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### Jewish American Artists: whom does that include?

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## REVIEW ESSAY

# Jewish American Artists: whom does that include?

### **Jewish Art in America: an introduction**

MATTHEW BAIGELL

Rowman & Littlefield, 2006

280 pp., \$96.00, ISBN-10 0742546403, ISBN 978-0742546400 (hardback);  
\$29.95, ISBN-10 0742546411, ISBN 978-0742546417 (paperback)

### **Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists**

SAMANTHA BASKIND

Greenwood Press, 2006

352 pp., \$85.00, ISBN-10 0313336377

### **Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art**

LISA E. BLOOM

Routledge, 2006

208 pp., \$120.00, ISBN-10 0415232201, ISBN 978-0415232203 (hardback);  
\$33.95, ISBN-10 041523221X, ISBN 9780145232210 (paperback)

Since study of Jewish art and artists in America is a field in formation, the appearance of recent books commands notice. Yet their concord and discord both demonstrate the need for much more work in an area still new. Despite attempts to define a field, their flaws call out for those with the energy and the will to conduct primary research, scour the archives, and interview those still alive.

Samantha Baskind, an associate professor of Art History at Cleveland State University, as well as author of the new encyclopaedia, contributed cover copy to Matthew Baigell's volume calling it "the first full-length introduction on the subject". The two appear to have communicated about at least some of their respective content, since Baskind acknowledges Baigell's "ongoing support of my work". Baigell, Professor Emeritus of Art History at Rutgers, is an Americanist who has been writing about Jewish art at least since 1991, when he contributed an essay to a Jewish Museum catalogue, *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York 1900–1945*, edited by Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe. Since then, Baigell has published related studies including *Jewish American Artists and the Holocaust* (1997); *Artist and Identity in Twentieth Century America* and a volume called *Complex Identities Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, which was co-edited with Milly Heyd (2001); *Jewish Artists in New York: The Holocaust Years* (2002), and *American Artists, Jewish Images* (2006). Although these titles overlap with the volume under review, assessment of repetition or evolution is beyond the scope of this essay.

Baigell states, “it is impossible to define what is Jewish about Jewish art unless one says simply that it is an art that records individual responses to Jewish awareness and experience” (228). He also aims to cover Jewish art in the entire United States; yet his outlook often proves to be New York-centric. Having spent most of his life in the Northeast, Baigell too often overlooks artists and interpretations that would broaden the scope of his discussion and defy stereotypes.

Writing about artists who either lived or worked in the Deep South, Baigell seems unaware that they faced a world quite different from that in greater New York or even in Boston or Philadelphia. He does write that the Virginia-born sculptor Moses Jacob Ezekiel wrote about Jewish issues and “created works that reflected a Jewish point of view”, but opines that he “wanted to be known as an artist who was Jewish rather than as a Jewish artist” (4). Ezekiel, Baigell, adds, studied art in Berlin and spent most of his adult life in Rome. Yet to understand why Baigell captioned an illustration of his work as by “Sir Moses Jacob Ezekiel”, we have to turn to Baskind’s essay to discover the knighthood awarded him in 1907 by the King of Italy. Such flawed editing alerts the attentive reader. Still other captions do not agree with the text, and readers who care will be disturbed that other errors have crept in. For example, the Museum of Modern Art called its second show “Nineteen Living Americans”, but Baigell has retitled it “The All-American Nineteen,” a phrase, which, in fact, captioned a contentious review of the show by the critic, Forbes Watson (43).

Discussing artists who embraced radical politics, Baigell asks: “But what prompted certain artists to become militant? Unfortunately without further research, the artists’ individual biographies do not yet offer a clear pattern that might indicate who would or would not be attracted to left causes, become card-carrying communists, or join the small cadre of artists dedicated to working for the CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America)” (48). In fact, Baigell’s failure to search out at least some of these critical details leaves him in a position of being at once too speculative and too vague.

Baigell informs the reader that Luise Kaish was born in Atlanta in 1925, without connecting this detail with her work. (The text on page 112 calls her “Louise”, while the caption on the adjacent page 113 gives the correct form.) He discusses Kaish’s figurative sculpture designed for synagogues, and even reproduces a figure of Moses she made to decorate an ark that contains the Torah scrolls. He fails to note that her use of human images inside a synagogue might be considered unusual, although the Second Commandment was long misunderstood as barring figurative art—a view that has yielded, as Baskind points out, to a close reading “that shows that the commandment was directed against figuration used for idol worship, not other types of artistic expression” (1). Too often, Baigell’s text reads like a catalogue listing various artists who have created work for synagogues, omitting the interesting historical or social context behind either the commissions or the creating of the art work.

When he does describe difficulties of growing up Jewish in the south—for example, Sigmund Abeles (b. 1934), in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, who had to travel to Charleston for religious services—Baigell remarks only that Abeles developed an awareness of “what it means to be Jewish in the modern world” (135). The activity of the Ku Klux Klan or the memory of Leo Frank, whose lynching by a mob in Georgia in 1915 led to the founding of the Anti-Defamation League, seem to have escaped Baigell’s notice. From the threat of the Klan to restricted neighborhoods, where they could not live, and clubs they could not join, some American Jews living outside New York,



**FIGURE 1** Luise Kaish: Detail "Moses": "Ark of Revelations", Bronze, 1964, 13' 6" h x 15' 6" w. Temple Brith Kodesh, Rochester, NY. Reproduced with kind permission of Luise Kaish.

experienced antisemitism that, while not as virulent as that in Nazi Germany, did have profound effects on their lives.

Growing up in Los Angeles in the late 1920s, the young Philip Guston (né Goldstein) also confronted the Klan, which he perceived as particularly menacing. Born in Montreal of Russian immigrant parents who surely knew antisemitism, is it any wonder that Guston chose to hide behind a changed surname? Yet Guston merits only a casual mention, when Baigell discusses the image on an altar in a canvas by David Newman as "a painting of a hand holding a cigarette in the style of Philip Guston but denoting biblical burnt offerings, smoke, and incense" (154)—a citation not included in an index that is far from complete.

Guston is, by all other accounts, a major Jewish artist. His pictures, including a series on the Klan, figure in the collections of many major museums. Baskind gives him due notice and she is not alone, since writers from Robert Storr to Donald Kuspit have discussed Guston's Jewish content. Kuspit speculated that Guston felt unconscious guilt at repudiating his Jewish identity through his name change. But if the name change motivated Baigell to omit Guston, why did he accept Mark Rothko's metamorphosis from Rothkowitz to Rothko? And if he considers Jerome Witkin's depiction of Nazis in Buchenwald to be Jewish art, why aren't Guston's pictures of Klan members?

Baskind discusses Guston's dedication of a 1977 painting to "I.B.," who is none other than the Russian Jewish fiction writer, Isaac Babel (139). While she does not mention that Guston also admired other major Jewish authors, including Franz Kafka and Philip Roth, the latter a personal friend, she quotes Guston that another of his friends, the artist David Aronson, "caused me to remember and made me a witness too". Aronson's kabbalistic and Jewish folkloric themes earned a brief discussion by Baigell, although he dismisses and ignores the more famous Guston (134).

Baigell repeatedly judges the Jewishness of others and tries to gauge how "ethnically centered" they are (for example, on page 130). Despite such efforts to measure artists' levels of spirituality and ritual practice, Baigell's own discussion of accepted ritual occasionally strays without comment into disputed areas. For example, he writes without caveat about "the prayer of expiation, *shlogn kapores*," which supposedly transfers one's sins to a rooster (or, for women a hen) shortly before *Yom Kippur* by swinging the recently killed bird above one's head three times in a circle (80, 132). A practice not mentioned in either Torah or Talmud, it has historically elicited strong dissent. Some Jewish sages have called *shlogn kapores* a foolish custom and even "a heathen superstition". More recently, a rabbi identified as the head of Kosher Law Enforcement for New York State has joined with PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) to seek to eliminate this practice on the streets of Crown Heights in Brooklyn.

Men in general fare better than women in Baigell's eyes. He praises the contemporary Tobi Kahn as "a spiritual artist" and describes him as "the most observant and religiously educated of all Jewish artists in his generation"(202). But of Ruth Gikow's painting, *Queen Esther II* (1952), he writes: "Gikow was attracted to the theme, but—and this is meant as an assessment rather than a judgment—one does not sense the drama inherent in the scene with which a more ethnically centered artistic [*sic*] might have imbued it" (130; in Baigell's writing, the sometimes flippant tone and careless editing also contribute to one's disappointment at what might have become a more valuable volume). In contrast, Baskind, who liked this same painting well enough to make it one of the 16 color plates in her book, remarks upon "Gikow's command of shimmering color application in her representation of the figures' orientalized clothing" (122).

It is curious that Baigell chose both to include Gikow and to discuss and reproduce this particular work if he believes that she needed to be "more ethnically centered". The muddy black-and-white reproductions that illustrate his book are in no sense adequate to its subjects. More often, images discussed are not reproduced at all; but when they are, the results are discouragingly poor—even for black and white.

Though Baigell states that he tried to show that "Jewish American artists who explore Jewish themes and are concerned with their Jewish identity are not concentrated in any one city or area but live all over the country", he has not achieved his goal before the contemporary era, when, as he admits, "more documentation and archival data exists or is available" (x, xi). He pays almost no attention to the large number working in twentieth-century Chicago. Where, for example, is Todros Geller (1889–1949), who arrived from the Ukraine in 1918 and headed the art department at the beloved Jewish People's Institute in the 1920s? Geller, in turn, became a mentor to the next generation of Chicago's important Jewish artists, among them Aaron Bohrod and Mitchell Siporin. Baigell mentions only Siporin, and then only in a list; he does not discuss or otherwise identify him.

Geller is also one of the 14 Chicago Jewish artists who participated in the 1937 portfolio, *A Gift to Biro Bidjan*, created to benefit the Soviet autonomous region for

Jewish settlement, which was located in farthest Siberia, begun in the 1920s and then promoted in 1934 from a territory to a Jewish Autonomous Region under Joseph Stalin. Baigell does note briefly the campaign by the John Reed Clubs of New York and Chicago to collect art works for a proposed museum in the new region, but not one of the 14 participating Jewish artists from Chicago merited a mention (53). Raymond Katz produced a figure of Moses. Some of the others—David Bekker and Geller, for example, made for this portfolio art directly inspired by Yiddish poetry and theatre; still others, like Louis Weiner and Aaron Bohrod, depicted Jewish immigrant life from refugees to peddlers to the famous Maxwell Street Market on Chicago's West Side. Though most of Chicago's significant group of early twentieth-century Jewish artists also eluded Baskind, she did include a useful essay on Siporin, who later taught at Brandeis. These Chicago artists represent a fertile area for future research.

Just who is and who is not a Jewish artist is still not so clear either to these authors or to their readers, which suggests both the potential usefulness of their labours and the amount of work still required. Baigell misidentifies Andrew Dasburg as Jewish (20) and refers to "the critic Jacob Kainen" (35), rather than recognizing that Kainen was a noted painter and printmaker. After a stint on the WPA,<sup>1</sup> he had an important career as a artist and curator in Washington, DC, where Baskind tells us that the Philips Collection first purchased one of his paintings in 1942. Kainen's early scenes of Jewish immigrant life easily qualify him for Baigell's discussion. Baskind mentions that in addition to painting and printmaking, Kainen also produced cartoons for both *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, two leftist publications. He certainly merits Baskind's decision to count him in (148–51).

Rather than adapt Baigell's more limited view of what constitutes Jewish art, Baskind makes clear that for her Jewishness

in America or elsewhere, is much more than a religious evocation. Parochial imagery, as of a menorah, a rabbi, or a biblical subject, is only one expression of the Jewish experience. The special position of Judaism as both a religion and a secular culture instigates a wide variety of artwork that evokes the Jewish experience, and so religious matter is only one element discerned in the work of artists. . . (xiii)

Baskind, the author of an earlier book, *Raphael Soyfer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (2004), argues convincingly that sometimes "close observation of an artist's work reveals that Jewish identity is encoded in the art" (xiii). Thus, she tries to look beyond explicit subject-matter, setting the goal "to present artists that were raised as Jewish to a critical audience interested in exploring whether or not the artists' religio-cultural inheritance influenced their art" (xvi).

By contrast, Baigell makes the impression of judging when he writes of artists born in the 1970s or 1980s who explore Jewish themes: "Moral and ethical values stem, for the most part from family traditions and it is these, apparently, that form the basis of absorbing and passing on what they call their Jewish heritage" (164). It might have helped if Baigell, more than briefly discussing Shimon Attie (b. 1957), could have read what he told Baskind:

In my family, being "Jewish" was not about religion, but rather about a sensibility, a tradition, a culture, a way of thinking. It was about understanding the experience of being

part of a group that has experienced oppression through the ages, and to take that experience as a basis towards appreciating the importance of universal human rights. (28)

To his credit, Baigell makes an effort to discuss feminism in a chapter he calls “The 1970s and After, Feminism”. Yet he claims that Jewish women artists “did not explore Jewish subjects in depth until the 1980s” (213), ignoring the fact that many of the artists who pioneered feminist art were Jewish, among them Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, who briefly collaborated on the West Coast in the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts and on *Womanhouse* (1972), an installation and performance project that they produced together with their students, as well as in a related presentation of their work at the Corcoran Conference on Women in the Arts, held that year in Washington, DC. I have argued elsewhere that there is a link between Jewish identity, the heritage of radical politics in both Eastern Europe and in immigrant America, and a number of feminist artists.<sup>2</sup> Among the other feminist artists who explored Jewish subjects before the 1980s is Anita Steckel, who began her *Skylines of New York* series in 1970 and continued into the next decade. Her work makes references, for example, to Jewish mothers, the Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce, Hitler and the Holocaust, the Jewish prohibition against tattoos, and onetime Jewish neighbourhoods and communities such as Coney Island and Miami.

Lisa Bloom does pay attention to Chicago and Schapiro in *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*, a study that emphasizes “Jewishness”, which “stands for a cultural identity rather than a strictly defined religious one” (2). Bloom does examine contributions by Jewish Feminist artists and theorize about “the unadmitted Jewishness of much feminist art in the US” (5). She is at her best when she draws upon her own interviews, which she conducted with some of the artists, and arguably at her worst where she did not take the trouble to seek out and speak with others still living and willing and able to talk. Consciousness of ignoring important witnesses may explain a rather limp exculpatory: “The absence of archives and substantial written material on this topic placed an unfair burden on those I interviewed”.

Bloom is weakest when she discusses Judy Chicago, with whom she did not speak. Nor did she undertake archival research in Chicago’s papers, an immense, accessible, and valuable collection located at the Arthur and Elizabeth M. Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. Instead, it appears, from reading at least some of her books, that Bloom made up her mind about Chicago’s Jewish identity and had no desire to have to revise her first view. Bloom makes the erroneous claim that Chicago “broke completely with the Jewish faith”, when quite the opposite is true (51). In fact, by the time of her birth, Chicago’s parents, born to immigrants from Eastern Europe, had already rejected Judaism for Communism during the Depression. Growing up as Judith Sylvia Cohen, Chicago experienced Jewish ritual through her extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandmothers. She knew Jewish ethnicity at home and anti-semitism at school. From her parents she imbibed the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*, the obligation to make the world a better place. As an adult, Chicago changed her name to Gerowitz—that of her first Jewish husband, who died in an automobile accident not long after their marriage. Her marriage to her second Jewish husband ended in divorce, but for her third marriage (in 1985, to the photographer, Donald Woodman, with whom she collaborated on the *Holocaust Project*), the couple decided to have a Jewish wedding with many traditional rituals, though some were adapted to fit her feminist



Chicago surely would not have chosen to cite a novel notable for its portrayal of Jews if she had been seeking to suppress her Jewish identity. To the contrary, she is grappling publicly with it.

Nor is Bloom aware that Chicago not only never suppressed her Jewish identity but was using Jewish themes and texts in her art even before the 1970s. In 1964, she showed a painted clay sculpture of a vagina-like opening set in a curvilinear structure that she called *In My Mother's House*. The title derives from the Song of Songs, considered by many to be the most erotic of texts in the Jewish tradition. In the verse to which Chicago alludes, the Song's female narrator says of her lover, "I held him fast, I would not let him go/ Till I brought him to *my mother's house*" [italics mine]. In 1966, Chicago exhibited a 1965 abstract sculpture that she called *Lilith*, referring to the night demon in Jewish lore that appears in the Bible as a screech owl or "night monster" (Isaiah 34:14). Drawn to a medieval tale of Lilith, which describes her as Adam's first wife, who deserted Adam after he rejected her demand for equality in sexual positions, Chicago depicted three abstract shapes alluding to the three angels God sent in Lilith's pursuit.

Likewise, Bloom's claim that Chicago was silent during the 1970s about her family's politics is incorrect. Chicago wrote in *Through the Flower* about hearing at the age of 13 from her ailing father that he was a Communist and "about his desire to change the condition of black people in America, to abolish poverty, to expand educational opportunities for poor people, and to try to make the place he worked [the Chicago Post Office] more humane".

Bloom stumbles in another respect when it comes to Chicago's monumental feminist construct *The Dinner Party*: inspired by Leonardo's *Last Supper* according to the artist, which has led interpreters, and now Bloom, to deny the work any Jewish meaning (42). Yet the supper that became a Christian symbol began as a Passover



**FIGURE 3** Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (detail), 1979, Mixed media. The Brooklyn Museum of Art. Reproduced with kind permission of Judy Chicago.

seeder celebrating liberation from captivity in Egypt; and Chicago has also written that she made the plates that represent modern women rise up into three dimensions to symbolize women's liberation, thus transferring to women the seder's theme.

In short, Chicago never "shed" or denied her Jewish identity, although Jewishness was not the main focus of her work until she conceived of doing the *Holocaust Project* in 1985. Yet Bloom persists with her view that Chicago is one of a number of "successful Jewish artists who, having shed their very ethnic and cultural specificity in the 1970s, were admitted into the mainstream" (130). Bloom is on much stronger ground when she writes about the feminist artists whom she did interview, including such figures (among others) as Eleanor Antin, Deborah Kass, Elaine Reichek, Martha Rosler, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Of these only, Antin made the cut for Baskind's encyclopaedia, which one wishes was even more inclusive. In her entries, including Antin's, Baskind, who communicated directly with many of the living artists, also draws upon the most recent scholarship, citing, for example, Bloom's work on Antin.

Bloom herself emphasizes that she is not an art historian, but approaches her subject from the standpoint of critical theory: "What I am proposing then is to insert Jewishness into the complex discursive and rhetorical dimension of visual cultural studies" (5). This is both the strength and the flaw of her study. She brings a fresh perspective completely missed by Baigell, but she can write that "art by ethnic minorities as well as their representations are scarce in Pop art. . ." (128): this while discussing Jewish ethnicity, pointing out "the absence of Barbra [Streisand] from Warhol's oeuvre" (128), which she has already contrasted to the inclusion of Barbra in parodies of Warhol by Deborah Kass. Despite Bloom's focus on Jewish feminist artists, we could hope that she knew about important Jewish male artists usually associated with the Pop movement (George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jim Dine), as well as some of the less well-known female Jewish artists who made Pop Art (Rosalyn Drexler, Idelle Weber, Anita Steckel). But the absence of more comprehensive knowledge and more thorough research mars Bloom's study and allows her to make inaccurate and indefensible statements. In the same spirit with which she wants to investigate Jewish feminists, it is necessary to expand our definition of Pop Art. Anita Steckel, for example, held a show of "Mom Art" in 1963, intended to send up the sexist imagery characteristic of Pop Art made by men.

Baskind does include Segal, Dine, and Lichtenstein, whom she labels "one of the leading figures of the Pop Art movement" (176), but omits the less famous Jewish women associated with Pop. She finds no Jewish themes in Lichtenstein's work except for an appropriation of "Marc Chagall's flying fiddlers" for a mural in the entrance hall of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Perhaps this new attention to Jewish art will eventually allow some analysis of how Jewish culture produced so many important artists in America. Judging from Baigell's book, that time has not yet come.

It should be pointed out that Baskind's book is a volume in Greenwood Press's series called "Artists of the American Mosaic," which already includes other volumes on Asian Americans and Arab Americans. Thus, Baskind's method of presentation was somewhat predetermined. Nonetheless, the decision to include a brief biography of each artist and a discussion of societal and stylistic influences works well. She then explores a significant image or two, selecting those that illustrate the artist's Jewish background whenever possible. When the artist has commented directly on Jewish art or artists, she features that as well. With a few exceptions, such as Raphael Soyer or Jennings Tofel, she makes no claims to have conducted original primary research, but she appears to have done a

careful job of digesting and presenting the relevant scholarly and critical literature. Not least, this book is well edited.

Baskind's selection spans 85 artists from the nineteenth century through to the present, including, for example, painters (Albert Bloch, Theresa Bernstein, Florine Stettheimer); sculptors (Saul Baizerman, Jo Davidson, William Zorach); printmakers (Leonard Baskind, Minna Citron); photographers (Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon); and conceptual (Jonathan Borofsky, Barbara Kruger), installation (Shimon Attie, Nancy Spero), and performance artists (Eleanor Antin). In most cases, she has noted when an artist has worked in more than one area; she neglects to tell us, however, that Lee Krasner also made prints and that Chicago wrote performance pieces. Baskind has interviewed or corresponded with a number of the contemporary artists, including Judy Chicago, Audrey Flack, Tobi Kahn, Jack Levine, and Sol LeWitt. Her book features a black-and-white illustration for each artist except those whose work is represented on the eight pages of good colour reproductions at the centre of the book. She also has a brief bibliography on Jewish American art and a useful index.

Baskind begins her volume with a brief (less than 10 pages) history of Jewish American Art, but she makes up in quality what she lacks in quantity. She cites, for example, some of the Jewish artists who took up the Civil Rights movement as a theme during the 1960s: Raphael Soyer, Ben Shahn, R.B. Kitaj, and Art Spiegelman. She might have broadened this scope to include paintings by the forgotten but interesting Rosalyn Drexler.

When we do not yet have a credible enough revisionist history of twentieth-century American art, it is difficult and perhaps too soon to write the kind of overview of Jewish American art that Baigell has attempted. Bloom theorizes mainly about contemporary Jewish feminist artists working in Southern California, many of whom have not yet received the kind of attention she offers us. It is a shame that both writers are neither careful enough nor sufficiently grounded in the subject matter at hand. Baskind's efforts are conscientious and careful, but need to be expanded to encompass many more artists if we are ever to be able to analyse the whole rich area of Jewish American art.

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## Notes

1. The WPA or the Works Progress Administration was the largest federal agency under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, formed to provide jobs to artists and others during the Great Depression.
2. Gail Levin "Beyond the Pale" and "Censorship, Politics and Sexual Imagery."

## References

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- . "Censorship, Politics and Sexual Imagery in the Work of Jewish-American Feminist Artists." *Nashim* 14, Fall (2007): 63–96.