

March 8, 1996

ART REVIEW; Too Jewish? Jewish Artists Ponder

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

One of the videos in the show "Too Jewish," opening on Sunday at the Jewish Museum, tells the story of the Jewish girl who asks her mother why Jews don't wear stars, the way her Christian friends wear crosses. Her mother responds, "Honey, why advertise?"

What does "too Jewish" mean? That joke is probably as good a description as any. In a culture where Ralph Lauren and Lorne Greene (of "Bonanza" fame) have managed to make themselves better known for dressing up as cowboys than for being Jews, the goal of not seeming Jewish, or at least not seeming too Jewish, has been one of the central facts of American Jewish life. After all, it was "a nice Jewish lady," as the writer and artist Rhonda Lieberman points out in the show's catalogue, who invented "the ultimate shiksa goddess," Barbie. And it was Jews, the comedian Jackie Mason recalled, not non-Jews, who roared with laughter through his Broadway show, then kvetched afterward that it was "too Jewish."

Self-parody is one thing, of course. Self-loathing another. And to younger American Jewish artists, the tricky business of distinguishing between the two has become fodder for their art. Is it good art? Well, let's just say that the work in this show, to its credit, is different from much of the race-based, gender-based and ethnic-based stuff that has swamped the art scene in the last decade: first of all, it has got a sense of humor about itself (some of it does, at least), and second, it isn't the usual victim art. How can it be victim art when it's as much about what Jews do to themselves as it is about what other people do to them?

One reason this fact is interesting is that it suggests that for Jewish artists of the present generation the Holocaust is not the touchstone of ethnic identity it once was. There are a few exceptions in the show, like Seth Kramer's video in which he seeks to count six million grains of rice; still, they're few. The new reference points are current events along with the television shows and pop culture icons, like Barbie, that third- and fourth-generation Jews grew up with in their largely assimilated households.

So, for instance, when the artist Deborah Kass parodies Andy Warhol's silk-screened images of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, substituting Barbra Streisand's face for the former First Lady's (Ms. Kass calls it her "Jewish Jackie series"), she's taking her cues from Pop Art and pop culture. And she's also making a joke, obviously, though it's a double-edged one: Barbra Streisand, with her "Jewish" nose, is the antithesis of the pert Jackie, a funny distinction until you realize that your laughter depends on a stereotype of female beauty that doesn't accept Jewish looks like Ms. Streisand's. It's not a profound observation for Ms. Kass to make, maybe, but it is a clever way for her to expose, visually, the ethnic subtext of mainstream culture.

"Too Jewish" includes 45 works by 23 artists, and among the paintings, sculptures, drawings, videos and installations, there's even an outfit from the clothing designer Jean-Paul Gaultier's "Hasidic" collection, which caused such a brouhaha in the fashion world a few years ago. Mr. Gaultier's critics wondered about female models wearing fake fur pais, or side locks. Doesn't that cross the line from glamorizing to mocking Hasidic customs? Perhaps. As the art historian Linda Nochlin writes in her essay in the "Too Jewish" catalogue, only one thing was certain: Mr. Gaultier had chutzpah.

But without it how could he, as a dress designer, address the idea of being "too Jewish"? "False hooked noses, a plethora of silver fox, bowlegged models with huge bosoms and bulging bellies, the standard repertory of anti-Semitic caricature," Ms. Nochlin observes, "would be, well, just too too Jewish."

Norman Kleeblatt, the exhibition's curator, includes the Gaultier outfit with Barbie dolls at the beginning of the show to set a populist stage for the art that follows. He also includes a smart little video by Maurice Berger presenting snippets from television shows, like Jack Benny's and "Saturday Night Live," that raise thorny questions about how Jews are depicted in the mass media.

Why does popular, or consumer, culture exercise a particular fascination for some of the Jewish artists in this exhibition? Partly because it's the main engine of Jewish assimilation in America. As Jews have accumulated the trappings of mainstream American society, they have also come increasingly, though never

entirely, to be absorbed into it. In any case, assimilation at its extreme means ethnic erasure. And much of the art in the exhibition is about inserting, or asserting, Jewishness in the context of mainstream America. It's about challenging the very idea that someone, or something, can be "too Jewish."

Elaine Reichek's ersatz Americana installation is an example. It is a recreation of her childhood bedroom, with a twist: the stock Colonial wallpaper is discreetly stamped with a Jewish star and the quaint, framed samplers are embroidered with sayings like, "If you think you can be a little bit Jewish, you think you can be a little bit pregnant." Funny, yes, but seeing the linen hand towels in Ms. Reichek's installation with J.E.W. monograms on them goes beyond comedy, the way Mr. Gaultier's Hasidic takeoffs did. Which is Ms. Reichek's intent, no doubt: for you to ask yourself why the simple word "Jew" is provocative and unsettling, in a way "WASP" wouldn't be. The answer: Jews are not all that assimilated in American society after all.

Mr. Kleeblatt has organized "Too Jewish" in three parts. The first includes art about the body, the next is about popular culture, the last about Jewish ritual.

This means that the first section has Dennis Kardon's casts of noses of Jews in the art world (all different, which is to say, of course, that there is no "Jewish" nose). The next section includes Ms. Reichek's installation, and also Ms. Lieberman's "Barbra Bush," a fake Christmas tree festooned with images of Ms. Streisand that's a punning joke about Jewish Christmas envy. The last section includes Cary Leibowitz's designer yarmulkes and, rather more seriously, Helene Aylon's feminist perusal of the Hebrew Bible: she has marked, in pink pen, the offending patriarchal passages. In good Talmudic fashion, she has also included responses to her markings, pro and con, by Jewish scholars.

It's said that while second-generation Jews struggled to blend into, and often to deny their difference from, the American mainstream, recent generations have felt the freedom that comes with greater social acceptance to explore their Jewish roots. That's a generalization. But certainly the Jewish artists in this show break with past Jewish American artists like Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and even Barnett Newman, who rose to international prominence making abstract art that declared itself universalist (read: assimilationist).

True, from Ben Shahn on, there were always some Jewish American artists whose art dealt explicitly with Jewish subjects. And even Rothko and company came, in a sense despite themselves, and directly because of their success, to represent Jewishness, or Jewish intellectualism, in the popular imagination: that is, Jewishness in art came to be associated with its own absence, with a deracinated formalism.

But the younger artists in "Too Jewish" are something else, scornful of formalism, wrapped up in the current, acerbic debates about identity politics. Leave it to Jews, at least, to find the comic potential even in that.

"Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities" will open on Sunday at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92d Street, and remain on view through July 14. It is to travel to the Jewish Museum in San Francisco in September, and the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in January.