



## **A Place for the Weary To Rest**

### ***Tobi Kahn's Meditation Room Offers Inter-Denominational Balm on East 62nd Street***

By **MICHAEL ITKOFF**

Counseling others can be draining, as the HealthCare Chaplaincy knows full well, having dedicated itself to providing spiritual counsel across the religious spectrum to those who need it most for more than 40 years. After September 11, 2001, its rabbis, priests and imams were especially busy bringing solace to the New York community — so much so

that the president and CEO of the nonprofit organization, Walter J. Smith, saw the need for a space where the staff could pray or spend a quiet moment. He commissioned artist Tobi Kahn to design a meditation room, directly off the waiting area. It opened June 20 on the fourth floor of the chaplaincy's main office at 315 E. 62nd St. and has increasingly become a place of refuge for staff as well as visitors.

Kahn, 50, has gathered serious momentum as an artist. He has exhibited his abstract landscapes, humanoid-like metal sculptures and painted chairs in about 40 solo exhibitions and more than 60 museums. But this is the first time he has tried his hand at designing an entire room, down to the minutest of details.

Kahn invited this writer to meet with him recently in his new meditation room. Immediately upon entering the room through a sliding-glass door, heaving and sweaty from the sauna of Manhattan, I noticed a calming stillness. Three chairs and two benches faced a multi-wall mural of an ocean landscape. Once seated in the center chair, I followed the artist's request that I close my eyes. He turned the lights out, and for two minutes we sat in silence. I relaxed and let the stillness of the room envelop me. Soon a combination of ambient noise from outside and the room's acoustics created a reverberation that I could feel deep in my head. Kahn turned on the lights and started to explain all the details that make the space special.

The room seats "one less than a minyan," Kahn said, i.e. nine people. Kahn wanted the room, a year in the making, to be conducive to meditation for both individuals and small groups. Accordingly, three walls are covered with a panoramic ocean landscape, with the horizon line lower than eye level to give the impression that one is looking down on the water — as if overlooking the ocean from a house — rather than treading it.

The landscape is deceptively simple. On one wall, a rough horizon line divides a violet sky from an aquamarine sea; another features a large island, and the third contains two islands set on the horizon. Kahn said the islands provide an anchor point and add a touch of comfort to what would otherwise be a vast ocean — peaceful but ambiguous. The texture of the wall is rough; as one stares at a patch of blue more subtle tones slowly begin to show through. Kahn used more than 30 layers of paint to achieve this effect, including modeling paste, numerous shades of acrylic paint and a couple of layers of washes.

Made of mahogany and covered with nearly as many layers of paint as the walls, the chairs have leather seats that hold the body's shape for a few minutes after a sitter stands. Kahn wanted the presence of the person to last after he or she got up.

A flick of a switch transforms the room's ambience. With the lights off, diffused light filters in through the room's glass door. Another switch illuminates the mock skylight, which bounces white light around a dome in the center of the ceiling; this gives a feeling of expansiveness above and enhances the serenity of the landscape. Other light options target the wall panels in various ways and with degrees of brightness. I found the room

most engaging with the light off, the stillness of the room encompassing me as the sweat evaporated from my skin.

The staff of the HealthCare Chaplaincy includes people from a diverse array of religions; Kahn wanted the room to be accessible to all of them. Anyone Jewish, Buddhist, Quaker or otherwise will find it an exceptional space for worship or meditation. Or it can be useful to anyone simply wanting to escape a few minutes of this sodden New York heat.