

# A Raucous Reflection on Identity: Jewish and Feminine

Don't be put off by the yawn-inducing title of the Jewish Museum's "Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism." The show is a pucky, punchy look at the women's art movement,

**KAREN ROSENBERG**

ART REVIEW

one that takes as much inspiration from Marcia Tucker's "Bad Girls" survey of 1994 as it does from more comprehensive, conventional shows of feminist art.

Drawn mostly from the museum's collection, the show parallels recent and belated efforts by the Museum of Modern Art, among other museums, to highlight art made by women.

But it has a different feel, perhaps because the artists (almost all Jewish) invoke religious identity as often as gender. "Shifting

"Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism" continues through Jan. 30 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street, (212) 423-3200, jewishmuseum.org."

the Gaze," you could say, invokes not only the stereotype of the "bad girl" but also the "nice Jewish girl." It also includes some "nice Jewish boys" with feminist sympathies.

The exhibition begins with a studious but assertive self-portrait by a young Lee Krasner from 1930 and ends with Nicole Eisenman's brand-new painting "Seder," a distinctly untraditional depiction of the festival meal. In between are plenty of other smart, nervy works that grapple with feminism and Judaism, often simultaneously.

Organized by the associate curator Daniel Belasco, who is also working on a book about feminist consciousness in New York School art, the 32-painting show is concise yet deep. It's smartly installed, too: Six themed sections play fast and loose with chronology, creating novel, inter-generational girls' clubs instead of falling back on first wave/second wave distinctions.

The first gallery zeros in on Abstract Expressionist works by women on the verge of something else, be it Pop or Minimalism or Pattern and Decoration. Most riveting is Miriam Schapiro's "Fanfare," a vividly hued gestural abstraction from 1958; it reminds you that Ms. Schapiro was an accomplished member of the Cedar Tavern gang before she rejected abstract painting in favor of fabric "femmagés."

Another surprise comes from Judy Chicago, who with Ms.



LEE KRASNER INC.

"Seder," a new painting by Nicole Eisenman.

Schapiro spearheaded the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the early 1970s. The work here, "Sky Flesh" (1971), reveals glimpses of her prior artistic life as a minimalist painter and sculptor. Its spray-lacquered panels arrange soft pastels in the form of a grid, and are right in line with the surf- and hot-rod-inspired works by other West Coast artists of that era.

Also here is one of the last paintings made by Eva Hesse before she turned to sculpture: a concatenation of arcane symbols in a muted, blue-gray palette.

Ms. Hesse's painting from the early 1960s is the subject of a fall exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.)

In the Hesse work feminism is merely implied (the label notes that she was reading Simone de Beauvoir around the time she made the painting). In the next part of the show, it's explicit: here you'll find Joan Semmel's nude self-portrait, its extreme foreshortening exaggerated by a rather cramped installation. More arresting, though, is a painting by Lee Lozano (born Lenore Knaster) of a woman's chest

## Shifting the Gaze

Painting and Feminism  
Jewish Museum

with two Jewish stars where breasts should be and a nipple-shaped neck pendant.

The section of the show devoted to "Pattern and Decoration" is small, and deliberately so — rare for a show of feminist art. And it acknowledges the men who were part of the movement: Ms. Schapiro's "Blue Burst Fan," a collage of kimono-esque fabrics on a shaped canvas, hangs opposite Robert Kushner's messily exuberant "Blue Flounce."

A more tongue-in-cheek use of the decorative arts can be seen in Elaine Reichek's embroidered samplers from 1994, which are as vocal about assimilation as they are about stereotypical femininity. One of them reads, in neat cross-stitches: "Don't be loud. Don't be pushy. Don't talk with your hands."

In the next room works by Nancy Spero and her husband, Leon Golub, explode with righteous anger: over the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and the treatment of women generally. Mr. Golub's paint-encrusted "Napalm Man" goes right for the jugular, while Ms. Spero's multipaneled "Masha Brusikina" uses a smoother, Pop-inflected delivery to tell the story of a teenage girl executed by the Nazis in 1941.

Texts and symbols are the focus of the next grouping, in which the emergent Dana Frankfort's blazing-orange Star of David livens up older and more cerebral canvases by Louise Fishman, Joan Snyder and others. And with another hit of color, not to mention chutzpah, Deborah Kass's "Double Red Yentl, Split" from her "My Elvis" series, kicks off a grand finale of satiric and otherwise humorous paintings.

Warhol is again parodied in Audrey Flack's 1962 "Matzo Meal," a rendering of Jewish supermarket staples on a white background. And a work by one of the original "Bad Girls," Cary Leibowitz (who is male), that reads "I'm A Jew how 'bout U?!!," gamely sends up 1990s identity politics.

"Shifting the Gaze" ends squarely in the present, though, with recent works by Ms. Eisenman as well as by Amy Sillman and Dana Schutz. Ms. Eisenman's "Seder," which was made specifically for the show, depicts grotesque-faced family members sharing matzo and Manishevitz. Her vision of the springtime ritual seems informed by sacred and secular gatherings, from James Ensor's "Christ's Entry into Brussels" to George Grosz's "Eclipse of the Sun" to Norman Rockwell's "Saying Grace." It's both smart alecky and searching, as is this unfortunately titled exhibition. Really, the only "gaze" that matters here is the artist's gimlet eye.

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