Jewish Cultural Aspirations

Weisberg, Ruth, Zuckerman, Bruce

Published by Purdue University Press

Weisberg, Ruth and Bruce Zuckerman.
Jewish Cultural Aspirations.
Purdue University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/67732.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67732
The idea of “Jewish Art” is such a strange and troubled notion. Long denied even as a possibility, based on an overly simplistic reading of the Torah’s abhorrence of idolatry (cf. Exod 20:4–5; Deut 5:8–10), since the eighteenth century, as noted by Kalman Bland, “Jewish aniconism finally emerged as an unmistakably modern idea.” His deconstruction of Jewish aniconism sees this notion as initially a non-Jewish invention with anti-Semitic undertones—so much so that, “If not for Kant and Hegel the denial of Jewish art would not have been invented” (8). And, in spite of the fact that this notion flies in the face of the substantial historical record of Jewish visual creativity dating from antiquity to the present, the concept that Jews inherently do not and cannot produce a visual culture was frequently championed by the Jews themselves. Bland lists notable modern Jewish proponents of the aniconic theory, including Bernard Berenson, Harold Rosenberg, Max Dimont, Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas (Bland 40–44). Cynthia Ozick sums up this cultural prejudice with her declaration: “Where is the Jewish Michelangelo, the Jewish Rembrandt . . . ? He has never come into being. . . . Talented a bit, but nothing great. They never tried their hand at wood or stone or paint. ‘Thou shalt have no graven images’—the Second Commandment—prevented them” (278). While patently untrue within contemporary halachic understanding, the uneven application by the Rabbis of the Second Commandment through the ages and admittedly circumscribed Jewish visual creativity has certainly served
to hamper Jews’ confidence in their abilities to develop a creative visual freedom (Mann). That is, at least until the mid-twentieth century.

DEFINITIONS
First some definitions that can help us clarify what we mean by “Jewish Art.” For purposes of this discussion, Jewish visual art does not include Judaica and synagogue architecture, because there is no argument about these forms in terms of their permissibility or their extensive use throughout history.

The most parochial definition codifies Jewish Art as limited to cultural production utilizing specific Jewish subject matter, drawn from Jewish sacred and secular texts that explore Jewish social life, history and ritual. Since content is the defining factor, this can and should also include artwork created by non-Jews. On the other hand, the more catholic view would include any kind of art that Jews happen to create that reference the broadest Jewish concepts such as, peace, spirituality, brotherhood, tikkun ‘olam, ethnic identity and family. Here the subjects mirror the individualistic and pluralistic contemporary American culture. However defined, in all its permutations it is its Jewish content that denotes the work as Jewish Art. While both formulations are important to a vital Jewish Art, important distinctions must be made in order to understand better the consequences of each approach.

GOLDEN AGE
Jewish Art since the 1970s has been slowly gaining a distinct identity, a dawning consciousness of a cultural movement greater than the sum of its creators and creations. This consciousness has gained the most traction in the United States, even though hints of it are arising in other parts of the world. In particular, some Israeli artists are touched by this consciousness, although they are caught in a double cultural bind. For them, Jewishness is of course a given, since Jewish subjects typically form an integral part of the fabric of their upbringing. Nonetheless for many years the Israeli art world has taken its cues from the New York art world that overtly rejects the notion of “Jewish Art.” Therefore, significant resistance still exists in Israel to the very notion of the
category, Jewish Art. So when historian Matthew Baigell declared in a lecture at the Jewish Museum in New York on March 7, 2011 (now revised in this volume): “We are living in a golden age of Jewish American art,” part of the silence that greeted his thesis reflected a redoubling of institutional and international resistance to the appropriateness of “art” being qualified by the descriptor, “Jewish” (unpublished lecture; a summary appeared as “The Arty Semite”).

MUSEUMS
Moreover, most American Jewish museums are remarkably resistant to exhibiting contemporary Jewish Art—that is, art created with a self-consciously explicit Jewish content. With rare exceptions, the artists who are the most committed to Jewish subject matter have been passed over. To be sure, American Jewish museums, large and small, tend to be fully supportive of historical exhibitions of Jewish visual and material culture, and relish exploring a given Jewish individual’s involvement in mainstream culture. While many are publicly and even stridently committed to diversity, tolerance, interfaith dialogue and community involvement, they seem to have a blind spot regarding promoting and exhibiting contemporary art with explicit Jewish content. It may be institutionally understandable that they have major concerns about limited and shrinking budgets—along with deep fears of seeming “too Jewish” within an assumed dominant, assimilationist culture; nonetheless, their stance is deeply problematic. Still, turning such a blind eye to overtly Jewish-themed art is hardly conducive to its long term well-being. In fact, one might observe that such myopia evinces a pathological adherence to an anachronistic paradigm of the role that Jews should play (and not play) in American culture. For at least twenty-five years the mantra of social diversity was normative in encouraging explicit cultural expressions of black, ethnic, feminist and gay culture. Somehow only explicit Judaism is still anathema.

Nonetheless, Baigell finds this rising tide of Jewish-themed visual art to be profoundly broad-based, wonderfully chaotic, and—above all—exhilarating. The artists who are leading the way take their themes from a wide range of sources. The Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, midrash, ritual and all aspects of American Jewish life are all fair game for contemporary Jewish artists. The only unifying feature that underpins this artistic eclecticism is the desire to depict an identifiably Jewish content.
BAGGAGE
Significantly, Baigell identifies the sociological foundations for this phenomenon. To broadly paraphrase his historical analysis, the generation of Jewish artists from the first third of the twentieth century tended to move away from their Jewish heritage and roots. For the vast majority of Jewish artists of that time, many who were European born, the job at hand was to integrate into American culture, to be modern and successful and, above all, to fit in with the overwhelmingly non-Jewish cultural environment. For artists coming of age in the 1970s and later though, none of that seemed necessary. As second or third generation Americans who happened to be Jewish, the entire cultural spectrum, including Jewish thought and subjects, was available with little or no negative connotations. “The Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 gave Jewish Americans a new sense of pride in their religion and culture,” taking their place alongside other minority groups such as blacks, Latinos, gays and women in the march towards mainstream recognition (26 in ms.). In an age profoundly defined by identity politics, Jewishness became a publicly accepted option. Just as walking down the street with a yarmulke no longer prompted scorn or worse, so too Jewish subject matter could be equally considered as legitimate for making art. To simplify Baigell’s analysis, the crucial issue is baggage. Baigell’s Jews at the end of the twentieth century have little or no such cultural impediments to hamper their exploration of Jewish themes.

THE EXCEPTION—VISUAL ART
In the broader view, cutting-edge Jewish culture has been flourishing here ever since the 1960s, with major development of Jewish themes in literature, music and performance. Until recently, though, the visual arts have lagged behind. The reasons are complex. In all other cultural expressions the Jewish presence had been strong from the heyday of early Modernism, seemingly a natural outgrowth of Jewish assimilation into western secular culture. And while Jews’ participation in American culture was characteristic of their own assimilation, nonetheless they remained deeply Jewish because literature, music and performance had a long history in traditional Jewish culture as well. In a way not much had changed for these artists. Therefore once they were no longer marginalized for a generation or two, they could more easily examine Jewish subjects explicitly. However, this was not so for the majority of visual artists.
While Jews have always been well represented among twentieth-century visual arts, the shift into explicit Jewish subject matter met with more resistance than in other mediums. As these artists learned their trade as visual artists, they were unaware of any Jewish visual tradition to inform their Jewish consciousness. Neither colleges nor art schools ever taught about the extensive history of Jewish art. (With rare exceptions that is still the case today.) The ghosts of a perceived aniconic Jewish history combined with the modernist dismissal of traditional religion and culture as a legitimate subject matter therefore had the impact of shackling Jewish visual artists disproportionately. And while there were notable exceptions, they were almost always ignored because even if the artists managed to break through the conceptual wall, there was practically no audience prepared to appreciate their efforts. But things were about to change.

**MODERNISM / POSTMODERNISM**

In the early 1970s the orthodoxies of High Modernism, Abstract Expressionism, celebrating the purity of form and execution, and even the extremes of Minimalism slowly gave way to increasing considerations of non-visual content, first seen in Pop Art's ironic messages. The reintroduction of figurative painting and the advent of photography as a fully recognized artistic medium along with the integration of narration broadened the cultural possibilities for the visual artist. In the following twenty-five years there was a collapse of cultural hegemonies that gave way to the relative chaos of Postmodernism. These years celebrated a return to texts, conceptual issues, idiosyncratic techniques and multiplicities of meanings in one work. Postmodernism, according to H. H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, “encouraged overtly polemical practices and an ironic distance from conventions of the past.” Additionally it was “facilitated by the tools of Poststructuralism and deconstruction . . .” (685). In a very significant manner this multiplicity of means in visual creation along with a complex and arm's length attitude to tradition seemed to echo the complexity of Jewish ideas that were publicly airing within organized American Judaism at the same time.
JUDAISM
Organized Judaism experienced both a maturation and fracturing in the second half of the twentieth century. While the Reform and Conservative movements grew dramatically at mid-century and traditional Orthodoxy seemed doomed both from the devastations of the Holocaust and the suburban flight of many nominally-Orthodox Jews into more liberal movements and secularism, the unexpected rise of Modern Orthodoxy, the *Baal Teshuvah* movement and the exponential growth of the Ultra-Orthodox have vastly complicated the demographics and content of organized Judaism. The liberal reflections of Judaism are increasingly faced with internal challenges especially linked to intermarriage and plummeting literacy with regard to Jewish religion and culture. In cultural terms, the shifting sands have resulted in increased cross-pollination between Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionism and Jewish Renewal movements. The ongoing expansion of the role of women in Jewish thought and practice as well as a cautious openness to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals has changed the face of all aspects of American Judaism, including its various expressions of orthodoxy. It is no longer simply made up of discrete movements, but rather the options within contemporary Judaism are arrayed in a hodge-podge of frequently overlapping ideas and practices. Additionally, for those who are not literate in Hebrew but who are nonetheless interested in exploring Jewish texts, the proliferation of English translations of many traditional texts has dramatically facilitated accessing the vast body of Jewish lore and tradition, much of which until recently was the sole providence of the learned Orthodox.

Even more startling is the recent profusion of learning programs designed for visual artists called the Artist's Beit Midrash. First conceived and inaugurated by artist Tobi Kahn at the Skirball Center at Temple Emanu-El in New York, there are now at least eight in the United States and one operating in Tel Aviv. This is perhaps the first time in modern Jewish life that artists, mostly liberal and secular, are being exposed to classical Jewish texts for the purpose of creating visual art. All of this bodes well for artists who wish to explore the many aspects of Jewish thought and ideas in light of contemporary society. And increasingly many are doing so.
JEWISH ART GROUPS
Within the last ten years we have seen the formation of two organizations of artists dedicated to Jewish visual art. The Jewish Artists Initiative, based in Los Angeles, was founded in 2004 by Ruth Weisberg and currently has close to seventy members. In New York the Jewish Art Salon, created in 2008 by Yona Verwer, is much more loosely organized and has 376 artists and over 500 individuals associated with it. The organizations, while very different in scope and focus, share a fundamental belief that Jewish art is a growing movement that needs a forum and organizational support to thrive. Both organizations, along with a handful of other smaller groups have utilized Internet websites and email to create something essentially unheard of before: a National Community of Jewish Artists. The existence of the web as well as almost universal email and social networking sites has greatly facilitated this profusion of artist groups. The very fact of their existence indicates a groundswell of interest and enthusiasm for the idea of Jewish Art. This in turn promotes a proliferation of interconnectivity via the web leading to increased cultural crossovers and hybridization, not to mention the growing sense of an actual movement of Jewish Art. When artists hear that a contemporary historian feels they are collectively creating a “Golden Age,” it is much more than a temporary ego boost. Rather, such an appreciation begins to validate and strengthen their commitment to continuing to create artwork with serious Jewish content.

GOLDEN AGE—ALMOST
The confluence of Postmodernism, theological diversity and unprecedented social networking has led to a rare moment in Jewish cultural history: increased choice, clarity and freedom in Jewish visual creativity. Hence Baigell’s “Golden Age.”

Just as any fledgling movement needs a history, so too does it need a vision of what will sustain its continued growth. A critical apparatus is essential for the creation of a nurturing environment of creativity. While I share Baigell’s enthusiasm for the profusion of recent serious Jewish art and the enormous range of subjects explored, I simultaneously detect a disheartening hesitancy to tackle a whole host of difficult but enormously fruitful Jewish subjects.

My concern is that far too many contemporary Jewish artists seem content with superficial versions of Jewish ideas combined with an uncritical
appropriation of contemporary art styles. And while, in and of itself, this is not crippling to a cultural movement and may even at times produce a healthy diversity, in order for Jewish Art to become a truly world-class cultural expression, it must confront the depth and seriousness that are inherent in the classical Jewish texts and sources.

To be fair, many contemporary Jewish artists are not even aware of what they are missing. The aforementioned inadequacy of Jewish education, both in terms of Judaism's texts and Jewish Art History is appalling. Both can be remedied but only with considerable individual effort combined with what I consider to be an essential critical apparatus. It is appropriate to encourage Jewish artists to interrogate the very heart and soul of the Tanakh into their work boldly and without compunction.

PARADIGMS

For visual artists there is possibly nothing as rich as the parallel textual traditions of the Tanakh and the various midrashic and talmudic texts. The extremely terse nature of the biblical narratives cries out for the kind of textual deconstruction that the rabbis, who wrote the midrashic literature, pursued. In the course of explaining, elaborating or exploding the thorny theological, moral or practical issues the biblical texts present at practically every turn, the ancient rabbinic minds have provided a plethora of diverse strategies for contemporizing these stories. They always have a textual opening or a long-standing tradition of something gone awry which allows them to provide for a creative explanation. Understanding two contradictory thoughts at the same time is central to their methodology since the Torah, according to midrashic tradition, is understood to be able to accommodate “70 different facets,” i.e., valid interpretations (Slotki 534). The seeming violence the rabbis do to the original is no less than a ruthless determination to possess the ancient text for themselves as an inheritance that carries enormous responsibility. Rabbinic interpretations, as evocative and disturbing as they may be, are almost never simply personal. While for some Jewish artists there is a lingering hesitancy about actually depicting the patriarchs, matriarchs, holy prophets and kings, this misplaced piety must be resisted.

Sarah's Nightmare (2010; fig.1; Pl. VI) by Eden Morris has internalized Sarah's horrified reaction upon hearing of the near slaughter of her son Isaac
in the Akedah.⁶ In the face of the biblical silence and the proximity to Sarah’s death in the text (Genesis 23), Rashi comments (Petroff, Genesis, 243; see also Friedlander 233–234):

Genesis: 23:2; And Abraham came: From Beersheba; To eulogize Sarah and to bewail her: Sarah’s death is juxtaposed with the Binding of Isaac because through hearing the news of the Binding, that her son was readied for slaughter and was nearly slaughtered, her soul flew from her and she died.

Figure 1. Eden Morris. Sarah’s Nightmare. 2010. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30. Courtesy of the Artist.

In this radical painting about unintended consequences, the biblical narrative itself is barely seen in the background while the artist’s unique take on the midrash is prioritized in the foreground. As Isaac becomes simultaneously the sacrificial ram and Sarah’s haunted son, the artist has appropriated both biblical and midrashic texts to place the horror she perceives at the center of the narrative.
Another fruitful approach to classical Jewish texts is to refract them through a post-feminist lens. Precisely because of the undeniably dominant patriarchal nature of so many biblical narratives—all of which tend to attract extensive criticism in Jewish feminist literature—a fresh appraisal of the pivotal role of women and sexuality in nearly all these narratives continues to be compelling and relevant to visual artists of both sexes.

In the Genesis narrative of the three angels who come to visit Abraham (Gen 18:1–15), Sarah plays a passive and meek role. Standing in the shadows of the doorway, she laughs incredulously at the news of her impending miraculous pregnancy at the age of ninety and then clumsily lies to God about the incident. Janet Shafner’s Sarah (1998; fig. 2; Pl. VI) totally reassesses the matriarch’s role. Now sitting in the foreground, patiently waiting, her husband Abraham is nowhere to be seen and the three angels/strangers are likewise waiting, presumably for lunch (cf. 18:6–8). Rising up behind them is a bright but curious landscape dominated by two enormous breast-like mountains. The rivulets that spill down the mountainsides are at first puzzling until one recalls a curious midrash that speaks of a miraculous validation of Sarah in her generative role. The Talmud (Baba Metzia 87a) reports:

How many children then did Sarah suckle? — R. Levi said: “On the day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great banquet, and all the peoples of the world derided him, saying, ‘Have you seen that old man and woman, who brought a foundling from the street, and now claim him as their son! And what is more, they make a great banquet to establish their claim!’ What did our father Abraham do? — He went and invited all the great men of the age, and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but not the wet nurse, and a miracle happened unto our mother Sarah, her breasts opened like two fountains, and she suckled them all.”

Shafner’s painting recasts the biblical Sarah’s passive role by portraying her as a source of enormous sustenance and blessing by alluding to the extrabiblical legend envisioned by the rabbis.

Such a lens that bends gender tensions and conflicts in the biblical narrative can become a powerful tool for visual creation. And yet all too many artists, curiously including many women, seem to be oblivious to the dynamic and crucial role of women in biblical narratives.
Finally, the biblical strategies of juxtaposition, repetition, serial narratives, and textual contrasts are all underutilized paradigms that could be used to uncover hosts of alternative meanings lurking in these texts. Archie Rand’s career is dominated by serial narratives that utilize multiple images, comprising one work of art thoroughly echoing the sequential nature of many Jewish texts. *The Chapter Paintings* (1989) explore fifty-three discreet sections of the Torah; *The Nineteen Diaspora Paintings* (2002) spell out the individual petitions and praises of the Amidah, the central Jewish prayer, interpreted through biblical texts envisioned as illustrated pulp fiction; *The Seven Days of Creation* (2004) speak for themselves in a semi-abstract play of free association as well as *The 613* (2008; fig. 3; Pl. VII), perhaps his most ambitious work, measuring in at 1600 square feet and giving each and every commandment in the Torah.
its own canvas for Rand to personalize. While many of his works puzzle the viewer with a bewildering complexity of images; nonetheless, his work feels overwhelmingly Jewish because it echoes many primary biblical strategies.

Figure 3. Archie Rand, The 613. 2008. Oil on 613 canvases, 22’ x 100’. Courtesy of the Artist.

Another artist, who utilizes juxtaposition and textual contrasts, is Robert Kirschbaum, especially in his recent small paintings series, The Akedah Series (2008–09). Kirschbaum narrates the Akedah story in ten abstract images that employ three registers to represent heaven, the world of action and the earth below. In a field of frantic gestures, squares arise to form a symbolic altar until there appears to be a violent clash of abstract forces. As the confrontation subsides other square and rectangular forms coalesce into the final image of a doorway that appears to enter a sanctuary. Since this “scene” is in some sense the climax of the Akedah, it would seem that Kirschbaum has taken us to a portal of the Divine. And what triggered this portal to appear is found back in the fifth image, Akedah 45 (fig. 4; Pl. VII). In this image all of the agitated marks have assembled, each register defined by its own calligraphy, and floating over them all is the immediately recognizable pattern of the Zoharic chart of the ten Sefirot, each represented by a nine square grid cube, reflecting ten perfect self-contained universes. In Kirschbaum’s depiction it is the fulcrum of the Akedah narrative; the Divine meeting with Abraham and Isaac at the moment of the aborted sacrifice. Blind faith and unquestioning obedience are
rewarded by the revelation of the Divine Presence. Kirschbaum has imposed a Kabalistic synthesis on one of the most disturbing narratives in the Torah and has, as a result, found a remarkable Divine Portal beckoning us.


These examples of possible “paradigms” that arise out of classic Jewish texts as they collide with some aspects of Postmodernist sensibility are, of course, not exclusive prescriptions for Jewish artists. I offer them only to demonstrate what is possible if our Golden Age artists would consider the many options that the rich traditions of Jewish biblical and rabbinic texts make available to them.
PROSPECTS

It should be obvious that, the current revival of Jewish Art can only bloom into a true Golden Age, if it has broad public support, especially from the Jewish community in America. Just as there is now a sustained readership for Jewish oriented literature and ideas (and even occasionally some visual art) in such venues as the *Jewish Review of Books, Tablet, Jewcy, The Forward*, so likewise must we develop the potentiality of a literate visual Jewish culture and audience. Critics and journalists must be encouraged to analyze, thoughtfully comment on and explain these artist’s works to a Jewish audience so that both the Judaic and aesthetic elements are treated with equal respect. The public must listen and become engaged. The Jewish museums must overcome their reluctance and open their doors. In order to thrive, the Golden Age must be recognized.

We have made a good start. From out of the wilderness of our own doubts, we have found our way through a troubled past and, thanks to America’s loving embrace, we have emerged into a new artistic landscape full of promise. More artists, self-consciously drawing upon Jewish Tradition as a spring board for inspiration, have produced more explicitly Jewish Art. If we can muster the courage to stand apart as proud Jews in contemporary America, while fully embracing 3000 years of our history and close to 2000 years of visual creativity, contemporary Jewish Art has more than a fair chance to find its rightful day in the sun.
Notes

1. The long and tortuous controversy over Jews creating visual art is perhaps best summed up by Cecil Roth: “In all Jewish history, attitudes and interpretations varied from land to land and from generation to generation. Sometimes the application of the prohibition was absolute . . . even in relatively ‘liberal’ Jewish circles. . . . Sometimes men went to the other extreme, and great latitude was shown, human figures being incorporated freely even in objects associated with Divine worship” (11).

2. See Sed-Rajna. This excellent survey is simply an introduction to the extensive literature on Jewish art that dates from the third century CE Dura Europos synagogue murals, the many dozens of illuminated manuscripts in fourteenth and fifteenth century Spain and central Europe, the extensive illustrated Haggadot and Jewish books, seventeenth and eighteenth century illuminated Jewish manuscripts, nineteenth century Jewish genre painters and extensive artwork from the Bezalel School in pre-state Palestine and twentieth century modernist masters.

3. The diversity of rabbinic opinion on the permissibility of Jewish image-making is breathtaking. What becomes clear is that in many cases over the millennia visual art was permitted by the rabbis and that, as the threat of idolatry faded, the issue became more academic. My own inquiries, addressed to a number of orthodox rabbinic authorities have yielded the opinion that, other than three-dimensional highly finished and realistic statues, almost all artworks created as artworks are permissible.

4. The term Tanakh is an acronym of Torah-Nevi‘im-Ketuvim, that is, the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, constituting the three fold division of the Hebrew Bible.

5. I will use the terms midrash, Talmud, and the rabbis interchangeably for simplicity in this essay in describing the extensive Jewish oral tradition of commentary and interpretation.

6. Hebrew for “the Binding,” the traditional title given to the story in Gen 22:1–19.
Works Cited

———. “We Are Living in a Golden Age of Jewish American Art and We Really Don’t Know It.” This volume 1–31.