JOEL SILVERSTEIN



Fractured Epics:

History Painting and Imaginary Portraits

by Joel Silverstein

December 12, 2012- January 27, 2013

Presented by:

The Columbia/ Barnard Kraft Center for Jewish Student Life 606 West 115th Street

NY, NY, 10025

The Jewish Art Salon

Web: jewishartsalon.com

Email: jewishartsalon@gmail.com

Yona Verwer, President & Co-founder, Kraft Center 2012-3 Curator in Residence

The Jewish Art Salon and the Columbia / Barnard Kraft Center for Jewish Student Life are proud to present Fractured Epics: History Painting and Imaginary Portraits by Joel Silverstein.

Exhibits at The Kraft Center have been made possible through the support of The Sidney J. Silberman Endowment Fund and in loving memory of Sidney J. Silberman.





Cover: I Saw the Miracle of the Snakes, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 48" x 48"



Joel and the Golem, 2012. Acrylic and collage on wood, 23" x 23"





Golem!, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"





High Priest (Arnie), 2012. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 24" x 54"



Fractured Epics: The Paintings of Joel Silverstein

An Interview with Richard McBee

I have known Joel Silverstein for more than 20 years. We share many ideas about the creation and nature of contemporary Jewish Art, as well as a commitment to the growing contemporary Jewish Art community, exemplified by the Jewish Art Salon of which we are both founding members. This exhibition of his recent work at the Kraft Center for Jewish Student Life at Columbia/Barnard University has given me the crucial opportunity to examine the complex richness of his artwork.

As addressed in an exhibition proposal for Yeshiva University Museum in 2006, the artist believes that Jewish thought is a precursive factor in the formation of modern aesthetics and artistic creativity. Silverstein continues to write, curate and create paintings that reflect a vibrant synthesis of his Brooklyn upbringing, Jewish text (especially the Torah narratives and Midrashic commentaries) and postmodern visual sensibility; in short, a glimpse of the modern Jewish art experience. At first glance his work is obsessed with miracles: the miracle of the plagues, the miracle of the snakes, the miracle of the Golem coming alive, even the miracle of Superman who flies.

RM: What is it about the miraculous that appeals to you and draws you in?

JS: I can't stand the limits that contemporary culture puts upon us: if the miraculous is not possible and everything is material, i.e. materialistic, then I don't think I can live with that. So then I need to invent the miraculous, even if it doesn't exist. I feel this is the kind of thing that you have to seek in order to find, and constructing the miraculous in art is both a good place to start and perhaps even necessary in fighting the impositions of our rationalistic culture.

It's my belief that there is something greater than myself. There is a point where this and the imagination merge and I can't say where that place is-- which is false and which is true? And that's where I really groove to Jewish texts; the Hebrew Bible, traditional commentaries and more contemporary ones, Avivah Zornberg, (*The Particulars of Rapture*) Martin Jay, (*Downcast Eyes*), i.e. the point where postmodern discourse and writing, the idea of religion and God, and imagination all merge.

I don't need to feel that the imagination is merely imagination and not true. I don't need to categorize it because the miraculous is beyond categorization. This is very important. The fact that I interpret something that has happened to me in a vision, or engaged with the Hebrew Bible; or with my past, a memory of my parents who have died, something I'm looking for, my relationship with my family. All these things are the raw material for my artwork.

RM: Is R.J. Kitaj concerned with a similar paradigm?

JS: Yes, but he came to this late in his career. However, he affirmed the traditional way of Jewish thinking and the creative process. That is exciting and is similar to what we have been trying to do with the Jewish Art Salon.

RM: What about the "magic of time" that seems to permeate many of your works?

JS: In the study of literary myth there is the simultaneity of time, so there is no before, or after. But also in Torah study, time doesn't exist. So they are more than similar.

RM: You have said that seeing Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, *1956* as a child was a theophany. A theophany?

JS: This movie colored my visual life a lot. In Judaism there were no traditional visions (set iconography) of Moses and at that age it (the visual aspect) hit me hard. The DeMille Exodus narrative made a big impact on me. Charlton Heston looked like the Michelangelo sculpture. Visualizing the whole back story and the way DeMille went to Egypt to film fleshed out the biblical sensibility in a way that brought the narrative alive.

RM: The surface of almost all your artwork is distressed, rough, and broken up. Why?

JS: I have a personal love of surface. It's just my personality...an existential dread--to try to make meaning out a chaotic surface. I love early Byzantine and early Italian altarpiece painting, now so troubled after 500 years. But it is also the modern expressionist tradition I am drawn to, i.e. anxiety as a form of modernity. Additionally it expresses the existential experience of living in the now, and trying to come to some kind of idea that is centered on navigating through the world, because at a certain point being in the world, like Merleau Ponty's Phenomenology becomes a religious experience. It also makes the work feel modern in a traditional way, the way Picasso, Matisse or Soutine could actually tell a narrative in their paintings even though everyone denied they were doing so. A problem of the contemporary world and especially the contemporary Art world is the denial of particularist feeling, emotional deadness and inert neutrality. It comes out of the worst aspects of Warhol. It's something that I want my work to fight against.

RM: How do the narratives function in your work?

JS: My work begins with the reality and experiences of my personal life. Brighton Beach Exodus, 2007 started with my vision of Moses on the beach at Brighton. I had seen that view of the beach a thousand of times in my childhood and from the very beginning envisioned the image of Moses slaying the Egyptian as a sacred drama, like a spontaneous occurrence. Everything else grew out of that. This was clearly a Torah narrative placed in the modern world, my modern world: the ruined amusement rides, the toys pumped up like protagonists and my friends posing as models in the narrative. This is very much like Courbet's The Artist's Studio, 1854-55 where his friends and everybody he knows and those he doesn't know pop up, but he put them in for personal or allegorical reasons. So too in my process, it's about my life, but it begins with the story placed against the visual backdrop. My personal experience is then taken to a more metaphorical and metaphysical level.

RM: Much of your work is concerned with the sublime.

JS: The tradition of the sublime relates to feelings of awe in confronting nature and creation. Think of a viewer before a thunderstorm or a vast mountain gorge in the landscape paintings of Cole, Bierstadt, Friedrich or even Hartley. But it's more than that. It's confronting man's own limits of expression; the inability of art or language to capture, or fix anything down. In the 20th Century, we have seen these concepts applied to the Abstract Expressionists like Rothko. I am evoking a figurative sublime, but one very aware of its abstract precedents. The sublime has again becomes relevant for us, if only because it presents an aesthetic way to give us something else to talk about. I am proposing a hybridized impure sublime using cultural representations of all kinds, things both observed and imagined. I draw images from life or popular culture with no one representation seen as superior, more truthful or more relevant. A movie still of Charlton Heston's image can represent Moses, but so can a friend from my youth, a toy, an art historical reference, or my own self-portrait or family member. My goal is the depiction of a metaphysical reality; one where the boundaries of science, materialism and contemporary culture hold sway, but just barely.

RM: What's the significance of your portraits?

JS: I seem to need the clarity of painting people. I paint self-portraits--my wife, son, friends suggesting a spiritual narrative. Conversely, I dress them up as biblical characters or take photos from magazines in like poses and use these as models. The results have the desired air of "history" even though they are fabricated.

RM: How does this relate to the Second Commandment and Jewish Art?

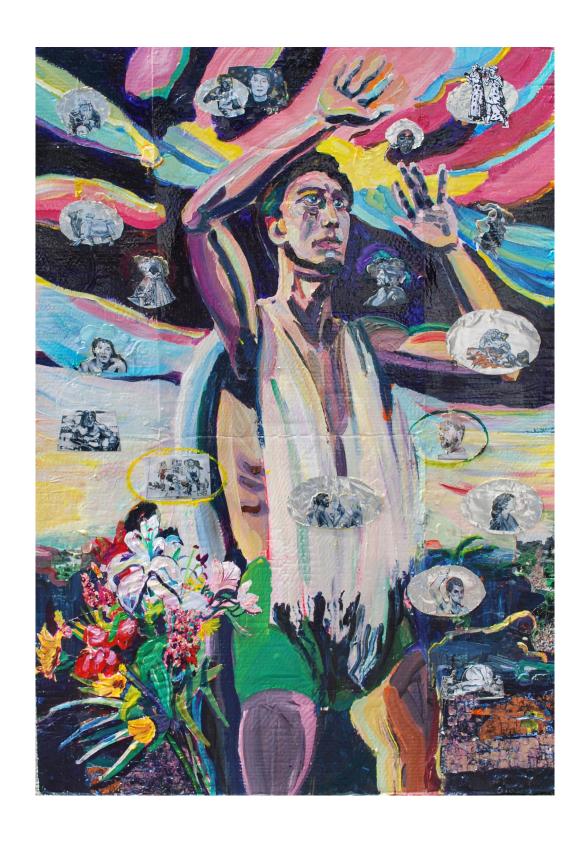
JS: I try to ditch my western Greco-Roman roots. The Second Commandment battles over images and image making raged in all the great monotheistic religions, including Judaism. This can be broken down into the people who like images (the Iconodules) the ones that destroy them (the Iconoclasts) and the ones that don't use them at all (Aniconics). It's not so simple to say who believed what and at what time in history they believed it. For my own artistic practice it's important to understand the limits of symbols within a Jewish context, because I feel we live in a depleted visual world of clichés. It's only by understanding the limits of figurative painting that we may restore its awe, the battle between making the image, breaking the image and getting rid of the image entirely.

Silverstein's work needs to be understood as the raucous collision of the deeply personal and the frankly Biblical, a metaphor for our lives as felt and lived. The paintings and collages express a curious mystical confessional, grafting aesthetic elements with breathtaking abandon. He is determined to redefine how we look at the world, mixing historical, cultural and religious categories in truly inventive ways. He is a Jewish artist for our times.

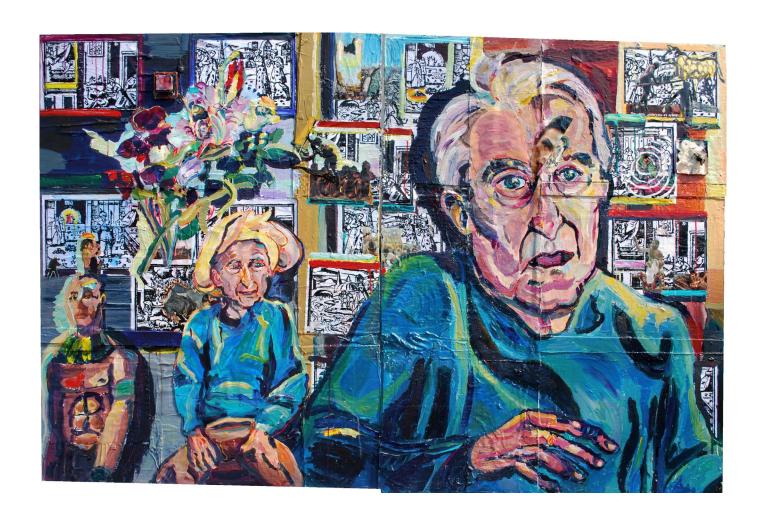
Richard McBee is an Independent artist, critic and curator. He writes for the Jewish Press and lives in New York.



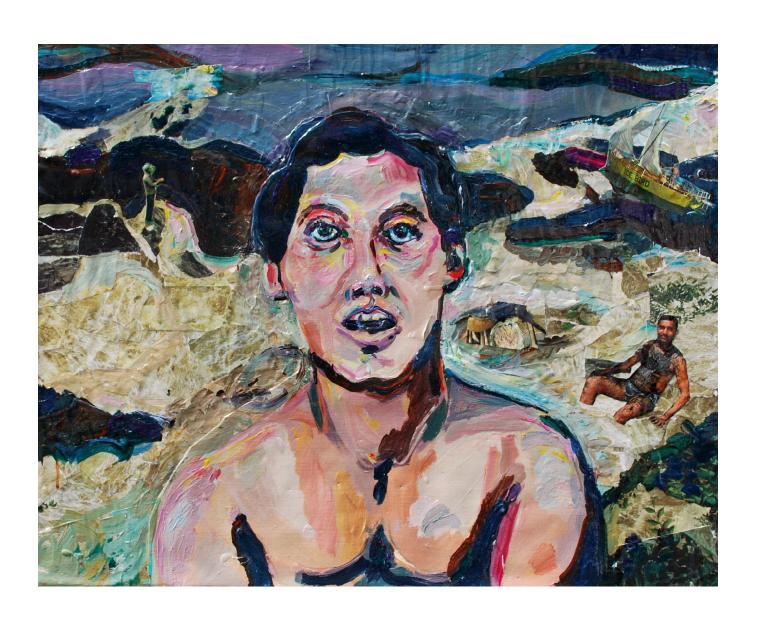
Us, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 58" x 127"

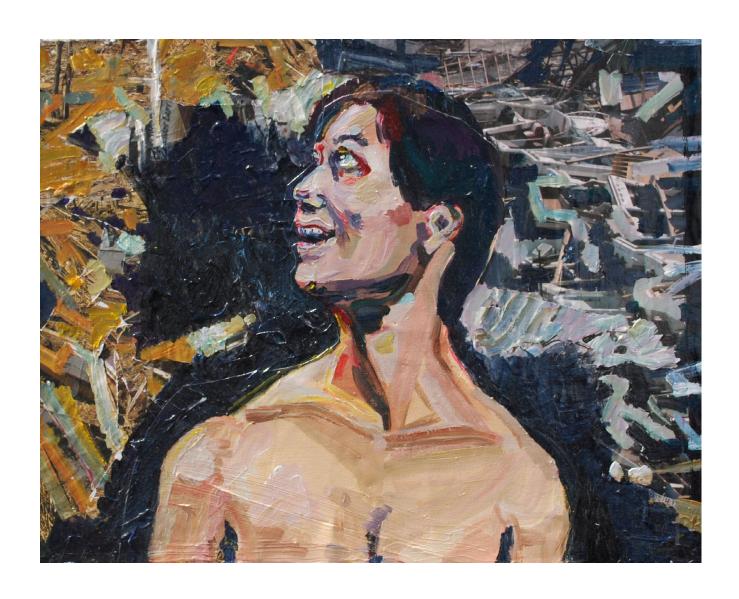


Manna, 2012. Acrylic and collage on vinyl board, 48" x 72"









Joel Silverstein is an artist, critic and teacher. He has earned a BFA and MPS from Pratt Institute and an MFA in Painting from Brooklyn College. He has shown work at the Beijing Academy of Art and Design, the Kleinert Center, the Monmouth Museum of Art, Montclair State University, New York University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Bronfman Center and the Columbia/ Barnard Kraft Center. His work is in several collections including the Malka- Lubelski Foundation. He has written for Artcritical.com, Sculpture, d'ART, New York Arts and has also written several catalogue essays including, Julian Hatton and George Rada: A Painter's Odyssey. The artist/ critic is a Founding and Executive Member of the Jewish Art Salon, an organization of over 700 Jewish Arts Professionals. He has curated the first three Salon exhibitions: "Tzelem: Presence and Likeness in Jewish Art at the Stanton Street Synagogue, Seduced by the Sacred" at the Charter Oak Foundation and the Mandell Gallery and The Dura Europos Project at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art and UJA, NY. The Dura Project was chosen by CAJM, the Committee of American Jewish Museums for their annual conference in February, 2011.

Special Thanks to: Yona Verwer, Presidant and Co-founder of the Jewish Art Salon, my friend Richard McBee, Carrie Fischbein, Assistant Director and the staff at at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel Kraft Center for Jewish Life and Sara Powers. Also special thanks to my wife, Julie Seidman, my son Jacob, my In-laws, Arnie and Cynthia Seidman and to the memory of my parents, Elias and Sylvia Silverstein.

Dedicated to the artist Hyman Bloom, 1913-2009

Website: joelsilversteinart.com

Email: joelartcrit@aol.com

