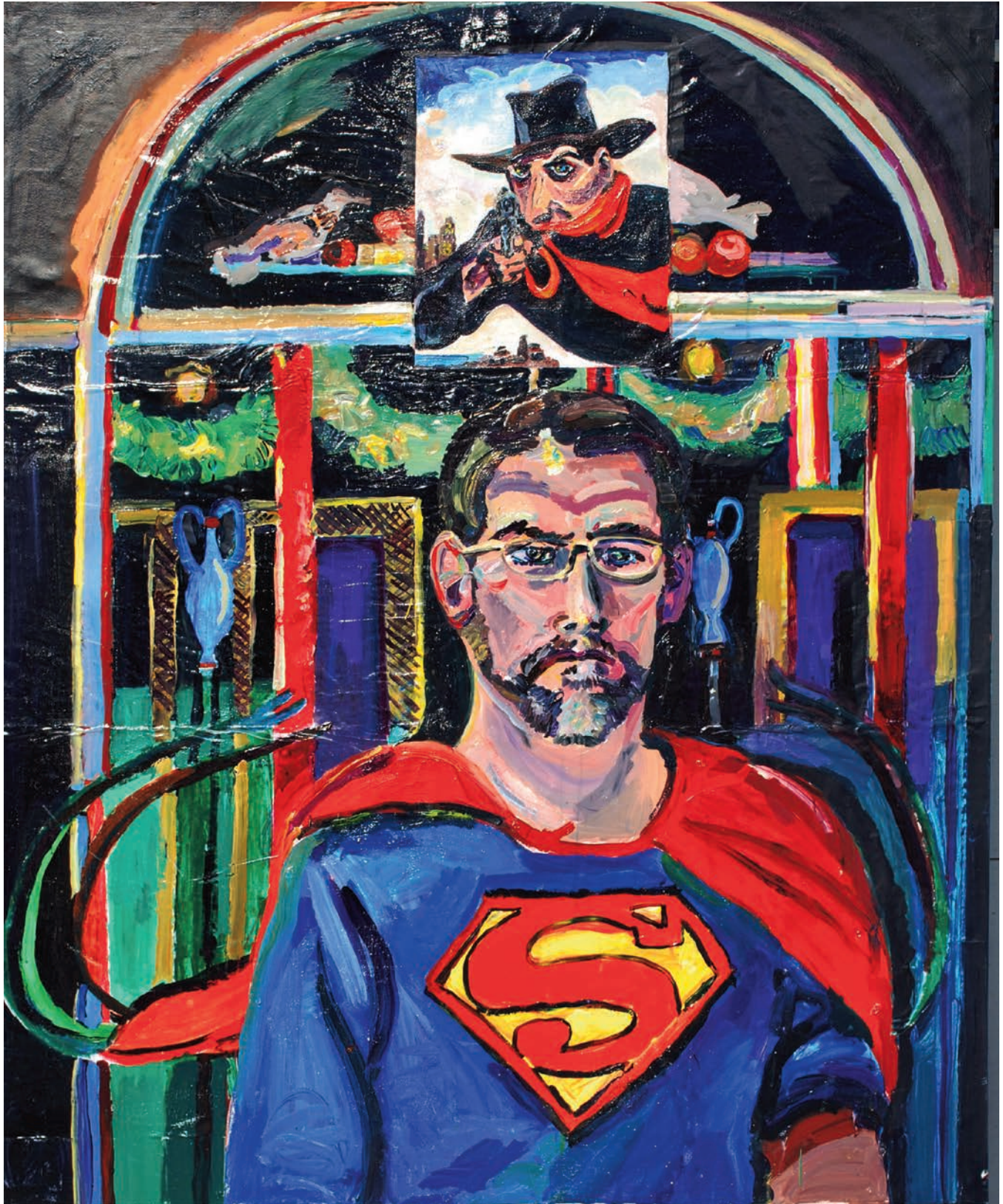


Jo-EI / Jore-EI:

Superheroes, Autobiography & Religion
The Art of Joel Silverstein





Cover: Jo-El/Jore-El, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"

Above: Francis Bacon's Superman, 2013. Acrylic on paper, 26" x 40"

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The Art of Joel Silverstein

March 23- May 16, 2014

Presented by Hadas Gallery, Rohr Center, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY

“Every Philosophy resolves itself into autobiography in the end” - Friedrich Nietzsche

I have always been a nut about superheroes, especially Superman. As a child in the 1960s, it was a particular time when superheroes and comics were corralled into a ghettoized genre, the realm of children, stunted adults and geeks. Reruns of *The Adventures of Superman* starring George Reeves played endlessly on the television; a big personal influence on my character despite the now current re-evaluation of its limited budget, special effects and padded foam rubber Superman suit. I was too young for the Marvel Revolution of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko which centered primarily on college students, yet I would come to this years later.

My interest in superheroes increased rather than decreased when I attended art school in the '70s. The use of comics wasn't new or foreign to art. Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Mel Ramos and even the realist Philip Pearlstein had used Superman and crew as subject matter. But rather than to mirror the earnest quality and expressionist energy of the comics genre, Pop Artists represented the deadpan irony of the '60s as contrasted to the "High Art" and high falutin' cultural traditions of Europe and America. They also represented a direct renunciation of mid-Twentieth Century Abstract Expressionism with its smug earnestness and posturing to sublimity.

My own trajectory in art was taking me in a different and personal direction. In 2009, I helped found the Jewish Art Salon, with Yona Verwer and Richard McBee. This group of Jewish Arts professionals explored their own cultural identities, but more importantly were not afraid to examine the specifically spiritual nature of their art. In educating myself about Jewish philosophy and culture, I read the works of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel and others, exploring art and religious ideas in a postmodern way. For example, the philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) uniquely blended Messianic Kabbalism with Communist theory to create the "Angel of History." According to Benjamin, the angel flaps his wings over the accumulations of a corrupt history as the wind of progress blows in from Paradise. This provides a weird, but satisfying view that history could cease and fundamentally begin anew, resolving the fundamental ontological conflicts of both individuals and society.

Suspiciously, this seems much like the superhero mythology of my early youth, posing the essential parallels between secular philosophy, comics and religious thought. Can history change and be redeemed? Can an individual evolve like a chrysalis in order to become a butterfly with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men? Clearly in the real world we have become cynical, beset by the problems of ourselves and our society in a shrinking and bitter landscape.

Luckily, art perseveres where reality cannot. This exhibition explores the theme of the superhero in large colorful figurative paintings observed from life. My family and I pose in costume, creating densely layered portraits and genre scenes. We, the family, morph into superheroes and as a result the hero motif is evoked, worshiped, criticized or even mocked. The inspiration and visual ideas come from Roman frescoes, Renaissance and Mannerist paintings. These classic works constitute part of the "heroic tradition" in painting which created a logic and iconography for the hero, one readily identifiable by the viewer. I interpret this language in a contemporary way to pose authentic

questions about the self; the act of living a heroic life in the modern world.

If any character is evoked in this exhibition, it is Superman and his ilk. I have always seen superheroes not simply as powerful or mythological beings like Hercules, but as avatars and harbingers of the metaphysical moral order. They more closely resemble the prophets and angels of the Hebrew Bible than the brawling heroes of the Greco-Roman universe. Many authors, such as Harry Brod, Simcha Weinstein, Jules Feiffer and others have commented on the unspoken Jewish content of Superman's origin story as created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, both Jews of the Great Depression on the eve of the Shoah. Kal-El, Superman's Kryptonian name, may be translated as "the voice of God" in Hebrew. The similarities abound. The name of his Kryptonian father Jor-El (originally, Jor-L) means "God is uplifted". The motifs of baby Kal-El's rocket ship evoking Moses' basket of the biblical text, the dual identity and messianic character of Superman himself have often led me to believe in the specifically Jewish aspects of the character. This message was not lost on me even as a child, as my name Joel means "God is God" (Ya plus El). So both Superman and I can be said to belong to the "House of El".

The signature series of the exhibition, *Jo-El/Jore-El*, is comprised of self-portraits posed in a Superman suit with surrounding studio props. While my middle-aged body is anything but muscular hero material, the parodist aspects of the series is augmented by the intensity of the visual and even religious meanings of the theme. Superman is the alienated self in the modern world, the super-ego of Freudian psychology, and the messianic ideal of Davidic renown. He is both what we all are and what we all can become.

In *Jo-El/Jore-El I*, 2013, my own image stands beneath a portrait of the '30s hero, The Shadow. This character is both an ancestor to the pulp tradition of Superman and a stern father figure possessing a Colt 45 aimed directly at the viewer. In a traditional religious altarpiece, the portrait at the top of the painting would be that of God the Father, placed above a depiction of Christ or the saints. In my own painting, the pulp character is standing for the Jewish God which cannot be represented; a shadow and metonym, a piece of the whole which cannot fully be shown or understood.

In *House of El*, 2013, I pose twice, once in my "civilian" clothes and again in Superman garb, inspired by a still of George Reeves. The jacket comes off and one can almost hear "This is a job for...!" The scene is modeled on both the *Villa of the Mysteries*, 60-50 BCE in Pompeii and the late *Pieta* of Titian, 1576. A rocket ship announces Superman's advent, while a severed head at the bottom the canvas is that of the mad android Brainiac, a dead ringer for the severed head of Goliath in the *David*, 1610 painting by Caravaggio. The Jewish nature of this character is telegraphed by the use of me as model, Jewish nose in tow, painted "in drag" so to speak, even as I wear a black fedora favored by observant religious males. The picture thus mixes Jewish, Pagan and Christian motifs.

During the mid-20th century, commercial movies offered wide screen Cinemascope in epic films like *The Robe*, 1953 and *The Ten Commandments*, 1956. These spectacles presented the viewing public with a stirring visual grandeur as well as kitsch-laden popular appeal. Their breathtaking narratives were commensurate with those of the Salon painters in the 19th Century, like Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Gustave Dore and Jean-Leon Gerome; painters of large scale, startlingly realistic religious works. The concept was to visually and thematically engulf viewers, to overwhelm them with a synthesis of artistic creation. In our own era, the large drip paintings of Jackson Pollock have been compared to the format of those particular movie screens. I became intrigued by the concept of scale and its inherent narrative possibilities. The exhibition culminates in a 16 foot acrylic mural, *Superman in Exile*, 2013. In it, a somewhat pensive and weary superhero confronts the ovens of the Holocaust and the horrors of World War Two. Showing parallels in time and space, the work also offers portraits of my wife and I posed under the elevated "F" Train in Brooklyn, a vision of Prague (home of The Golem) and the cemetery located outside my own home in Mahwah, New Jersey. Flanking the "Man of Steel" is Harry Houdini, magician and escape artist, another hero of Jewish origin and a

superhero in his own right. He is chained, hanging upside down and preparing for his deadly Milk Can Escape. Can Superman or even Houdini transcend death?

Jo-El/ Jore-El; Superheroes, Autobiography and Religion is my attempt to address what I know about painting and fuse it with my love of comics. I trace my own life and those of the people whom I care about through the history of the superhero. The time frame of the 1930s to the current era is strangely commensurate with the Modernist and post-modern periods, the era of the Existential self and various postmodern identities. While identity as a thematic concept has often been conceived as arbitrary or false in the philosophy of Deconstruction, we recall the old conundrum, "Which is the real identity, Clark Kent or Superman?" A chicken or the egg question if ever there was one, a better question to pose in the light of this exhibition is "If all identity is false, to what moral purpose can I construct a superhero identity?"

While I may never be a superhero or have such powers, I can paint one, wonderfully spanning the gulf between life and art. My goal is not to evoke the superhero character as some elemental power fantasy, childhood remnant or even Fascist ideal. I present a more symbolic, shamanistic and fragmentary representation, the gap in between experiential and linguistic descriptions. It is the tragic flaw between what you don't or can't get in this life and what may actually exist. The prophet Isaiah described the Messianic age as one where "the lion shall lay down with the lamb"; a geo-political vision of staggering import fundamental to every nation in the Western world, yet unrealized by any practical context of history. Similarly Jerry Siegel's original character was dubbed "The Man of Tomorrow" and decidedly not "the Man of Steel", a reference to the superhero as a transcendental, rather than merely an indestructible figure. He is in effect the symbol of a fulfilled humankind, replete with the potentialities of both truth and imagination. It is a symbol which our logical minds can dismiss, but is never really out of our presence. As the shirt comes off, our confidence and creativity are revealed by the letter "S" on a yellow chevron, cape fluttering behind us. We are born aloft, anew, and ever young. This exhibition is thereby dedicated to all those who engage in the never-ending battle, despite evil in the world and getting up for work.

I wish to thank Simcha Weinstein, Rabbi at Pratt Institute, Chair of the Religious Affairs Committee and Director of the Hadas Gallery, Rohr Center who believed in my art. Likewise I wish to thank Yona Verwer, President of the Jewish Art Salon who offered emotional and technical support, Richard McBee long-time friend and critic at the Jewish Press, Elke Reva-Sudin of Jewish Art Now, Ellen and Bobby Mass who worked on the catalog, Sarah Powers, Jenna Decuzzi and finally my wife Julie Seidman and son Jacob, whose unflinching support enabled me to continue painting and exhibiting.

Dedicated to the respective memories of Jerry Siegel, Joe Schuster, Jack Kirby, George Reeves and Christopher Reeve who in their own ways, all fought the good fight.

-Joel Silverstein

Please Note: The exhibition *Jo-El /Jore-El* presents depictions of characters and people. These images do not represent any trademarked characters or persons living or dead. The paintings and writing depicted are parodies and homages intended for personal enjoyment only and do not relate to any characters shown in movies, comics, games, television, print, or real life, but are original creations and wholly fictional. Give me a break guys, it's just me in a Superman suit. Besides the name Superman was used by both Freidrich Nietzsche and George Bernard Shaw first. Viewer's discretion is advised.

**This Exhibition is presented by:
Hadas Gallery, Rohr Center, Pratt Institute, and the Jewish Art Salon.
It is also endorsed by Jewish Art Now.**



Superman Surveys The Thunderbolt, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"



House of El, 2013. Acrylic on canvas and panel, 48" x 75"



Gentlemen, Krypton is Doomed!, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 48"x 73'



I Wish I Were Batman I, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"





Left top: I Wish I Were Batman II, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24"

Left bottom: I Wish I Were Batman III, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24"

Above: Joel in Arkham, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 63" X 68"



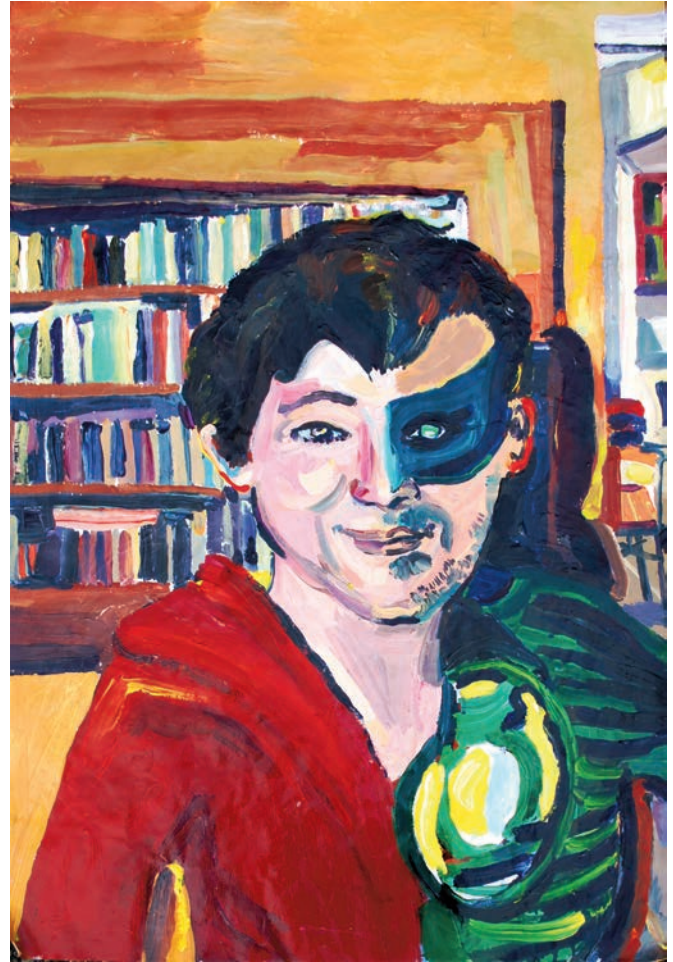
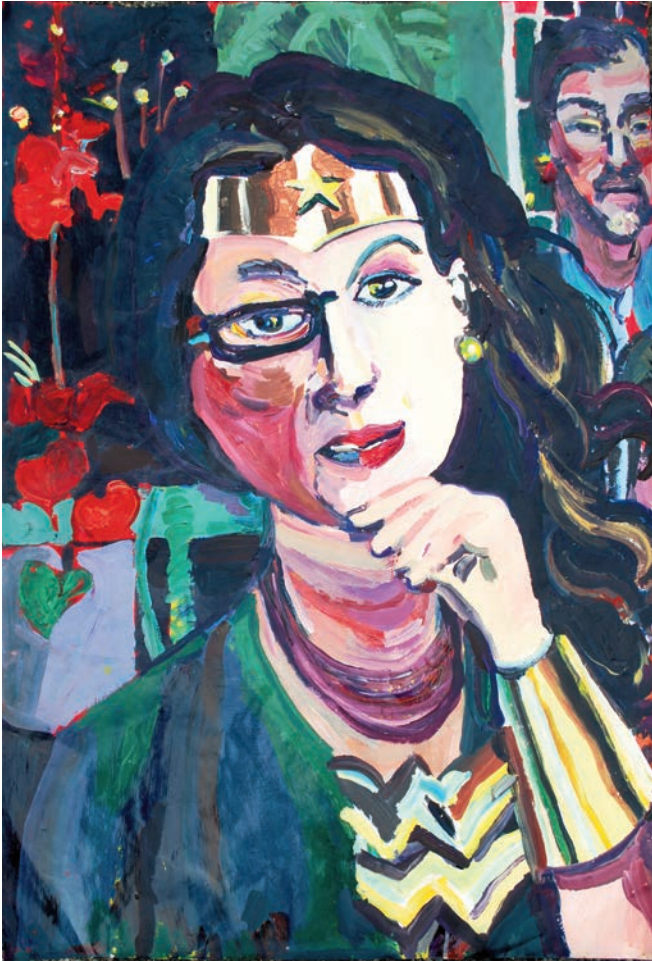
Hulk Meets Samson, 2013. Acrylic and casein on panel, 48" x 48"



Me as Hawkman, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"



Hawkman in Graveyard, 2013. Acrylic on panel, 32" x 45"



Left: Julie as Wonder Woman, 2013. Acrylic on paper, mounted on panel, 26" x 40"
Right: Jake as Green Lantern, 2013. Acrylic on paper, mounted on panel, 26" x 40"



Superman in Exile, 2013. Acrylic on canvas mural, 60" x 192"

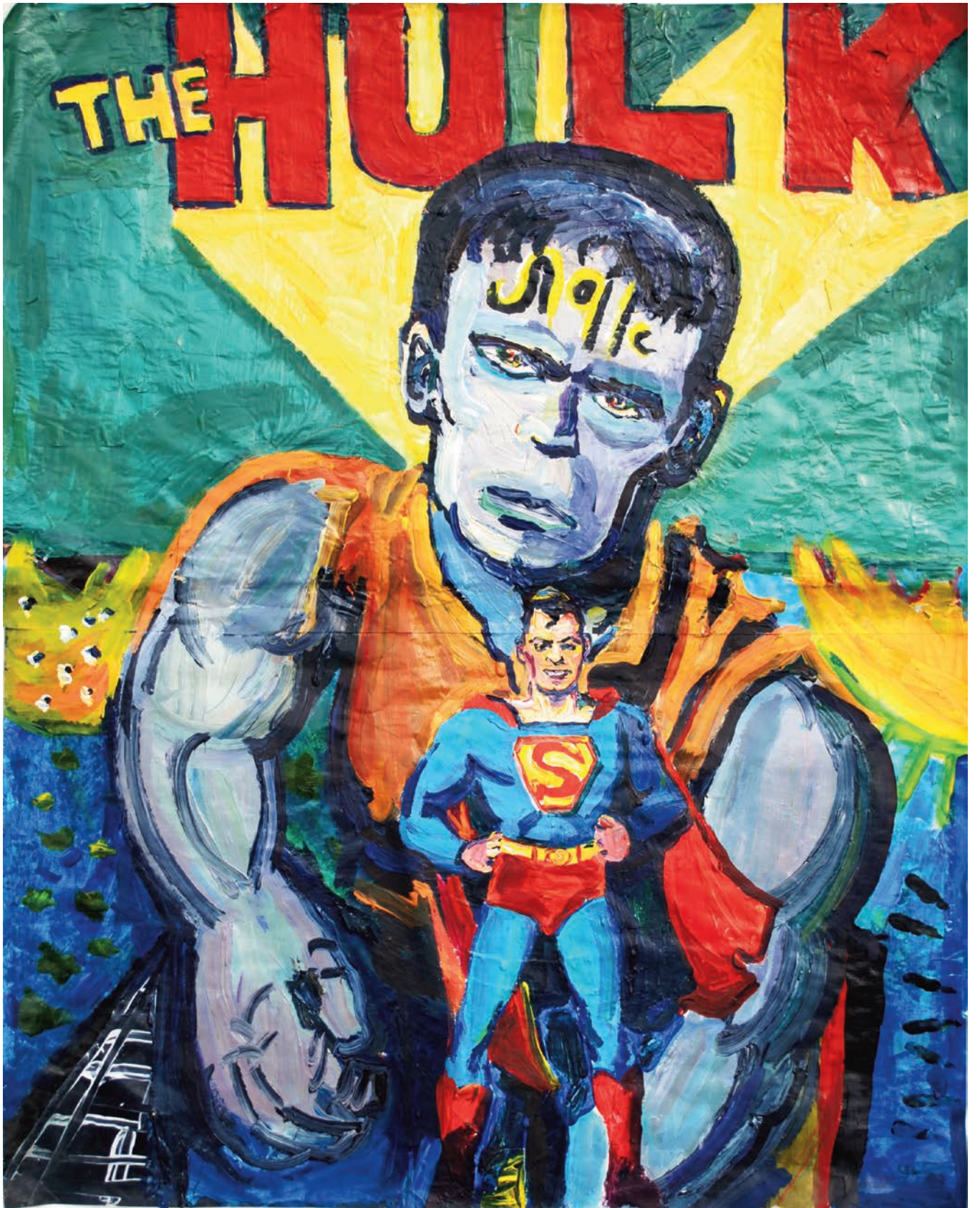




The Spider, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Hall of Heroes: Superman, 2013. Acrylic on pressboard panel, 48" x 48"



Hulk Meets Superman (Golem and Mashiach) 2014. Acrylic on paper, 40" x 50"