

**Bloom, Lisa E. *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.**

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Lisa Bloom's book, poised at the crest of a wave, shines a nuanced light on an important aspect of the year of feminist art. That's what Leigh Ann Miller calls 2007 in "Gender on Ice," in *Art in America*, and with good reason. Major exhibitions of feminist art occurred on both coasts this year: the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles showed *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* and the Brooklyn Museum showed *Global Feminisms*. Feminism in art is current in this decade; in the 1990s artists were concerned with identity politics. In 1996 the Jewish Museum in New York showed the groundbreaking exhibition, *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*.

Following these cultural developments, Lisa Bloom's groundbreaking book addresses the overwhelming Jewish connection with feminist art from the 70s through the present and considers how Jewish identities are constructed within feminist art. Bloom examines the fascinating and important question about what she terms the imbrication (that is, layering and overlapping) of certain unacknowledged questions of Jewish identity that has overlain American feminism in the arts and she looks at what she calls "ghosts" of ethnicity. Is the Jewish identity of so many feminist artists, many more than are presented in this book, a coincidence or does Jewish ethnicity connect them? How do Jewish religious values and ethnic identity play a part in feminist art? Does their Jewish identity permeate every act of their visual art? Can a Jewish feminist artist create a Jewish feminist artwork and a mainstream non-Jewish non-feminist artwork or is every artwork made by a Jewish feminist also a Jewish feminist artwork?

These questions should be seen in the context of the identity politics of the 1990s. Lisa Bloom comes to Jewish feminist art after the identity politics that overwhelmed the subject matter of artists in the 1990s. Many artists at that time explored issues surrounding their ethnic, racial and sexual identities African Americans, Latinos, Lesbian, and gay artists depicted their concerns with identity. It was "in the air" and Jewish artists followed that trend.

Her perspective is from visual culture studies rather than art history and her locus is California more than other parts of the American cultural scene. The book starts with a chapter about Clement Greenberg and ends with an Arab American woman artist. Thus, the book concerns Jewish identity in a larger context than Jewish feminist artists. Only a selected number of artists are discussed. It would be worthwhile to consider Jewish feminist art with a more complete sample of the feminist women artists as well writers, critics, art collectives, curators, and gallery owners. All that would add immensely to our consideration of this important topic. To her enduring credit, Bloom takes on a very large topic but the discussion is superficial in many cases. The book is both fascinating and flawed, controversial and challenging.

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Some striking questions emerge: Why are there so many Jewish women among American feminist artists and how is Jewish identity part of American feminist art? Feminism in general and feminist art in particular has involved many Jewish women starting with Betty Friedan. Lisa Bloom examines this phenomenon and brings attention to a few feminist artists who are American Jewish women. The book promises to discuss how feminism and Jewishness might be connected and layered. The promise, while tantalizing and thought-provoking, is not entirely resolved.

There are also the definitional problems: what constitutes feminist art? What is Jewish art? And always, there is the question of identity: Jewishness as religious, ethnic, and/or cultural identity. Some of these larger questions have also been addressed by other recent books such as Ori Z. Soltes, *Fixing the World: Jewish American Painters in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 2003; David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel's *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, 1998; and Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd, *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, 2001.

The artists considered in depth in this book are: Judy Chicago, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler. In less depth she considers contemporary feminist art in New York and California, with examples by artists in New York from 1990 such as Danielle Abrams, Rhonda Lieberman, Elaine Reichek, Deborah Kass, Sherry Millner, Joan Braderman, and in California: Ruth Wallen, Beverly Niadus, Lidia Shaddow, and concluding with Doris Bittar, a non-Jewish Arab-American artist. These artists are exemplars and variously well-known and aesthetically strong. Each of the artists Bloom discusses in this book represents a different reaction to Jewishness.

Many artists of the 70s and 80s proclaimed that they were first artists, then members of their sex or ethnicity or race, and many art viewers insisted that the quality of the art was more important than the identities or ethnic or gender politics. In this regard the book may open up a useful dialogue between generations. Can a young feminist today really understand or even fully acknowledge the Judeophobia and anti-Semitism that affected women who came of age in the late 60s? It was not unusual then to be told that Judaism was a religion of hatred and retribution with a paternalistic God in contrast to the loving and forgiving Christian religion. Jewish women were thought to hate their bodies because of menstruation and the *mikva*. Of course, this was all nonsense, but it is against this background that Mierle Laderman Ukeles makes her *mikva* series, that Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro created Womanhouse, that Linda Nochlin asked why are there no women artists, that Miriam Schapiro wrote that anonymous is a woman, that the Guerilla Girls protested the lack of women artists represented in the major museums, and that the young Jewish American artist changed her name from Judy Cohen Gerstein to the entirely non-patronymic Judy Chicago.

Lisa Bloom is sensitive to this, stating, "Because women of my generation no longer face the same kinds of highly structured resistance from patriarchal institutions, it is easy to forget the force that feminism has at that moment in the 1970s when women were

engaged in activist movements and aimed to alter their personal lives as well as their art practices and teaching” (p. 61).

The limitations of time and place are exemplified by Bloom’s discussion of Judy Chicago. Bloom begins with the question of Chicago’s name choice and claims that it alludes to the “working class.” But “Chicago” does not define a class structure; it is a place, a city with neighborhoods, with various classes and many ethnicities, consisting of individuals whose self-reinvention has characterized the city of broad shoulders, this powerful place, from which coincidentally I am writing this review during a semester at the Newberry Library. The city has always had a deep sense of ethnicities overridden by loyalty to the city itself. It places a strong hold and a fierce loyalty on its citizens. The Jewish Chicago-based writer Saul Bellow in 1949 has the character Augie Marsh proclaim memorably at the beginning of his novel of the same title, “I am an American, Chicago born that somber city--....” As a Chicago born Jewish American, Judy Cohen would have known Bellow’s famous line; it was written when she was ten years old. In her feminism, she rejected her married last name of Gerstein, but her birth name of Cohen was also a patronymic, as feminists in the 60s and 70s were very conscious. By choosing the city of her birth for her last name, the artist asserted her right to choose her own name, a name that is not a patronymic. Her rejection of her birth (or “maiden”) name and her married names was a feminist act, and not, as Bloom suggests, an assertion of class identity or of ethnic identity. By changing her name from Judy Cohen to Judy Chicago, the artist is saying, “I am first an American, Chicago born, and by implication, secondarily a Jewish woman.”

This problem--American first, Jewish second also characterizes the attitudes surrounding Clement Greenberg and other artists, art critics and art historians, both male and female, of the U.S. before the 1980s. The imbrication of Jewishness in feminism corresponds to and is confirmed by my own life experiences. In the early 1970s arriving in the Midwest for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the need for equal rights for women. Having graduated from a woman’s college in New York, the low status of women in the heartland came as a surprise. Being a woman was standing in my way of getting a job more than being Jewish. So it is logical that feminism was more important than Jewish identity at that particular time. With three other women I founded a women’s liberation consciousness-raising group in our small Midwestern academic community. With tongue-in-cheek, we called it SWAG subversive women’s action group. Was it a coincidence that three of the four founding members of our group were Jewish women and that two, including myself, were first-generation Americans and daughters of Holocaust survivors? Wasn’t our Jewish identity shadowing every aspect of our lives, including our active feminism?

Bloom’s book reminds me how hard it is to recapture the dominant anti-Semitism of the 1970s including in feminism. At a meeting of the National Organization of Women, the president of the local chapter called Judaism a patriarchal religion with a cruel, retributive, and dominant male God whereas Christianity was called gentle, kind, and a religion of forgiveness. Jewish women were said to be sexually repressed due to our

supposedly patriarchal religion which found menstruation repugnant, so nasty that Jewish women had to ritually soak before a man would touch her after menstruation. A liberated woman ought to be happy to have sex during menstruation and even enjoy the taste of her own blood. Why else, educated WASP women said, would there be this ritual *mikva*? And wasn't it amazingly archaic, this trapping left over from a male-dominated sexually-repressive, and unforgiving ancient religion? Why would a liberated woman submit herself to such repression, they asked? It is in this context that Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *mikva* series needs to be understood.

Born too late to remember, Bloom may be forgiven for not knowing the dominant Judaeophobic strictures against which Jewish women were fighting in the 1970s, if it were not that she is so assertive in her judgments about what the 70s feminists left out, namely their Jewishness. Bloom writes that Jews entered art history for social assimilation. At Columbia in the 60s we joked that the university is an Episcopalian school where atheists teach Catholicism to Jews. That Jews played a major role in American art history is a chapter in itself. From Bernard Berenson to Sydney Freedberg to Meyer Schapiro to Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, mainstream art history and art criticism has had major proponents who were Jewish men. In my experience, nearly all of my professors of medieval and Renaissance art were assimilated Jewish men.

They had academic careers, and only much later did I realize that museum careers were not open to them. I think that Jews entered art history in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century because they could, that this choice of career is an expression of a sense of freedom. Now Jews could look freely at "forbidden" and "treyf" art. Now we had freedom to look at pictorial images of the Madonna and Child and try to figure out what made these images so magnetic, what made them so meaningful and powerful to millions of Christians.

Bloom devotes the first chapter to influential art critic Clement Greenberg whose assimilationist stance borders on Jewish self-hatred. He is neither a feminist nor an artist, but he provides background for what feminist artists faced. When I met him, he showed no interest in the art that was not abstract expressionist.

The particular choices of artists that Bloom chooses for her book-- Judy Chicago, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Rosler-- leaves out some major artists. Although she mentions Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff, she nowhere includes other major Jewish women artists such as Audrey Flack, Vera Klement, and many more, and galleries such as Artemesia in Chicago and Bernice Steinbaum in New York and Miami, both of which championed feminist art. Gail Levin has written about Schapiro and Chicago in an article in the *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* ("Beyond the Pale: Jewish Identity, Radical Politics and Feminist Art in the United States").

Bloom acknowledges the complexities of feminism and assimilation (p. 104). The striking cover image, *Gold Barbra*, of Barbra Steisand from *The Jewish Jackie Series* by Deborah Kass, 1992, highlights the question of appearance vs. assimilation. Each of the

artists discussed in the individual chapters represents a different reaction to Jewishness. Martha Rosler creates interesting work, but the illustrations of her work are small.

Times have changed from the 1970s to the present. But how much have they changed? What constitutes “too Jewish”? When and where is it OK to be Jewish? Five years ago a university professor said, “I like that you don’t wear your Jewishness on your sleeve.” The response is obvious: Jewishness doesn’t have to be on a person’s sleeve to be essential. For many of the Jewish feminist artists discussed in this fascinating book, as for me, Jewish identity is imbricated in everything. It is essential to our values and core beliefs. Bloom’s thought-provoking book raises those questions and those answers.

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