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Lisa E. Bloom *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 194 pp.; 66 b/w ill. Cloth \$105.00 (9780415232203)

Thumbnail

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Since the early 1990s, several prominent artists, curators, and professors have opened a dialogue to address the definitions and meanings of Jewish American Art. This surge coincided with, but was not part of, multiculturalism and identity-based art and politics. (For clarification, like Bloom I am interested in Jewishness the culture rather than Judaism the religion). Over the past decades many important articles, exhibitions, and catalogues demonstrate how being a Jew has shaped the careers of art professionals, and how Jews in the art market and the academy often saw (some perhaps still do) their status as Jews as something to suppress or at least negotiate in order to succeed in the United States. The tendency of Jews to explore their identities in terms of race and ethnicity began in the late nineteenth century with the formation of Zionism, and when identity moved beyond religion and race to being understood as ethnic and cultural. The activity of intense scholarship begun in the 1990s continues today. For example, curator Norman Kleeblatt's bold, exciting, and innovative 1996 exhibition at New York City's Jewish Museum, *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, along with its catalogue (New York: Jewish Museum, 1996) and related essays by Kleeblatt, brought these artists and concerns out for public scrutiny, inspiring the work of other artists and writers. Kleeblatt created a turning point in the presentation and interpretation of Jewish-American contemporary art.

Lisa Bloom's book is an important contribution to this ongoing dialogue. She joins Kleeblatt (whom she credits with assisting her career) and artists and academics such as Deborah Kass, Ken Aptekar, Cary Leibowitz, Beverly Naidus, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Margaret Olin, Matthew Baigell, Donald Kuspit, Maurice Berger, Carol Zemel, and many others who work on Jewish identity and visual culture. Some have turned the lens on themselves, scrutinizing how their formerly unarticulated Jewishness has impacted their work and career choices. Others are concerned with such historical figures in American art as Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and Meyer Shapiro. Within the academy, studies on Jewishness are a cross-disciplinary phenomenon. Overwhelmingly, these artists and authors are themselves Jews; often they insert their personal narratives into the projects.

Despite the visual and intellectual richness of this material, much of the work on Jewishness remains ghettoized under Judaic Studies, unincorporated into notions of identity, race, and multiculturalism. Even with their minority status Jews are seen in America as white, a "successful minority," and assimilated; in other words they are not considered marginalized. Bloom's book brings issues of Jewishness and Jewish feminism to the center of scholarship on contemporary feminist art. In doing so, she rightly calls attention to the problems of race, ethnicity, class, and assimilation as key components in the lives of Jewish-American feminist artists. A central theoretical premise of Bloom's book is that Jews were elevated to white status and privilege at the expense of their Jewishness. But as esteemed anthropologist Daniel Segal points out, the notion of whiteness that concerns many scholars today is the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant male culture of the Victorian era, rather than current de-Christianized and secularized whiteness.<sup>1</sup> The problem with Bloom's narrative is that she has mainly depended on a former notion of whiteness by relying on Karen Brodtkin's How

*Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), a book discredited by Segal along with others in a diversity of fields. Bloom's theoretically driven conclusions derive from a lack of historical and factual information on American-Jewish history that would buttress her plausible claims or discredit her unsubstantiated ones.

Bloom begins with a thoughtful introduction that informs the reader of the territory ahead. Her first chapter, "Clement Greenberg's Modernist Shadow," examines how even today's practicing artists have to contend with Greenberg's looming "critical authority." As artist Rhonda Lieberman quips, "Clement Greenberg is the closest thing we have to a rabbi of 'High Art': in his synagogue of abstraction the artist transcends ethnicity" (14). Bloom writes of the importance of the 1940s and 1950s for both the achievement of whiteness by Jews and Greenberg's and Rosenberg's championing of the cause of artistic universalism via Abstract Expressionism. Even now, as Lieberman suggests, Greenberg's support for formalism, abstraction, and suppression of ethnic identity continues to have an impact on today's painters. Bloom relates that in order to establish their careers and art market, Jews were not to work from their ethnic identity, despite the fact that within their professional and personal circles they identified as Jews. Bloom vocalizes what Greenberg and Rosenberg ignored—being a Jew in the public arena. While it is not my intention to undercut Bloom's argument, questions as to the nature of the relationship between the Jewish Abstract Expressionists and the hard-drinking, hyper-masculine, white artists at the Cedar Bar are not addressed. Neither does she question whether universalism and abstraction were paths for Christians as well as Jews.

In subsequent chapters Bloom rewrites contemporary feminist art to stress the importance of Jewishness in the life and work of such key figures as Judy Chicago, an artist who had

previously privileged gender above all else. Bloom also brings attention to current artists who openly work from and speak about how being a Jew factors into their work and their movement through the academy, museums, and the art market. The issue, then, is still vital and alive.

Bloom breaks her slender volume into six chapters, focusing on individual artists, discrete time periods, and geographic locations. The author discards the New York-centric view that significant art has only been produced and displayed in Manhattan. Her regionalist outlook emphasizes the importance of artists and groups in California for establishing the foundation of Jewish-feminist art. She makes clear that to be a Jew in the United States is not fixed but rather an evolving, shifting identity. Often, as with Greenberg, it is something one has to confront or is confronted by, and then has to contend with over time.

Bloom's second chapter examines the early 1970s, and establishes that a disproportionate percentage of early feminist artists were Jews, as was claimed about first-wave feminism. (The question of disproportion is a curious one. How much is too much, too little, and who decides the cutoff marks?) In her innovative treatment of Judy Chicago, Bloom insists that art history rethink Chicago's career in terms of her interlocked identities as both a Jew and a feminist. Bloom's discussion of Judy's decision to drop her Jewish surname Gerowitz and adopt Chicago is both original and persuasive. I might add that her famed *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) contains an element of Jewish history not explored here. If *The Dinner Party* is based on the Last Supper, then according to many scholars and theologians what is being referenced is a Passover Seder. In this same chapter, Bloom brings much deserved attention to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who garnered fame with her performance pieces, including *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80), in which she shook hands with and thanked each sanitation worker in New York City for her or his work. Always

openly self-identified as a Jewish-feminist, Ukeles uses her art to address Jewish laws about cleanliness, domesticity, and modesty. In my own phone conversation with the artist, she confirmed my view of the extreme transgressiveness of her work, having waited for years, she says, for this to be understood. For a modern Orthodox such as Ukeles, an image of a woman (Ukeles) immodestly dressed in men's clothes (jeans and workshirts), hair uncovered, touching the hands of multiple men flies in the face of traditional Orthodox law.

Artist Eleanor Antin (chapter 3) has been the subject of previous and engaging writings by Bloom. The author draws attention to the conflicts within Antin and her work between Jewish traditions and assimilation, and between the desire for middle-class values and status at a cost to one's Jewishness. In her performances, installations, and short films, Antin examines how race intersects with gender. I question both Bloom's and Antin's assertion that when Antin performs as a fictional Jewish vaudevillian, applying blackface in order to adopt an African American identity, she draws attention to the vaudevillian tradition in which both Jewish women and black women were seen as exotic and erotic spectacles, thereby linking the otherness of both figures. Instead, historically marginalized white ethnic groups, such as the Irish in the nineteenth century and Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, donned blackface not to identify with the marginalized status of African Americans; rather, by applying blackface new immigrants adopted racism as the means to best African Americans and to present themselves as distinct from them. Al Jolson and the Marx Brothers each followed this path.

Chapter 4 concerns the performances and installations of Martha Rosler, noting that "critics have rarely commented on the fact that Rosler's work tends to deal with the dilemmas of what it means to be a divided, not fully assimilated Jewish female subject" (93). While a young California artist, Rosler did

not acknowledge this tension. Bloom, who devoted a great deal of time to meeting and talking with Rosler, seems to have encountered several artists at a moment when they were willing to reexamine their early careers and unease with Jewishness; clearly, Bloom established strong bonds of trust and understanding between herself and her subjects. Self-examination by these artists is also part of the wave of critical thinking on Jews and identity that began in the early 1990s. Chapters 5 and 6 conclude Bloom's study by discussing distinct contemporary art practices in New York, California, and post-nationally. Here the author addresses both the issue of diaspora and the many artists who work across national borders. One example is Beverly Naidus whose work with Israelis and Palestinians expresses her own discomfort with being labeled an Anglo in California.

Bloom's work is thoughtfully written, generously illustrated (although frustratingly only in black and white), balanced between New York, California, and other regions, as well as engaged with the founders of the feminist art movement and the latest wave of Jewish-feminist artists. *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art* deserves to be well-received by both the Jewish-American art scene and by those within the larger field of contemporary art that has yet to include Jewish artistic production in its conception of post-war art.

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1 Daniel A. Segal, review of *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, by Karen Brodtkin, and *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*, by John Hartigan, Jr., *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (May 2002): 470-73.

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