

## OBJECT AT THE LIMIT OF ABSTRACTION. CHROMATIC MORPHOGENESIS IN IVAN KAVTEA'S WORK

Between 1968–1974, he studied at the Republican School of Art „I. Repin,” Chişinău, Rep. of Moldova. Since 1980, he has been a member of the Union of Artists of the USSR (youth department). In 1988 he became a probationary member and from 1992 – a full member of the UA of the Republic of Moldova. Between 1989–1993, he was part of the „Phantom” artistic group in Chişinău. In 2002 he became a member of the Union of Artists of Germany (Saxony). He undertook a series of creative residencies, including: 1983 – Senej Creative House, Moscow; 1985 – Korovin CH, Gurzuf, Crimea; 1987 – Shorja CH on Lake Sevan, Armenia; 1995 – Brăila Plein-Air Group, România; 1997 – Tescani CH, România; 2010 – Villotta, Italy, and 2012 – Gaville, Italy. Between 1978–1999, he participated in numerous exhibitions in Moldova, Russia, and other republics of the former USSR, and 1999–2016 – solo and group exhibitions in Leipzig, Berlin, and other cities in Germany. From 2017 to 2023, he painted the church from his native village of Ocniţa, Republic of Moldova. His works are in private collections in various countries, as well as in the National Museum of Art of Moldova.



Ivan KAVTEA

### **Object at the Limit of Abstraction. Chromatic Morphogenesis in Ivan Kavtea's Work**

**Abstract.** The article analyzes the artistic evolution of Ivan Kavtea, an artist originally from the Republic of Moldova, later settled in Germany. His journey spans from traditional objectual realism to neo-abstraction, focusing on the use of pure color as an essential means of expression. The concept of “object at the limit of abstraction” defines his style, where realistic elements are gradually abstracted while preserving an allusion to the original referent, a notion inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy. Kavtea often starts from natural impulses and recognizable motifs, which he transforms chromatically and compositionally, resulting in fragmentary-abstract works. Compared to the evolution of Kandinsky's *Blue Rider*, his artistic path highlights a tension between figuration and abstraction, yet without completely abandoning the real source. The artist incorporates literary and philosophical influences, including writings by Vladimir Nabokov and the *Book of Genesis*, exploring fundamental themes such as memory, creation, and transcendentalism. Throughout his work, Ivan Kavtea promotes a neomodernist and conceptual vision, where color becomes the primary instrument of emotional and intellectual communication, upholding the principle that painting, like music, should express itself in an autonomous and abstract form.

**Keywords:** neo-abstraction, realism and abstraction, pure color, neomodernism, conceptualism, visual art.

### **Obiect la limita abstractului. Morfogeneza cromatică în opera lui Ivan Kavtea**

**Rezumat.** Articolul analizează evoluţia artistică a lui Ivan Kavtea, artist originar din Republica Moldova, stabilit ulterior în Germania. Acesta parcurge un drum de la realismul tradiţional spre neo-abstracţie, concentrându-se pe utilizarea culorii pure ca mijloc esenţial de expresie. Conceptul de „obiect la limita abstractului” defineşte stilul său, în care elementele realiste sunt treptat abstractizate, păstrând însă o aluzie la referenţialul original, concept inspirat de filosofia lui Ludwig Wittgenstein. Ivan Kavtea porneşte adesea de la impulsuri naturale şi motive recognoscibile, pe care le transformă cromatic şi compoziţional, ajungând la lucrări fragmentar-abstracte. Comparativ cu evoluţia „Călăreţului Albastru” al lui Kandinski, parcursul său artistic evidenţiază o tensiune între figurativ şi abstract, dar fără a abandona complet sursa reală. Artistul integrează influenţe literare şi filosofice, inclusiv din scrierile lui Vladimir Nabokov şi din „Cartea Genezei”, explorând teme fundamentale precum memoria, creaţia şi transcendentalismul. Prin întreaga sa operă, Ivan Kavtea promovează o viziune neomodernistă şi conceptuală, unde culoarea devine instrumentul principal de comunicare emoţională şi intelectuală, afirmând principiul că pictura, asemenea muzicii, trebuie să se exprime într-o formă autonomă şi abstractă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** neo-abstracţie, realism şi abstractizare, culoare pură, neomodernism, conceptualism, artă vizuală.

### **“The Object on the Verge of Abstraction”**

– By stating this phrase, Ivan Kavtea suggests that the subject or object in his work is almost completely abstract and not easily defined or understood in concrete terms. The noun “abstract” comes from the Latin “abstractum,” which in turn derives from the verb “abstrahere.” The etymology of the word “abstractum” can be broken down as follows: “ab-” – a Latin prefix meaning “from” or “away from,” and “-strahere” – derived from the verb “trahere,” which means “to pull” or “to extract.” Thus, in Latin, “abstractum” meant “something that has been extracted” or “something separated from.”

In his creation, the artist has travelled the path from the traditional objectual realism of the 19th century to neo-abstraction. In his quest for greater expressiveness, Ivan Kavtea turned to the use of pure color, which inevitably led to a departure from traditional realism toward abstraction, deliberately stopping at a boundary between realism and abstraction, assigning symbolic resonance to color and structuring the paintings based on color chromatics. Thus, Ivan Kavtea often begins his painting with a realistic motif, gradually abstracting it to the point where color acquires a symbolic connotation. He applies active spots, then pauses with neutral colours, only to intervene again with an intense hue. Often, he starts from the impulse he receives from nature, arriving at a color abstraction, at that “something that has been extracted,” without definitively abandoning the original archetype. Nature and objects borrowed (from nature) are, for the artist, material, a reference source, because “...what has been seen once can never be brought back into chaos...” (Vladimir Nabokov, “Other Shores”), and in this way, Ivan Kavtea transforms them into a work of abstract art, or more precisely into an abstraction, in which the allusion to the “original referent” is often preserved or encoded. The “original referent” is a concept derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, particularly from his first major work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. According to Wittgenstein, in *Tractatus*, language functions through a system of

correspondence between words (or sentences) and things in the world. This relationship of correspondence is what he calls “referentiality.” In this sense, paraphrasing Wittgenstein (transposing him into the visual-chromatic realm of art), the “original referent” would be the real thing or object to which an abstract painting directly refers, without intermediaries or further interpretations. In other words, the “original referent” is the concrete object or situation derived from reality, which the form and color in Ivan Kavtea’s work represent or faithfully describe.

He conducts very precise studies after nature, reviewing them multiple times, varying the color and composition, amplifying the intensity of each color to make it stand out at its highest note, or conversely, softening it into a mass of combined shades, transitioning from a realistic motif to a fragmentary-abstract composition. The entire range of colours is, for the painter, the most important means of expression for realizing his content-related intentions. He often creates series of works with the same motif, considering it, once found, self-sufficient and appropriate. He begins, in several sessions and on different canvases, to intervene over the motif, stylizing, transforming, and recycling it until the initial realistic interpretation allows the application of pure color, which the artist controls and organizes with the help of neutral tones, ultimately reaching a reminiscence. The initial motif becomes a re-interpretive pattern – a source, raw material, an object/subject brought to the edge of abstraction.

Such a subtle interplay between abstract and real can be observed, for example, in the series of landscapes with the same motif but created in different periods, to which he intentionally gives different titles, much like a parent names their children, where each bears its own name. “Village Motif”, “Gentle Winter”, “Festive Snow” etc. “Festive Snow” seems to invite the viewer to a meticulous study, detail by detail, under a magnifying lens, centimetre by centimetre, discovering various abstract motifs that together recreate a memory of the former landscape. Such mastery and freedom of dis-

creet interpretation of reality here reach a peak of virtuosity, especially in terms of color, chromatics, and minimalist simplicity.

“The Blue Rider” – the key character in the work of Wassily Kandinsky, galloping as if penetrating a process of significant transformation, a chronological journey that reflects the master’s evolution from realist art to the pioneering of pure abstraction. Initially, Kandinsky approached the subject of “The Blue Rider” in a realistic manner. In the first versions, the work depicted a visible rider on a horse crossing a landscape. The elements of the painting were still recognizable, rendered with enough detail to be easily identified. In this phase, Kandinsky was influenced by the traditions of Russian and German painting, with a focus on color harmony and composition. As his style evolved, Kandinsky began to simplify and stylize the image of the rider. It became less about faithful representation of reality and more about conveying an emotional experience through colours,

shapes, and lines. The rider and the horse were gradually reduced to essential forms, outlines, and patches of color, losing their figurative clarity altogether. Eventually, “The Blue Rider” became an abstract symbol, more of an idea or driving force than a literal representation. At this stage, Kandinsky was no longer interested in depicting a specific landscape or scene but rather a mood, movement, or inner energy. This transition from realism to abstraction in “The Blue Rider” reflects Kandinsky’s artistic development and his essential contribution to the birth and growth of abstract art in the 20th century, remaining a strictly modernist approach of the historical avant-garde.

Through his work, Ivan Kavtea proposes a neo-modernist, analytical, and conceptual discourse. By predominantly experimental and random methods, using colours, shapes, and structures that seemingly take the form of a spontaneous, haphazard game, these are at the same time deeply empirical and offer impulses for the



“Festive Snow”, 1987, oil, canvas, 100 × 80 cm

transformation of the objectual reality, lived and emotionally and intellectually experienced by the artist. Using the fascinating possibilities of abstract painting in the free use of color, lines, shapes, different textures, and structures, the artist still seeks to maintain a connection with reality and to indicate the source of the idea. Some works may have concrete physical forms, but the artist's intention and the viewer's perception place them on the edge of abstraction.

A series of works with the same motif: "Moldovan Winter", "Winter Day", "Rural Motif", etc. – if we were to imaginatively mirror-align it with the metamorphoses of the "Blue Rider" in the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, it could open a new perspective and to attribute a degree of interactivity between the artwork and the viewer. This experience is similar to watching a film, where the same scene is presented from multiple perspectives. Each landscape represents a "scene" of this static film, but dynamic in the sense of exploring tones and colours. The recurring motifs seem to remain still, but in reality, they evolve through a continuous tonal and chromatic transformation, giving the sensation of movement and internal development. Let us imagine that Ivan Kavtea's paintings, from the aforementioned series, could represent the panoramic view that would metaphorically unfold

before the Blue Rider. Thus, we would have the opportunity to follow not just a landscape, but a deeper story, where pure forms and colours become characters, and the narrative is woven from their interaction. This visual journey challenges the observer to discover new meanings in each painting, while each work contributes to a more complete understanding of the entire series. The result is an artistic experience that transcends mere contemplation, transforming into an exploration of the essence of forms and colours, in a perpetual search for meaning. However, Ivan Kavtea deliberately stops at that threshold before pure abstraction. To be continued... as it often says in the final sequence of a film, only that it will be a subsequent and different chromatic interpretation of the same "original reference."

Additionally, in the artist's gallery, we can notice a series of canvases derived from transcendental literary and philosophical concepts and ideas, borrowed from literature, music, theoretical writings, verses from the Bible, etc., which Ivan Kavtea visualizes directly through a primordial-abstract path.

"Moments" is the name of an abstract composition inspired by *Speak, Memory* – an autobiographical book (often called a novel) by Vladimir Nabokov, in which the author recounts a period of nearly forty years – from



"First Tying of the Vine", 1987, oil, canvas, 115×140 cm





“Landscape in Red”, 1991, oil, canvas, 72×114 cm

the early decades of the 20th century until May 1940, when he moved from Europe to the United States. Ivan Kavtea started reading it out of curiosity, discovering that the great Russian writer spent his childhood with his aunt and other cousins on one of the Wittgenstein family estates in the village of Kamenka (Podolsk Governorate), times that he recalls fondly in the novel. The current Camenca, placed on the left of bank of Dniester, is a city, near Ivan Kavtea’s native village (Ocnița, Camenca region, Republic of Moldova), a city which, after his emigration to Germany, became his second home, where, to this day, he continues to commute from Leipzig. He was overwhelmed right from the first lines of the novel by the depth of the transcendental and metaphoric discourse of the ontology of human existence, which anticipates the random and associative memories generated by the author’s childhood. “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour.” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*)

Out of a nearly childlike curiosity, yet deeply professional and artistic, Ivan Kavtea began il-

lustrating the verses of Genesis. The Artist-Creator aims to visually transpose that process, step by step, of creating the world from darkness, from the great void. “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Book of Genesis. Genesis 1:2). In many religions, including Christianity, the world is seen as God’s masterpiece – His “magnum opus.” This idea suggests that creation is a work of art of incomprehensible complexity and beauty, reflecting the greatness and genius of the Creator. Thus, the concept of God as an artist in Genesis can be explored through these parallels between divine creation and the artistic process, emphasizing the grand and deliberate nature of the act of creation. These verses open the account of the creation of the world, from the Bible, specifically from the Book of Genesis. It is part of the biblical account of the world’s creation, describing the initial state of the Earth before light and the rest of creation were made. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... God called the light ‘day’, and the darkness He called ‘night’. And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.” Thus, through various techniques (oil, acrylic, wet-on-wet watercolor), Ivan Kavtea seeks to visualize that creative act of the Creator.



“Flowering Trees”, 2002, oil/canvas, 122×100 cm

And if we are to refer to the phenomenon of idealization, we could allude to the transcendental idealism of Edmund Husserl, who in his work *Cartesian Meditations* mentions: “Realized in this concrete and systematic manner, phenomenology is eo ipso ‘transcendental idealism’, though in a fundamentally new sense: not in the sense of a psychological idealism, not in the sense of an idealism that seeks to deduce a world endowed with meaning from meaningless sensory data... This idealism is not a construction based on a game of arguments and cannot be achieved as the price of victory in dialectical disputes with ‘realisms’. It is the explication of the meaning of any type of existing object that I, the ego, can imagine, and especially the explication of the meaning of the transcendence of nature, of culture, and of the world in general” (Edmund Husserl *Cartesian Meditations*).

Regardless of the subject or interpretation and under any circumstances, Ivan Kavtea remains faithful to his artistic credo: “The problem of color as an independent means of expression is crucial for painting.” He loves pure and strong colours and feels a great affinity for the great masters who worked in the same direction, such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Minas Avetisyan, and others. He is a follower of Wassily Kandinsky, especially his theoretical works, believing that painting should

be as abstract as music. He follows Kandinsky’s principles that “...painting must achieve its own tonal background. This prophetic formulation of Goethe represents a premonition of the situation in which painting finds itself today, a situation which is the starting point of a path where painting will develop with the help of its own means, up to the level of art in an abstract sense, eventually reaching pure pictorial composition” (Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). “Working with strong colours is especially difficult because every wrong tone becomes even more obvious, like a false note in a loudly resonating song”, states Ivan Kavtea. His works are diverse combinations of chromatic relationships, varying in intensity and tone, an interweaving of pure, bright, local colours, with subtle transitions between shades, the contrast between warm and cold, from clear opposition to complete closeness and fusion.

“...In general, color is a means by which the soul can be directly influenced. Color is the key; the eye is the hammer; the soul is a piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that, pressing a certain key, makes the human soul vibrate intentionally...” (Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*).

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“Rural Motif”, 2013, acrylic, canvas, 81×115 cm



“Equilibrium”, 2002, oil, canvas, 87×100 cm





“Moment”, 2013, oil, canvas, 81×130 cm



“Moldovan Table”, 2002, oil, canvas, 115×100 cm





“Vernissage”, 2013, acrylic, canvas, 100×80 cm



“Golden Autumn”, 2013, acrylic, oil/canvas, 81×130 cm



"Untitled", 2005, acrylic, canvas, 81×100 cm



"Expectation", 1985, oil, canvas, 71×100 cm