

inaccessibility of history—in this case, Jewish history in particular—by intertwining four distinct voices. The first records an absurdist sightseeing tour of “Jewish” Poland—a response to that particularized post-modern, post-Holocaust slice of American cultural tourism. The second listens in on the reluctant recollections from an immigrant grandmother of life in America during War II. The third presents five fictional memoir excerpts that imagine the final moments of a great aunt’s life who died without a trace in the camps. The fourth examines five emotional expressions of crisis states: anxiety, hopelessness, fear, anger, and depression.

The breadth of Madansky’s focus on the the issue of Jewish identity is also reflected in other parts of the “On the Jewish Question” installation—for example,

12 drawings based on kabbalistic texts that share the wall with the illegible texts of Marx’s pair of essays—and, in the middle of the floor, a pile of pasta shaped as a Star of David and heaped like the seven hills of Jerusalem. Her choice of pasta as medium offers a wry allusion to the

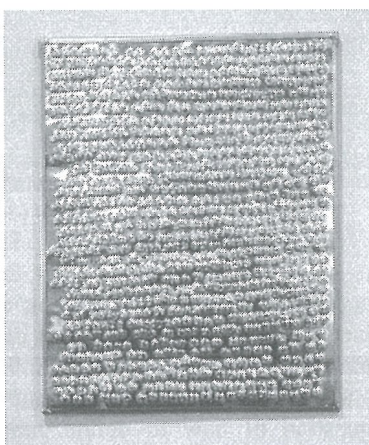


FIG 731: Cynthia Madansky:
detail of FIG 727

1862 work by the German Jew, Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem*, which was inspired by the unifying Italian nationalist writings of Mazzini, conceptual father of the *Risorgimento*. Hess first articulated a modern political nationalist sensibility for Jews—it was upon this sensibility that Herzl would build some three decades later.

The question of Jewish history as it has pointed toward Israel and the Middle East with some urgency since 1897, a more direct urgency since 1948 and an urgency exploding by 1967 and then (in some segments of the Jewish community) slowly diminishing while (in other segments) still expanding in the last decade—the question of the layers of Jewish past and possible futures, which is part of this central element of Madansky’s installation redirects itself back out toward the idea of a broadly “Jewish Narrative” and other particular concomitants under the brush of Brooklyn-born and -raised Joel Silverstein (b. 1957). He has in fact been wrestling as a critic and curator as well as a painter during the last decade in particular with these questions.

Silverstein has referred to concerns of Jewish American artists of the past two generations as formulating “the new Jewish painting,” that has grown out of the post-modernist movement of the past forty years and, as Matthew Baigell, among others, has asserted, grew, in part, out of the increasingly strident visual self-expression of specifically defined artistic identity on the part of Black, Latino/a, Women and Gay artists. Aside from those Jewish artists who have been inspired by artists from within these various “groups” to assert a Jewish consciousness for their own artistic identity, we have seen particular parts of these identity elements penetrating work by Jewish artists conscious of interwoven aspects of their identities—from Helene Aylon’s gender-engagement to Carl Plansky’s transvestite expressions of his gayness.

Silverstein has spoken of “Jewish Art” as an orientation and a methodology, rather than a style or a subject focus. Among the paintings in a recent series, organized in an exhibition called *Fractured Epics: History Painting and Imaginary Portraits*,⁹⁹³ are works that explore elements of personal, biblical, midrashic and mystical subject matter in a vibrant expressionist, surface-rich style—he has commented on how in love with surface and texture he is—that explodes out of the image toward the viewer. Interviewed for the exhibition catalogue by Richard McBee, the artist commented, too, on his passion for the miraculous—for a merging of a sense of God and of imagination.⁹⁹⁴ One might put it in terms that have been a consistent part of *this* narrative: a merging of different aspects of the *sacer* and also, not only of a merging of the *sacer* and the *profanus*—in the sense of merging “the real” and “the imaginary”—but a merging made possible by recognizing both realms as genuine and of equal, if different validity.

Silverstein’s sensibility offers a visual parallel to the literary form of Magic Realism, in which miraculous and magical events simply occur in everyday contexts. Given the area of his upbringing, near Coney Island, with its winter-long abandoned amusement parks and, (as he expresses it in the statement for his website), “[t]he strange environment of Brighton Beach with its ruined amusement rides and multitudes of observant Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, secular Russian immigrants, Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics and Pakistani Muslims

⁹⁹³ The exhibition was curated by Yona Verwer at The Columbia/Barnard Kraft Center for Jewish Life in December, 2012-January, 2013.

⁹⁹⁴ The interview will be found in the catalogue of the just-named exhibition. For more on Richard McBee’s painting, specifically on the *akedah*, see above, chapter eighteen, 518-20.

[he not only received] an early primer on multiculturalism and religious experience,” which would push him toward thinking both broad and nuanced. But added to that was what he describes as a theophany—a vision of God—at age six, when he saw Cecil B. Demille’s 1956 epic movie, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston as an inspired and inspiring Moses. Add to this his “personal experiences of local Holocaust survivors, many of them living in Brighton in the 1970s, and you have the makings of a heady but nascent mysticism.”⁹⁹⁵

So his ten-foot wide painting, titled “Brighton Exodus”—an epic

FIG 732: Joel Silverstein: *Brighton Exodus*, 2008



synthesis done in 2008 but, so many years later, inspired, in part, by Demille—excitedly combines moments described in the Torah and interpretations posed in rabbinic sources with the artist’s own contemporary reality and his imaginings. “It started with my vision of Moses on the beach at Brighton. I had seen that view of the beach a thousand of times in my childhood and from the very beginning envisioned the image of Moses slaying the Egyptian as a sacred drama, like a spontaneous occurrence. Everything else grew out of that. This was clearly a Torah narrative placed in the modern world, my modern world: the ruined amusement rides, the toys pumped up like protagonists and my friends posing as models in the narrative.”⁹⁹⁶ So it is filled with diverse everyday people—a kind of Courbet’s “The Artist’s Studio” (1854-5), as Silverstein further commented in his McBee interview, in which he placed virtually all his friends and acquaintances—re-visioned as the familiar beach populated by those he knows: “it’s about my life, but... [m]y personal experience is then taken to a more metaphorical and metaphysical level.”⁹⁹⁷ The beach has become the shores of the Sea of Reeds. Its inhabitants, oblivious to or focused on the miraculous

events of years earlier or about to take place, are derived from posed models, photos and toy action figures [FIG 732].

Moreover, consistent with the medieval penchant for including sequences of actions within a single frame as if they are all taking place simultaneously (and they *are* in *sacer* time and space) the image has more than one narrative point of view. Thus if one understands the beach crowd to be slowly gathering for the unanticipated miracle of the sea parting, on the other hand a muscle-bound figure,

front and center, offers the much earlier moment when a naked Moses (this depiction a far cry from Charlton Heston or Michelangelo’s figure) slays the headless Egyptian taskmaster with a simple hand gesture. It is the Babylonian Talmud that offers the statement that

the future prophet killed the overseer with the power of God’s word rather than by physically assaulting him. On the other hand the positioning of the two figures is a dead ringer—in reverse—for renowned Italian Renaissance representations by Florentine masters like Piero della Francesca and Antonio Verrocchio, depicting John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, one leg bent at a diagonal, echoed by the upraised hand that pours the water from a shallow bowl.

Among the everyday people, clothed or naked, we find a boxer and a gladiator, a Roman soldier and—an angel with thick, bright yellow wings. Aside from the artist’s sense of homage to Courbet and his ironic reference to an oft-depicted and important moment in the Christian narrative and its art, he notes the importance of the biblical figures of the early modernist Corot (1796-1875), who painted such works “in an age of growing secular skepticism. Like Corot, [Silverstein has to] re-invent or re-invoke the sacred for people who fail to believe in miracles.”⁹⁹⁸ Those miracles can have an overtly personal content that carries beyond the rich texture of his painted surfaces. His 2012 “Joel and The Golem” offers an acrylic and collage image on wood in which we see the artist, as it were, from the back

⁹⁹⁵ See the statement on Silverstein’s *Joel Silverstein Artist* website.

⁹⁹⁶ McBee interview, *Ibid.*

⁹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹⁸ Silverstein website, *Ibid.*

and naked to the waist confronting—envisioning—the large figure of the Golem that we can recognize from stills in the 1920 Wegener film, but dominated by the sort of blue that carry the mind’s eye back through early Picasso to Gauguin.⁹⁹⁹

Silverstein’s sources are diverse and interwoven—drawing deliberately from within and beyond the Jewish tradition—his style thick and engaging, his symbolic language both intellectual and visually interesting. As a curator and organizer he is, together with McBee and Yona Verwer, a principal in the entity now over a decade old called the Jewish Art Salon. Like its counterpart on the West coast, the Jewish Art Initiative in Southern California, the New York-based Salon exists in order to offer a venue to engage and explore the issues that this volume has spent so many pages addressing. The Salon has sponsored exhibitions of work by its art-making members and lectures by its art-analyzing members.

Among the more compelling of the former was the 2010-11 *Dura Europus Project: An Ancient Site Revisited through 21st Century Eyes*. Curated by Silverstein and McBee, the exhibition derived from invitations to scores of artists to respond to any scene from the narratives contained within the Dura Europus synagogue wall painting cycle, in whatever manner they preferred. The sole limiting criterion was that the result had to fit on a 30” x 30” panel. The result was nothing less than spectacular.¹⁰⁰⁰ Forty-nine images by forty-nine artists—seven times seven—yield a remarkable range of colors and textures, of diverse media and materials, offering an array of styles, symbols, and subjects [FIG 733].¹⁰⁰¹

⁹⁹⁹ See above, chapter ten, 273 and chapter thirteen, 351.

¹⁰⁰⁰ The exhibition was co-sponsored by and shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art in December, 2011-March, 2012.

¹⁰⁰¹ The artists were Ellen Alt, Cheselyn Amato, Siona Benjamin, Suzanne Benton, John Bradford, Helene Burke, Linda Caspe, Aliza Donath, Chava Evans, Alan Falk, Harriet Finck, Tanya Fredman, David K. Friedman, Fay Grajower, Tamar Hirschl, Sandra Indig, Tobi Kahn, Rachel Kanter, Robert Kirschbaum, Batya F. Kuncman, Diane Kurz, Stacy Leeman, Howard Lerner, Irit E. Malinsky, Judith Margolis, Richard McBee, Jacob Mezrahi, Eden Morris, Ellen Deitell Newman, Natan Nuchi, Archie Rand, Deborah Rosenthal, Cynthia Beth Rubin, Debbie Schore, Ruth Schreiber, Sari Seltzer, Janet Shafner, Brian Shapiro, Susan Shender, Adele Shtern, Joel Silverstein, Renata Stein, Miriam Stern, Elke Reva Sudin, Deborah Ugoretz, Yona Verwer, David Wander, Ahron Weiner, and Laurie Wohl. Any of these 49 works really merits a discussion as does the work in general of any of the artists in this group who were not singled out in my larger narrative. I can only apologize for the limitations of my timely knowledge of their work and hope for another occasion to remedy that shortcoming.

If one understanding of art is that it offers a self-portrait of the artist in a manner analogous to how one may look at the universe and everything within it as a composite self-portrait of the Creator, then these 49 works, as “self-portraits,” carry us back, by way of the photographs of Arthur Mones and the drawings and watercolors of Lionel Reiss to the proof that Jews cannot simply be defined by their physiology, either external or internal. We are led full circle back, further,



FIG 733: *Dura Europus Project*: Installation View, 2011-12

to the issue of how impossible it is to define “Judaism” or its concomitants, “Jew” and “Jewish”—and so, too, any noun to which this last word, an adjective, is appended, including the nouns “art” and “architecture.” Even the issue of the artist’s identity as a piece of the issue is embedded within this neo-Dura compendium, since at least one of the artists—John Bradford, well-known for his decades-long engagement of the Hebrew Biblical narrative in his paintings—is not Jewish.

So many of these last-discussed works turn to texts—real, imagined, visible and invisible—which truth is not in the end so surprising for artists whose millennia-long heritage is that of being the People of the Book. There is also an irony: that in the America into which most (not all) of these text-obsessed artists thrive, the Jewish community has for the past two centuries by and large been the most ignorant of any major Jewish community in history with regard to its own textual heritage. So many 19th- and 20th-century American Jews have simply not been aware of the ins and outs of the rabbinic tradition due to indifference to it. At least until relatively recently, that is, when this began to change—when many more Jews have turned back to the rabbinic and mystical traditions in order to gain a better understanding of who they are and what they might be. A good number of artists has followed that path even as it has yielded diverse cross-paths and

sub-paths.

This does not mean that textual connections necessarily help clarify the definition of Jewish art, of course. Indeed, none of the lengthy discussion that has filled out this volume has led to or is likely to lead to a definition of what exactly constitutes "Jewish art and architecture." The sweeping creativity observable across time, space and circumstance has perforce succumbed to constant shifts of definitional parameters with regard to both artist identity and art. On the other hand, that sweep does lead to the realization, for those who might find such a realization necessary, that the People of the Book is—or has at least become, once the opportunity presented itself—a people of increasingly rich visual accomplishment; and that the historically consistent Jewish fondness for and art of asking questions with multiple answers and with no answers at all applies perfectly to the discussion of Jewish art and architecture. It is perhaps that process and mode of questioning that constitutes the consummate "Jewish art."