Textiles are the most varied of ‘manufactured’ goods. Lending themselves to body covering, shelter, food storage, transportation of goods, and group/clan identification, they were, and remain to this day, objects of high status, decoration, creativity, and spiritual identity. A Stitch in Jewish Time: Provocative Textiles explores how exceptional contemporary artists apply their skillful creativity to the ever-evolving understanding of Jewish values. Individually addressing issues of memory and reflection, interpretations of history and ritual, and links between the past and present, they delve into aspects of the Holocaust, war, patriotism, celebration, prayer, feminism, and sexuality, frequently through the inclusion of Biblical texts and sometimes challenging traditional forms.

Until modern times, however, textiles were not ranked as fine art materials and were not regarded as highly as precious metals and gemstones, carved rare wood, fine porcelains and blown glass with their perceived greater durability, standards of workmanship, and prestige. Although the exquisite tapestries of Renaissance and Baroque Europe offer an exception to this, the fabrication of textiles was, for centuries, considered a domestic craft — “women’s work.”

A major rift in the hitherto male-dominated art world occurred in 1969 with the emergence of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, each challenging the concept of women relegated to “women’s work.” They collaborated to form the first feminist art program, Womanhouse, at the California Institute of the Arts, and to this day continue to make references in their art to the humble and restricted materials of women’s creative efforts.

Schapiro’s work is marked by a signature gesture of overlaying a collage of fabric on the painted graphic canvas, asserting her links to the continuing role of women and domesticity. Her Menorah, constructed of burgeoning floral textile elements, asserts an egalitarian assertion of identification and meaning in this traditional seven-branched symbol of Judaism.
Chicago, frequently working in large series or “projects,” uses needlecraft and weaving as an additional technique of fine art. The Birth Project (1980-1985) grew out of Chicago’s realization that there were few if any images of actual childbirth depicted in Western art. This epic Aubusson tapestry, woven by Audrey Cowan in collaboration with Judy Chicago, was achieved through the needlework efforts of numerous women across the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand, as was Chicago’s renowned Dinner Party (1974-1979). Chicago differs with the neat and clean version presented in Genesis 2:21-23, presenting the act of birth and human creation as a volcanic event, linking it to all human endeavors.

Abandoned objects are used by Carol Hamoy who recycles them into provocative art works based on Biblical texts. The Ten Plagues offers a contemporary view of the Biblical plagues of Exodus 7:11, whereby modern afflictions such as infertility, loneliness, famine, cancer, and AIDS, are embroidered on the bodices of well-worn, vintage nurse uniforms. The ten plagues are repeated to chilling effect by Leslie Golomb and Louise Silk in a series of text-laden quilts positing the parallels between slavery in America and the plight of the Jews fleeing from Egypt.
A restrictive garment created of hundreds of sewn-together scraps and fragments of marriage contracts, *ketubbot*, by Andi Aronovitz calls poignant attention to the situation of many traditional, Orthodox women locked in failed or abusive marriages. The rulings of the religious courts adjudicating such marriages too often make it impossible for a woman to seek redress.

The Holocaust – a subject that defies artistic creativity in its magnitude -- is explored in several sensitive ways. Shoshana Comet fled Nazi-occupied Belgium, only to be caught in the crossfire as she and her family crisscrossed the French countryside on foot, escaping the advancing
German troops and eluding French collaborators. Years later, she confronted her harrowing childhood memories through the art of weaving. In 1968 she commenced a series of dramatic open loom textiles that, through their scale, texture, and intense colors convey despair resolving into hope. Lisa Rosowsky, born a generation after the Holocaust, expresses the impetus to transmit memory in her elegiac installation of profound dignity and grief in the ashes of hopelessness. Judy Chicago’s drawing, *Double Jeopardy*, from her *Holocaust Project* grips the heart by showing a woman stitching the required, loathsome yellow star identity patch, to the garments of her husband, children, parents.

One rarely thinks of textile as the medium for portraiture. In bravura style, Estelle Yarinsky reaches into the rich, little known historical past to introduce us to two outstanding Jewish women: Dona Gracia di Nasi, a 16th-century *converso*, and Rosa Raisa, an early 20th-century European opera star. Depicting symbolic objects of their time and lives, their stories are revealed, brought to life by artistry and vibrant choice of fabric. Robert Forman, uses the difficult and little known fiber technique of ‘string painting’ to explore the many facets of his own personality and creating a multiple self portrait. The compassionate champion of the old, ill, dying, and abandoned, Deidre Scherer machine embroiders endless layers of fabric, achieving subtle nuances and pulling the viewer ever closer to the subject to share in a greater understanding of loneliness and age.
Marvelous ceremonial textiles embrace Jewish ritual through elegance, beauty, and pertinence. The Parochet by Mark Podwal, designed for Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York and woven by Gloria Ross in Felletin, France, is a masterpiece of tapestry weaving. Torah mantles by Temma Gentles take the concept of “dressing the Torah” quite literally, as does her richly beaded, sparkling tik container. Reflecting the belief that the Torah is a tree of life to all who uphold it, Jacqueline Nicholls expresses its life-giving force through a Torah cover that is in the provocative form of a woman’s corset...a pregnant woman at that.

Reeva Shaffer covers the Torah Ark with a dimensional parochet of felted clouds of wool, inscribed with the Hebrew letters spelling emet (truth). The huppah (wedding canopy) has inspired two very different strategies: a woven copper wire and pearl structure by Nancy Koenigsberg and a painted silk form by Corinne Soiken Strauss. Laurie Wohl, using a self invented technique of “unweaving,” offers “Peace is Like a River” as a sanctuary hanging. Laurie Gross has installed a magnificent 40-foot-long synagogue wall tapestry balanced by several of her iconic prayer pieces. Recollecting his own bar mitzvah ceremony, Greg Lauren has crafted a crisp blazer and tallit entirely stitched in paper.
Gola Sangam, a knitted, embroidered dinner table set for six, by Israeli artist Ravit Gat, reveals the voices of anxieties, separations, hatred, and torments of love. Influenced by the Bauhaus movement, Rina Arbel has captured the essence of the Judean Hills in a subtle woven tapestry. With exquisite skill and attention, the embroideries of Adina Gatt glow with contemporary interpretations of traditional objects, including an Omer Counter measuring the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot.

Elaine Reichek

We are reminded of our tenuous situation as Jews in the world by a pair of embroideries by Adam Cohen. In the guise of armed insects, ever vigilant, they emerge from a background of camouflage cloth. Elaine Reichek, combining vintage and current photography with stitching, issues an embroidered warning in her piece Shoyn Vider. Non-conformist artist book-maker Doug Beube envisions a “protective” flack vest and Andi Aronowitz, out of hundreds of tightly rolled Hebrew prayers, crafts a protective garment to wear in times of extreme need. Michael Berkowitz focuses on talismanic imprecations from the Kabbalah to ward off “demons.”

These and the many other artists featured change our conception of textiles, the fibers and materials, form, construction, and creative reach. In the realm of conceptual fine art, each is outstanding and leaves an indelible impression that expands our perception of contemporary art and enhances our understanding of Jewish history, experience, and values.
The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color catalog with an essay by Laura Kruger, Curator.

Opening Reception: Wednesday, October 13, 2010, 5:30 pm - 7:30 pm
RSVP and photo ID required: aglazer@huc.edu or (212) 824-2293

Location: One West 4th Street (between Broadway and Mercer Street), Manhattan
Subway: R/W to 8th St./NYU; 6 to Astor Place; A/C/E/B/D/F/V to West 4th St.
Hours: Monday - Thursday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm; Friday, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm; Select Sundays (September 26, October 31, November 7, November 21, December 5, December 19, January 9, January 23, February 13, March 27, April 10), 10:00 am to 2:00 pm
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