CHILDREN OF RUTH:
Artists Choosing Judaism

DR. BERNARD HELLER MUSEUM
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE, NEW YORK

CHILDREN OF RUTH: Artists Choosing Judaism

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"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" — Ruth 1:16

The Heller Museum at Hebrew Union College is proud to present *Children of Ruth: Artists Choosing Judaism*, which we believe to be the first group exhibition by artists who have found a spiritual home in Judaism through conversion. Their journeys evoke the message of the *Book of Ruth*, one of the five *megillot* (scrolls) of the Bible. It tells the story of the first convert to Judaism, who is honored as the ancestor of King David.

These 17 artists' diverse paths to Judaism are rooted in their individual, personal quests. As artist Mary Apikos beautifully expresses it: "In some ways, conversion to Judaism is simply like having a key that was always there in my life. It is like returning home."

Hailing from New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, Norway, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States, their works range from abstract to representational and employ a variety of media, including painting, drawing, collage, lithography, textile, found objects, sculpture, and model-making.

Their subject matter is as wide-ranging as their spiritual journeys. Some artists look to recent events or contemporary moral issues, others comment on biblical texts or merge their early backgrounds and languages with Jewish themes. Several point to Jewish religious customs and rituals, or conjure up a Golem, a mystical protector of the Jewish community in times of despair.

These artists are vital members of the Jewish People, as the Torah in *Deuteronomy* (*Devarim) 19:9-14* explains, because we were **all** together at Sinai:

> "You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God…I make this covenant…not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day."

Nancy Mantell, Ph.D., *Curator*

Susan H. Picker, Ph.D., *Associate Curator*

Front cover:

KATE LENKOWSKY

Breaking Free, 2024
Linen and cotton quilting, 31" x 31"

Kate Lenkowsky's quilt was inspired by a text in the biblical book *Qohelet (Ecclesiastes)* that declares that envy is self-destructive. The cocoon shape suggests the isolation in which envious people keep themselves and which must be broken open if they are to discover their own gifts.

The Song of Miriam, 2023
Linen and cotton quilting, 23 ½" x 35"

Back cover:

MARY APIKOS

We Can Only Be Human Together, 2024
Ink on Duralar, 5' x 4'

In speaking to the harm inflicted on children when adults wage war, Mary Apikos was inspired by the Grimm Brothers' story, *The Six Swans* (1812). In that tale, six brothers are enchanted and turned into swans. For fifteen minutes a day, if they work together, they can blow away their feathers with their magical breath and become human once again. She depicts the moment of transformation from swan to human as one child helps another.

ZAC BANIK

Diary of Symbols and Lines:
2 Tevet, 14 Tevet (at right)***,***
8 Kislev, 28 Kislev
2023 - 2024
Collage and ink drawing, 10" x 8" each

Zac Banik created a diary during the two months following the events of October 7, 2023. He explains, "I intended to document moments of stress, sorrow, insight, joy, and mundanity in the months after the attacks." Four of the 29 pages in the complete work are in this exhibition, featuring the artist's expression through prose, typography, symbols, and freeform sketches.

CAROLYN CARSON

Daughters of Ruth, 2025
Handwoven textile on loom, 66" x 96"

Although Carolyn Carson's family had been ministers for generations, the artist found her spiritual home in Judaism and underwent a conversion later in life. As a resident of Pittsburgh, she wrote that the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre tore at her heart. Carson explains that *Daughters of Ruth* depicts both the scars that all Jews feel because of worldwide antisemitism, and her feeling of belonging as a Jew among the Jewish people.

MIKE COCKRILL

Excavation, 2019 - 2025
Acrylic, textiles, and painted fabric on canvas,
71" x 61"

Mike Cockrill explains, "This is a work connected to my two decades of Torah study, in which the foundational document of Judaism is continually turned over, the text figuratively pulled apart, reinterpreted, and re-understood. It was important to me that two women (with poses that hint back to Egyptian forms) are doing the excavation in my painting. One holds a book while the other holds a brush – ready to repaint (rewrite) the traditional history from which she may have been excluded or been misrepresented. The traditional patriarchy literally lies at the women's feet in the form of a blindfolded and disembodied head – out of which flowers the possibilities of new beginnings."

NANCY CURRENT

Ruth and Jethro, Under the Wings of the Shechinah, 2023
Acrylic, screenprint, and collage on paper, 30" x 22"

In the *Book of Ruth*, Ruth was praised for her loyalty and courage as she followed Naomi and joined the Jewish people. She was further honored by becoming the ancestor of King David. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite priest who advised Moses on how to delegate responsibility and conserve his strength as the Israelites journeyed through the desert. In *Exodus 18*, he taught Moses how to select judges from each tribe, thereby establishing a system of justice. Nancy Current explains, "The well and fragments of historic documents from the Cairo genizah refer to knowledge gained by study. My study of Jewish texts has been the foundation of my life for many years."

BERIT ENGEN

The Book of Ruth, 2018 – 2019
Woven linen, 9" x 8" each

And there was famine in the land . . . (Ruth 1:1)

And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died. . . (Ruth 1: 3, 5) (at right)

For wherever you go . . . (Ruth 1:16)

Showing the lineage of Ruth (through Boaz) to her great-grandson, David. (Ruth 4: 18, 22)

Berit Engen's *The Book of Ruth* consists of 15 tapestries, each based on a few lines from the biblical book. Included in this exhibition are those from the beginning of the story and from the final lines. Engen explains, "As both an immigrant and a convert, the story resonates with me on a deep level. I wanted to draw from my own outsider experience of loneliness, doubts, being accepted, and deep joy."

KATE HENDRICKSON

Orange (Kah-TOHM) כתום, 2022 *(at left)*
Graphite and pastel on Fabriano Artistico, 22" x 30"

While a trusted circle of friends and family supported Hendrickson during her exploration and conversion to Judaism, there were others with whom she "could not share this personal journey due to a sense of inevitable disapproval." As she became more comfortable revealing her Jewish identity to a broader circle, the previously concealed Hebrew letters and words in her works became more overtly discernible, as seen in these works from her *Revealed Faith* series.

Tree (EHTS) עץ, 2021
Graphite and pastel on Fabriano Artistico, 22" x 30"

ALAN HOBSCHEID

Bedikat Chametz, 2023
Oil on paper on wood panel, 24" x 30"

Alan Hobscheid describes the holiday of Passover as dominated by preparation, part of which is the ancient practice of searching for the last bits of leavened bread, called *bedikat chametz*, in order to dispose of it. He notes, "At the deeply personal level, this whole ritual is serious business – in total darkness, you must find and get rid of all of it – not only that within your home, but that within your soul. This work depicts the intimacy of the ritual, the desperate moments of crawling on the floor and seeking out those qualities of yourself that need improvement during this time of spring and renewal."

BARBARA A. JOHNSON

Creation Two Ways; Order and Chaos, 2018
Encaustic painting, 8" x 16"

Barbara Johnson depicts two contrasting versions of creation. We experience a glimpse of the chaos engendered in The Big Bang theory with all of its complexity and drama in the left panel. The biblical depiction of a more orderly progression complete with light and dark, day and night, and the stacking of days until we reach seven is seen in the right panel.

CAROL MAN

Pirke Avot 1:10, 2019 *(at right)*
Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 40"

Carol Man has accessed her Chinese and Jewish identity to create a Chinese-Hebrew calligraphy following the tradition of both languages, in which the text goes from top to bottom in Chinese and from right to left in Hebrew. She depicts a teaching from the Hebrew book *Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers),* which states, "Love work, hate acting the superior, and do not attempt to draw near to the ruling authority." This credo, which shares principles from the two cultures, was proudly displayed by Man's son on his university dormitory door.

Pork Dishes, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 27.5" x 39.5"

CHAVA TZIPORAH NESHER

Boruch Haba Bamidbar b'Montana, 2024 *(at right)*
Papercut, 8.5" x 11"

Chava Tzipora Nesher strives particularly to follow the precept learned from the stories of Abraham and Sarah – the welcoming of guests. She explains that "the motifs in this piece are elements of Montana where the bison is prominent for its indigenous significance of giving all of itself for the People – its meat, hide, and bones. It is also a kosher animal."

From Missoula to Geula — Bamidbar b'Montana,
2024
Beadwork and embroidery, 10.5" x 5"

TETSUYA NODA

Diary: June 11, 1971, Bet Din for Conversion, 1971
Intaglio print, 23" x 17" *(at left)*

Diary: June 11, 1971, Certificate of Conversion, 1971
Intaglio print, 22" x 18"

Tetsuya Noda is a Japanese artist known for his *Diary* prints, which use complex woodblock, silkscreen, and photographic techniques. Beginning in the 1960s, each work is dated and the series now numbers more than 500 works. The two prints in this exhibition bear the date of his conversion to Judaism: June 11, 1971. It was followed shortly thereafter by his marriage to the daughter of the then Israeli ambassador to Japan. The first print depicts the *Bet Din*, a Jewish rabbinical court with its three presiding rabbis, along with many symbols of Judaism. The second is essentially a conversion certificate signed by the rabbis of the *Bet Din* and is unusual in his oeuvre for its dark background – a starry night with multiple views of Noda's profile in the bottom right.

ANNALIESE ROSA

Temple Golem, 2023
Ceramic sculpture, 23.6" x 15.7" x 7.9"

The golem (a Jewish legendary clay figure brought to life through magic) is emblematic of Annaliese Rosa's life as a Jewish person. She explains, "The golem is an unformed being and an unformed Jew, and so too am I." She asks, "Am I a Jew created by my community and my parents' decision to convert, or am I a Jew because I decided as a young adult, and continue to decide every day, to continue existing as a proud queer Jewish person in the world? Golems are creatures on the fringes, accidental queer icons, and safe, sacred spaces. The golem guards the temple within myself, where my Judaism gives fire to my activism and pride. The golem stands up for the Jewish values I was taught during my conversion, and after it. The golem reinforces the sacred teachings of community, tradition, and *tikkun olam* (healing the world)."

RHODA RYBA

This Song, 2023
Acrylic and collage, 26" x 34"

Rhoda Ryba became what she describes as a "Jew-by-Choice" late in life, after many years of intense Bible study and questioning. Her work incorporates Hebrew and English text in abstract or semi-abstract depictions of her experience of the beauty of the Torah. "This work was created while preparing my adult bat mitzvah in 2015. The text of my Torah reading was *Va-Yelekh (Deuteronomy 31)*, in which *hashirah* ("this song" in Hebrew) is repeated five times and which I spoke about in my *d'var Torah* (remarks on the Torah portion). The song is the Torah, personified in the feminine form, as if it was a woman that Moses loved. Moses was asked to teach 'her' to all of us; and he was promised that this song would never be forgotten by the people of Israel."

YONA VERWER

Immersion VIII, 2025
Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 40"

Yona Verwer's *Immersion* series began in the 1990s, when she converted to Judaism. Going to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath used for purification, is part of the conversion experience and signifies the transition from non-Jew to Jew. She explains that this painting portrays her "*mikvah* experiences: the joy of weightlessness, the reference to the marriage ritual (before which one also goes to the *mikvah*), and the feeling of being spiritually elevated." The artist is from the Netherlands, and her painting incorporates her interpretations from the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

VICKY VOGL

EMET, 2024
Mixed media, 29" x 25" x 24"

Born to an Ecuadorian mother and Czechoslovakian Jewish father who fled to America in 1939, Vicky Vogl grew up with both heritages. She found a new connection to Judaism as an adult, ultimately converting after her father's death. She explains that she appreciated that, "the Jewish faith encourages participants to keep studying and asking questions, even about the faith itself." This puppet theater piece depicting a *golem,* a clay figure from Jewish folklore created to rescue Jews from danger, was influenced by the stories Vogl's father told her about the Czech Jewish community, the rich tradition of the art of puppetry, and Francisco Goya's etchings.

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