

OLD STORIES AND NEW

New Under the Sun

Australian Contemporary Design in Jewish Ceremony III

Canberra Museum and Gallery, until Oct 2

Tues-Fri 10-5; Sat-Sun 12-4.

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Ritual objects, such as the Judaica in this exhibition, serve as reference points which flow back and forth along the continuum of time. Inscribed with sacred texts, imbued with archaic inscriptions, or describing archetypal shapes, such objects hold symbolic meaning, linking visible [present] and invisible [past and future] worlds.

This collection of Judaica is a travelling exhibition, the third of its kind commissioned and curated by Melbourne's Jewish Museum of Australia. Replete with beautiful objects that help preserve old traditions, some also represent new interpretations, or awakenings of old teachings, only now becoming ritualised in contemporary practices.

The well-known festivals of Shabbat, Pesach, Chanukah and Rosh Hashanah are well represented. Various versions of candelabra, temple screens, plates, cups and bowls, ornate and plain, ethereal and earthen, fill the room. They are like songs singing their traditions, but in contemporary textures. Like songs, they also hold the *pause* in the breath --a space between in and out, then and now.

Metal smith Zac Frankel's beaten silver cups and bowls focus on promises, covenants to be [ful]filled with life-giving liquid. Guy Blashki's timber screen and Aliza's Freedman's paper cut-outs refer to traditions of separating ritual spaces: for example, the *mechitzah* between men and women in a synagogue, or that between spaces for preparing and eating food. Contemporary practices and cultural lifestyles challenge both traditions; what survives this challenge of the new?

This is the first of the exhibitions to encourage the development of new symbolic representations to accompany rituals added to the Jewish calendar since the mid-last century, thus accentuating the fact that Jewish ritual practices are a living tradition, subject to change. Prominence is given to a selection of objects centered on the place of women, giving symbolic counterbalance to what curator Rebecca Forgasz delicately describes as "perceived inequities" in Jewish tradition. Jennifer Robertson has woven delicate *tallit* for women, based on the native pomegranate; Bern Emmerichs decorates two exquisite bowls for girls' naming ceremonies--intimate, almost medieval in their pictorial and verbal detail of names, families, talismans; Marion Marshall's *tzitzit* tassel

necklace focuses on the knots edging traditional men's shawls, and makes them the centrepiece of an interesting piece of feminine adornment.

Heather Shain Ellyard's *ushpizot* calls in the spirits of seven female prophets [Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Hannah, Avigail, Hulda, Esther], inverting the tradition of honouring 7 male figures during the 7 nights of Sukkoth. The seven clusters of words, pastel colour-plates and images of plants associated with them, render a delicate representation of their respective qualities and actions. Like many of the pieces in this exhibition, this work has undergone a transformative process from research through to realisation.

Other women artists link feminine and masculine in surprising ways: Aliza Freedman's intricate, framed paper-cut hanging is inserted with a painted portrait of David Ben Gurion and a transcription of his "Prayer for the State of Israel". Nitza Flanz Karpel weaves a highly-textured screen in shredded fabrics from the words of a Psalm. The hanging fixes something that needs repeating: its textures, however, scratch freshly again and again at the strings of our hearts.

Since 1953, the Nazi Holocaust has been ritualised in *Yom Hashoah* [Holocaust Remembrance Day]—a 'festival of lament' that is broadly, but not universally, observed. Here, Blanche Tilden's *Ritual Sash*, made of fragile tubes of white and blue glass, is like a symbolic aide-memoire for the Holocaust that hints at both the fateful 'train journeys of so many', and a magazine of bullets. Anne Ross commemorates Anne Frank in a box which holds keepsake memorials of the dead, but is capped with a garden of trees—a great symbol of survival. Helmut Leuckenhausen's imposing plinth-like candelabrum contrasts with the tiny delicacy of Ede Horton's modest *Channukiot* cast with 9 x 5mm holes. These pieces together commemorate the duality of ritual, grief and hope commingled. These are candles lit for the living and the dead: light burns the memory but also inflames the heart with hope.

Whilst the number of candles lit in tradition is either fixed at 6 [to represent the 6 million dead], or optional, Tracey Clement goes one step further: each time her candelabrum is used, it must be reassembled by sprinkling large quantities of salt over its wire structure.

Whilst some focus on Children [Phoebe porter's delicate spinning tops; Philomena Hali: the first menstruation for young girls; Lili Dubs: her first grandchild cloth]; others focus more on beauty of design [the interchangeable colours and segments of Brenda Factors' pieces; the perfect cylindrical shape of Hendrik Forster's silver, steel and gold ritual cups and jug. Paul Justin's perfect, interlocking silver candlesticks and *kiddush* cup, based on the Star of David, holding hope and faith within their prismatic shapes. Complete with felt cover, *Masa'at/Journeys* is a 'self-contained kit for tradition in transit' a comment on contemporary cultural mobility and perhaps too on the Diaspora itself.

Andrea Krantz has designed a circular calendar which synchronises both Jewish and Gregorian calendars—a fitting symbol for an exhibition traces relationship between custom and innovation, memorialised landscapes and countries of new settlement. Whilst I can't agree with the Museum's directors' statement that the objects represent

“*indigenous* Australian Jewish ceremonial artefacts”, nonetheless the pieces certainly play witness to ‘encounters with new landscapes, colours, light and flora’ in their aesthetics.

The *Miriam’s Cup* commissions highlight this aspect: Glenice Lesley Matthews exquisite cup made of silvers, gold and cloisonné, includes an Australian south sea pearl at the base of its bowl to assure the purity of its function [the pearl would dissolve if it were used for wine].

And Janine Tanzer’s inscribed, repousse glass cup and saucer, with its rippled reflective mirroring, and sophisticated relationship to partnering and separation between cup and saucer, is an object that could only come from living in a country of such passionate and desperate a relationship to heat and water.

Of course, enactments and re-enactment are statements of *life*; thus these object are not just memories but invited the vigour of re-enactment—a covenants to survival.

The rest is noise.