

WOMEN OF THE BOOK: JEWISH WOMEN RECORDING, REFLECTING, RE-VISIONING

Curators: Shoshana Gugenheim (Founding Artist), Judith Margolis, Dr. Ronit Steinberg

A Torah scroll, *tefillin* or *mezzuzot* written by a heretic, a traitor, an idol worshipper, a slave (non-Jewish), **a woman**, a minor, a Cuthean [Samaritan], or a Jewish *mumar* [convert] are invalid . . . (BT *Gittin* 45b)

Being the one to change a tradition can be daunting, especially if one is a woman Torah scribe. However, knowing that the root of the ancient word “*ivri*” (meaning “Hebrew”; in Modern Hebrew, “a Jewish person”) means “boundary crosser,” has enriched my understanding of my work as a Torah scribe, for when I began scribing my first scroll in the fall of 2006, I was among the first women in modern Jewish history to cross the *halachic* boundary and to write a Torah scroll intended for public reading.

During those remarkable and sometimes grueling days, in the moments when my encounter with the text pained or shamed me as I would copy declarations of war, massacres and acts of misogyny, I questioned my role as keeper of the story and as woman in this narrative. On other days, I was moved to tears identifying with stories of human struggle with anger, jealousy and desire. I wondered how a scribe, obligated to neither add nor omit a single letter, stays faithful to the text.

It became clear to me that this road map of the Jewish people needed new voices, ones that would give rise to new perspectives and narratives of interpretation. For this task, I called upon Jewish women artists who would each interpret one of the 54 weekly Torah portions, making personal, visual meaning from the text. The works would be created on parchment and bound with sinew, like a Torah scroll. Thus *Women of the Book: Jewish Women Recording, Reflecting, Re-visioning* was born.

In selecting artists for the project, curators Judith Margolis, Dr. Ronit Steinberg and I reached out to Jewish women artists across Europe, Israel, North and South America, Australia and South Africa. We were interested not only in the quality of the artists’ previous works, but also the quality of imagination and interpretation conveyed in their proposed sketches. The artists come from a wide range of experience, backgrounds and cultural inheritance, while spanning the religious continuum from secular to Ultra-Orthodox. Some identify as cultural Jews, never having opened the pages of the Five Books of Moses while others abide by the laws of traditional *halachic* practice, their lives influenced by these stories week to week. Some are Jews by choice. Some are children of Holocaust survivors. Most, but not all, are professional artists.

Along the way we saw that many artists were being gentle, literal or focused only on traditional ideas of beauty in their works, as if the subject matter, Torah, forbade using their art for criticism or rebuke. With support and encouragement, participants began to venture away from the literal and expected and toward the unknown. Beauty, both lyrical and grotesque, emerged, expressing emotions evoked by the text.

The nine years of crafting *Women of the Book* evolved in feminine time—expansive, unfolding and inspired. Allowing for long pauses, some participants faced personal or family illness, sent their children to war and to the *huppah* (wedding canopy). Some mourned loved ones, left marriages, moved across the world, attended to fertility and infertility and menopause. Our household alone saw the birth of two children and two Torah scrolls, fertility treatments and their ill effects, breastfeeding, weaning and the emotional and physical wrestling of a stay-at-home mom.

Women of the Book is informed by the philosophical and artistic perspective of my work as a social practice artist and the collaborations I form. How I come to my work as a curator is defined by how I practice my craft as an artist. In her essay, “Between Theory and Action in Social Practice Art,” Chloe Bass describes “an engaged process that, in its openness, creates aesthetically and philosophically beautiful results. The work is living: it has the flexibility to breathe and grow. Who participates—and how we participate—will have a specific impact not on defining the projects, but enlivening them.”

However much Torah you have encountered, take this chance and walk inside to the living stories.

Shoshana Gugenheim, July 2015