

# **The Divine Chariot Series**

**by Bruria**

The Jewish Community Museum  
San Francisco  
May 15–July 10, 1986



An artist expresses the essence of reality by the image or images created. The images are, in fact, symbols. A "symbol" suggests special implications in addition to its conventional and obvious meanings.

The wheel is a common object known all over the world. Bruria's work, *The Divine Chariot*, delves into the symbolic significance of the wheel. It evokes "a myriad of symbolic references from the ancient world to the present."<sup>1</sup>

Ten years ago Jose Arguëlles predicted that a new vision would come forth in our culture. He described this vision as a "language of renewed archetypal significance based on a profoundly religious orientation." Indeed, Bruria is a leader in the fulfillment of this prophecy.

*The Divine Chariot* is Bruria's expression of the wholeness of herself as an artist, as a Jewish woman in the 20th century and as a spiritual person connected to the universe.

The symbols Bruria expresses beckon us to discover the mysteries of the Kabbala. *The Divine Chariot* was inspired by the 13th century Spanish Kabbalist poet, Abraham Abulafia. The work is based on an interpretation of the Prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Divine Chariot.

A function of symbolism is to move beyond the limitations of the fragment and integrate parts into the whole... each symbol becoming a link. Bruria links the present and the past, the ancient and the future. Her personal statements describe these links with her Jewish heritage, the mystical past and spirituality.

I wish to thank Jo Milgram for her essay and introducing Bruria and *The Divine Chariot* to the Jewish Community Museum. My special thanks to the always committed staff, Mary Lou Arum, Tim Keys and Susan Loder.

1. Melinda Wortz, Art Historian and Director, Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine.

**Helaine Fortgang**  
Executive Director, Jewish Community Museum

This exhibition is sponsored by The Jewish Community Museum Mr. Ralph Mishkin, Mrs. Chase Mitchell Mishkin, Mr. Jonas Rosenfield, Jr., and Mrs. Nina Green Rosenfield.

**The Jewish Community Museum**  
121 Steuart Street  
San Francisco, California  
94105

May 15–July 10, 1986



*The Placement of Power*, bronze, patina, 30 inches

Cover: *Interaction on the Line*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, photo by Terry Sutherland

# The Divine Chariot Series

by Bruria

## An Homage to the 13th Century Spanish Kabbalist Poet, Abraham Abulafia

In the past four years I have been translating the writings of Abraham Abulafia, *Interpretations to More Nevochim*, a commentary on Maimonides Guide to the Perplexed. Abulafia, born in Saragosa, Spain in 1238, was a Kabbalist, rabbi and poet. He was considered a master of Tzeruf (combination), an anti-rationalist technique of meditation based on the permutations of the Hebrew alphabet. He was an exponent of prophetic Kabbala, a universalist and a mystical rabble-rouser.

Abulafia's comments on the Kabbalists of his time is timely today: "Only change, new life and new interpretations of the time worn systems would revive them. Human beings, vehicles for change, resulting from spiritual experience, could vitalize the old traditions and make them worthy of being passed down to new generations."

As a woman entering this realm of study and mind expansion, I find that creation and the passing of information, a search for truth and a continued source of inspiration is a very natural and comfortable involvement for me.

The works in this exhibition were directly inspired by my work on Abulafia's manuscript and the Prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Divine Chariot (*Merkavah*). It took three and one-half years to create the bronze wheels, 10 acrylic paintings on paper, five artbooks, and most recently, five acrylic paintings on canvas. It also took me on a journey to Spain to search out the 11th to 14th century centers of Kabbala in Gerona, Toledo and Cordova.

The four bronze wheels deal with symbolism, myth and transformation. The wagon wheel, a symbol of the circle, depicts the Universe. The ten spokes of the wheel represent a holy number. In the mystical tradition "no holy thing is ever less than ten." In my work, the tenth spoke is always in transition, becoming an organic form. The hands symbolize creation, and the Hebrew letters refers to the system of numbers and structures. The paintings of acrylic are on paper and canvas; they are the permutations of the letters Alef and A. The technique on the paper work is similar to the Japanese Sumi painter, immediate, no erasing, and only complete inner control. The art books have been created from handmade paper (Gampi, Bird of Paradise, and commercial parchment paper); they are three-dimensional forms.

The material has taken me on a continuous journey, a journey into the past and the future at once.

**Bruria**  
1986

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## Their Wheels and Symbols

Probably the richest source of authentic Jewish imagery and symbol is to be found in the *alphabet*, the Hebrew alphabet. The letters reflect the view that God used them as tools with which to create the universe. According to Jewish mysticism, the letters tell not only how evil came into the world (the shattering of the vessels of light), but also point to the cure, the repair of the world, *tikkun olam*, which is the human task. The letters are used as a vehicle of language, the medium of communication between God and humans; they individually sustain a dialogue with God. All this is accomplished by means of a tripartite symbol set: the phonetic, graphic, and numerologic modes of the Hebrew letters; how the letters sound, how they look, and what their numerical values are.<sup>1</sup>

Bruria's four works in bronze and nine works in acrylic on paper (permutations and combinations of the *aleph*) are compact visualizations of cosmological process as conveyed by two Kabbalistic symbol sets. The first is that of the *alephbet*, briefly introduced above. The second is the system of *sefirot*, emanations of God visualized diagrammatically as spheres of light, and sometimes as an abstracted tree or human figure. These symbol sets interact with each other to convey something about creation, the nature of God and of humanity. Bruria's work is rich in accessible metaphor and authentically Jewish not only in its

content but in its tendency toward abstraction which frees the viewers from the seductive limitations of the representational image and invites them to "read in" their own free association and commentary.

The remainder of this essay will deal with these issues: how the *alephbet* works as a phonetic, and graphic symbol set; and how Bruria's "reinvented" wheel works in a familiar yet novel way. In fact it works so well that the Jewish particular harmonizes precisely with the universal imagery recounted in the history of religions.

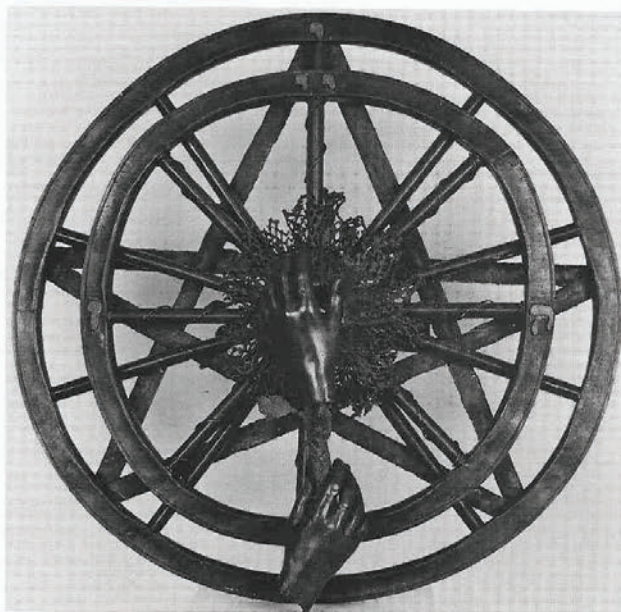
## How the Audible Aleph Connects Us with God

Everyone understands that receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai is an image of Israel's experience of God and acceptance of the authority of Torah. After all, we received a clearly defined set of doctrines whose direct meaning negates any mystic tendency to infinite interpretations.<sup>2</sup> The mystics however, emphasize the "experience" part of revelation. They ask, what did we actually hear when Israel received the Ten Utterances? Some traditions say we heard it all; others say that we heard only the first two, and were so terrorized by the Divine presence that we implored Moses to mediate the remaining eight.

Rabbi Mendel Torum of Rymanov (d. 1814) made the puzzling statement that Israel heard only the first letter, of the first word, of the first utterance. Now the first word is *anokhi*, "I am." The innocent reader might think, "well, what's so puzzling about that?" So we heard "A." But the initiated knows that the first consonant is an *aleph*, and an *aleph* has no sound of its own; it is a silent letter.

What then did we hear in the silence? The late Gershom Scholem, doyen of the science of Jewish mysticism, explains that the *aleph* may be said to denote the source of all articulate sound, the "potential sound of a divine larynx, as it were, about to speak." In that way, Rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation at Sinai into a mystical revelation "pregnant with infi-

nite meaning but without specific meaning." It remained for Moses to translate the nonverbal into the human linear language of the receivable Torah. Scholem writes that the word of God made itself heard through the medium of human language, which is one of the most important legacies bequeathed by Judaism to the religions of the world. It means language is the connection between us and God. And Rabbi's Mendel's image is a powerful reminder of that principle, whenever the eloquently silent *aleph* configures before our eyes.



The Power of One, bronze, patina, 30 inches



1. Ronald Kiener, "Hebrew Language as Metaphor for Emanation in 13th Century Qabbalah," paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, 1982.

2. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 29ff.

## How the Visible Aleph Connects Us with God

The first calligraphic stroke of the *aleph* is an apostrophe, which is a tiny horizontal mark ending in a tiny vertical. But even before it can move in either direction, it is a tiny dot; you might say, like a puncture into space. Primitive humanity instinctively knew they could access the Divine Presence by metaphorically poking a hole into space and inviting God in. The apostrophe part of the *aleph* is in fact a yod, the letter which is God's signature so to speak, evidence of God's vertical/horizontal presence in space. This tiny opening into sacred space is a center point of absolute beginning where all creation takes place. It has acquired many names in the history of religions: Divine Egg, Hidden Seed, Root of Roots. The cord which in turn connects us to this sacred source is often called the "axis of the world." It is the vertical stroke of the *aleph* (some call it the *vov* stroke); it is the stairway to heaven; it is the Mountain of the Lord; it is Jacob's ladder.<sup>3</sup> The second yod stroke at the bottom of the *aleph* symbolizes humanity, created in the image of the Divine. In this way, the visible *aleph* is a God connection: upper and lower yod are God and mankind, respectively, while connecting *vov* stroke is the "how" of the relationship.

## The Alephbet Creates the World, and the Wheel, of Course

An ancient fragment from the Midrash Tanhuma presumes a conversation between the Holy One and Torah as God prepares to embark on the work of Creation. "I request laborers." The Torah replies, "I put at your disposal 22 laborers, namely the 22 letters of the *alephbet*." These 22 letters and the first 10 numbers are established in the Sefer Yetzirah (3rd century C.E.) as the tools of creation, through whose combinations, everything comes into being. It is illuminating to observe in this connection that in Greek, elements and letters are the same word (*stochiol*). These elements/letters are in strong evidence on Bruria's bronze worlds of creation. In *Power of One*, the first ten letters circle the circumference, terminating in God's name, the double yod. In *Creation-Divine Influx-Shefa* they additionally mark the upper spokes as divine words creating abundance. In *The Power of Many*, the *aleph* and *hey* are God's breath which keep the wheel turning.

## The Hub of the Wheel as Sacred Center

The sacred center opening which is mainly conceptual in the *aleph*, (the ten works in acrylic on paper) is visually more explicit in Bruria's bronzes, where it is the hub of each of four worlds of creation. Seen in profile, the hub appears as the knob of a cosmic door. Only the human hand can open it and admit the Hidden Light. Only the human being can invite (or block) God's presence. Biblical images are also in evidence. In *The Power of Many*, the axis of the world is the Tree of Life; the only one of the spokes/sefirot which carries arborescent growth. In *Creation-Divine Influx-Shefa* the four rivers of Eden emanate from the hands at the center. The four rivers

of Eden is a verbal mandala, a quaternity image more explicit in *The Placement of Power*, where each spatial direction is marked by the presence of its guardian angel, Uriel, Michael,<sup>4</sup> Gavriel, and Raphael. A quaternity mandala as an instrument of meditation conveys safe grounding, peace and calm, signifying stability and rest.<sup>4</sup>

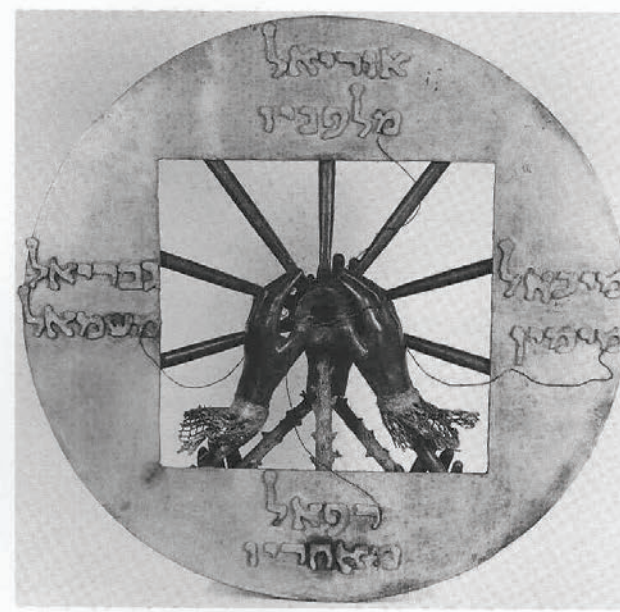
## The Divine Chariot—The Merkavah, a word about the word

Ma'aseh Merkavah, "the work/story of the chariot" is only one of the many terms used, during a period of more than 1500 years to designate the mystical movement, its teaching, or its adherents.

Bruria's choice of wheel as artistic metaphor works well on several levels.

As a bearer of the chariot, it rapidly rolls the communal and personal historic, religious and mystical experience, out of the hoary past, into our present, and quickly beyond it. (And anyone over 25 knows how fast that is.)

Why chariot? God is called the rider of the clouds (Psalms.68.5), and rider mounted upon the cherubim (Ps.18.11), gliding on the wings of the wind. Rider and chariot share the same root (*rokhev, merkavah*). It makes sense that mystical yearning and searching would transport one to the heavens, to angels cherubs, and their orbits. Finally it works linguistically on yet another level. The same root means "complex." It first appears in the Talmud where it is used to describe the grafting of plants: the new plant "is caused to ride" *murkav*, on the old, much as Bruria's signs and symbols ride grafted to her orbiting wheels; growing the secrets of human and divine being and belonging.



The Placement of Power, bronze, patina, 30 inches

Jo Milgrom  
Center for Judaic Studies,  
Graduate Theological Union,  
Berkeley, California

3. Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), introduction.

4. Edward Edinger, *Ego and Archetype* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), p.182.



## Bruria

### Education

Alfred University, Alfred, New York  
Seminar Hakibutzim, Tel Aviv, Israel

### Awards

California Arts Council, 1976-78

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1986 *Permutations on the Letters Alef + A*  
Bertha Urdang Gallery, New York
- 1985 *The Divine Chariot*  
Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum, Los Angeles  
*Nine Books for the Poet*  
University of California, Los Angeles, Art Library
- 1982 *Tradition in Transition*  
University of California, Irvine  
*New Work in Handmade Paper*  
Meredith Niles Gallery, Santa Barbara  
*The Transformation Series*  
Tom Luttrell Gallery, San Francisco
- 1972-82 *The Berrigan Series*  
*Shell Forms and Masks*  
*Kerchief Series*  
*Introspective Series*  
*The Edge of Change*  
Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1980-81 *The Complete Head Series*  
Desert Museum, Palm Springs  
*The Complete Head Series*  
De Saisset Art Museum, Santa Clara
- 1975 *The Erosion Series*  
Roberts Gallery, Santa Monica
- Selected Group Exhibitions**
- 1985 *The Seeing Eye*  
Invitational, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles
- 1984 *Book Art*  
Otis/Parsons Art Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1980-84 *The American Porcelain Show*  
Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.  
Traveling to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, and India.
- 1983 *Icons and Images for Children of All Ages*  
Dedicated to the memory of Nancy Hanks.  
Sponsored by the Museum of African American Art.  
The Clark Humanities Museum, Scripps College, Claremont
- At Home*  
One-of-a-kind book.  
Invitational, Long Beach Museum of Art
- 1980 *The Mask as Metaphor*  
Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles
- 1979 *The Ambiguous Self*  
Galleria Il Tragheto, Venice, Italy  
*West Coast Spectrum*  
Security Pacific National Bank, Los Angeles
- Artist as Critic*  
Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Bamsdall Park
- 1978 *Metamagic*  
California State University, Dominguez Hills
- 1977 *Overglaze C/019-017*  
California State University, Fullerton  
*Four Artists*  
Woman's Building, Los Angeles
- 1976 *Magical Mystery Tour*  
Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Bamsdall Park

### Selected Collections

Renwick Gallery, National Museum of Fine Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The Muchmore Collection

Eric and Liza Lidow Collection

### Selected Bibliography

#### Books:

Watson-Jones, Virginia. *Contemporary American Women Sculptors*. Oryz Press, 1986

Axel, Jan, and McCready, Karen. *Porcelain, Traditions and New Visions*, p. 186. Watson, Guptill, 1981.

Hunt, Kendall. *History of American Ceramics*, p. 234.

Wilding, Faith. *By Our Own Hands*. Double X, 1977.

#### Exhibition Catalogues:

*Bruria, An Homage to Abraham Abulafia*, Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum, June 3-August 18, 1985.

Raven, Arlene. *At Home*, p. 4. Long Beach Museum, 1983.

"Tradition in Transition." *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal*, No. 31 (Winter, 1981), p. 36.

Herman, Lloyd E. *American Porcelain: New Expression in Ancient Art*, p. 31. National Museum of American Art. Forest Grove, Oregon: Timber Press, 1980.

*L'Ambiguità dell'io*. Venice, Italy: Galleria Il Tragheto, 1979.

Levin, Elaine. *West Coast Spectrum*. Los Angeles, California: Security Pacific National Bank, 1979.

Shaw, Richard. *Introduction to Overglaze Ceramics*, p. 163-65. California State University, Fullerton, 1977.

#### Articles:

Tiberman, Marcy. "Bruria at Meredith Niles Gallery." *Images and Issues*, Vol 3, No. 5, April, 1983, p. 66.

McCloud, Mac. "Bruria." *American Ceramics*, Vol. 1, no. 4, 1983, p. 48.

"At Home Exhibition." *Artweek*, November, 1983.

Scholl, Jane E. "Witty and Pretty, Vital Exotic—It's American Porcelain." *Smithsonian*, February, 1981, pp. 113-16.

Weisberg, Ruth. "Bruria at Tom Luttrell." *Images and Issues*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September, 1981, p. 71.

Weisberg, Ruth. "Metamorphosis of Material and Form." *Artweek*, Vol. 11, No. 36, December, 1980, p. 4.

Muchnic, Suzanne. "Art Walk." *Los Angeles Times*, January, 1978.

Wortz, Melinda. "Porcelain Masks and Landscapes by Bruria." *Artweek*, 1974.

Kunzel, David. "The Erosion Series." *Artweek*, 1973.

### Lectures and Presentations

1984 University Betzalel, Jerusalem, Israel

1982 University of California, Irvine

University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Religion

University of Southern California, Los Angeles

ISC Conference, Oakland

1980 "Hot Seat," Camera Vision, Los Angeles

1979 Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Bamsdall Park

1978 Scripps College, Pomona

1977 California State University, Fullerton

1976 California State University, Dominguez Hills

1974 California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland

1972 Joan of Art Seminar, Tamarind Workshop

### Bruria's Breath

the 3rd face  
completely revealed

lips open to say  
ALEPH

begin

AH  
enter life  
exhale

exile  
soon enough

Exile  
the 2nd word  
but the 1st  
they both pronounce

Language born  
looking back into  
Eden's green silence

David Meltzer  
Poet, writer, editor,  
scholar, teacher



### Works in the Exhibition

#### Bronze Sculptures:

*The Placement of Power*, bronze, patina,  
30 inches

*The Power of One*, bronze, patina,  
30 inches

*The Creation=Divine Influx=Shefa*, bronze,  
patina, 30 inches

*The Power of Many*, bronze, patina,  
30 inches

#### Handmade Books:

*One Whole Book from One Whole Page*,  
watercolor, ink on parchment paper,  
9 x 11-1/2 x 1 inches

*A Book of Impressions*, Xerox, watercolor,  
oil crayon, ink, gold paint on parchment  
paper, 9 x 11-1/2 x 1 inches

*A Book of Symbols*, watercolor, gold paint  
on parchment paper, 9 x 11-1/2 x 1 inches

*Tree of Life*, Xerox, watercolor, calligraphy  
on parchment and tracing paper,  
9 x 11-1/2 x 1 inches

*Numerical Facsimile*, ink and gold paint  
on Gampi and Bird of Paradise paper,  
5-1/2 x 7 inches

#### Paintings on Canvas:

*Interaction on the Line*, acrylic,  
48 x 48 inches

*Broken Light*, acrylic, 48 x 48 inches

*Spatial Depth*, acrylic, 48 x 48 inches

*Alef*, acrylic, 18 x 18 inches

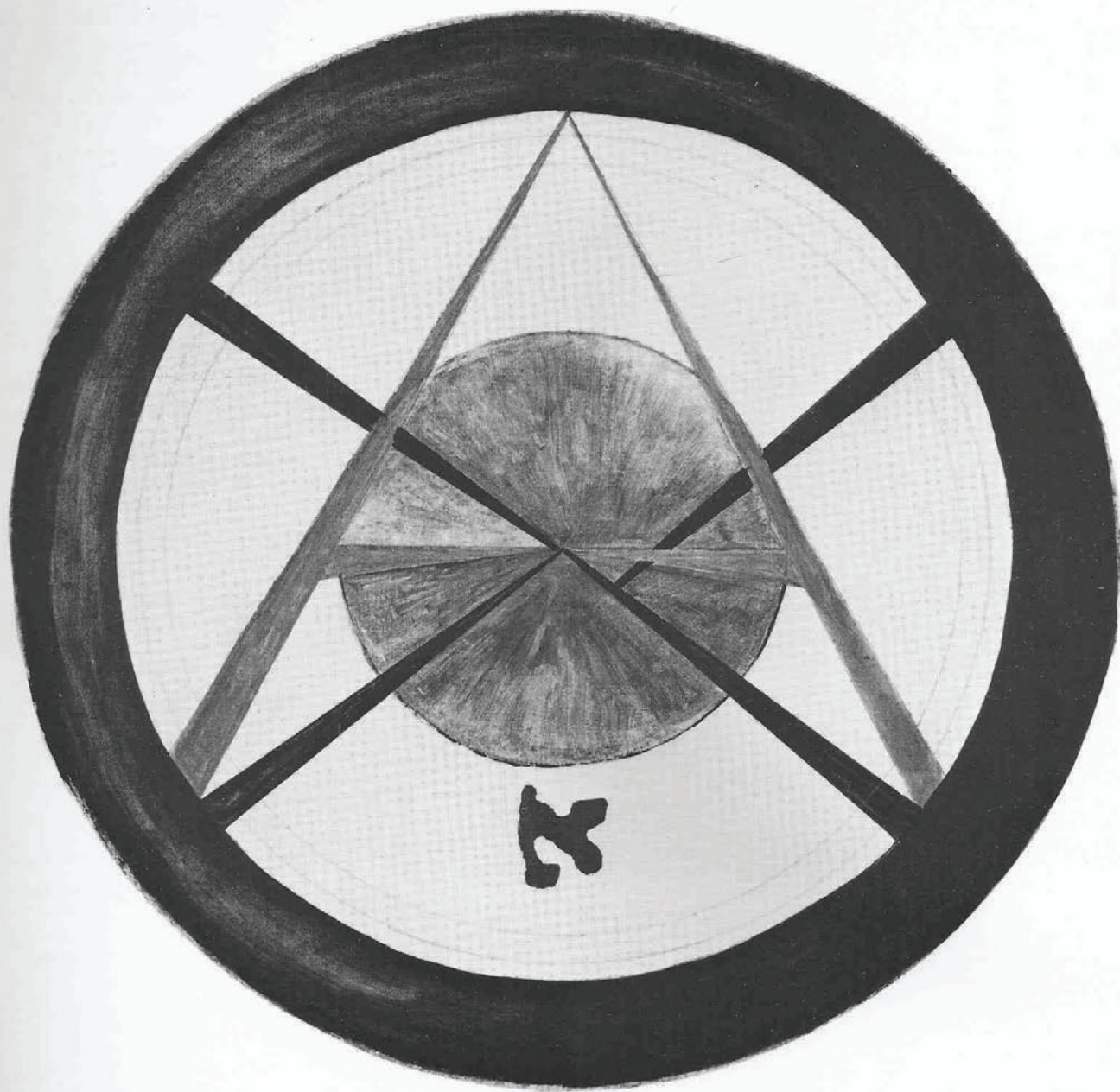
*Pierced Space*, acrylic, 18 x 18 inches

Nine Paintings on Paper:  
*Permutations on the Letters Alef + A*,  
acrylic, 18 x 24 inches



Photograph: Hella Hammid





*Permutations on the Letters Alef + A, acrylic on paper, 18 x 24 inches*