and lure you in. There is something primeval and all too familiar about them. They evoke memories of landscapes viewed from an airplane window, indigenous cave paintings, exotically patterned fabrics of the East, or stained glass windows of a church visited as a child. The memories that his pieces elicit are as endless as the gradations of color he unlocks in each work.

In his first solo show at Sundaram Tagore gallery in Hong Kong, the artist unveils his newly composed series of steel collages, wall-mounted reliefs and sculptures. After chatting with the artist one quickly assembles a tapestry of memories and stories that clearly infuse his work. "I grew up in the Middle East. My family's roots are in Bukhara and Kabul on the Silk Road. The influence of the colours and the emotional context comes from there," Joseph says. "When you start creating sculptural pieces, even though you are not aware of it, you start going back to the colors you were raised around. Being in Jerusalem and the Middle East all the colors exist in your consciousness." With titles like *Sari Blossom II*, *Baby Kimono* and *Punjab Mist* Joseph's works alluringly illustrate the influence and power held over him by the East.

Within Joseph's oeuvre there is a constant interplay of binaries harmoniously brought together and imbricated one atop the other—construction and destruction, exposure and shelter, industrial production and hand assembly, East and West, painting and sculpture. Whilst his love of color has its origins in his childhood memories of the East and love of nature Joseph's choice of form and material

owes its genesis to his experience as both Israeli and American. He was born four years before the official creation of the state of Israel, in what was then Palestine, against the background of conflict. Growing up surrounded by metal - the shrapnel of war, makeshift refugee camps for the displaced and dispossessed, the accoutrements of a new country rapidly militarizing; tanks, airplanes, arms- left an indelible impression upon Joseph. Metal was an ever-present material in his past. After moving to New York City, a city of concrete, glass and steel, it also came to represent his new prosperous life and also the possibilities of the future. In the 1960s New York was experiencing a surge of artistic experimentation and was in the throes of a cultural revolution. Sculpture in particular was breaking new ground. Artists like John Chamberlain, who soon became a close friend to Joseph, paved the way for a new sculptural form, bringing three-dimensionality to abstract expressionism with his crushed metal sculptures made of old car parts and junk. In this environment, surrounded by notable artists such as Frank Stella, Larry Rivers, and Chamberlain, it wasn't long before Joseph devised his own unique approach to sculpture, experimenting with the application of mineral pigment to salvaged scraps of galvanized steel—a material both cheap and once treated, easily able to absorb color.

For thirty years Joseph has been developing his technique. Working outdoors on the rooftop of his Brooklyn studio, he blurs the line between painting and sculpture, pouring and brushing pigment, water and acid on to scrap metal. Over varying periods of time, the pigment-covered plates are exposed to nature's elements—wind, rain and sunshine. The natural world becomes physically present in the forms of the works themselves, evident in pieces like *Spring Hall* (2009) in which the grains of sand, pebbles and leaves moving over the pigment, or rain drops falling across the pigmented surface ▶

leave behind their marbled and grainy imprints. From afar, this piece resembles satellite imagery of the earth—oceans, mountains, forests and the sky captured in every conceivable shade of blue and green. Here is nature beautifully utilised as a tool in the creation of art. Other works, exposed for a lesser time to the vagaries of the weather demonstrate a greater concentration of pigment. This lends the works a remarkably sensual, tactile quality, as demonstrated by *Man Red Sea* (2006). These works composed of heavily saturated plates of vivid red, are so textured and resplendent in color that the velvety works tempt you to reach out and touch them.

It is clear that Joseph derives a great deal of inspiration from the medium with which he works. Preoccupied with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, and colours, he creates a unique rhythm, energy and story for each piece. His earthier toned

steel compositions, like *Sari Blossom II* (2008) and *Untitled Earthtone* (2009) are composed of a patchwork of burnt umber, sienna and rust, giving the impression of an aerial landscape view of a sun-burnt desert, and divided parcels of land. Or maybe they are reminiscent of Indian shantytowns, or refugee camps glimpsed on past journeys. His *Urbanas*, composed of dozens of pairs of geometrically stacked cylinders, have a totemic quality inspired by Balinese temples, but they just as quickly call to mind the skyscrapers of his adopted city. His 'boats', jutting three dimensional wall sculptures, such as *Baby Kimono* (2008) similarly juxtapose the traditional with the modern. Drawing upon the form of tribal masks, they simultaneously call to mind man-made constructions, such as skeletal structures of boats and steel ships. Or, perhaps they are something more organic—a washed up fish or a scorched, sun-withered animal carcass.



right: Nathan Slate Joseph, *Baby Kimono*, 2008, pigment on galvanized steel, 42 x 15 x 13 inches  
left: Nathan Slate Joseph, *Sari Kimono Suite II*, 2008, pigment on galvanized steel, 48 x 14 x 9.5



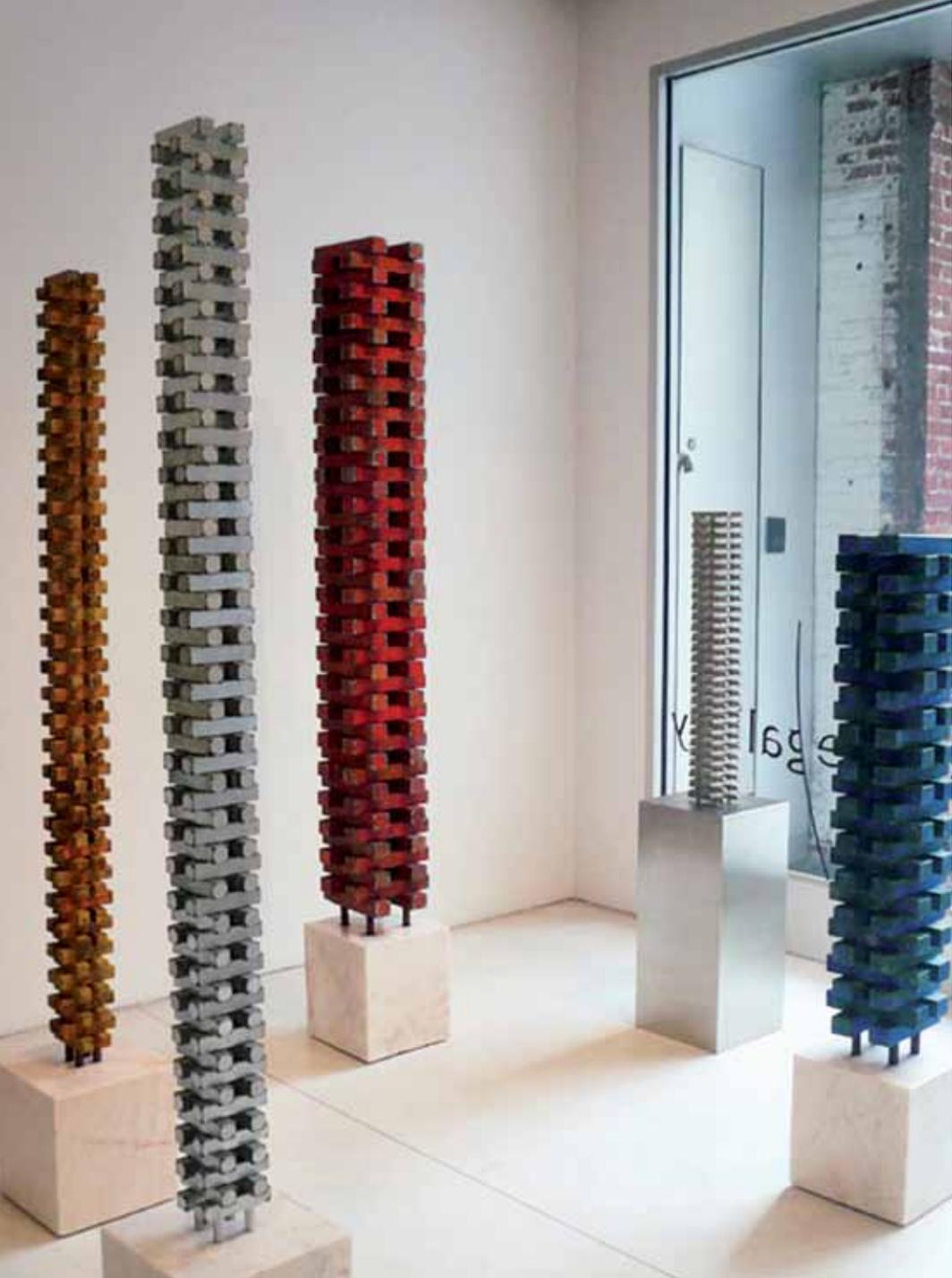
Nathan Slate Joseph, *Spring Hall*, 2009, pigment on galvanized steel, 84 x 48 inches

The nature of the material itself allows Joseph to expand sculpture's language and form, abandoning himself to the unlocking and exploration of the possibilities it presents. Squares and rectangles of steel are roughly hewn with an oxyacetylene torch in some works, giving each piece of flat metal a more sculptural quality. Others are cut with precision by machine. The relief of spot-welds and joins in the metal, or the delicate layering of the metal plates is accentuated if the work is viewed in dimmed light. Suddenly, the metal plates cast shadows



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Sari Blossom II*, 2008, pigment on galvanized steel, 84 x 48 inches

against one another creating depth and dimension. The artist revels in revealing the true nature of the material he uses and does not disguise its humble origin. *Julie Kimono* (2009) and *Sari Kimono Suite II* (2008) both incorporate and feature the holes, crinkles, dents and scratches which betray the material's previous incarnation. However, these flaws become integral to the pieces, adding value and uniqueness to the works rather than detracting from them. He takes what we discard and overlook and gives it a second life. ▶



By way of explanation of his choice in recycling materials Joseph says, "I used to drive around the city and pick up stuff. Coming from a place where material was not so available, I saw that in America, people threw away more than people could build countries with." Without assuming the role of preacher or didact Joseph's work encourages us to question the impact our own wastefulness is having on the environment, an issue that resonates with audiences globally. By taking humble discarded steel – a commonplace, left-over material of our consumption – and turning it into a work of beauty and contemplation there is an accessibility and democracy to Joseph's art.

Free of contrived mannerisms or definite subject matter, Joseph's art strips away the superfluous. Not only does Joseph draw on his memory and personal history, but he also invites viewers to do the same. Reduced to its essence in form and colour, there is a purity and openness to his work. He speaks a language accessible to all therein lies the beauty of his work. ■

*Talking with the Walls* Nathan Slate Joseph Solo Exhibition runs until June 6 at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Hong Kong [www.sundaramtagore.com](http://www.sundaramtagore.com)

below: Nathan Slate Joseph working in his outdoor studio, New York City, 2009  
left: Nathan Slate Joseph, *Urbana* installation, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York City, 2009

All images in this article are courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Hong Kong.

Uzbek-Israeli artist **Nathan Slate Joseph** creates raw, tactile works by staining shards of discarded steel with pigments and acid. Exposing the metal to rain, wind and sunlight in his outdoor New York City studio, he achieves unpredictable patinas and textures. Intensely coloured, Joseph's art straddles the realms of painting and sculpture, East and West, nature and the manmade.

Joseph has been an integral part of the New York School of Art for the past 30 years, in the same milieu as the noted American artists Larry Rivers, John Chamberlain and Frank Stella. Today, he is renowned for his works exploring globalization, immigration and climate change. For his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, Joseph presents a new series of paintings, freestanding sculptures and wall-mounted vessels.

Nathan Slate Joseph's work is in numerous collections worldwide. He has collaborated extensively with the renowned architect Adam Tihany and his work is installed at Jean Georges at the Trump International Hotel, New York; Inagiku at the Waldorf-Astoria, New York; one sixtyblue restaurant, Chicago; the Dan Eilat Hotel, Israel; and American embassies in Cyprus, Mexico and Turkey. Notable private collectors include John Chamberlain, singer Joni

Mitchell, and chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten. Recently, his work was acquired by the Zimmerli Museum, New Jersey. Joseph lives and works in New York. A catalogue accompanies this exhibition.

