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Contemporary Jewish Female Artists: Critiquing Challenging and Dismantling the Patriarchal Construction of Judaism

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Contemporary Jewish Female Artists:
Critiquing, Challenging and Dismantling the Patriarchal Construction of Judaism

By
Cosette Victoria Shachnow

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
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I dedicate this thesis to my mother:
I will forever be indebted to you for your assistance, advice, encouragement, and for
asking the question: “Why would a woman even want to pray with a man?”

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Jewish Feminist Art?	1 – 17
Chapter One: Critique Through Appropriation	18 – 49
Chapter Two: The Self and Tradition	50 – 78
Bibliography	79 – 85

INTRODUCTION

What is Jewish Feminist Art?

The unfaltering Jewish legal system defined by the Torah (the ancient biblical text) articulates laws describing the manner in which worshippers should live and behave. Despite pivotal historical events affecting the Jewish community these laws have not changed with the passage of time. Many Jews interpret and incorporate some, or all, of teachings and laws into their daily lives. This thesis investigates art that reflects on the contemporary Jewish-American experience and identity as parallel to the second and third wave feminist movements. This thesis aims to reveal the manner in which contemporary female Jewish artists, specifically Hèlene Aylon, Yona Verwer, Deborah Kass, Maya Escobar, Jamie Sneider and Nikki S. Lee explore the restrictions that the Torah imposes as they pertain to women and as they create and reinforce a strong division between the genders.

The Fundamentals: What is Judaism and who is a Jew?

Many Jews revere the ancient Judaic literature. Jews divide the *Bible* (also known as the “Hebrew Bible” or “Old Testament”) into three sections: the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* and the *Ketuvim*. One finds Jewish history, law and commandments in the Torah, also referred to as the *Five books of Moses*, referencing that the prophet Moses wrote the Torah. One considers the Torah the most sacred book. The *Nevi'im*, or The Prophets, also contains history and teachings. The Prophets scribed the *Nevi'im*. The *Ketuvim* contains assorted writings. Jews accepted the *Ketuvim* into the canon of literature after

accepting the Torah and the Nevi'im.¹ These books relay the laws, events, and people of value to contemporary Jews.

A fundamental aspect of Judaism includes the belief that only one God exists, making the religion monotheistic. Jewish scholar Eliezer Segal defines Judaism as including “such features as the worship of a personal supernatural deity, a revealed scripture, a divinely ordained code of laws, and an assortment of institutions and communal structures in which the religion is observed.”² Certainly, many Jews believe in a God, study the sacred literature, abide by laws (in the Torah) and attend synagogue. Within the Jewish religion, specifically as practiced in the United States, worshippers range in levels of observance.

Orthodox Jews, or the most religious sect of Jews, adhere to the teachings and laws of the Torah and follow the strict rules that Orthodox leaders impose on the community. In an attempt to remain completely faithful to the religion, they typically do not attempt to integrate into the greater American culture.³ Further, one often interprets that the Torah specifies the roles of each gender. Because Orthodox Jews strictly adhere to the teachings of the Torah, they tend to maintain a rigid gender divide.⁴ *Conservative* Jews follow Jewish traditions and laws. However, they differ from the Orthodox sects because they do not reject modernity. Certainly, Conservative Jews do attempt to integrate into American culture while strictly practicing Judaism.⁵

¹ Segal, Eliezer. *Introducing Judaism*. (New York: Routledge, 2009,) 13-15.

² Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 4.

³ Segal. *Introducing Judaism*, 119.

⁴ Chaiken, Paula. “Other Tales: Museum Objects, Women, and Jewish Knowledges,” in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt. (New York: Routledge:1997), 74.

⁵ Segal. *Introducing Judaism*, 125.

Reformed Jewish movements propose greater liberties for followers to allow worshippers to integrate into American society while continuing to practice Judaism. Reformed Jews generally do not adhere to rituals that would greatly distinguish them from other Americans, such as traditional Jewish dietary laws, which require Jews to keep kosher. However, they also reinterpret Jewish laws particularly in regards to gender by creating greater gender equality. Segal states that, “the Reform movement declared that women’s obligations was identical to that of men in all religious precepts.”⁶ For example, in 1972, Sally Priesand became the first woman rabbi.⁷ Thus, Reformed Judaism differs from the more traditional Orthodox and Conservative movements as they aim to soften or even eliminate many of the traditional restrictions and regulations the Torah imposes.

Members of each sect of Judaism often practice many of the same traditions in different ways. Scholar Jacob Neusner defines tradition as “something handed on from the past and which is made contemporary” and posits that “the Judaic religious life...[stresses]... tradition.”⁸ Certainly, one can see the value of tradition and the struggle for Orthodox Jews to assimilate into contemporary society reflected in the 1964 musical, *Fiddler on the Roof* based on the book by Joseph Stein. The musical opens with the song “Tradition,” which reads as a list of traditions assigned to each gender, and then proceeds to critique all of the traditions.

Although scholars distribute levels of observance into three categories (and numerous subcategories within the aforementioned broad categories), one encounters

⁶ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 116.

⁷ Nadell, Pamela S. “Women and American Judaism,” in *Women and Judaism*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 162.

⁸ Jacob, Neusner. “The Study of Religion as the Study of Tradition,” *History of Religions*. 13 (1975): 191 - 192.

obstacles by relying on concrete definitions of *Judaism* as outlined above. In actuality, followers often contemplate the religion by reinterpreting traditions and laws, and thus follow their own version of Judaism.

Jewish Identity defines Jews as individuals born Jewish or people who convert to Judaism. In 2014 Orthodox Rabbi Itamir Tubul articulated for *The Economist* that “you are a Jew if your mother is Jewish, or if your conversion to Judaism accorded with the *Halacha*, Jewish religious law.”⁹ Tubul explains the Orthodox belief that Jews include simply those with Jewish blood or those who choose to become Jewish and thus convert. Certainly, someone with a Jewish Identity, as defined by Tubul, can practice Judaism, but it is not a requirement.

The term *Jewishness* refers to how one practices Judaism. It does not require that the practitioner is Jewish, as defined by Tubul, or that one should practice Judaism as the Torah instructs. In 1998, scholars Charles Liebman and Bernard Susser stated that, in the English language, Jewishness “describes culture, ethnicity, and a historical sense of belonging to the Jewish people.”¹⁰ This definition implies that one can associate with the Jewish culture through birth or through personally understanding and relating with Jewish history.

One can witness the increasing fluidity of the term Jewishness. In 2014, Reformed Rabbi Rick Jacobs stated for *The Economist* that, “Jewishness can’t only be an accident [of birth.]” The article continues to explain: “whereas Orthodox notions of Jewishness ignore belief, more liberal denominations include it. For others, Jewishness

⁹ “Who is a Jew?” last modified: January 11, 2014.

<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21593507-competing-answers-increasingly-pressing-question-who-jew>.

¹⁰ Charles Liebman, and Bernard Susser. “Judaism and Jewishness in the Jewish State.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 555. (1998.) 16.

is broader than either faith or lineage.”¹¹ Jacobs speaks for the view of Reformed Judaism by stating that one can be Jewish through a desire to be Jewish or a belief in Judaism. He states that one can practice Judaism even though one might not be born Jewish. Liebman and Susser provide limitations for Jewishness, while Jacob provides a broad definition of Jewishness. These shifting definitions reflect the changing nature and the fluidity of the religion, its practices, and its people, especially amongst the Reformed sects. The transforming definitions of *Jewishness* suggest flexibility and diversity within the religion.

Events Impacting the Jewish Identity

During World War II (which lasted from 1939 until 1945) the Nazis planned the mass extermination of Jews, now known as The Holocaust. Approximately six million Jewish people died. As a result of the Holocaust, many Jews questioned their Jewish Identity, wondering how God could have allowed the deaths of so many Jews.¹² This could have caused a great number of practitioners to abandon the religion. However, many within the Jewish community felt that more Jews should strongly identify as Jewish to metaphorically “beat” the Nazis. Scholar Dana Kaplan posits that, “all interpretations of Judaism were now valid, because Judaic religious authority had been destroyed by the barbaric acts of the Nazis. Therefore all forms of Judaism.... Were now legitimate religious responses.”¹³ Certainly, the horrendous affects of the Holocaust impacted the way in which people chose to practice and identify as Jewish.

¹¹ “Who is a Jew?”

¹² Kaplan, Dana Evan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009,) 41

¹³ Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 45.

Immediately proceeding the Holocaust, many Americans did not express a desire to publically speak about the Holocaust. However, many American Jews supported the construction of the Israeli state, perhaps to assuage their guilt for failing to provide the Jews with more assistance during the Holocaust. The state was established in 1948, and quickly became an integral aspect of the Jewish identity.¹⁴ In fact *The Economist* posits that Israel became an “entry point” to Jewishness.¹⁵ Greater interest in Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel continues to impact the Jewish discourse.

Jewish Art and Exhibitions

Several museums and institutions throughout the United States exhibit art and artifacts pertaining to Judaism, Jewishness and the Jewish Identity. The Jewish Museum of New York plays an integral role as a public Jewish art and cultural institution. The mission statement of the museum articulates that the museum: “[illuminates] the Jewish experience, both secular and religious, demonstrating the strength of Jewish identity and culture.”¹⁶ The broad statement allows the museum to provide a diverse array of exhibitions, controversial or conventional, displaying Jewish subject matter as well as the changing nature of Judaism, Jewishness and the Jewish Identity. Two integral exhibitions (although not the only exhibitions) directly pertaining to, and reflecting on the Jewish identity and its shifting definition curated by the Jewish Museum of New York include: “Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities” curated in 1996 and the “Jewish Identity Project” curated in 2006.

¹⁴ Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 44-45

¹⁵ “Who is a Jew?”

¹⁶ “History of the Museum,” The Jewish Museum of New York, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/History>.

In 1996 Norman Kleeblatt curated “Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities.” Kleeblatt organized the exhibition to reflect on Jewish stereotypes regarding the body, stereotypes about Jewish people circulated through mass media, and Jewish rituals. The exhibition presented works by Jewish artists reflecting on themes regarding the Jewish identity. The catalogue opens with commentary by Joan Rosenbaum, the former director of the Jewish Museum of New York, stating that, “[The artist’s] art reflects the ways Jews have been seen and defined by the world, and how Jews see themselves.”¹⁷ Thus, Kleeblatt selects a sample of pieces meant to attest to the way in which the Jews understand themselves and have been understood by others.

In 2006, Susan Chevlowe curated “The Jewish Identity Project.” The museum commissioned photographers to capture and identify the “race” of Jewish people. Certainly, race does not exist biologically but rather as a social construct. Scholar Jefferson Fish poses the question “What is race?” and proceeds to answer, “There is no such thing. Race is a myth.”¹⁸ The portraits in “The Jewish Identity Project” reveal the diversity of Jewish practitioners and thus serve to confirm Fish’s speculation.

“The Jewish Identity Project” also attempts to identify the physical and spiritual location of home for Jews by photographing houses and communities that Jews populate. Lastly, the exhibition tackles the meaning of Judaism. Photographs reveal people performing their Jewishness. The artists chose the individuals to photograph and designed the scenes to capture and interpret the Jewish Identity. One can see from the exhibition catalogue that Jews come in all colors; live everywhere; and practice Judaism

¹⁷ *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities*. Edited by Norman L. Kleeblatt. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1996), Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Jewish Museum. vii.

¹⁸ Jefferson M. Fish “Mixed Book” in *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* ed James Spradley Late et al. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2009), 218.

in various ways. Regardless of the activities the subjects engage in, they explore the Jewish Identity by performing their interpretation of Jewishness.

The Jewish Museum of New York presents exhibitions to investigate Judaism and the definition of “Jewishness,” which they define as the behaviors and activities of individuals or groups. Scholar Steven Lavine articulates that the structure of museums as an institution poses challenges for curators, as “an exhibition often bears the burden of being representative of an entire group or region.”¹⁹ The Jewish Museum of New York attempts to represent the meaning of the Jewish Identity, Jewishness, and Judaism from various perspectives. They display diverse perspectives of Jewishness by allowing for thematic and stylistic changes to occur overtime, thus demonstrating the dynamic and fluid nature of Jewishness.

During the 1970s, Jewish-Americans began to express more of an interest in speaking of the Holocaust due to a fear of losing the memory of the Holocaust.²⁰ In 1993, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, DC. The museum exhibits relics such as photographs and shoes of Holocaust victims.²¹ The museum thus preserves the memory of the Holocaust by revealing quotidian objects belonging to victims. Further, the objects prove that the Holocaust happened and allows the viewer to form a spiritual connection with the victims.

The similarity between the methods of displaying works created as artworks at art museums and objects of Holocaust victims at Holocaust memorial centers forces one to question the role and duty of an exhibition space dedicated to presenting the Jewish

¹⁹ Lavine, Steven D. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 6.

²⁰ Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 38.

²¹ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner. “Understanding the Holocaust Through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.” *Journal of Architectural Education*. 48 (1995): 242

experience. Because curators display the pieces in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and thus a museum, as defined by the name of the exhibition space, does this mean one should consider these artifacts “art?” Similarly, why would a spectator hesitate to label these pieces as art?

Certainly, The Holocaust Memorial Museum exhibits the consequences of a historical tragedy. However, revealing objects evidencing oppression has its merits. An ancient adage truthfully states that, “those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it,” therefore if we fail to study and learn from mistakes of the past, we will likely repeat those errors again and again. Thus, the Holocaust Memorial Museums serves as an integral institution that reminds people of the gruesomeness of the Holocaust. Art Historian Carol Duncan explains the role of the museum as the “preserver of cultural memory.”²² Thus, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum serves to protect the recollection of the Holocaust and preserve the memory of its victims, while the Jewish Museum intends to project the current interpretation of Judaism and explore the future of Judaism.

Contemporary Judaism, Gender, and Art

Prevailing sexism and gender inequality within American society influenced the first-wave feminist movement during the late 19th and early 20th century, the second-wave feminist movement during the 1970s, and the current third-wave feminist movement. This thesis focuses on art created during the second and third-wave feminist movement, which impacts all women, including Jewish women. The contributions of Jewish and non-Jewish feminist theorists including anthropologist Sherry Ortner, anthropologist and gender theorist Gayle Rubin, and gender theorist Judith Butler; and

²² Carol Duncan. “The Art Museum As Ritual,” in *The Art of Art History: A critical Anthology*, ed. Preziosi Donald, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 424.

works by artists Carolee Schneemann, Judy Chicago, Lynda Benglis, Cindy Sherman and artists of the “Goddess Movement” provide a framework for analyzing contemporary artwork by feminist Jewish-American artists reflecting on the female experience regarding the functions of the body, the societally defined roles and expectations of women, and the presentation of the female body.

Biblical law and Orthodox discussions focusing on the menstruation cycle relay the impurity of the cycle and state that women must abstain from sexual relations during the week of their cycle. Segal explains that: “Biblical law decreed that women are impure and sexually unavailable for one week after the onset of menstruation.”²³ The interpretation of the menstruation cycle thus carries connotations of female pollution. However, while Jewish law deems the blood from the menstruation cycle as impure, Jewish law distinguishes between Jews and non-Jews based on lineage. This demonstrates the paradox of blood: one is considered Jewish by blood while Jewish law considers menstruation impure.

Ortner explores the perceived inferiority of women in her 1974 article Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture? Ortner explores why societies traditionally deem women inferior to men. Ortner attributes the inferiority of women to their biological functions, which include their menstruation cycles and ability to birth children. Thus, because their body supposedly places women in a “lower order of the cultural process,” women connote with nature. In comparison, men do not menstruate, deliver and (traditionally) raise children, and therefore they “lack natural creative functions.”²⁴ According to

²³ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 264.

²⁴ Ortner, Sherry B. “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). 73 -74.

Ortner, because the bodies of men do not create, men connote with culture. Due to these reasons, Ortner speculates that societies consider men the driving force behind culture.

In 1972, Jewish artist Judy Chicago collaborated with a group of women to create an installation piece, *Womanhouse*. One piece entitled *Menstruation Bathroom* exhibits a pristine white bathroom with the exception of an overflowing garbage can containing sanitary supplies stained with blood. Scholar Arlene Raven posits that the indication of blood (and thus menstruation) deems the bathroom “a metaphor for the unspeakable.”²⁵ Judy Chicago portrays images reflecting the period to force rhetoric on a subject traditionally carrying negative connotations.

Carolee Schneemann stands naked in her 1975 performance piece *Interior Scroll* reading aloud from a scroll, which she unravels from her vagina. Scholar Joanna Frueh exclaims that this project:

Overhauls the myths of the stupid, weak, or powerless beauty.... *Interior Scroll* is a dance, ritual, oratory, proclamation, exorcism, and vision – of a time beyond patriarchal and misogynist control of women’s bodies. Scrolls can contain proclamations, and scrolls, like the Torah, can contain sacred texts.²⁶

Schneemann reveals her body and her intimate feelings to demonstrate her capability to exert full control over her body, which she can accomplish through posing nude. She forces people to confront words that generally stir discomfort, such as vagina.

Schneemann assumes power over religion by associating religion (as represented by the scroll) with the naked body, and thus challenges the authority of religion. Judy Chicago and Schneemann reflect on the female body to force dialogue about topics that people generally prefer to avoid.

²⁵ Raven, Arlene. “Womanhouse” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994,) 55.

²⁶ Frueh, Joanna. “The Body Through Women’s Eyes” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 192.

The Torah articulates the laws and thus expectations that Jews should follow. The Torah contains 613 laws. Of these 613 laws, only three specifically pertain to women. The laws include visiting the ritual bath, or the mikveh, after menstruating, and lighting the candles and setting aside challah during the Sabbath.²⁷ Certainly, the Reformed movement allows women to follow all the three laws pertaining to women, as well as the other 610 laws. However, the interpretation of the laws by the Orthodox sects state women should follow only the three laws pertaining specifically to women. Many believe that the 610 laws prohibit Orthodox women from fully participating in Jewish life.

In Rubin's 1975 article The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex Rubin defines the sex/gender system, "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be."²⁸ This system suggests that human societies define the role and duties of a person solely based on his or her gender. Those adhering to the sex/gender system find themselves precluded from roles or activities that do not specifically and traditionally pertain to the biological sex of the person. Rubin also proposes her desire for a gender egalitarian society.

The piece *Bridal Staircase* in Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* portrays a life-size sculpture of a woman wearing a wedding gown and holding a bouquet of flowers. The woman stands in front of a wall between two sets of stairs. The staircase to the left ascends, while the staircase in front of her descends. Although the body of the woman

²⁷ Chaiken, "Other Tales," 74.

²⁸ Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 165.

faces the descending staircase, she looks towards the top left corner of the work – towards the ascending staircase. The gown and title suggests that the woman celebrates her wedding day. Her body points towards the downstairs staircase, suggesting that she plans to descend into the home, specifically towards the kitchen to enter into her life as a wife.²⁹ However, she looks towards the upward staircase, perhaps aspiring to achieve greater feats than dominance in the kitchen. For instance, popular society suggests that one must move upwards to achieve success or to enter heaven by referring to the “the corporate ladder” or “Stairway to Heaven.” Arlene Raven exclaims that: “*Womanhouse* turned the house inside out, thereby making the private public. The anger that many women felt in isolation in the single nuclear-family suburban American dwelling was flung out at 10,000 people who came to see the environment and performances.”³⁰ Judy Chicago made the private life of women public. Women questioned their subjugated social role.

Photographs by and of Cindy Sherman appear as still-shots of scenes in movies. In these photographs Sherman poses as a stereotypical female character. In her 1978 *Untitled Film Still #16* Sherman dresses in black attire, shows her legs, and presents her hair as short and black. She sits in a chair located in the center of a room. She holds a cigarette in her right hand and looks to the left. Her uncrossed legs rest directly in front of her. She appears in control and relaxed, especially in comparison to *Untitled Film Still #21*. In this scene, strong and erect buildings frame the face and shoulders of a woman wearing a hat and gray suit. She looks quizzically away from the viewer. In this work Sherman appears as a confused female character in a large city, a space created by and

²⁹ Raven, “Womanhouse,” 52.

³⁰ Raven, “Womanhouse,” 61.

for men.³¹ Judy Chicago creates a piece highlighting the anger women experience due to the expectations society places on them and Sherman creates a piece that reveals women entering into a world created for men. Judy Chicago and Sherman challenge the traditional expectations for women.

Jewish laws dictate the manner in which Jews should publically present themselves. The Jewish law, T'zeni'ut, mandates that Jews of all genders should dress and behave modestly and conservatively by covering the body and hair and avoiding lavish jewelry.³² Further, Jewish law prohibits dressing in clothing of the opposite gender. Isaac Bashevis Singer writes of Yentl, the female character who dresses as a man in order to attend Yeshiva, or Jewish school, in his 1975 novella Yentl the Yeshiva Boy. Eventually, Yentl feels guilt and apprehension about her decision to cross-dress. Singer writes: “only now did Yentl grasp the meaning of the Torah’s prohibition against wearing clothes of the other sex. By doing so one deceived not only others but also oneself. Even the soul was perplexed.”³³ This story, which inspired the 1983 film directed by and starring Barbra Streisand, portrays an Orthodox woman breaking the Jewish law in order to gain an opportunity to learn the law.

In 2004, Judith Butler wrote Undoing Gender. Butler contemplates “what it might mean to undo restrictively normatative conceptions of sexual and gendered life.”³⁴ Butler discusses gender performance in relation to one’s biological sex, and discloses the medical and societal risks that intersex or transgender individuals face if they do not

³¹ Williams, Robert. *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 252.

³² Yehuda Henkin. “Understanding Tzniut: Controversies in the Jewish Community.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*. 18. (2009)

³³ Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to The Letter Writer*. (New York: Library of the Americas: 2004), 446.

³⁴ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge: 2004), 3.

conform to a specific biological gender. Artists question the manner in which society dictates women should present themselves and their femininity.

In 1974 artist Lynda Benglis placed an advertisement for her art exhibition in *Art Forum*. In the advertisement, Benglis stands nude and wears a pair of sunglasses. She bends her knees and holds a dildo to her vagina, suggesting that Benglis intends to show herself with a penis. Frueh suggests that Benglis behaves masculine by holding the dildo to her vagina. According to American societal standards, Benglis does not “properly” represent herself or femininity.³⁵ By creating the advertisement, Benglis challenges notions of gender by appearing masculine and by failing to behave how society expects women to behave.

During the 1970s several feminist artists depicted deities. Artists aspired to portray the “goddess,” or a feminized version of a God in order to critique the patriarchal structure of religions and eliminate gender inequalities. Gloria Orenstein suggests that:

The contemporary feminist movement to reclaim the Goddess through the arts is thus to be understood as embedded both within a larger “herstory” of women’s historical critique of patriarchal religions and within a pre-patriarchal herstorical context of women’s artistic creativity through representations of powerful female figures.³⁶

While the actual *beliefs* of the Goddess Movement can in no way be compared to the beliefs of Judaism, one can still see parallels in the artistic presentation of women.

Contemporary female Jewish artists represent strong Old Testament female figures, such as Lilith and Esther, in order to critique the patriarchal structure of religion by presenting modern women as powerful female biblical figures. Benglis and the Goddess artists

³⁵Frueh, Joanna. “The Body Through Women’s Eyes” 194.

³⁶Orenstein, Gloria. “Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Artists” in *The Power of Feminist Art* ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.) 176.

challenge the gender dichotomy by presenting women in provocative and authoritative roles.

Thesis Overview

The second of the Ten Jewish Commandments specifies that one cannot artistically depict anything on the earth or in the heavens. While this commandment specifically refers to idolatry, individuals have often interpreted it to mean that Jews could not create art.³⁷ However, because practicing Judaism requires various ritual and holy objects, Jewish artists once classified embellished ritual items as art.³⁸ This thesis does not look at ritual objects as portrayed in a traditional sense due to the fact that Jews have been creating art (reflecting secular or religious themes) for decades.³⁹

For this thesis, I introduce female artists whose artwork embodies the ideas of Ortner, Butler and Rubin; and whose work mirrors the techniques of their artistic predecessors. I classify the artworks into two categories: Jewish ritual objects and portraiture. Certainly, the artists reflect on Judaism or the Jewish Identity. However, the artists critique objects through their works or incorporate themselves into the portraits. The artists explore issues impacting the contemporary Jewish Identity of all sects. Thus, the works often are personal and controversial. The artists challenge the laws and perceptions of Judaism. For instance, Hélène Aylon and Yona Verwer present objects that they feel discriminate against women; Maya Escobar and Siona Benjamin reflect on their multicultural identities; Deborah Kass adapts the silk-screen medium used by Andy

³⁷ Voolen, van Edward. *Jewish Art And Culture*. (New York: Prestel, 2006), 13.

³⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 84.

³⁹ Shulamit, Reinharz. "A Survey of the First Century of Jewish Women Artists: The Impact of Four Upheavals." Accessed: October 6, 2013.
<http://www.brandeis.edu/hbi/publications/workingpapers/docs/reinharz.pdf>.

Warhol during the mid-twentieth century to create portraits of prominent female Jewish women; Jamie Sneider reinterprets the *Play Boy Calendar* in her own 2009 calendar, *Year of the Jewish Woman*; and Nikki S. Lee completely fabricates a Jewish wedding. These artists investigate what they believe to be problematic areas of Judaism in order to critique, challenge, and dismantle the patriarchal construction of the Jewish religion and culture.

CHAPTER ONE

Critique Through Appropriation: Artists Incorporating the Religious Object

Laws articulated in the Torah dictate the manner in which worshippers should move, present, and conduct their bodies. Thus, women strictly abiding by the Jewish laws tend to surrender control over their bodies to the laws of the religion. Certain objects allow worshippers to abide by laws. Women can lose the ability to exercise full control over their bodies due to the structure and function of ritual objects and Biblical laws – which affect Orthodox women who strictly adhere to the laws in the Torah. Thus, Orthodox feminist artists reflect on and challenge restrictions by creating artwork. Curiously, non-Orthodox women also create artwork that reflects on Jewish laws and objects. This suggests that restrictions facing Orthodox women also impact non-Orthodox women. The Jewish female artists I explore in this chapter include Hèlene Aylon, Yona Verwer, Maya Escobar, Jamie Sneider, Maya Escobar, and Nikki S. Lee. These women explore their Jewishness through manipulating and mocking objects and laws that stymie the ability of women to practice the Jewish religion as freely as men practice the religion.

Objects

Practicing Judaism orthodoxly involves and requires various objects. *Ritual objects* include holy materials that might or might not serve a ceremonial function, and objects which make it possible to abide by the Jewish law. Jewish law prohibits physical manipulation of ritual objects, and in the case of damage, are placed “somewhere,” which

often implies burial of the object.¹ One can find laws in the *Torah* (also called the “Five Books of Moses.”)

According to the Orthodox interpretation of the Torah, the book contains the entire history of the world and humanity, Jewish laws and commandments, and was scribed by the biblical Jewish religious leader Moses.² Jewish scholar Nicholas De Lange describes the *Torah* as “The oldest, and most highly esteemed of all Jewish books and in a sense the foundation document upon which the whole of Judaism is built.”³ Orthodox Jews consider the Torah one of the most sacred Judaic texts and ritual objects: One would bury a destroyed Torah, and one considers reading and studying the biblical text equivalent to prayer.⁴ Thus, the Jews deeply respect the Torah because its text establishes the construction of Judaism.

Many Jews (Orthodox or not) attempt to gain exposure to the Torah through attending synagogue services or through enrolling in *Yeshiva*, or Jewish school. Orthodox Jews immerse themselves in and devote themselves to Torah study. The Orthodox Jews place great importance on the physical book and do not clearly distinguish between scholarship and prayer. Rather, they consider these concepts interchangeable.

Despite the importance of the book and its teachings Torah study was traditionally reserved for men. Scholar Dvora E. Weisberg explains, “Classical rabbinic literature

¹ Virginia Greene. “Accessories of Holiness: Defining Jewish Sacred Objects.” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*. 31 (1992): 34, 35.

² Segal, Eliezer. *Introducing Judaism*. (New York: Routledge, 200), 13.

³ De Lange, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Judaism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44.

⁴ Virginia Greene. “Accessories of Holiness,” 34 - 35.

shows no interest in the subject of women as students of Torah.”⁵ Certainly, prior to the 1970s, women could not attend rabbinical school to become rabbis and traditionally women did not attend Yeshiva, this is seen in Singer’s *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*.⁶ These institutions, which require ample immersion in the Torah, once condoned the participation of women in Judaic prayer and education.

Additionally, only three laws (out of 613) in the book pertain specifically to women, demonstrating how infrequently the book even addresses women. Thus, an analyses of the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law from the point of view of feminist theorists and artists reveals that the Torah favors and empowers men and diminishes the role of women in Judaism.

Hélène Aylon’s 1990 installation piece *The Liberation of G-D* (from *The G-D Project*) (Chapter 1 Figure #1) shows rows and columns of thick open books (which are copies of the Torah.) The translucent pages reveal pink highlights. Aylon created a videotape of herself creating the piece. In the videotape, the viewer sees the book because Aylon points a video camera to the glossy pages of the book and runs her finger and pen over certain passages while speaking. Each time she touches the book one can hear a crunch, which comes from the parchment that she glued onto each page of the book. She states: “*I highlight onto the parchment that covers each page: between words in the empty spaces where a female presence has been omitted.*” She also highlights words that represent “*vengeance, deception, cruelty and misogyny, words attributed to*

⁵ Weisberg, E. Dvora. “Women and Torah Study in Aggadah.” *Women and Judaism*. Ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn. 41- 63 (New York University Press: New York: 2009), 44.

⁶ De Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism*, 68.

God.”⁷ One can see the books, which remain covered in parchment with visible pink highlights.

Aylon lines the open books on the wall, demanding one to acknowledge the pages. By gluing parchment onto the book, Aylon avoids writing directly on the book and instead marks the parchment. She utilizes the color pink to highlight sections of the book, and pink represent stereotypical femininity. In the video, one never sees Aylon’s face. Instead, one sees her hand highlighting the words and hears her voice describing the process.

Highlighting the book while discussing the process of deciding what to highlight demonstrates an analytical critique of the work, thus alluding to scholarship and education – an area traditionally denied to women. Yet, Aylon defies this regulation by interpreting the Torah.

Aylon highlights parchment, which she glued onto the text, rather than the actual pages of the book. Although Aylon damages the text with glue, she does not damage the text with a pen or highlighter. Perhaps she avoids writing on the text to claim that she does not blame the text for the prevailing sexism within it. Instead, she blames the point of view (or the lens) in which people interpret the text. Thus, the parchment would represent the point of view.

However, in another interpretation, one also associates studying and reading the Torah with prayer. Aylon creates a physical division between her highlighter and the pages of the book by covering the pages with the clear parchment. Thus, Aylon reads through the clear parchment rather than directly from the pages of the Torah. This allows

⁷ “The Liberation of G-D,” narrated,” accessed September 21, 2013, <http://www.heleneaylon.com/LiberationofGod.html>.

Aylon to avoid praying, and thus allows her to disassociate the spiritual from the analytical.

In the video, one does not see Aylon's face. This allows the artist to avoid revealing herself as a main subject and to focus solely on the Torah as the main subject to be critiqued. She therefore does not make her critique of the Torah personal. The controversial nature of her work could subject her, the artist, to societal and religious analyses and critique. By speaking solely about the book and removing her face from the video, she disconnects the work from the "author" (herself.) This also suggests that Aylon feels that the issues she identifies with affect all women abiding by the Torah and not just herself.

Aylon displays frustration towards the construction of the Torah and disregards Orthodox Jewish female norms by studying in order to critique the Torah. This suggests that she shows lack of concern for modesty. She harshly critiques areas of the book she believes demean women, thus assuming a position of empowerment. By reading, critiquing and analyzing the Torah, Aylon defies traditional female Jewish conventions and norms and demands gender equality. Aylon adapts a similar approach as Schneemann in *Interior Scroll*. Each woman created an artwork meant to critique a religious document in order to achieve equality.

Physically at the Synagogue

Practicing Jews typically attend *synagogue*, also called shul and temple. At the synagogue, Jewish people gather together to read and interpret the Torah and worship with the assistance of a rabbi.⁸ Some people attend synagogue regularly, while others attend only on high holidays. However, many go to synagogue in order to be a "seen" or

⁸ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 245.

to gain recognition as a member of the Jewish community.⁹ Thus, by regularly attending synagogue, one asserts and reaffirms one's membership within the Jewish community and socializes with other worshippers. Jews often attend synagogue during the Shabbat. The *Shabbat*, the day of rest, occurs every Friday evening until Saturday evening. During the Shabbat, Jewish people reflect on the creation of the world according to Exodus, a book of the Torah. Jews attend the religious services and then they return home to eat a meal with their family.

Jewish law dictates that during *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, and the Shabbat one cannot do any *work* or physical labor. One broadly defines work as pushing a stroller, pressing an elevator button, or carrying objects (such as keys) outside of the home.¹⁰ However, one can perform work inside of the home. A community can create an extension of the home with an *eruv*, a series of objects or ropes which one usually places over telephone wires, street lamps, or other objects on the street. The *eruv* not only enables Jews to abide by a law (avoiding work), it allows all worshippers to attend temple, because, within the bounds of the *eruv* one can do work – thus enabling people with house keys, a baby carriage, or wheelchair, to leave the home to attend synagogue. The *eruv* typically surrounds a neighborhood with a high population of Jewish people.

The *eruv* enables greater numbers of Jews to attend temple because within the bounds of an *eruv* people can carry objects and engage in physical labor. However, without an *eruv* women would be more likely than men to remain at home during Shabbat and Yom Kippur. Of the three roles and duties of women (as illustrated in the Torah), two of them pertain to the Sabbath: Women light the candles and set aside

⁹ De Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism*, 116.

¹⁰ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 245, 279.

challah.¹¹ These commandments pertain to women, and prioritize that women remain at home during the Sabbath and Yom Kippur.

Jewish law does not require for women to attend synagogue during the Sabbath, however, synagogue is a social activity. Since the role of the women includes lighting the Shabbat candles and setting aside the challah women would stay at home. They would guard the home (as one cannot carry keys) or watch a child in a stroller or wheelchair so that the able-bodied man could attend services. However, the eruv eradicates the need for a woman to stay at home because it creates an extension of the home, and thus transforms the area within its bounds into a home, allowing all residents to attend religious services (for instance, a woman could push a stroller to synagogue.) However, not all neighborhoods have an eruv.

Artist Yona Verwer arranges a variety of vibrant paintings in a circle for her 2012 installation piece, *Tightrope*. One painting, *Stanton Street Shul – Detail of Astrology Mural* (Chapter 1, Figure #2) depicts a blue fish in front of a marbleized background. Another piece in the installation, *Stanton Street Shul* (Chapter 1, Figure #3) depicts a background of dull greens, oranges and pinks. A border within this background encompasses a sky and an arm, with an arm extending from the left side of the work. The hand on the arm holds long thin beige strands – presumably wheat. Each of the paintings contains an incomplete image, with the rest of the image extending off the page.

Verwer includes quotes on LCD monitors in the center of the circle. Women respond to the questions: “*What impact has having no eruv had on your life?*” and “*Have you considered moving to another neighborhood?*” The response of one woman reads: “I

¹¹ Chaiken, Paula. “Other Tales: Museum Objects, Women, and Jewish Knowledges,” in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 74.

have the almost singular honor of technically being in a building that is “protected” by the NYU eruv... my shul... is not within that eruv...so it meant that we had to deal with opprobrium or sympathy when we wheeled a handicapped child into shul, or I had to spend an hour trying to do a five minute walk to get that child to shul.”

Verwer organizes the paintings, which display images of sections of the synagogue, in a circle around quotes anonymously collected online by women. These quotes reflect the sentiments of women who do not reside within an eruv.¹² The paintings represent the synagogues, the construction of the installation evokes the physical structure of the eruv, and the anonymous quotes represent the absence of women at the synagogue, or the great challenges of attending synagogue.

The title of the work, *Tightrope* refers to the common construction material (a rope) that one typically utilizes to construct an eruv.¹³ Placing the paintings around statements by women reflecting on the lack of an eruv allows Verwer to place women within the bounds of the eruv. However, the textual component of the piece emphasizes the potential value of the eruv for women who do not live within the bounds of an eruv while also commenting on the simplicity of the construction of the eruv. This forces one to ponder as to why more neighborhoods do not construct an eruv.

Through including quotes by women in the center, *Tightrope* metaphorically grants women tethered to their homes a space in which to communicate with observers. *Tightrope* thus visually and verbally depicts and emphasizes constraints religious Jewish women experience because they cannot leave the home to enter the synagogue during holidays.

¹² Verwer, Yona. (Artist), in email with the author, November 12, 2013.

¹³ Verwer, Yona. Interview by author. Email, November 12, 2013.

By addressing the ability (or inability) of a woman to move outside of the domestic sphere, and by including insight from women, Verwer adapts a similar approach in *Tightrope* that Chicago adapts in *Womanhouse*. While Chicago made the private domestic area public, Verwer makes a public area accessible to women who find that gender constraints prohibits their ability to see the able to see the synagogue. Exhibiting artworks that highlight female oppression forces society to confront issues facing Orthodox women.

In earlier times, women and men prayed together in synagogues. However, this changed during the Medieval Ages, when a physical barrier (called a *partition*) was created in synagogues to physically divide the space in which men and women pray. Segal posits that a barrier was implemented to prevent the “worshiper from being distracted by sexual temptations.” Dividing the sexes during worship remains common practice in Orthodox synagogues.¹⁴ However, in order to begin Orthodox services, ten men must be present while the number of females in attendance does not influence when the services begins. Therefore, dividing the sexes makes females dependent on the presence of men in order to worship.

Hélène Aylon created her installation piece, *The Partition is in Place but the Service Cannot Begin* (Chapter 1, Figure #5) in 2002. The photograph of the piece reveals many square cloths attached to rods hanging from the ceiling. The cloths extend from the top of the photograph to midway through the photograph. Long strings attach to the square cloth and extend down to the floor. One can see through these strings to the other side of the barrier. One can see people standing in front of the strings. The people appear miniscule in comparison to the piece. Aylon writes the caption: “If there were

¹⁴ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 250, 245.

nine male worshippers and one thousand female worshippers, the service could not begin because the service requires the presence of ten men.”¹⁵

Aylon constructed the piece from ‘Tsitsit, the same material one uses to create Tallit, the ritual prayer shawl which religious men wear.’¹⁶ Cutting the cords and untying the knots of the ‘Tsitsit removes it of its special qualities and most synagogues will bury the object when destroyed. Thus, the treatment of a damaged Tallit represents the holiness of the object.’¹⁷

When in situ the large square cloths on the upper part of the work rest above eye-level. Thus, one cannot see through the large square cloths when standing on the ground while looking up towards the work due to their placement. However, one can see through the strings cascading down towards the floor. Aylon spreads the strings far enough that one can physically move between them. The scale of the people to the work reveals the substantial size of the piece.

Aylon places the squares, or the solid area, higher than a body can physically reach. Certainly, one cannot walk through a solid square unless one cuts through the fabric, yet one can simply walk through the strings. Thus, one can easily maneuver the barrier to move between the two sides of the blockade, or one can just rest in the center of the barrier, and thus refuse to choose a side. This creates greater gender equality because it obliterates the gender dichotomy that divides men and women.

Further, ‘Tsitsit usually functions as a material for clothing worn by men. Interestingly, Aylon removes the fabric from the male body in order to create a division between two gendered bodies. Thus, she does not associate the material with either the

¹⁵ “The Partition is in Place But...” accessed September 21, 2013. <http://www.heleneaylon.com/>.

¹⁶ “The Partition is in Place But...”

¹⁷ Greene, “Accessories of Holiness,” 36.

male or female body. Instead, Aylon associates the material with the human worshipper, as distinct from the gendered body. The structure of the work allows for the body to move in between the barrier that traditionally divides the (two) genders.

In practice, the Partition by Aylon creates a metaphysical division between the sexes. This contrasts against the traditional partition, which controls the body by pigeonholing men and women into a gender dichotomy. However, Aylon places strings on the bottom, allowing men and women to see through to the other side of the partition, suggesting that women and men should freely move between the sides of the partition. Thus, strings allow for greater accessibility, and indeed symbolically invite both genders to participate in religious worship.

Clothing

Clothing serves many functions for different people. Attire represents the way people perceive themselves and thus determines the way in which others view them. Meanwhile, apparel (or lack of it) carries connotations regarding gender and sexuality. Jewish people wear specific garments during prayer. Certain prayer garb can traditionally only be worn by men, and Jewish laws mandate that one should dress and present one's self conservatively and modestly. These two concepts impose strict regulations regarding the presentation of the body. Jewish female artists address the structure and function of clothing.

Men traditionally wear the tallit, a prayer shawl, during prayer. Today, Orthodox men continue to wear the tallit while women cover their heads. However, in the more liberal reformed congregations in England and the United States, women have adapted the tallit with the rise of the feminist movement and wear it as an expression of their

equality.¹⁸ The tallit oftentimes is white with blue stripes. One drapes it over one's shoulders. Thus, the tallit covers the entire back, and covers the left and right side shoulders. It features strings on the bottom that extend to the middle of the front thighs. When a tallit ruins, a synagogue will typically bury it, thus treating it as a sacred object.¹⁹

Jewish female bi-cultural artists often incorporate their multiple identities into their artworks. While one associates the Tallit with Judaism and masculinity, one would associate the rebozo, a colorful shawl that wraps around the head and shoulders, with Chicano women and femininity. Traditionally, Chicano women would wear the rebozo while working. However, today one often considers the rebozo "a sign of womanhood." Although the rebozo might not be worn frequently, it has become a cultural signifier of woman hood and femininity.²⁰

Maya Escobar's 2006 piece, *Tallit Rebozo Satirical Advertising Campaign* (Chapter 1 Figure #5) repeats the image of four women wearing a colorful cloth around the shoulders with strings extending to their knees. The first and third women model the front of the shawl. A pattern of green and red squares on the top, blue and white stripes right above the middle; and pinks, purples, and teal stripes down the side draw the eye to the bottom of the attire. Colorful strings and pom-poms attach to the bottom of the shawl, and extend down to the knees. The model bends her elbows by her midsection and grasps the cloth while touching her knuckles. The back of the apparel similarly features colorful vertical and horizontal lines.

¹⁸ De Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism*, 126.

¹⁹ Greene, "Accessories of Holiness," 37.

²⁰ Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella. "Rebozos, Our Cultural Blankets." *Voices: A Journal of Chicano/Latina Studies* 3 (2001),138.

The figures modeling the back of the garment wear their hair in a ponytail and rest their arms and hands down by their side. They wear the shawl over their shoulders. The shawl only reaches down to their lower back – revealing the backside of the women. A light brown square in the middle of the back of the shawl features Hebrew letters that translate to “peace” or “hello.” The statement rests above the English word “Peace.” Two white flowers rest in between the Hebrew and English letters. One cannot see the eyes of the model showing the front of the garb – just her nose and mouth. The model showing the back of the garb wears her hair in a ponytail and holds her hands down by her side.

The bright colors of the garment in *Tallit Rebozo Satirical Advertising Campaign* comprise a striking pattern distinguishing this garb from the more common white tallit with blue stripes. Traditionally, only Jewish men who pray would wear the tallit. Similarly, only Chicano women who work would wear the rebozo. However, today women in reformed congregations wear the tallit, and Chicano women would wear the rebozo.

Escobar repeats the front and back of the model twice, and also utilizes the word “campaign” in the title. Repetition imposes the image in front of the viewer; while the word “campaign” evokes fighting and selling tactics. These factors heighten the aggressive nature of the piece, and allude to advertisements. Certainly, one creates advertisements to convince and motivate someone.

Escobar appropriates the traditional colors and design of a rebozo and implants them onto the structure of a tallit. Certainly, Escobar relays the importance of females fighting for inclusion into Judaic life through adapting female symbols of one culture and

incorporating them onto a symbol of masculinity and through using language evoking aggressive selling techniques. The presentation of the tallit/ rebozzo evokes issues regarding gender, religion, culture and class. Certainly, Escobar relies on similar tactics as Sherman in her work *Untitled Film Still #21* by incorporating a signifier of womanhood onto a structure evoking masculinity.

The women modeling the back of the garment reveal their hair and their backside to the viewer. The women facing forward do not reveal the contours of their body, as the shawl covers the majority of the body. While the models showing the front reveal their mouths, they do not show the eyes. Thus, one cannot clearly discern the facial features, and thus identities, of the women.

The models facing forward do not reveal any identifying features regarding their visage or their body. Yet, the women facing backward reveal the contour of their backsides. The Jewish law, T'zeni'ut mandates that Jews of all genders should dress conservatively and behave modestly.²¹ The women facing forward successfully cover themselves. However, the women facing backward reveal their backsides. Obviously, both women sport the tallit, which implies that they observe the religion. Yet, the women modeling the front cover themselves, while the women modeling the back disregard modesty, and thus contradict T'zeni'ut.

Undoubtedly, clothing serves many functions in Jewish culture. Certain clothing functions as religious garb for worshippers. Additionally, religious laws mandate the way in which a woman should dress and behave, affecting her fashion choices.

Certainly, the Orthodox community encourages conservative presentation. In her

²¹ Yehuda Henkin, "Understanding Tzniut: Controversies in the Jewish Community." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 18 (2009.)

autobiography, Aylon recalls: “Before setting out on the honeymoon trip from New York City to Montreal, my new husband asked me to tie my long hair into a boy’s cap.... My husband also told me not to extend my hand for a handshake.”²² Firstly, the husband of Aylon suddenly asks his new bride to present and conduct herself in a manner in which she had not conducted herself prior to the marriage. Thus, this quote provides an example of the control that Orthodox men can exert over their wives while simultaneously revealing the conservative nature of the Orthodox community. Certainly, Orthodox women tend to wear conservative clothing, hiding their sexuality.

Hanukkah, a holiday lasting for eight days, occurs during the winter. The history of the holiday states that the Hellenistic leader Antiochus IV oppressed the Jews and dominated and desecrated their temple. Yet, the Jews reclaimed their temple in Jerusalem. However, the Jews only had enough uncontaminated oil meant to last for one night, yet, the oil lasted for eight days.²³ To commemorate that a single candle lasted for eight days, each night worshippers light a candle for the night of Hanukkah they celebrate, lighting an additional candle for each night. For instance, on the first night Jews light one candle, and on the second night they light two candles. Additionally, worshippers light the candle in the middle of the menorah – one does not count the middle candle as one of the eight candles.

In *December* (Chapter 1, Figure #7) of Sneider’s calendar, she shows a silver symmetrical pole. Four silver U-shaped objects flank the pole, thus equaling nine little poles extending off of the larger pole. A star with five points sits under the fifth pole directly in the middle of the eight other poles. The star elevates this pole above the eight

²² Aylon, H  lene. *Whatever is Contained Must be Released*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2012), 97.

²³ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 290.

other poles. A woman stands on top of each of the nine poles wearing only clear white high-heels and underwear ranging in color from (from left to right) white, yellow, beige and red (the pattern repeats on the other side) and blue in the middle. She stands angled towards the left on the left side of the structure; and she stands angling towards the right on the right side of the structure; in the center, she faces forward. She stands erect and holds her arms up together with a flame in her hands. She smiles giddily and arranges her hair to cover her breasts.

The symmetry of the eight poles, and the elevation of the middle pole resembles a candleholder, specifically a menorah. Thus, Sneider shows a traditional, silver menorah. The star with five points signifies a Jewish star. She places an image of herself holding a flame in the candleholders rather than traditional lit candlesticks in the menorah. She thus signifies a candle. She stands tall and smiles, suggesting confidence and jubilation. In each image of herself, she assumes a similar pose, thus showing solidarity through uniformity.

Sneider creates a juxtaposition between the real and unreal: the menorah resembles an actual menorah, however, Sneider stands in for the candlesticks. By incorporating herself into the menorah, Sneider contradicts Jewish law by revealing her body and demanding attention, yet, she also evokes her religion by suggesting that she celebrates the holiday. This pose also adds an element of humor to this piece²⁴ as one would not immediately associate a woman celebrating Judaism with nudity. Thus, her pose and lack of clothing creates an inability to categorize her: Is she Orthodox? Although one associates Orthodox women with conservative dress, this does not mean that all Orthodox women always dress conservatively. Certainly, if one were to pass a

²⁴ Wendy Wick Reaves, "The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art." *American Art*. 15 (2001) 2.

woman dressed provocatively, one might not assume that she affiliates with the Orthodox sect. Yet, this does not prove a lack of affiliation. This coincides with the double standards American society implements on women: the second wave feminist movement created greater legal and vocational opportunities for women, essentially granting them similar freedoms as men. Yet, women abiding by these new codes, and failing to abide by traditional standards of femininity, could cause them to find themselves culturally discriminated against and judged. Sneider (literally) reveals her femininity in *December*. Yet, her nudity creates ambiguity as one does not know how to categorize her. The inability to categorize her and the clear interest in religion allows Sneider to simply demonstrate her unique Jewishness.

Through revealing her body, standing tall (and certainly not modestly), and evoking sexuality, Sneider incorporates religion (the Menorah) and sexuality (her unclothed body) and feminism (through proudly portraying her body.) Although one typically creates a clear distinction between these three concepts,²⁵ Sneider does not distinguish between these three. Rather, Sneider blatantly incorporates these three concepts. Thus, through this piece, Sneider evokes sexuality and breaks the biblical law of T'zeni'ut in order to reflect on religious restrictions regarding sexuality.

Laws: Female Sexuality, Menstruation, and Love: Art out of Concepts

Laws state the way in which women should behave with people of the opposite sex, conduct themselves during menstruation, and adhere to marriage practices. Artists reflect on these laws through creating objects specifically pertaining to the laws.

²⁵ Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo. "Introduction: Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion." In *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*. Ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2011), 1.

The orthodox practice of *Shomer Negiah* literally translates to “guards the touch.” Orthodox Jewish youth (women and men) who follow the concept of Shomer Negiah refrain from all forms of touching the opposite sex until after marriage, and even then, they only touch their spouse.

In 2005, Escobar created *Shomer Negiah* (Chapter 1, Figure #7). *Shomer Negia* comprises of underwear ranging in colors (fuchsia, red, orange, teal, blue and black) with the expression “*Shomer Negiah*” written on the backside in Hebrew. One can purchase a pair of this undergarment for \$20 each on her website.

The underwear, like the law, translates to “Guards to the Touch,” this expression means “do not touch.” However, because the underwear provides the instructions that one should avoid physical contact, the statement on the underwear assumes that a woman might remove her clothing with a male. Escobar found the inspiration to design this garment upon observing that many young Orthodox women wear their conservative garb tightly on their bodies and, although they follow Shomer Negiah, they display an interest in meeting men.²⁶

Placing a statement that orders an individual not to touch on the back of underwear marketed for women who oppose contact with the opposite sex due to religious regulations poses many contradictions. It suggests that a woman might have an interest in meeting and removing her clothing with a male. Thus, the underwear acts as a physical reminder of the vow a woman made to abstain from sexual relations until after marriage. Ben Schacter writes for the exhibition guide, *Tzit Tzit: Fiber Art and Jewish Identity*, that Escobar “exclaim[s] “Hands Off!” at precisely the moment of greatest

²⁶ Escobar, Maya. (Artist) Interview by author. Phone, November 20, 2013.

vulnerability.”²⁷ The statement implies that perhaps sexuality and human instinct could take precedence over the vow one made to follow one’s religious laws.

Additionally, the statement would appear behind the woman on her buttocks. This would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the wearer to physically see the statement if she were wearing the underwear. The only person who would be able to see the statement would be someone situated behind the wearer. Thus, if someone were to see the underwear on the woman (assuming that the two individuals were about to touch because she would be nearly naked), then the woman would be breaking a law: if she were with a male, she breaks *Shomer Negiah*, as the law prohibits followers from touching someone of the opposite gender. If she were with a woman, she would similarly be breaking a law, as Jewish law also prohibits homosexual relationships. Segal states that “The Torah outlawed homosexual relations as an ‘abomination.’”²⁸ Thus, if a sexual partner does see the underwear, then the oath and Jewish law was already broken.

Placing a word prohibiting one from touching on a pair of underwear (which would be covering the behind of a woman) might also provoke a potential suitor. Frustration caused by the law disabling the suitor or woman from contact might cause anger at the law and Judaism itself. While Escobar suggests that the words might lack potency in the face of a physical situation and challenges the power of language, she also questions religious animosity.

Historically, menstruation significantly lowered the status of women (as reflected on by scholar Sherry Ortner and feminist artists.) In her autobiography, Aylon recalls,

²⁷ Escobar, Maya. “Excerpt from the Tzit Tzit: Fiber Art and Jewish Identity. Exhibition Catalog, by curator Ben Schacter.” *Maya Talk*. Last Modified: July 25, 2010. <http://blog.mayaescobar.com/2010/07/25/blurring-boundaries-between-jewish-denominations/>.

²⁸ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 260.

“My classmates and I had read and reread those sections in *Vayikra* (Leviticus) – the parts our teacher skipped over. We read that women were “unclean” when they got the bloody disease, menstruation.”²⁹ This reflection reinforces the dirtiness and sickness associated with menstruation. It additionally suggests the unimportance of the cycle, as women would not even learn about it, and thus the insignificance of women. These perceptions of menstruation make women seem dirty and unclean. However, as men do not experience menstruation, men appear pure in contrast to the women who do experience menstruation.

Aylon reflects on her menstrual cycle in a two-part piece, *My Clean Days* and *My Marriage Bed* (Chapter 1, Figure #8) in her 2001 installation series: *The G-D Project*. In *My Clean Days* Aylon plasters calendars on the walls. Images of the calendars project onto the second part of the installation piece, *My Marriage Bed*. This work shows a twin-size bed with white sheets and blankets that spread out onto the floor. This installation also includes a video discussing her cycle.³⁰

The calendars reflect the days Aylon menstruated and the days she was obligated to take a *mikveh*, or a ritual bath during her twelve-year marriage to her husband. The image of the calendars reflects onto her twin size white bed. Menstruation, according to Jewish law represents impurity. However, Aylon covers a twin size bed with white sheets. Due to the size of the bed, one would not consider it a “marriage bed,” while the white of the sheets represents innocence and cleanliness. Aylon alludes to her cycle by projecting a representation of her period onto the clean, child-like and thus bed pure bed.

²⁹ Aylon, *Whatever is Contained Must be Released*, 46.

³⁰ “My Bridal Chamber,” accessed September 21, 2013, http://www.heleneaylon.com/Bridal_Chamber.html.

Aylon comments on how society expects women to behave demurely despite experiencing something so “impure.”

Aylon follows the feminist art tradition of confronting the viewer with the menstruation cycle. She suggests the unacceptability of minimizing and diminishing the role and status of women due to her menstruation cycle. While Judy Chicago projects signifiers of blood in *Menstruation Bathroom*, Aylon projects calendars detailing her cycle onto a white bed, thus Aylon similarly alludes to the cycle. However, Aylon literally reflects the cycle on a clean white bed, this differs from the approach taken by Chicago because she reveals the sterility and thus cleanliness of the cycle. She requests recognition for and acceptance of the menstruation cycle as a natural part of femininity and humanity.

Jews typically practice monogamous relationships, although the Talmud condones polygamous relationships. The wife typically receives the *ketubbah*, or a Jewish marriage contract. The ketubbah stipulates the terms and conditions of a marriage. Marriage and ample procreation has been considered an expectation and assumption for Jewish people.³¹ Traditionally, Jewish people typically marry within the religion to conserve the Jewish bloodline.

For the “Jewish Identity Project” exhibition at the Jewish Museum of New York, Nikki S. Lee photographs a series *The Wedding* [2005.] In *The Wedding* (2) (Chapter 1, Figure #10.) She, an Asian woman, poses wearing a white gown and veil sits down, and touches her veil with her left hand. She smiles while looking towards the right, away from the viewer. A man sits to her left. He wears a yarmulke and a tallit. He looks

³¹ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, 299-300

towards an ornate piece of paper positioned in front of Lee. The hand of a man whose face we do not see reaches over to the paper holding a pen to the paper in front of Lee.

The white gown and veil worn by the women imply her role as the bride and that she celebrates her wedding. However, while the yarmulke and the Tallit worn by the man next to her reinforce the religious occasion, it does not prove that he is the man whom she weds. Yet, the piece of paper, presumably a ketubbah, in front of Lee constitutes an important element of a Jewish wedding. The woman and the document signify that the woman celebrates her wedding.

Although the image represents a Jewish wedding, Lee explains that she hired actors to pose for the scenes in the series.³² However, without reading the text (or a familiarity with works by Lee), one would never assume that Lee posed the entire series specifically for this project. This knowledge forces one to question the inauthenticity and the authenticity of the photographs.

Lee's photographs portray images of what could and usually does occur at a traditional Jewish wedding. However, the models in these photographs were merely models and the images do not portray an actual Jewish wedding – as Lee did not actually marry a Jewish man. The concept of this series aligns with the concept of the *simulacrum* – or representation of something. Art Historian Michael Camille explains that, “the simulacrum calls into question the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is repressed.”³³ While the photographs represent a real wedding by demonstrating what happens at a wedding, a marriage did not actually occur. This makes

³² *The Jewish Identity Project New American Photography*. Edited by Susan Chevlowe. (New York: The Jewish Museum of New York, 2006. Published in conjunction with the exhibit of the same name), 83 and 174.

³³ Camille, Michael. “Similacrum” in *Critical Terms for Art History*. Ed. Nelson, Robert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.) iBook.

the wedding the repressed, as it did not happen and thus is not real, and therefore deeming *The Wedding* a simulacrum of a traditional Jewish wedding.

By photographing a wedding – which did not actually culminate in a marriage, but instead a series of shots staged to appear as a marriage, Lee follows in the tradition of Rene Magritte. His 1948 painting, *Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe* shows a pipe with the title beneath it. The image appears as a pipe, yet, it is not really a pipe, as one cannot smoke (or touch or hold) this particular painting of a pipe.³⁴ Similarly, the photographs by Lee appear as a wedding, they feature a ketubah and a wedding gown, which serve as signifiers of a traditional Jewish wedding. However, they do not represent the actual, real, authentic union between herself and another.

Looking at the inauthenticity requires one to regard the authenticity of the image. The photographs by Lee do, indeed, represent something real – it represents the accurate image of a wedding, and this might be all that matters. Scholar Roland Barthes articulates that:

What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see it; it is the absolute Particular.³⁵

Any photograph of a wedding represents a wedding. Are the photographs of a wedding that resulted in a marriage real after they are developed, after the reception? Similarly, are the photographs of a wedding real even if the couple divorces? Certainly, in both of these cases, it was a real wedding, but it is no longer a physical wedding or even a marriage. Similarly, the photographs taken by Lee had ended upon completion of the series, like a

³⁴ Camille, "Simulacrum," iBook.

³⁵ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. (New York: Hill and Wang: 1980), 4.

wedding ceremony; and the photographs are still looked at even after she has parted from the other actors in the series, like a divorce.

Further, one can define marriage as a union between two people. Lee and the other figure shared a union by working together to photograph the series. Therefore, although the quintessential traditions of a marriage might not have occurred, a marriage (of some sorts) did occur. Lee fits into “The Jewish Identity Project” because she performs a ritual that many Jewish people perform. While she performs and represents Jewishness, this is not a portrait of a “Jewish woman,” merely a portrait of someone *acting* as a Jewish woman. Thus, these photographs stand as representations of a Jewish wedding, or “objects” of a Jewish ritual.

Artists challenge the laws of Judaism through analyzing objects that carry sexist connotations, manipulating objects to be more inclusive, and creating objects to demonstrate the versatility and the diversity of the worshipper. The artworks show that while objects aide in the ability to practice Judaism, they also can constrict Jewish women. However, new objects can be made to aide women in the ability to practice her religion while remaining true to herself. Artists consistently strive to achieve equality for women through challenging objects and laws denying Jewish women of absolute equality.

Chapter One Images

Figure #1



Hèlene Aylon
The Liberation of G-d
1990
Warhol.org
The Jewish Museum, New York, Dobkins Family
Foundation and Fine Arts Acquisition Committee
Funds, Estate of Phyllis Frey, and Mr. and Mrs.
George Jaffin Fund

Figure #2



Yona Verwer
Installation – Stanton Street Shul –
Detail of Astrology Mural
2012
Yonaverwer.com
Acrylic on canvas, steel cables, LCD
monitors
71" x 104" x 71" (installation)
Location unknown



Detail of Figure 2

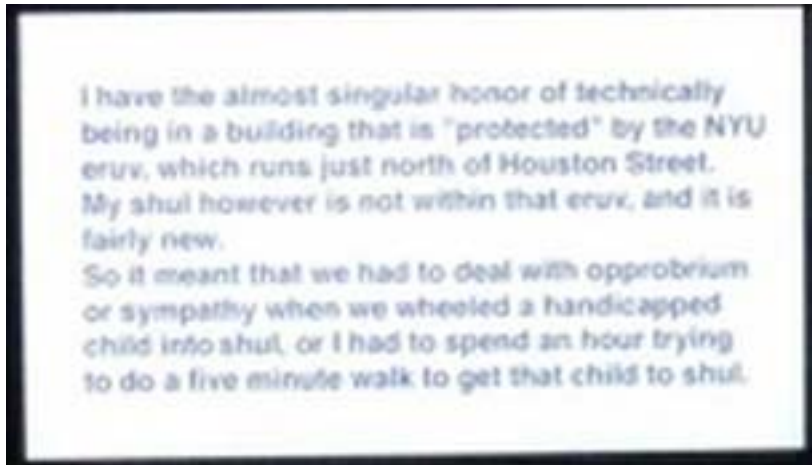
Figure #3



Yona Verwer
Stanton Street Shul
2012
Yonaverwer.com
Acrylic on canvas, steel cables,
LCD monitors
Detail from website
71" x 104" x 71" (installation)
Location unknown

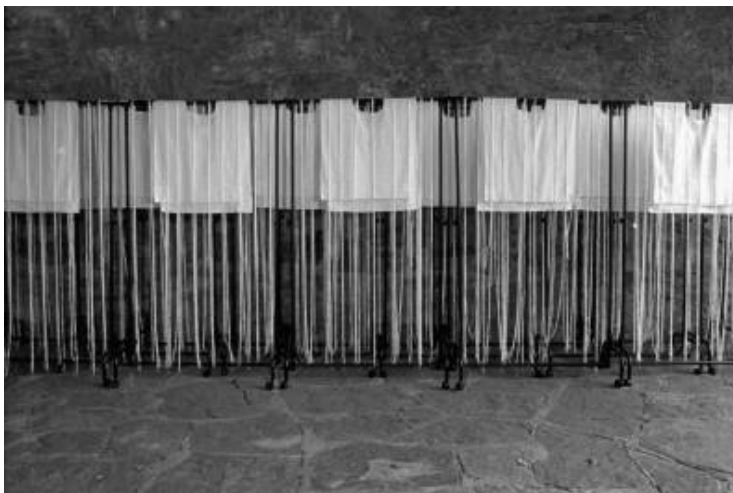


Detail of Figure 3



Detail of Figure #3

Figure #4



Hélène Aylon (photo by Tim Donovan)
The Partition is in Place, But the
Service Can't Begin
2002
Heleneaylon.com
'Tsitsit (cloth)
21" x 6"
Current location unknown

Figure #5



Maya Escobar
Tallit Rebozo Satirical
Advertising Campaign
2006
Mayaescobar.com
Digital



Front detail of Figure 6



Back detail of Figure 6

Figure #6



Jamie Sneider
December, "Year of the Jewish Woman"
Scan and screen shot of original calendar
2009
Offset printing on 100 lb paper
27.5" x 11.5"
From the personal collection of
Cosette Shachnow

Figure #7



Maya Escobar
Shomer Negiah
2005
Mayaescobar.com
Cotton
Extra small, small, medium,
large
For sale at mayaescobar.com

Figure #8



Hélène Aylon
My Clean Days/ My Marriage
Bed
1990
Hélèneaylon.com
Mixed Media
White Handkerchiefs (on bed)
24-foot menstrual chart (on
wall)
Current location unknown

Figure #9



Nikki S. Lee
The Wedding (2)
2005
Scan from "Jewish Identity Project"
exhibition catalogue
C-print mounted on aluminum
30" x 22.5"
Leslie Tonkonow Artworks and
Projects

CHAPTER TWO

The Self and Tradition: Self-Portraiture as a Technique for Assimilation into the World of Judaism

Artists create portraits to represent the likeness or personality of those whom they depict. Scholar Amelia Jones states that, “we are compelled to identify a body (and thus a self) with whom we can identify ourselves, onto whom we can project our innermost desires.”¹ Thus, the viewer of the portrait can identify with the subject of the portrait. Jewish female artists create portraits. Certainly, the role of a Jewish woman differs from the role of the Jewish man. Some perceive that restrictions prevent women from fully practicing Jewish traditions. Additionally, women of Jewish Identity often experience stereotypes and discrimination (from within and outside of the religion.) Artists depict the female body through portraiture (biographical) and self-portraiture (autobiographical.) Portraiture provides artists with a forum to construct a discourse that celebrates prominent female biblical leaders; that assimilates women into Jewish institutions; and that depicts an awareness of stereotypes regarding Jewish women. Ultimately, portraiture allows artists to incorporate women into the Jewish history and cultural fabric.

Judaism: Female Biblical Figures

The traditional Art History canon contains countless portraits representing stories from the *Old Testament*, or the Jewish Bible, as well as the *New Testament*, or the Catholic Bible. The depiction of female characters in the New Testament (particularly of the Virgin Mary) inundates the Art History survey textbooks and art museums – often secular and religion-neutral spaces. These depictions typically present women as

¹ Amelia Jones. "Body." In *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), iBook.

submissive and modest.² Contemporary female Jewish artists examine and explore the role of pivotal women in the Old Testament.

Lilith

Lilith, the first wife of Adam, appears in Jewish literature. For instance, a cabbalistic document, *The Alphabet of Ben Sirah* states that Adam and Lilith were created at the same time and with the same substance, thus making them equals. However, once Adam expected Lilith to follow his commands she left him to kill newborns and rendezvous with demons. According to scholar Karen Von Veh, Lilith was “promoted as the first strong minded woman and a figurehead for women’s rights.”³ Through refusing to surrender her freedom to another, Lilith represents independence. Through rendezvousing with demons and killing babies, Lilith rejects activities society expects women to perform, such as mothering and marriage.

Benjamin’s 2006 piece, *Finding Home #80 (Fereshteh) Lilith* (Chapter 2 Figure #1) features a blue woman with light shadows. The body faces directly to the right. The figure bends her thick arm and holds her ring and middle finger together. She curves her fingers towards her face. Her long bluish-gray hair flows behind her. The figure rests her right hand on her right hip and leans her neck upward with her eyes closed and mouth slightly ajar. A long white cloth with light blue vertical stripes covers her chest and billows behind her, while a separate white cloth drapes down her waist with multiple long white strings extending outside of the frame. An arrow extends through the right side of her chest with barely visible crimson near the arrow. A thick brown belt holding bullets

² Karen Von Veh. “Saints and Sinners: Re-Evaluating Gendered Power Bases Entrenched by Religious Imagery.” In *Taking a Hard Look: Gender and Visual Culture*, ed. Amanda du Preez. 47 –69. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009,) 57.

³ Von Veh, “Saints and Sinners,” 57.

and a gun drapes off her right hip. A dark gold wide bracelet with a chain drooping downwards decorates her right wrist, and two thin moss colored bracelets adorn her left wrist. A crescent shaped earring dangles from her right ear, and a necklace with a miniscule hand clings to her chest. Maroon bush-shaped flames ignite the star-covered midnight blue background. The words, written in black, capital, letters “*Then to the amazement of all there arose from the fire a blue maiden wafting the fragrance of lotuses in bloom*” align the top of the painting encompassed in a white background. A bird the same color as the flames soars towards the top right corner of the canvas. Its body appears under the word “bloom” but the head extends into the maroon frame bordering the entire scene. This scene rests in a golden frame. Benjamin writes the Hebrew letters “Alef” “Shin” and “Qof” in the pediment of the frame.

Benjamin portrays the body of Lilith with blue skin. The blue skin symbolizes Krishna, a Hindu God. Cox explains that the blue skin for Benjamin “became... a metaphor for being an Indian – Jewish – American woman.”⁴ Through portraying Lilith with blue skin, Benjamin addresses her own mixed Indian and Jewish identity. The cloth draping across the body of Lilith resembles a *tallit*, the prayer shawl traditionally worn by men. The necklace of an open hand on the neck of the figure resembles a *hamsa*, symbolically meant to repel bad fortune. The ammunition belt carries a gun and bullets.⁵ The figure’s expression remains serene despite the puncture wound through her chest and

⁴ Lorraine Morales Cox, *Siona Benjamin: Lilith in the New World*. (New York, NY: Flomenhaft Gallery, 2008).

⁵ McBee, Richard. “Lilith By Siona Benjamin,” last modified July 15, 2011. <http://richardmcbee.com/writings/contemporary-jewish-art/item/lilith-by-siona-benjamin>.

flames around her body. The Hebrew text, “Alef” “Shin” and “Qof” translates to “passion.”⁶

The reference to the flames (“there arose from the fire”) in the text above the figure implies that the figure emerges from fire. While fire produces warmth and light, fire can also mutilate one who touches it. Flames ensconce Lilith and the arrow penetrates her, thus demonstrating imminent danger. Yet, she conveys a serene expression, which makes her seem impervious to the danger. Lilith wears a hamsa, which many cultures believe serves as protection. Alluding to the danger and the spiritual implies a divine presence.

The flames also allude to the Burning Bush of the Jewish leader Moses. Jewish Scholar Eliezer Segal explains that while at “Mount Horeb, [Moses] encountered a burning bush whose fire would not be consumed. God spoke from the bush and ordered Moses to lead the Hebrews to freedom.”⁷ This quote references the belief that God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, and told him to free the Jews from slavery. In this reading, depicting Lilith in flames suggests that God attempts to develop a relationship with Lilith, as God did with Moses when God told him to free the Jews. Suggesting that God communicates with Lilith equalizes her with Moses and grants her with similar authority as Moses.

While Lilith represents female liberation, Lilith does not appear liberated in this image: the fire traps her body, while the arrow threatens her life. The ammunition belt and gun suggest that she must fight, yet, the image does not allude to what she must fight for. However, these military objects do allude to war, which one typically associates

⁶ Benjamin exclaimed in an email correspondence that “its an Urdu work ISHQ...written in Hebrew”

⁷ Segal, Eliezer. *Introducing Judaism*. (New York: Routledge, 2009),16.

with men, and thus masculinity.⁸ Lilith also wears a tallit, typically worn by men. Lilith, who represents liberation and rebellion, sports symbols evoking masculinity and thus creates an association between Lilith and masculinity. However, Lilith does not behave in a societally accepted feminine or masculine manner, thus portraying her with both masculine and feminine symbols demonstrate gender non-conformity.

Ortner posits that “woman’s body seems to doom her to mere reproductions of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, “artificially,” through the medium of technology and symbols.”⁹ From this perspective, Benjamin creates an association between nature and culture. Benjamin depicts Lilith, a woman, standing outside. Fire and the sky surround her. These elements allude to nature. However, the fire, as a symbol of Moses, the tallit, and the hamsa allude to culture, while the jewelry alludes to femininity. By depicting Lilith outside with symbols, Benjamin merges the feminine with the masculine.

Feminist artists incorporate masculine signifiers into their works to represent female power while evoking femininity. Utilizing this technique does not connote compliance or obedience, but rather strength and power. This portrayal aligns with art historian Craig Owen’s theory that “In order to speak, to represent herself, a woman assumes a masculine position; perhaps this is why femininity is frequently associated with masquerade, with false representations, with simulation and seduction.”¹⁰ Thus, the imagery that many feminist artists adapt aligns with the theory as proposed by Owens

⁸ V. Spike Paterson. “Gendered Identities, Ideologies and Practices in the Context of War and Militarism,” in *Gender War and Militarism, Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Laura Sjoberg, 17-29. (Santa Barbara: Praeger: 2010.)

⁹ Sherry B Ortner. “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 74.

¹⁰ Craig Owens. “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” in *The Art of Art History: A critical Anthology*. Ed. Preziosi Donald, (Oxford University Press, 2009), 337.

that women appropriate masculine signifiers in order to project the idea that women possess as much power as one assumes men to possess. Revealing the feminine body in a masculine context reveals the nuances of the personality of Lilith. Through incorporating symbols evoking war, Benjamin reinforces the strength and power of Lilith, thus equalizing Lilith with men. This tactic allows Benjamin to depict Lilith, as well as other biblical women, as powerful.

Esther

The story of the biblical Queen Esther appears in the Ketuvim – or the third section of the Old Testament. Esther’s cousin and teacher, Mordecai, instilled Esther with a Jewish upbringing but presented her as a Persian woman. One way in which he succeeded in presenting her as Persian was through changing her name from the Jewish “Hadassah” to the Persian “Esther.” Mordecai presented Esther to Xerxes, the King of Persia, upon learning that he sought a new bride. Xerxes eventually chose to marry Esther. Haman, the Prime Minister of the king, demanded that the king murder all of the Jews (which would include Esther.) At first, Xerxes agrees, until Esther reveals her own Jewish Identity and encourages Xerxes to save the Jews. Ultimately, the king agrees to let the Jews live.¹¹

Benjamin’s 2006 triptych, *Finding Home #90, 91, and 92* (Chapter 2, Figure #2) *Hear, See and Speak No Evil (Fereshteh)* features a brown panel with three portraits of Esther next to one another. The blue face in #90 looks directly towards the viewer. The ears of the face hide amidst its brown aviator helmet. The figure closes her lips shut and peers her wide-open eyes directly towards the viewer. The cobalt background features thin white overlapping swirls. The frame, with a muted red and green intricate design

¹¹ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*.19.

encloses the image. The word “hear” appears on the top of the frame while the phrase “no evil” appears on the bottom of the frame, making the phrase: “hear no evil.” #91 features a blue bust-portrait wearing a white blindfold. The outline of a blue eyelid behind the transparent blindfold reveals closed eyes. The mouth similarly remains closed. The background features a black design with thin white swirls. The design right above the center of the female’s head differs from the swirls within the rest of the design. This design features a large vertical oval underneath a smaller horizontal oval. Two circles rest on the left and right side of the smaller oval. The maroon frame features an undulating violet design. The word “see” rests on the top of the frame while “no evil” rests on the bottom, forming the phrase “see no evil.” #92 portrays a baby-blue bust-portrait wearing a charcoal-colored gas mask that covers the mouth and nose of the figure. The wide-open eyes of the figure look straight ahead towards the viewer. The light mint background features a dark green floral design. The crimson frame with a golden pattern features the word “speak” along the top and “no evil” on the bottom, comprising the phrase “speak no evil.” Additionally, Benjamin includes Hebrew text (spelling “Esther”) on the collarbone of each of the blue figures.

In #90 the white swirls amongst the cobalt background evoke white clouds against a blue sky while the aviator helmet evokes flight. One physically moves during flight, therefore, the helmet suggests freedom. However, flight also requires airplanes, which evoke isolation and confinement. Although the word “hear” adorns the top of the frame, the helmet covers the ears of the figure. This implies that the figure cannot hear, either by choice or by the physical force of the helmet. In #91 a blindfold covers the closed eyes of the blue figure. Yet, the figure closes her eyes, suggesting that she accepts her

inability to see and that she willingly surrenders her sight to the blindfold. While the word “see” reinforces sight, the phrase “see no evil” suggests that she avoids seeing evil. However, this blindness also stymies her ability to enjoy the complex background, as well as the design above her head that resembles an owl. In #92 a gasmask covers the entire face of the figure besides the eyes. Although the gasmask Esther wears prevents against injury, it implies that violence occurs and thus evokes war. The imagery of war juxtaposes against the floral background, representing fertility and life. The mask covering the mouth and the word “speak” suggest an inability of the figure to communicate, especially as the entirety of the phrase states: “speak no evil.” This suggests that perhaps the figure should or does not speak any “evil.”

Esther acknowledges and understands the gravity of the threat facing the Jews upon learning from Mordecai that Haman wishes to kill the Jews. Esther does not isolate herself when she learns of the danger. Instead, she “hears” the evil. Esther disregards potential risks by speaking to the king. She “sees” the imminent danger and seeks the king. Lastly, because she advocates for her beliefs, she “speaks,” ultimately saving the Jews. Esther’s acknowledgement, peaceful communication, and aggressive stance prevent the slaughter of the Jews. Further, by taking action, Esther protects herself and the Jews, represented by the gasmask. By acting, Esther eliminates the need for violence, thus removing the prospect of war. Benjamin’s work reinforces the importance of acknowledgment, communication and action.

One must inquire as to why some of these images and words contradict the actual story of Esther. Firstly, Esther did not encounter a battle. Yet, Esther wears a helmet and

a gas mask. These objects suggest war and thus evoke masculinity.¹² Esther adopts skills typically associated with men to save her people. Further, Esther was not blinded. Yet, Benjamin curiously blinds Esther in #91. Yet, the outline of an owl rests above the head of Esther, and owls signify wisdom. Wisdom implies foresight and knowledge, which evoke sight. Although a blindfold covers the eyes of Esther, she does not require her sight to save the Jews, but she does require wisdom and foresight.

The images alluding to war also evoke the current political situation in the Middle East. Perhaps, Benjamin also suggests that in order to remedy the political climate, one must rely on foresight and communication skills – as relied on by Esther, to peacefully come to agreements with oppositional parties. Examining the representation of Esther by artists allows one to further assess the value of Esther and her story for feminist Jewish artists.

In *March* (Chapter 2, Figure #3) Sneider stands to the left of the page with her body turned three-quarters towards the viewer. She stands in front of a translucent gold backdrop that reflects the back of her head and front left side of her body. She purses her mouth and widens her heavily shadowed eyes. She turns her neck to the right and thus looks directly towards the viewer. Her left leg slightly protrudes in front of her right leg, which one can visibly see in the reflection. She wears a revealing gold bikini bottom tied together with gold strings. Multiple round, coin-like jewels form a necklace around her chest and cover her breasts. A thin gold chain supports the name “Esther” and lies above the larger necklace. Two thick, round gold bracelets decorate each wrist. A jeweled gold crown pulls back her silky straight brown hair.

¹² Paterson. “Gendered Identities, Ideologies and Practices in the Context of War and Militarism.”

Sneider identifies as Esther through wearing a necklace stating her name. Additionally, she sports golden attire and jewels. These objects connote affluence and thus indicate royalty. Covering herself with a bikini bottom and a necklace around her chest reveals her body. Yet, her firm stance suggests seriousness. Sneider additionally stares directly at the viewer and opens her body towards the viewer, thus inviting the viewer to stare directly at her. Sneider stands in contrapposto. Her stance mirrors the representation of leaders and kings. For instance the neoclassical French painter, Jacques-Louis David depicts Napoleon Bonaparte, the French political and military leader, in a similar position in his 1812 portrait *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*. Certainly artists depict the contrapposto stance to represent strength and dignity.¹³ Assuming this stance allows Sneider to demonstrate that she associates with powerful military and ruling figures.

Sneider pays tribute to, and glorifies Esther through wearing her name around her neck and through depicting her as one would depict a ruler. She decorates her body with jewels, displays her long hair, and wears a necklace stating the female name (Esther), thus Sneider adorns herself in visual signifiers of femininity.¹⁴ This allows her to demonstrate that she identifies as female, yet the stance also evokes the power and strength that one typically associates with masculinity.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey states that “women...stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent

¹³ West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 72 – 73.

¹⁴ Cottingham, Laura. *Seeing Through the Seventies*. (New York: G+B Arts International imprint, 2000), 190-191.

image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not bearer of making.”¹⁵

Mulvey explains that women typically exist (in film) as an object for a man and for the spectators. This provides men with the power to impose demands on women and thus deems women as inferior to men. However, Sneider poses as male leaders, which equalizes her with powerful men. She therefore does not allow one to belittle her as a “male other.” As the designer of her calendar, she did not receive “linguist command” by a male. Rather, she was the “bearer of making.” Sneider creates and stars in the scene, thus demonstrating ownership over the image. Certainly, an audience of people observes, or “gazes” at the calendar, which she does not object to and rather encourages by selling her calendar. Thus, Sneider assumes control over her own body as well as the body of Esther through posing as her.

Secular American culture bombards society with images of the scantily clad female body. The Jewish law of T’zeni’ut suggests that one should dress and behave modestly.¹⁶ Although the portrayal of the body as done by Sneider aligns with the American acceptance and practice of exhibiting female nudity, it does not align with Jewish laws dictating how one should present one self. Sneider intersects concepts of American cultural norms with the Judaic cultural and legal taboos by behaving as an Old Testament figure in an American culturally acceptable manner. She thus evokes the works of earlier feminist artists who defy cultural norms regarding presentation of femininity.

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 834.

¹⁶ Yehuda Henkin, “Understanding Tzniut: Controversies in the Jewish Community,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 18. (2009): 236.

Benjamin and Sneider appropriate both “feminine” and “masculine” qualities when portraying themselves as biblical female women. Their acceptance and use of both qualities equalizes the genders by suggesting that they both have positive traits worth possessing, yet it also challenges the traditional representation of women.

Jewishness: Practicing Jewish Traditions

The Old Testament relays stories of the lives of prominent Jewish biblical ancestors. Yet, it also outlines Jewish laws, activities and traditions that Jews should continue to observe. The teachings of the Old Testament contain the most important information for the foundation and continuity of the Jewish religion.

Traditionally, only men attended Yeshiva (Jewish school, which focuses on teaching the Torah.) Recently some Orthodox Yeshivot opened their doors to women.¹⁷ In 1975, Singer wrote the novella Yentl the Yeshiva Boy. The story takes place during the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe. Yentl desires to attain an education, a feat which women were unable to accomplish. Yet, her father secretly teaches her Jewish law. When her father dies, Yentl assumes the identity of a man by renaming herself Anshel, exchanging her female garb for male garb, and searching for a Yeshiva to attend as a male. While in Yeshiva, Yentl meets and falls in love with a peer, Avigdor, whom she learns is engaged to marry another woman, Hadass. However, when the family of Hadass discovers that the brother of Avigdor committed suicide, her family terminates the engagement. Avigdor successfully convinces Yentl, whom he believes is a man, to marry Hadass, a feminine woman.¹⁸

¹⁷ De Lange, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Judaism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 68.

¹⁸ Singer, Issac Bashevis. *Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to The Letter Writer*. (New York: Library of the Americas, 2004.)

The novella of Yentl the Yeshiva Boy inspired the 1983 musical film, Yentl, directed by and starring Barbra Streisand. In one pivotal scene in the film (not in the book) Yentl visits a bookseller and attempts to buy a book before she adopts the identity of a male. However, the bookseller attempts to dissuade Yentl from buying the book, due to her gender, and instead tries to sell her a picture book. Only when Yentl informs the bookseller that she wishes to purchase the book for her father, he allows her to purchase it.¹⁹

Deborah Kass' 1993 black and white silkscreen *Triple Yentl (My Elvis)* (Chapter 2, Figure #4) features three identical figures standing next to each other in front of a light-gray background. The figures increasingly lighten from left to right. Each figure wears a fitted black hat that bulges on the top with a slight cap in the front producing a shadow over the forehead of the figure. The barely visible frame of the eyeglasses physically shields the eyes of the figures, but still exposes the eyes. The stern faces gaze directly at the viewer. A white collar covers the neck of the figures and a white shirt peeps out over the pants. A heavy black coat and black pants prevent the viewer from discerning the physique of the three bodies. The left hand rests in the coat pocket and the fingers on the right hand curl around a thick book.

The title, *Triple Yentl (My Elvis)* references the cultural icon, Elvis Presley. Perhaps, Yentl was an icon for Kass as Elvis was an icon for America. Kass titles the work *Yentl* (the female name of the figure), although Kass actually portrays Anshel, the male alter-ego of Yentl. Characters refer to Yentl as Anshel during her entire time as a student. Although Yentl behaves as a man would through studying and marrying Hadass,

¹⁹ Streisand, Barbara. *Yentl*. DVD. Directed by: Barbara Streisand. Beverly Hills: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., 1984.

Yentl loves Avigdor and expresses her distress about assuming a masculine identity. Although Yentl can physically appear as a man, she cannot completely disassociate herself from her feminine identity. Throughout the film, in order to live a reasonable life, Yentl must identify with a specific gender.²⁰ Fittingly, Kass allows Yentl to maintain her female name while appearing as a male in order to study Jewish law, thus obliterating the gender divide.

Yentl poses as a man to read literature rather than picture books, which demonstrates the ability and interest a woman might express towards education and literacy. Certainly, Yentl crashes the world of Talmudic studies, which excluded women. Thus, no other woman who physically presents herself as female attends the Yeshiva. Through repeating the image of the figure, Kass provides Yentl with the company of two other women. Yet, the women progressively become dimmer when reading the image from left to right. One similarly reads from left to right in the American language. Perhaps Kass suggests that one should “read” the work.

The eyeglasses, book and tallit signify scholarship, which imply learning and intellect. However, artistic traditions rarely depict women as scholars.²¹ Although Yentl biologically assumes a female identity, she rejects her femininity due to regulations prohibiting women from obtaining an education. Thus, she presents herself as masculine and scholarly, allowing her to assume a masculine identity.

Yentl physically embodies masculinity to attend Yeshiva (In this case, Yentl considers masculinity superior to femininity because she desires to participate in

²⁰ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2004.)

²¹ *Deborah Kass: Before and After Happily Ever After*. Edited by Eric Shiner. New York: Skira Rizzoli. 2012. Published in Conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. 126

activities that do not allow for female participation.) Yentl challenges the assumed superiority of masculinity by successfully personifying a man to achieve an education. Assuming a masculine identity allows her to gain an education, but also stymies her ability to embrace her femininity – she cannot have both, just one or the other.²² Pursuing Talmudic studies allows Yentl to bravely challenge the traditional Jewish codes that define the position of women and men. Kass thus demonstrates the determination of a woman to achieve equality, although achieving equality requires the rejection of femininity.

Traditions include lifestyle activities, such as education. Yet they also include holidays. The Jewish New Year consists of two important days. During the first day, *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, the “supreme judge,” God, judges all of the Jews, while the fate of the Jews seals on *Yom Kippur*. God judges the Jews and the Jews atone for their sins, deeming the Jewish New Year one of the most momentous Jewish holidays. Accordingly, synagogue attendance increases significantly.²³ This reinforces the importance of the “High Holy Days,” a major event, with great religious and social significance.

In *September* (Chapter 2, Figure #5) of Sneider’s calendar, a panorama of a baby-blue sky covers the upper half of the work, while trees and mountains compose the bottom of the background of the image. Sneider stands towards the right side of the page. Her body extends from the bottom of the page to the top of the page. She uses both of her hands to grasp a long thin undulating brown and black object, which she holds to her mouth. The object reaches to the left of the page. One cannot directly see her face (due to the object in her mouth and her stance directly towards the left side of the page.) A

²² *Deborah Kass: Before and After Happily Ever After*, 93

²³ De Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism*. 286, 137.

light hits the front of her body while a shadow hits the back of her body. She wears only black shoes, though the number “5770” appears on her left oblique. She slightly arches her back and her hair flows behind her. Her left knee bends forward and her left foot closely rests behind her right knee.

Sneider dominates the foreground of the work, while trees and mountains recede far into the background. The clarity of the mountains, trees and sky imply that Sneider intends to demonstrate that she shoots the photograph outside of the domestic space. Meanwhile, the lack of focus of the background details suggests the insignificance of the actual location of the space. Rather than highlight the location, Sneider portrays such a vast background to emphasize the importance of physically positioning the body outdoors.

The object Sneider holds to her mouth, a shofar, signifies the Jewish New Year. The rabbi or cantor blows it on this holiday. One interprets blowing the shofar as a sign of righteousness and to proclaim “God [the judge] as the king of the universe.”²⁴ Thus, one would blow it to display reverence towards God. Perhaps one would also blow it to summon God to judge the worshippers. The number 5770 signifies the Jewish year, which equates to 2009, the year of the release of the calendar. However, incorporating a number onto her naked body evokes the Holocaust, as the Nazis tattooed numbers onto the bodies of victims in order to identify victims, who often died naked. Sneider thus honors the victims of the Holocaust by incorporating a number onto her body. Simultaneously, she blows the shofar, a symbol of virtue, publically. Incorporating the tattoo and the shofar lead one to assume that she cries for help. Certainly, while one

²⁴ Segal, *Introducing Judaism*. 287.

should continue to honor the Holocaust victims, Sneider also demands that individuals continue to help others in need.

In an alternative reading, Sneider stands alone and physically elevates her nude body. Her solitude reinforces her absence from the synagogue. Her elevation and nudity challenge Jewish law, as she blatantly disobeys Tzniut. Sneider also blows the shofar, thus clearly demanding judgment from the “supreme judge.” However, the shofar physically appears as a phallic symbol. She thus evokes and proclaims her freedom to express her sexuality. Similarly, presenting her unclothed body in a public area suggests that she disregards public opinion regarding her body and that she demands judgment from contemporary and Orthodox Jewish society regarding the presentation of her body. However, she also reveals her Jewishness.

While *September* represents a call to action, Sneider certainly rejects “proper” taste by standing nude. This demands the question: Can one fight for humanity while rejecting proper societal norms? Although human atrocities occur, many people (particularly those abiding by Jewish law) emphasize the importance of properly conducting one’s self, this reveals the priorities of people. Sneider stands outside, nude, and blows a shofar certainly rejecting norms of Judaism and culture. Sneider demands judgment, and, by American and Jewish standards, she rejects proper taste. Sneider, like Benglis, stands nude and reveals herself publically. Sneider follows in Benglis’ footsteps by projecting her voice and revealing herself in order to gain cultural and sexual power.²⁵ Her power seems to grant her the authority to mock authoritative figures dictating the manner in which women should publically conduct themselves.

²⁵Frueh, Joanna. “The Body Through Women’s Eyes” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994),194.

Jewish Identity: American Cultural Jewish Traditions

Members of the Jewish culture have historically faced unique challenges assimilating into American mainstream culture, an issue that artists reflect on in their work. For instance, many artists in the 1996 exhibition, “Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities” focus on stereotypes facing Jews, especially the nose. Artists reflect on and critique stereotypes regarding Jewish women.

Kass’ 1997 black and white silkscreen *9 Silver Barbra’s* (Chapter 2, Figure 6) features the profile of nine identical faces. Kass evenly disperses the visages in rows and columns, and the visages face left. A curve on the bridge of the figure’s nose extends into the slight bump on the dorsum. The nose then flattens in the middle until reaching the bulging tip slightly above the nostrils. The harsh mouth remains closed. The area right below her lower lip sinks inward, while her jawbone extends forward. The face’s eyes remain open wide. The anatomical detail of the ears and heavy shadow on the side of her face emphasizes the prominent jaw and ear of the figure.

Repeating and showing the detail in the face encourages scrutiny. The slight bump in the nose renders it imperfect, and thus realistic. The figure’s exposed ears and alert eyes suggest ambition.

Kass repeats and stacks the image on a silkscreen print, appropriating the style of Warhol. Art Historian David Hopkins explains that stacking “‘implied a submission to the routinization of supermarket-era shopping as well as mimicking the techniques of mass-production.”²⁶ Borrowing Warhol’s style allows Kass to put Streisand, or the Jewish success, on a “supermarket shelf.” This concept grants Streisand with great

²⁶ Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art 1945- 2000*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115.

visibility and thus accessibility by granting her with recognition. Kass thus inundates society with the portrait of Streisand. Kass highlights the imperfect nose of the figure, a concern for many Jews, and a common representation of Jews amongst Jewish and non-Jewish people.²⁷ By imposing the figure, with her “imperfect” nose, Kass critiques the society that critiques the Jewish body.

Sneider sets *June* (Chapter 2, Figure 9) in a clear blue swimming pool. Sneider sits on her bent spread knees and rests her arms on a transparent blue chair. Her back faces the viewer, allowing the viewer to see her long brown hair cascading down her back. Yet, she turns her smiling face towards the viewer. She places round sunglasses with a white frame on her head, and sports a white bikini bottom with “shalom” (meaning hello and peace) written in navy blue in Hebrew. A white border frames this scene. This photo of Sneider tilts against a yellow and orange border decorated with cartoonish orange slices. It says in white script “Greetings from” and in orange script “Florida along the bottom of the photograph.

The swimming pool and inflatable chair evoke swimming. Yet, her spread legs, arch of the back, and turn of the neck seem unnatural. The blue Hebrew letters on the white bikini bottom, the only attire worn by the artist, evoke the Israeli flag. The text suggests that the image occurs in Florida. The tilt of the photograph on the orange backdrop makes the piece resemble a greeting card and thus grants it with a “kitschy” quality.

Sneider transcribes the word “hello” or “peace” in blue letters on the bikini bottoms. These colors evoke the colors of the Israeli flag. The word “Florida” reminds

²⁷ Goldblatt, Roy. “As Plain as the Nose on your Face: The Nose as the Organ of Othering.” *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*. 48 (2003), 565.

one of Snowbirds, or those who move to Florida from the North during the cold seasons. Many Jewish elderly people move to Florida for the winter. In fact, Sneider states: “Florida’s where the grandparents go.”²⁸ While Sneider incorporates symbols evoking the Jewish Identity, the physical position of and attire on the body connote promiscuity, and thus Sneider challenges the laws of Judaism mandating that one present one self modestly.

As in *December* and *September*, although Sneider does not present herself modestly she still references her Jewish identity. In fact, Sneider seems to utilize her sexuality to demonstrate her Jewishness. Because Sneider, a Jewish woman, acknowledges her Jewish Identity, she demonstrates her Jewishness. Through this image, she states that she performs her Jewishness through visiting Florida, yet she also reveals her own personality by flaunting her sexuality. This piece reinforces that no “correct” way exists regarding behaving Jewish. Sneider thus challenges the steadfast laws meant to maintain Jewish traditions by blatantly breaking them.

However, the conglomeration of sexual and Jewish images in the calendar by Sneider juxtaposes. This juxtaposition creates an element of surprise and deems the work “humorous.”²⁹ Jewish people often rely on humor and jokes to communicate, and as scholar Stephen Whitfield proposes, Jews, an oppressed group, often rely on humor as a defense mechanism.³⁰ Through humor, Sneider demands attention (she was certainly given attention by reporters for her calendar at the 2013 Jew York exhibition curated by Zach Feuer and Untitled Gallery.) Through attention, Sneider gains control to lead the

²⁸ Sneider, Jamie. Interview by author. Phone, November 6, 2013.

²⁹ Wendy Wick Reaves, “The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art.” *American Art*. 15 (2001) 2.

³⁰ Stephen J Whitfield, “The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor.” *Modern Judaism* 6 (1986): 248.

discussion about Jewish women, especially as she participates in numerous interviews and appears on blogs.

In conclusion, portraiture allows female artists to readjust the rigid patriarchal structure of Judaism by providing them with a means to integrate themselves into the Judaic (religious or cultural) structure and thus assume a place within the fabric of Judaism, Jewishness and Jewish Identity. Jo Anna Isaak states that “Art history has served to rationalize the material base upon which patriarchy in capitalist societies rest: men’s control over women’s labor power, sexuality, and access to symbolic representation.”³¹ Although men once constructed the artistic representation of women, portraits by and about Jewish women allow women to incorporate themselves into a history and tradition that often fails to acknowledge women and grant themselves with a voice. This creates an atmosphere of inclusiveness and empowerment for women, which can ultimately strengthen Jewish American identity by creating greater diversity as well as greater unity.

³¹ Isaak, Jo Anna. *Feminism and Contemporary Art*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 48.

Chapter Two Images

Figure #1

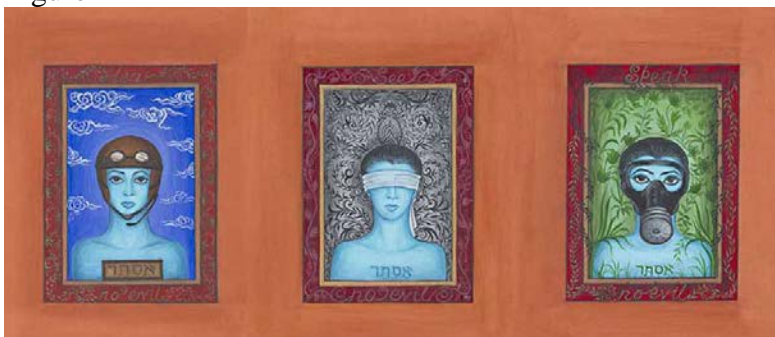


Siona Benjamin
Finding Home #80 (Fereshteh) Lilith
2006
Sionabenzamin.com
Gouache and Gold Leaf on wood
38" x 24"
Flomenhaft Gallery



*Detail of Figure 1
Screenshot from
Sionabenjamin.com*

Figure #2



Siona Benjamin
Finding Home #90, 91, 92 – Hear,
See and Speak No Evil (Fereshteh)
“Esther”
2006
Sionabenjamin.com
Gouache on paper
6.5”x5” (each)
At Flomenhaft Gallery



#90

Detail of Figure 2

Screenshot from Sionabenzamin.com



#91

Detail of Figure 2

Screenshot from Sionabenzamin.com



#92

Detail of Figure 2

Screenshot from Sionabenzamin.com

Figure #3



Jamie Sneider
March, Cover, "Year of the Jewish Woman"
2009
Scan and screen shot of original calendar
Offset printing on 100 lb paper
27.5" x 11.5"
From the collection of Cosette Shachnow

Figure #4



Deborah Kass
Triple Yentil (My Elvis)
1993
Deborahkass.com
Silkscreen and acrylic on
canvas
72" x 96"
Collection of William S. Erlich
and Ruth Lloyds



Detail of Figure #4
Screenshot from
Deborahkass.com
(Glasses)

Figure #5



Jamie Sneider
 September, "Year of the Jewish Woman"
 2009
 Scan and screen shot of original calendar
 Offset printing on 100 lb paper
 27.5" x 11.5"
 From the collection of Cosette Shachnow

Figure #6



Deborah Kass
 9 Silver Barbra's
 1997
 Deborahkass.com
 Silkscreen on paper
 18" x 23"
 Location Unknown

Figure #7



Jamie Sneider
June, "Year of the Jewish
Woman"
2009
Scan and screen shot of original
calendar
Offset printing on 100 lb paper
27.5" x 11.5"
Original copy of calendar at
Union College

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