

New York/New Work:

Contemporary Jewish Art from NYC

Artists' statements

David Sperber





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David Wander • Yona Verwer • Tobi Kahn • Eli Valley • Cynthia Beth Rubin Archie Rand • Helene Aylon • Richard McBee • Siona Benjamin Robert Kirschbaum • Joel Silverstein • Rachel Kanter • Ahron Weiner



New York/New Work: Contemporary Jewish Art from NYC

Curators: Dvora Liss and David Sperber Van Leer Research Institute's Polonsky Building 24/9-5/11, 2015

New York/New Work: Contemporary Jewish Art from New York

Jewish art in the United States today exists as its own defined and developed field of visual art. In 2013, the art historian Matthew Baigell described our era as "the Golden Age" of American Jewish art. These artists present complex, critical and questioning observations, that draw on deep knowledge and reinterpretations of the Jewish texts.

The exhibition *New York/New Work* presents, for the first time in Israel, some of the current major and canonical artists of contemporary Jewish art in the United States. These artists hail from different diasporic spaces and appropriate Jewish traditions on their own terms. Their contributions to the development of contemporary American Judaism in the context of a dual diasporic lens are considerable: on the one hand, they examine the Diaspora's relationship with itself; and, on the other hand, they look at its relationship with other diasporic locations.

Contemporary scholars explain the concept of "Diaspora" as a synchronous culture where people are located within two cultures and two languages: they share the culture of where they live, but they also belong to the culture of another group. This complex condition suggests simultaneous local and trans-local cultural belonging and expression. In other words, it is a condition where the collective has two compasses: one points to the person's physical location, while the second points to another, distant locale; one to the local culture, and the second to the culture the person shares with other, related collectives that live elsewhere. "What makes Judaism a diasporic culture," scholar Daniel Boyarin stresses, "are the ties with other Jews in other places around the world, thanks to Judaism's cultural discourse and practice. . ." Boyarin points to the study of texts as the central axis of the Jewish diasporic condition.

Many of the works on display in this exhibition are inspired by the Bible, *midrash* (textual interpretations or explanations) and Jewish myth, but seek to speak to the here and now through various discursive contexts: ethnicity, religion, politics and gender. Other works draw on traditional Judaica and are an act of reinventing the text and the ritual, shaping these in a conceptual or spiritual language. Although the artists working within this framework do not reject aspects of secular Jewish culture, they undoubtedly place religious values at the center of the discussion on Jewish culture.

It appears that this post-secular turnaround is based on a growing feeling among American Jews that only religion (but not necessarily organized religion) can inspire and create a meaningful contemporary Jewish culture. This turnaround is clear in the shift that occurred between the exhibitions *Too Jewish?*: Challenging Traditional Identities curated by Norman Kleeblatt, which traveled to many museums throughout the United States in the 1990s, and Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life curated by Daniel Belasco, which was shown at the Jewish Museum in New York a decade later. Too Jewish? looked at Judaism in the context of identity—ethnicity, assimilation and gender—and marked the beginning of the inclusion of contemporary Jewish art in the world of American Jewish art. In contrast, Reinventing Ritual indicated a further stage in the development of Jewish art in the United States, one that showed the return to or a "re-enchantment" with religion. As the cultural historian Stephen Whitfield explains, "There is simply no longer a serious way of being Jewish—and of living within Jewish culture—without Judaism."

One of the characteristics of the new trend, namely a direct and in-depth focus on Judaism, is the establishment of groups and associations of artists who draw their inspiration from Judaism in all its diversity. The current exhibition presents new works by members of the Jewish Art Salon (JAS), one of the most important, and certainly the largest, of such groups. Archie Rand explores the cycles of traditional Judaism in his art. He has created a number of series, including ones that look at the seven days of creation, the 613 mitzvot (commandments), the 39 activities prohibited on the Sabbath, the Amidah prayer (central prayer of Jewish liturgy) and the 54 weekly Torah portions read in the synagogue. The current exhibition presents a new series by Rand that examines the four mitzvot of Purim: reading Megillat Esther, the festive meal, mishloach manot (gifts of food to friends) and matanot leevyonim (gifts to the poor). Helène Aylon previously exhibited an ambitious and radical installation, The Liberation of G-d, (1990-1996) that launched her long-standing preoccupation with a radical feminist critique of the Jewish world, institutions, worship and canonical texts. In The Liberation of G-d Aylon marked the non-humanistic verses found in the Torah. In the work she is exhibiting here, she marks the Torah verses brimming with anger and brutal curses and questions whether these verses can be indeed be attributed to G-d.

A feminist perspective also emerges in the works of **Rachel Kanter**, a textile artist who creates feminist ritual textiles, and of **Tobi Kahn**, whose work over the years has reinvented traditional ritual objects. Here Kanter is exhibiting a giant mezuzah that transforms the traditional mezuzah into a feminist "Femage" – a collage incorporating elements of women's traditional crafts in a way that combines both solidarity and criticism. Kahn's "Judaica" is characterized by a contemporary, abstract and conceptual language that always touches on spirituality. The four small chairs in the current exhibition symbolize the four mothers of the Jewish people. The chairs serve as models for new ritual objects. Just as the traditional "Chair of Elijah" is used during the circumcision ceremony, these chairs are intended to be used during the "zeved habat" ceremony when a baby girl is named. New designs for traditional Jewish objects also appear in the works of **Robert Kirschbaum**, connecting a clean design language with the spirituality and mysticism that is found in the Holy Scriptures. His series, entitled Devarim, is composed of 42 sculptures, the same number as the number of letters in the ineffable Divine Name. The series connects the material with the spiritual, and what is missing with the utopian. The sculptures derive their forms from Hebrew letters, architectural models in Jewish sources and ritual objects. One work in the exhibition refers to the letter "Tav" and to the shape of the Temple as described in the prophecy of Ezekiel; another's shape is inspired by the steps used to light the menorah in the Temple and a third recalls the shape of tefillin (phylacteries).

Although Jewish diasporic culture is articulated in the works of all the artists in this exhibition, it is particularly clearly expressed in the works of **Siona Benjamin**, a Jew born in India, who connects Indian iconography, American pop culture and Judaism. The complex relationship between the Diasporas, i.e., American Jewry and Israel, are strongly present in the comics of **Eli Valley**. On the other hand, the particularistic history of American Jewry is addressed in the works of **Yona Verwer** and **Cynthia Beth Rubin**, who employ the new technology of Augmented Reality to add layers of meaning and association to their imagery. The texts and myths that connect the different Jewish Diasporas create a connection between the past and the present in the works of **Richard McBee** and **David Wander**. McBee's works draw their inspiration from the Bible and midrash, to which he offers psychological and

existential interpretations. In the current exhibition, Depicting Hagar as a black woman who is addressed twice by the Divine, raises issues of race and power both in America and Israel. Wander's work in the exhibition looks at Samson, the biblical hero, and is part of a broader series of visual midrash. The connection or confrontation between biblical myths and current culture is clearly expressed in the art of **Ahron D. Weiner**, whose work deliberately reveals the holy encoded within the secular. Through the medium of décollage using advertisement posters, he creates high culture (art) from what is considered low culture (advertising). **Joel Silverstein** achieves a similar effect in a different way, by hybridizing the legends that sprung from American Jewry—Superman and The Incredible Hulk—with traditional Jewish myths, like the Golem of Prague and the Messiah.

Israeli culture has no defined or well-developed field of Jewish art; Judaism—as a living and unique religious tradition—is usually excluded from the central discourse of Israeli art. Viewing the "there" from within the prism of the "here," through an art exhibition that draws its inspiration from Jewish tradition, sources and culture, can challenge the conventional dichotomy in Israel that separates art from religion, and Jewish art from Israeli art. Unraveling these dichotomies and subverting the resulting hierarchies can inspire the local art scene that alienates itself from tradition.

David Sperber

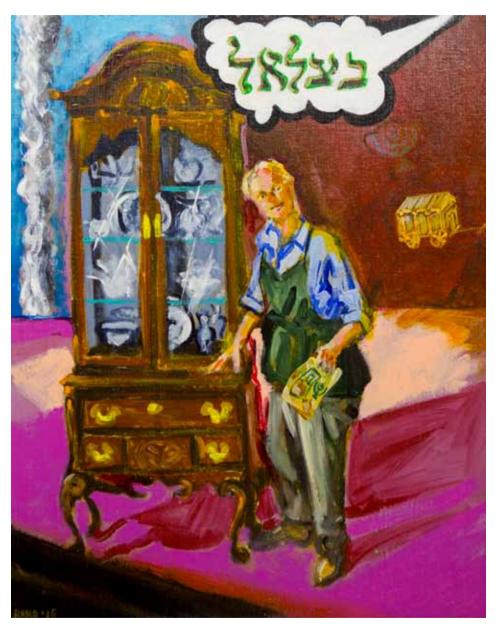
Archie Rand

Purim, 2015

In November 2015 Penguin/Random House will be releasing my book, 'The 613', documenting the complete 2001-2006 cycle of 613 paintings that address the 'Taryag Mitzvot'. In the studio my attention tends to shift between the narrative and non-narrative elements provided by tradition. Having done two series of paintings on the Amidah prayer, 39 paintings on 'The Forbidden Labors of the Sabbath,' the 'Creation Murals' at Michlalah (The Jerusalem College For Women), 'The 54 Chapter Paintings' (after the weekly portion) and numerous other painting projects derived from Scripture and liturgy it seems that commandments are a preferred subject. The four Purim paintings represent the traditional directives that have been passed down to us: to read the Megillah, to give gifts, to give charity and to partake in the festive meal.

Bezalel, 2015

Bezalel is imposed by God on Moses and Moses is not happy about it. Although the Bible is very clear, rabbinic commentary timidly fails to appreciate Bezalel's importance in providing necessary visual metaphors for God's presence. God doesn't need artists but God knows that the Jewish people do. 'Bezalel', a painting that was begun in 1985, was not completed until this year as I felt that not only Bezalel's skill but also his community-oriented grace should be acknowledged.



Bezalel, 2015, Acrylic on Canvas board

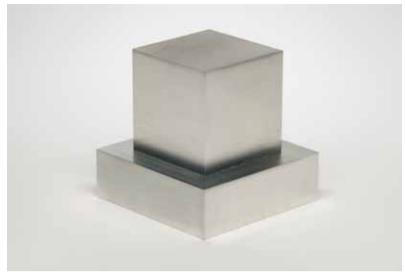
Robert Kirschbaum

Devarim, 2015

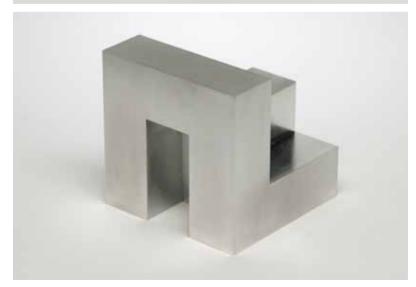
In creating these works, I begin with a nine-square grid, commonly used as a demarcation of sacred space, found most prominently in Judaism as the basis for Ezekiel's Temple Vision, and from it project a cube, each face divided into the aforementioned nine-square grid. Following the grid pattern, I then carve out, weigh, transform, permute, and depict forms initially intended to function as discrete objects that are fragments of a more perfect whole. With some of these forms I deliberately evoke Jewish symbols: Hebrew letter forms, Jewish ritual objects, and references to the Temple and Temple implements, as well as numeric symbols invoked by the introduction of plane shapes – hexagons, octagons, and circles.

I have carved 42 of these works, with reference to the <code>42-letter</code> Name of God. Associated with the creation – the <code>Zohar</code> (the 'Book of Splendor') speaks of 'the first forty-two letters of the Holy Name, by which heaven and earth were created' – the 42-letter Name is also said to consist of the first 42 letters of the Hebrew Bible, and thought to have been engraved by God, during the Creation, on the stone that was used to separate the waters – the stone that ultimately became the foundation stone of the Temple, and is regarded as the center of the universe.

The sculptures derive their forms from Hebrew letters, architectural models in Jewish sources and ritual objects. One work in the exhibition refers to the letter "Tav" and to the shape of the Temple as described in the prophecy of Ezekiel; another's shape is inspired by the steps used to light the menorah in the Temple and a third recalls the shape of tefillin (phylacteries).







Devarim, 2015, Machined aluminum

Richard McBee

Hagar The Stranger, 2010-2013

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is intimately intertwined with the narrative of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. After Sarah tragically dies upon hearing of the attempted sacrifice of her son Isaac, Abraham remarries and has six children with a woman named Keturah. She is identified as Hagar by the Midrash. One more thing about Hagar. She is repeatedly identified as 'Hagar the Egyptian.' That tells us something about her I never noticed. She is black. Oh? All of Mankind is descended from Noah's sons; Shem, Japhet and Ham. Shem is the ancestor of the Jewish people (Semites). Japhet is the father of the Greeks (Europeans). And Ham is the father of Mizraim (Egypt) and Cush (Africans). (Genesis 10 and later sources). This racial designation is echoed by generations of African American Christians. This is explored in the essay 'Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation' by Delores S. Williams (2006). This is especially true for African American Christian women; just consider the parallel themes: slavery, abuse by white mistresses, sexual abuse by white masters, and attempts at escape. Additionally, the Torah offers a positive outcome that Black reality could only hope for. Issues of race and gender dominate contemporary American dialogues for Jews and non-Jews alike. The Biblical subject of Hagar suddenly leaps into the present.







Hagar The Stranger, 2014, Oil on canvas

David Wander

Samson, 2014

Working with sequential images in an accordion book format I create a college of drawings painting and text imagining a personal visual midrash on the story of Samson. These works are part of a series that I'm working on called 'visualizing the bible'. My interest in this story lies in the great strength Samson has been blessed with, and the confusion of what to do with this G-d given power in the real world of family, enemies, isolation and the search for love and acceptance. The Israelites did what was evil in G-d's sight. The story begins with Israelites being oppressed by the philistines for 40 years an amount of time reminiscent of the modbar. A couple is unable to have children. The woman is barren. An angle comes to her and she becomes pregnant. The angle tells her son has very exact instructions. We will be an Nazarite. He has a path from before he is born. She tells her husband. Was this a child of the divine? An offering is made to this angle and it ascends upward on the fire. Walking in the Timmah vineyards Samson is startled by a Lion. The spirit of G-d came over him bare handed he rips the lion open. Bees come and in no time make Honey in the carcass. The violence of the ripping open the lion and the immediate sweetness of the honey form a riddle and he asks his wedding party to solve this. He ask all to solve his Riddle, 'Out of the eater came something to eat out of the strong came something sweet.' Seeking comfort and rest from his battles with the philistines Samson goes to a prostitute in Gaza. He can't even rest through the night. The people of Gaza and assembling to kill him. He wakes in the middle of the night and rips of the city gates. and destroys their protection as he is feeling so alone and makes himself a booth in the dessert overlooking Heron. Maybe he is getting rest thinking of the trials of Abraham in Machpellah. Thinking he can finally find love he meets Dellilah again in a vineyard. She has made a deal with the philistine overlord to deliver him for silver. He thinking he is playing a tie me up sex game with his bride. Is taunted with statements of, If you love me you would... Back and forth they go three times he playfully breaks his bindings. He tells her through prodding the real source of his strength and she deliver him to his enemies who blind him.









Samson, 2014, Print

Ahron D. Weiner

Moses hitting the rock, 2004

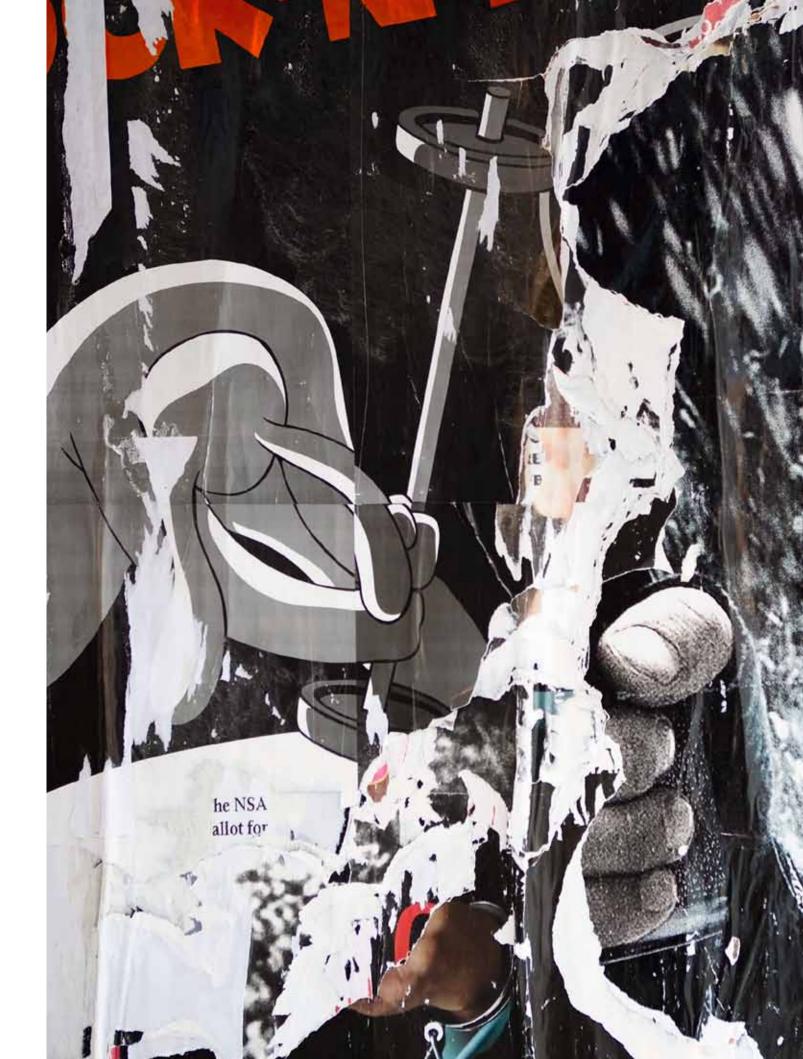
The destruction of Sodom, 2006

Cain Killing Abel, 2010

In every generation the Bible has found new interpretive apparatuses – from the invention of the book, which usurped the scroll, to the latest in computing. Artists, too, have approached the world's oldest stories in ever-newer media: illuminated manuscript, fresco, sculpture, painting, installations, performance art, and digital media. If all of creation is to be found in the Bible, it stands to reason that the Bible can be found in everything that's been created.

To explore the outer limits of this concept, I've undertaken a long-term project of semiotic archeology in what might seem like the least promising medium: advertising. Through systematic decollage of in situ street advertising posters and digital photography, I've witnessed the Old Testament narrative come to life anew. My technique has its roots in alchemist's attempts to elevate the base to the golden, and in the Kabbalistic notion of permutation: a rearrangement of words and images to uncover hidden meanings, hermetic truths, not as worship but as art. To find meaning in advertising – a transient medium primarily concerned with promoting consumerism – is essentially an act of faith. To unearth the holy encoded within the unholy—this is my project's central mission.

It has been said that the average US consumer sees over 3,000 advertising messages per day. Visually, my series emulates the chaos of advertising messaging – the constant barrage our eyes and minds are under in contemporary society. I want viewers to consider advertising and art, where the boundary of one ends, the other begins, and the roles each play in our lives.



Cain Killing Abel, 2010, Digital photography of advertising decollage

Siona Benjamin

In my work, I raise questions about what and where is "home", while evoking issues such as identity, immigration, motherhood, and the role of art in social change. I am a Bene Israel Jew from India; my family has gradually dispersed, mostly to Israel and America, but my parents remained in India. I am now also an American, living and working in Montclair, New Jersey. With such a background, the desire to "find home", spiritually and literally, has always preoccupied me – a concern that I feel many Americans can relate to, as this comparatively younger nation was largely formed by immigrants and their descendants. The feeling I have of never being able to set deep roots no matter where I am is unnerving, but on the other hand, there is something seductive about the spiritual borderland in which I seem to find myself.

My paintings also explore female energy and power, as I am inspired by tantric art (of ancient India). The work is informed as well by Indian miniature paintings, Byzantine icons and Jewish religious art from my childhood. It was by studying Indian miniature paintings that I learned composition and color balance.

I remember the ornate synagogues of my childhood, the oil lamps, the velvet- and silver-covered torahs, a chair left vacant for the prophet Elijah in the synagogue. Having grown up in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim society, having been educated in Catholic and Zoroastrian schools, being raised Jewish and now living in America, I have always had to reflect upon the cultural boundary zones in which I have lived.

Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes, 2013

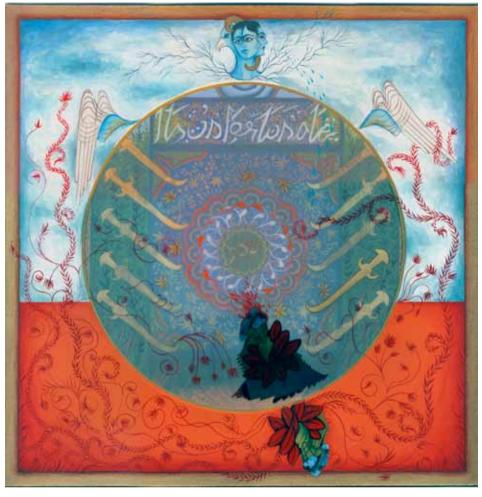
'The Four who entered Pardes' – In the original story 'Ben Azzai gazed and died. Ben Zoma gazed and was harmed. Acher cut down the plantings. Rabbi Akiva entered and left in peace.' In may work Rachel looked and died, Sara looked and went mad, Leah looked and cut the shoots and Rebecca looked and descended in peace.

Rachel looked and died: Rachel weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted. Just before Rachel dies giving birth to a longed for child, she sees the future of her children and their children, from the bondage of slavery to the Holocaust. Sara looked and went mad: Sara saw Abraham take their son away to be sacrificed. She goes mad with worry and grief and wanders lost until she dies like so many mothers who have lost their children in wars, sacrificing them to gods of power and greed. Leah looked and cut the shoots: Leah's eyes were weak but she learned to look within where she found a faith that valued both male and female worlds. In spite of being the "the other", she finds the strength to find her place. Rebecca looked and descended in peace: Even paradise is not a life without imperfection, it is about responding to challenge with courage.

Lilith's Lair And Other Stories Of Deception, 2012

In 'Lilith's Lair...' triptych, the central self-portrait, enveloped in gold, is 'crowned' by a series of eight small photo-collage figures of Indian dancers. The two wings of the triptych are dominated by large photos of a figure from the specific dance performances of Siona's works – Liliths with blue faces, thick white and gold wings, and white flames rising in towering halos from them. The halo flames are lightly drawn, as are images of beasts and birds swirling

around the central panel, against the deep red that suffuses the entire triptych. This is, perhaps, both the red blood of sacrifice or the red of passionate love, and also a reference to the Red Sea, as the Sea of Reeds is popularly called, at the bottom of which, in one part of the Lilith legend, the demon is said to reside – where she may have helped the Israelites, descendants of Joseph, to pass through safely while engulfing their pursuers, the descendants of the Pharaoh who had elevated Joseph to his position of political power. These groups are in turn the ancestors of two of the key groups balancing between peace and war in the region of the Middle East. Ultimately, Siona Benjamin's point and purpose, aside from making lush, beautiful art, is to use it as an instrument for being part of the process of improving the world, and not merely observing it.



Sophie's love, 2012, Mixed media on museum board

Improvisation # 21: Sophie's love, 2012

This series of works is less stridently colored than any of my pervious works, and in which I often use pencil and mixed media on mylar, along with gouache paint. These paintings are done more spontaneously and with less planning. I had a lot of joy doing these paintings/drawings directly on the mylar, making plans for what comes next only by thinking one step in advance. Titles of each of these works also came equally spontaneously. My mother had passed away around the time I make Improvisation #21"Sophie's Love". I spun a garden of Sophie's never ending love in the spiral of the labyrinth, mandala like and abundant. 'Improvisation' like in jazz music improvisations and from Kandinsky's series similarly titled, these works are crafted with precision and carefreeness at the same time.

Ori Soltes



Eli Valley

Israel Man and Diaspora Boy, 2008

Gaza Exit Interview, 2014

I Have To Draw Him, 2015

For a century now we've witnessed Zionist pugilism, the idea that Jewish pride and strength are inextricably linked with the creation and defense of Israel. One of the tenets of this ideology is that the Diaspora Jewish 'self' is by definition weak. It's why organized trips to Israel are marketed as building 'Jewish pride,' or why the Israeli government establishes committees, think tanks and emergency programs to save Diaspora Jews from our supposed extinction. When a Diaspora Jew questions this ideology, we're questioning the roles of pride and shame, of heroism and victimhood, that were established in the last century and solidified after the Holocaust and the creation of Israel. We've imbibed a self-hatred exported by Israel to Jewish communities around the world. My comics are partly a response to this: proud Diaspora pugilism arguing that we are not the ones who should be ashamed.



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I Have To Draw Him: Charlie Hebdo Massacre, 2015, Print

Yona Verwer

Cynthia Beth Rubin

History, Heritage and the Lower East Side, 2015

We weave together the stories of the past and the present in layers of paint, photographs, video, and recording. Working with Jewish architecture from throughout the world, our work evokes the bittersweet traces of melded histories. These collaborative works consist of digital prints, acrylic paint, and augmented reality on canvas, with imagery reflecting the Jewish neighborhood of New York's Lower East Side mixed with traditional signs and related contemporary motifs from current LES synagogues. Historical interpretation is provided by historian Elyssa Sampson. Using an iPad or smartphone, the viewer can trigger videos or photos of the source material embedded in the artwork, embarking on a discovery process that leads the viewer closer to experiencing the sensations of the layered history of the Lower East Side.

History, Heritage and the Lower East Side, 2015, Digital Print and Acrylic Paint on Canvas with embedded Augmented Reality





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Tobi Kahn

AHMA, Models for Shalom Bat Chairs (Baby naming chairs), 2008

These 'Shalom Bat' chairs are intended to be used in a ritual imagined by me when my wife, the writer Nessa Rapoport, was expecting our first child. Over twenty years later, I created a new set of chairs (2008), now on permanent loan to New York's Abraham Joshua Heschel School. The chairs, evoking thrones, are ceremonial, designed for women family members to welcome a newborn baby girl into the world and to name her, elevating the ritual of naming a new daughter. They are painted in a pattern reminiscent of an aerial view of islands or a family of related forms.

YLANH, Tu b'Shvat Seder Plate, 2011

This ceremonial tray consists of seven bridges to hold 15 fruit, the numerical value in Hebrew of tet vav, or tu. Seven signifies the shiv'a minim, the seven species of the bequeathed land of milk and honey. The fruits I remember from childhood that adorned the plate my mother composed for the eve of 'Tu b'Shvat' were oranges, grapes, tangerines, apples, dates, figs, carob, raisins, and almonds – whose colors are the palette of these works. Salvaged remnants from other projects, these materials have been given a new life for their own new year. They are also a bridge from the evident world to the mystical one of 'pardes', the kabbalistic orchard that is paradise.

Memorial Lights/Yahrzeit Light, 2008-2011

Obsessed by memory, I have always believed that art can be redemptive, a force in healing the world. Grief ruptures meaning. Art can be a small, still voice that begins to mend it - not by trying to represent those who are missing or by attempting to portray their absence, but by inviting all of us who live after them to our own imaginative encounter with the possibilities of memory.

Inert memory is not alive. The tribute the dead ask of us is not only to grieve over the horror of their oblivion, but to live with joy and fruitfulness in order to honor them. Like us, they dreamed of a future that affirms love, that avows significance.



Lahav 2008-2011, Installation

Joel Silverstein

Hulk Meets Superman, 2014

I use traditional painting techniques and collage to create strange portraits with multiple meanings. The iconography of this painting is derived from the cover of the comic book, *The Hulk #1*, 1962 by Jack Kirby and a Superman promotion poster painted by H.J Ward for National Periodicals in 1940. I compare and contrast comic book symbols for both pop and religious reasons. As The Hulk stands behind Superman, two great figures of Jewish mythology emerge. The Hulkmetamorphoses into the Golem of Prague (a German Expressionist movie; Paul Wegener, 1920) and Superman is the coming Jewish Messiah. The image of the Golem is complete as the magic word 'Emet' (truth) is plainly inscribed on his forehead.



Rachel Kanter

What I see when I close my eyes, 2011

This mezuzah is about the idea of home as an actual house and "home" as a place of comfort and memory. Because of it's size, the mezuzah doesn't just hang on the doorpost of the home but becomes the doorpost. It highlights the doorway as an entry to the home and as a structural element of the home. The image on the mezuzah is a personal one from childhood; lying on the grass and looking up at the trees. It is a memory from where I spent my summers and an image that I used when learning self-hypnosis for the delivery of my three children.



Helène Aylon

Written Behind My Back, 2013

The video, *Written Behind My Back*, premiered at the Jewish Museum in October 2013 at my Book Reading there. It follows the premise of 'The Liberation of G-d' where I question the words that are quoted as G-d's words and judge them to be misquotes. I am peeved that I was not consulted about the curses etc. in this supposedly Godly warning to those who disobey G-d's laws as I do not believe that a G-d would have threatened humans with such cruel and hateful punishment. Two photographs of my own back (with letters projected on my back) are a literal depiction of the title of this work.





Written Behind My Back, 2013, Installation

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