

Over the centuries, Judaism has contributed to humanity by introducing the revolutionary idea of monotheism, a legacy of prophets, mystics, great scholars, and individuals with substantial achievements in every endeavour and profession known to man - with one glaring exception (or so it seems) = great visual art. Of course, Jews have always been involved in the arts and although there are great Jewish poets, writers, story tellers, musicians and composers, thus far there have been only very few great visual artists in the history of art. I don't mean Jews who made art (there were/are thousands of those) but Jews who made specifically Jewish Art with the ambition to match the level and quality of the visual arts of other great cultures of the world.

I am not a philosopher or a historian – I am an artist and I would like to engage with Jewish artists worldwide in what I regard to be our current, most important, even urgent Jewish quest – to create a great Jewish visual art.

In my view Jewish aesthetics begin with our quintessential text the Torah. In Genesis 1:31 we read “And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good” (italics are mine). Just like an artist, God ‘stands back’ and admires His creation. As Melissa Raphael points out “in a refrain repeated six times, God makes a primordial aesthetic judgment that the world is beautiful in the perfect unity of its form and function... excellent for its purpose, the connotations here are less moral than aesthetic”. Aesthetic judgments were made right at the beginning of creation. “God creates the possibility of the visual image (not sound, smell or other impressions of the senses) in His first command of all: “Let there be light” Genesis 1:3. God’s ‘final’ act of creation in Genesis is the formation of man from the earth, mixed with water into a golem and brought to life by the ‘breath’ of God, infusing a spiritual soul into man. As the Midrash suggests, God continues to keep His creation sustained/alive by speaking it into continuous existence. Creativity is constant. As long as the world will continue to exist, creativity and aesthetics are the underlying force-fields of creation. To emphasise this point and leading by example, God even ‘takes on the garb’ of the artist in a conventional sense - to begin with He creates by manipulating the ‘natural elements’ eg: pillar of fire, column of smoke, the Flood, the rainbow, etc. Not satisfied with that elemental, ‘natural’ creativity, He seems to have a need for a covenantal relationship with man and therefore requiring a tangible (physical, manmade object – so man could understand it) ‘contract’ by creating the first set of the two “Tablets of Testimony (the ten commandments), inscribed by the ‘finger’ of God” (Exodus 31: 18), His creative tool and which are presented to Moses on Mt Sinai. However, after Moses smashes those tablets following the episode of the Golden Calf, God instructs Moses to ‘carve’ another set of tablets with the ten commandments. Moses, inspired (directed) by God therefore can be regarded as the first (truly) Jewish artist!

Having created the world as a visual, aesthetically pleasing entity, God decides to ‘live’ amongst it. However, in order to do so He must, very precisely instruct the people about the construction of His dwelling place. Having decided that the Jews were to build His abode on earth, according to the Torah, He becomes the first patron of Jewish art or to be precise, Godly art. Wanting to have a ‘physical place’ in order to “dwell amongst the Jewish people” God decided to create the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and the associated ritual objects as His special place.

God’s instructions and specifications are very detailed as described in the Book of Exodus. God chose and directly inspired/instructed his designated Jewish artist – Betzalel (chosen because of his ability/insight with the

manipulation of the Hebrew letters of creation) to make these never before seen objects. Betzalel was instructed/spiritually inspired in the creation of visual art, architecture, numerous crafts and in the teaching of these (Exodus 35:30-34). As a good patron, God also appointed Oholiab, son of Ahisamach from the tribe of Dan as his assistant (Exodus 35:35). Thus Jewish visual Art came into being. To follow this line of thought I would suggest that God needed these Jewish visual art objects in order for us to ‘be able to connect’ with His presence through the mitzvot of using these objects. As a result, we as Jews were/are compelled to make art – by Godly decree! Was this not the very first ‘installation/exhibition’ of Jewish art? Could this be the recipe for all art - to be inspired by or contain a spiritual dimension? Genesis 12:1 is perhaps the hint to all artists; God tells Abraham “Go into yourself...”, don’t follow the crowd, be yourself.

Mel Alexenberg makes an interesting observation: “The literal translation of Betzalel’s (Bezel El) full name is; ‘in the Divine Shadow son of Fiery Light son of Freedom’. In the Shadow of God is a reference to Betzalel’s ability to interpret

God’s will as well as Moses’ instructions as directed by God. It honours the artist’s passion and freedom of expression. That his name is not ‘in the Divine Light’ acknowledges the shadow side of the creative process, the Freudian subconscious, the dark inclinations that need to be transformed into life-enhancing energies. The artist possesses the creative power to turn darkness into light... Ohaliab’s full name translates as ‘My Tent of Reliance on Father, Son and Brother’, integrating the contemporary with its past and future... Betzalel represents the psychological power of the artist and Ohaliab the sociological impact on community... The prototypic Jewish art is a collaborative enterprise... it results in a creation of a modular, mobile structure (the tabernacle) in which the divine shekinah can dwell and engage human beings in dialogue”.

Unlike the history of any other type of art that naturally goes through a long period of slow gestation and development before reaching its creative zenith and then is followed by its inevitable decline, Jewish visual art starts out at the absolute pinnacle of creative possibility. Although he came out of a culture with great art traditions (Egypt), the objects Bezalel created were unique, inventively creative and without precedents. Their Jewishness consisted in the combination of their specific aesthetic beauty and particular functionality for spiritual purposes. They epitomise the elevation of culturally utilitarian objects to a mystical purpose. Another clear example of that is the specific injunction about the priestly garments and vestments that the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) should (make and) wear while attending to his priestly duties, Exodus 28:4. These were to be made for ‘dignity and beauty’. Just like with the creation of the architecture and ‘industrial objects’ required for the Mishkan, the fashion design of the priestly garments are unique. Where Greek culture venerated the holiness of human, bodily beauty, we Jews believe in hadrat kodesh, the beauty of holiness (in the body).

It therefore appears to me that because Jewish art was born from the start - fully developed, future generations of Jewish artists had/have at least two, very clear opportunities and or possibilities open to them. They could:

- 1) Use the Torah as a ‘blueprint’ and follow the lead of Bezalel and create Jewish (mystically elevated) objects and images both as an extension of the ceremonial or ritualistic type artefacts for direct assistance with worship in the Temple, synagogue or home, as the circumstantial needs changed and to continue to be inspired by the workings of Godly actions/



plans as they became revealed over the centuries from Abraham to Moses to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai to Arizal to Nachmonides to Chassidus, and all the other prophets and commentators in between and in the future. Jewish art resulting from this particular impulse is usually referred to today in a somewhat negative and patronising term as Judaica. This type of Jewish art is not and should not be seen in such negative terms. It is after all an extension of Bezalel's example and is an inventive process of adopting art to the reality of synagogue and home rituals and traditions.

2) Or they could follow the Talmudic example and interpret the workings of God's creations, nature, the universe and man's place within it, through the process of Jewish experience, intelligence, creativity and understanding. A specifically Jewish 'world view' if you will as evolved throughout the Diaspora and in Israel. Notwithstanding (the past) obstacles posed by the 2nd Commandment, this approach can well accommodate even the stringent Halachic limitations.

Both of these categories embrace the broad parameters and potential for a Jewish visual Art; the first category is in the form of instruction/inspiration initiated by G-d, the second is a potential dialogue, interpretation, argument and or provocation initiated by man.

Jews have a language, a most amazing alphabet, a tradition and a religion spanning over 3000 years that is uniquely theirs. And yet they were usually regarded as vagabonds amongst the nations for 2000 years. Due to historical, political and cultural reasons Jewish art has had as yet ill-defined and often undiscovered or at least unarticulated history. Due to this mottled history, Jewish artists often feel that our art is still in its embryonic state and in my view provides a challenge for Jewish artists still - especially today.

Having such lofty beginnings, why hasn't a Jewish art evolved to the status of other cultural arts? Why is it that every Jewish artist goes through a personal journey of discovery, almost starting from scratch when it comes to one's own Jewishness in art? Why is the subject so difficult, so divisive and so undervalued amongst artists and cultural historians, both Jewish and non-Jewish? Why when it comes to visual art even us Jews have cringe difficulty with the word Jewish?

The conventional view is that from the Babylonian exile onwards, as a generally accepted historical norm, the creative abilities of Jews seem to have been directed towards Torah scholarship, theological dissertations, poetry, music as well as legal pursuits as a way of retaining our unique cultural identity. Jews became involved with a range of crafts, trades and professions wherever the dominant culture in the diaspora allowed them. The Jewish diasporic experience necessitated a portable culture. Books are transported or even memorised much more readily than paintings or sculpture. I'm amazed that given their intellectual nimbleness Jewish artists didn't find a way to adjust to their circumstances. Or perhaps Jewish art needs to be reviewed from a Jewish historical/cultural perspective? Perhaps we may yet (re) discover archeologically past Jewish artistic achievements? Or perhaps, given their vulnerable minority status during centuries of diasporic displacement, they were covered to accept (perhaps even believe?) the views of the dominant culture in regards to Jewish creativity? The 19th century, German philosopher Friedrich Hegel typifies that hostile attitude towards the Jews as the ultimate other. In his essay *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* he decides that Jews are 'spiritually empty' and this in his mind was reflected in the 'emptiness' of all of their creations; 'their sanctuary was an empty room, their day dedicated to their invisible God was an empty time. He goes on to suggest that 'their intolerant and domineering God is jealous of the reverence of the image'. Even when Jewish artists tried to 'fit in' with the predominant culture of their time, they were usually denounced as pretenders, copyists, chameleons and imitators of other people's culture. Even influential, Jewish intellectuals of their time like Cesare Lombroso at the turn of the century proclaimed: "While Jews have a much higher rate of men of genius, they have yet to produce 'men like Newton, Darwin or Michelangelo...' because they have not yet completed their ethnic evolution, as they show by their obstinacy with which they cling to their ancient beliefs". For him even the "act of circumcision contaminates psychologically the pure genius of the Jew". And during the emerging national ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries, Jewish artists were denounced as overtly 'internationalist' who could never fit in and who worked against the nationalistic culture within which they found themselves. Like with all other anti-Semitic accusations, even the voice/sound of the Jews was marginalised as 'corrupted', guttural, vulgar and uncivilised. They were regarded as having a 'hidden' language/code which was dangerous (internationalist) to the dominant culture even to

the point where after trying to assimilate into the main culture by trying to 'fit in' with the mores and behaviours of the majority, become blended in/'unseen' by minimising their 'Jewish mannerisms', speech dialect and behaviour, they were still regarded as sounding 'too Jewish' and therefore deemed unable to acculturate.

Even after the emancipation of the Jews from the ghettoised enclaves of Europe they were denounced as a people apart, different, the ultimate other, without an art (of their own) and an 'artless people'. As Margaret Olin points out "the fledgling discipline of art history in the nineteenth century Germany took its first steps in an intellectual climate heavily dominated by nationalist ideologies. This nationalist structure in which art is viewed as an extension of national identity, enables 'German art' or 'French art' but disables Jewish art'. In this equation, Jews - perceived as anti-national, at best peripheral participants in the life of their 'host country' - merely imitate or distort, never invent."

The apparent absence of Jewish art turned into the rejection of art by Jews and through anti-Semitic rhetoric that Jews were accosted by in intellectual and art historical circles turned into an active Jewish hostility toward art which became the art historical trope of the 19th century. Jews were written out of art history either as marginal to it, or as a people defined by their deficiencies: a lack of history, a lack of land, a lack of art.

Even in Israel the idea of a Jewish art is a problematic issue (even today) where nationalism has helped to produce an Israeli art but Jewishness is marginalised in favour of the 'fashionable' internationalist trends. It's the past accusations against Jews turned upside down, like a lot of contemporary politics when it comes to Jews! So, for instance during mid-20th century when Modernism dominated; to Modernism religion became a dirty word. It exemplified a sense of the past that has been superseded by secularism. Secularism has become synonymous with an almost cult like zeal and fervour in its denial of any relevance in religious interest, in Israel as well as globally. The Nietzschean concept of the 'death of God' which was so inspirational to Western culture post WW2, was also influential in Israeli art. In that context "Jewish themes were generally subject to strict purist control aimed at shaping content to fit the accepted norm. Content failing to adapt was as a rule marginalised". No wonder that religious art doesn't even figure in any contemporary discourse of Israeli/Jewish art.

"...Israeli art establishment clearly demarcates the boundaries separating itself from the domain of religion, in an act of purification designed to present secular art as modern, enlightened and progressive. The argument ensuing from this position is that no worthwhile contemporary art can be created from within a neo-traditional worldview." The argument is even further inverted by blaming a lack of intellectual art discourse within the religious establishment on the religious establishment itself for its attitude of separateness and conservatism. It must be remembered that although the Mishnah and other texts are replete with references to a kind of 'Jewish' aesthetics, beauty, colour, images etc, it's all in the pursuit of Chalachic principles and guidelines for the practical 'doing' of Judaism not some philosophical, artistic ideals. It's like blaming Jews for anti-Semitism!

With all the associated difficulties, the reality of course is that there were always Jewish artists of various kinds; artisans, craftsmen, painters and sculptors. Usually working within the given styles and fashions of their times and adapting Jewish themes to their needs where necessary even though the idea of a Jewish art didn't yet exist. And having little patronage and no official (state or religious) recognition, no recognisable or legal forms to support themselves, they must have relied upon private commissions and or making art for purely personal purposes.

The diasporic experience for Jews seems to have had one consistent pattern; relative periods of peace, followed by regular periods of ever newly inventive forms of discrimination, fear, ostracism, anti-Semitism and eventual expulsion. The ultimate result of this pattern was the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. Equally incomprehensible was the silence by the rest of the world to the plight of the Jews. Silence, emptiness, an abyss, nothingness and death are the most apt and by now the most cliché metaphors for the Holocaust and which in some sectors represent the whole diasporic experience itself. Perhaps Adorno was right "after Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric!" Yet it is poetry that best encapsulates the Jewish spirit, like the poem 'White Stars' written in the Vilna Ghetto, during the most unimaginable dark times by Abraham Sutzkever, one of the greatest Yiddish poets;

"...But in cellars and holes
Cries the murderous quiet
I fly higher, over rooftops
And I search: Where are You? Where?"



Under Your white stars
Stretch to me Your white hand
My words are tears
Wanting to rest in Your hand...

This poem typifies the eternal Jewish yearning, a search for God's purpose, particularly during periods of the most desolate abandonment. What happened to that original 'good' in creation that God exclaimed so aesthetically? The poet Debbie Masel has written; "On Tisha b'Av we sit by the rivers of blood and tears that flow from Babylon to Babi Yar. How can we sing the Lord's song in an ocean of suffering? If I forget you. O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth... Our longing is our one true song, writes the Rabbi of Piacenza in 1942, in the Warsaw Ghetto. It is the song of songs, from a world beyond words; the song of faith after Auschwitz."

Perhaps this abyss, silence and a sense of withdrawal is one of the most poignant conceptual parameters of Jewish visual art? After all God had to 'withdraw' in order to provide the space to create our world. In my view, as Jewish artists we have an obligation to create, especially after (and because of) the Holocaust!

I was born towards the end of WW2, in Russia where my (Polish born) parents fled to in order to escape the war. We returned to Poland, to Lodz in 1946 and I attended a Jewish kindergarten and eventually a Jewish (Yiddish) school, the Peretz School, named after the famous Jewish author and playwright Isaac Leib Peretz. This was a secular, Yiddish school that epitomised Peretz's cultural position. He saw his role as a Jewish writer was to express 'Jewish ideals...grounded in Jewish tradition and Jewish history' . The safety cocoon of this school and home where Yiddish was my first language provided me with a cherished connection to Jewish secular culture and Judaism in its broadest inclusive sense. My strongest and most vivid memories however, of these early childhood years are not so pleasant. I remember being chased, having stones thrown at me, being spat at and at times accosted physically on the way home from school and in our apartment's courtyard by Polish kids of my own age or slightly older, screaming at me and other Jewish kids "you filthy Jew(s) go back to Palestine". I only knew Poland. Their taunts about Palestine confused me. At that age I didn't even know where or what Palestine was! It's ironic that from 2010 some voices were being heard internationally for the Jews in Israel to "go back to where they came from - Europe!" The Europe that disgorged its Jews so angrily!

We left Poland in 1958 for France and eventually Australia. I trace my artistic beginnings to our year in Paris where I was lucky enough to be chosen as one of two day-school students to attend art classes run by a professional artist in the loft of our school, 3 times a week. Although I was the youngest there, I was provided with paints, paper, canvasses and drawing materials and was treated equally to everyone else in the class. That year I also discovered the great museums of Paris and artists like Rembrandt, Rubens, Velasquez, Van Gogh, Monet, Picasso, Matisse amongst many others who imprinted themselves on my aspiration. I absorbed this visual feast with a passion. I wanted to be part of this camaraderie.

After one year we left Paris (I left very reluctantly) for Australia where we settled permanently. In the late 1950's Australia was somewhat of a cultural backwater of Colonial Brittan and although Modernism was gradually fighting its way into the broader culture, regional, nostalgically rural aesthetics dominated. It wasn't until the late 1960's that the new attitude which was flooding the world finally reached Australia. American, bold, large scale, primary coloured, cutting edge aesthetic was a breath of freedom from the narrow, usually brownish, nationalistically orientated Australian regionalist or British aesthetic. I embraced this new (to me) art with enthusiasm. The political weapon which this art became misused as an American cold war tool only became apparent (to me) much later.

At that time, Judaism was a private, cultural matter for me, experienced at home. My art was my public stage where Formalist and art Conceptual ideas so prevalent in the art world at that time dominated. Yet I remember desperately looking for a possible unification of my (public) paintings with an inner voice (my Jewish self).

I had no idea how to go about making my art Jewish. There were so few precedents in books or magazines and certainly none in Australia. The answers to my dilemma presented themselves in an unexpected way.

My artistically Jewish cultural 'awakening' which felt more like thunderbolt revelations occurred during a trip to the USA in 1977. The first one occurred at the Museum of Jewish Art in New York where the exhibition Fabric of Jewish Life opened my eyes to the visual richness of Jewish ritual cloths (of our/my past), and the second occurred in Huston at the Rothko Chapel where the potential of a Jewish spiritual/mystical content in art presented itself as a possibility, for the first time in my life.

I came to appreciate the detailed loving care that most Jewish ritual cloths are made with. Their ordinariness, everydayness, their function yet their beauty made me understand the sense of depth that Jewish art has. These common (cloths) objects found in most synagogues are elevated through art to a spiritual plane. They provided me with the connection, a lineage to Bezalel's creations - the first Jewish art objects. This was a powerful realisation of a central Jewish tenet that the Godly exists within the ordinary and that Judaism seeks to elevate the ordinary to the Godly level. This was one key to my understanding of the essence of a Jewish aesthetic and a possible way to blend the two artistic possibilities of Jewish art I discussed previously. In the Rothko Chapel I experienced a sense of something greater than myself. In this 'nothingness' of space amongst the grey paintings of Rothko I discovered a possible space created (for me/anyone) by this 'grave emptiness' that cried out to be filled! It reminded me of the 'empty' Holy of Holies chamber in the Temple where the High Priest entered once a year on Yom Kippur and only tied to a rope (just in case) for quick retrieval but this space was by/for man but with spiritual portent. This was the second key that unlocked the potential within me to combine my present reality as an artist with my culturally deep reality as a Jew. These momentous experiences led me on a journey where art and Jewishness exist as mutually attracting, seductive forces, longing for unification, intertwined inside of everything I am and do as an artist.

Over the past decade I became aware of other Jewish artists struggling with the same issues. Kitaj's manifesto could have been written by any Jewish artist today!

The establishment of the State of Israel and the reunification of Jews with their ancestral land after 2000 years of diasporic 'wonderings' finally provided

the perfect, natural opportunity for a Jewish visual art to develop and flourish. Interestingly, already in 1907 Rabbi Kook sent a message dedicating the Betzalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, while lamenting over the suffering of Jews scattered in exile, he continued: "one of the clear signs of revival is the honourable pursuit that is to emerge from your honoured association, 'The Revival of Art and Hebraic Beauty in the Land of Israel.'" And yet, if anything - an Israeli art emerged, not necessarily a Jewish one. Israeli artists (until recently, perhaps) regarded themselves as Israelis first, Jewish (if at all) a very distant second. And although the UN Charter that created the State of Israel makes numerous references to "a Jewish State" this seems to be a work in progress and only gradually becoming part of the Israeli psyche and aesthetic. With current, growing world attitudes towards the de-legitimization of the existence of the State of Israel and the trouble that some countries as well as the Palestinian Authority have in recognising Israel as a Jewish State, the Israeli Government and the Israeli public has begun to refocus/re-embrace its Jewishness as a central core to its/our national and cultural identity. Despite the cultural divide between secularism and religion as discussed earlier, a new inclusive awareness seems to be developing in regard to Jewish art. There seems to be an awakening of Jewish art around the world. Jewish artists are starting to come out of their 'Jewish closet' and unashamedly present themselves as Jewish artists. Although there is a desperate need for collectors to support and encourage this trend, it is encouraging to see in recent years the beginnings of serious dissemination of contemporary Jewish ideas in Jewish art by Jewish historians, artists and cultural commentators. This is evident by the increasing range of books, magazines and various blogs and articles on line on the subject of Jewish art. Even contemporary Jewish art is getting recognition.

In support of this growing positive attitude, I believe that it's high time for Jewish artists worldwide to re-focus their/our Jewishness as a motivating and inspirational factor in our art. Partly in solidarity with Israel as a political response to the delegitimization, partly for cultural reasons in order to (re) establish the centrality of Judaism in our lives and partly because it is high time to develop the full potential of a Jewish visual art to blossom as one of the great arts of the world. As a people as well as a culture we deserve a great Jewish visual art!

Since I became conscious of the possibility of a Jewish aesthetic in 1977, I have over the years become more convinced about and committed to the creation of a Jewish art. My intention from that distant beginning was to create a great Jewish art. I want to create Jewish paintings of the quality of the great masters of art, not unlike what Cezanne used to refer to as 'paintings for the museums'. In my case I wanted to create a legacy for



future Jewish artists so that they would have some possible example to follow, bounce off from, reject. So that in the future Jewish artists wouldn't have to 'rediscover the wheel' of Jewish art but have a precursor to follow, to react against, to contribute to etc.

I started with tentative attempts at visualising Jewishly. I had very few precedents to respond to so like most Jewish artists (until now perhaps) I started 'from scratch'. I had to invent for myself a Jewish symbology and content. I immersed myself in a wide range of Jewish texts in order to understand my Jewish heritage – after all we do have a long and rich written tradition. I undertook ideas that explored my personal Jewish history and identity in a series of paintings and works on paper. Diaristic images reflecting my past experiences filled my paintings through the late 1970's and early 80's. I expanded these through the 1980's and 90's into themes that dealt with important aspects of the cultural Jewish history of Australia like migration and the Jewish connection to other minorities in Australia, especially the Aborigines.

At the same time as my personal Jewish, diasporic, historical content was developing, increasingly more spiritual or religiously based ideas and art works started to interest me. I became aware that Jews made art wherever they found themselves – Haggadot are a good example. Haggadot were produced in every country, often even localised to the city or village where Jews happened to live. They were created on every continent except Australia. There was no illustrated, Australian Haggadah – so I decided to create one. I self published it in 1993. I saw a creative void so I filled it with ideas that celebrated the biblical Exodus as well as my reality of Australia. It is essential for me that I acknowledge the land and country I live in. The Australian multicultural context is part of my psyche and I believe that this allows my Jewish content to thrive. I am a Jew and an Australian. The Australian context (landscape, history, light, flora and fauna) distinguished my Haggadah from all the others. In this work I located our ancestral flight from slavery in Egypt within the Australian locale as a metaphor for my own family's flight from Europe. There was another connection to the idea of 'wondering in the wilderness' that was obliquely hinted at in my Australian Haggadah – a proposal in the 1930's to establish a Jewish settlement in the Kimberley, Western Australia. I explored that particular theme over a ten-year period which culminated in a major exhibition titled Wounded – Land, Memory, Destiny in 2004 in Melbourne. One of the sub-themes I explored in this body of work was the provocative potential effect of locating a Jewish settlement in Aboriginal lands and the double dislocation this would have caused to two peoples; Aborigines and Jews. I was fascinated by the historical parallels of Aboriginal and Jewish dispossession and expulsions. These were balanced by a number of works dealing with an apology presented to the Jewish people in Israel and in Australia in 2001 by a Christian group of nuns The Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary (formed in 1952 in Darmstadt-Eberstadt, Germany) on behalf of all Christian denominations for the long history of anti-Semitism perpetrated by the Church. This was contrasted by the long overdue apology from the Australian Federal Government to the Aboriginal peoples (that the Government was unable to provide until 2008) for the long history of dispossession of their ancestral lands, family break ups through 'the stolen generation' and mass murder. Coincidentally, I was a witness also in 2001 on the tribal lands of the Warmun Community in the Kimberley where the Governor General of Australia at the time, Sir William Dean presented his personal apology to that community for all of the terrible atrocities that were perpetrated against them by white people.

The final part of this exhibition dealt with my personal experiences caused by our family's translocation from Europe to Australia, directly as a result of anti-Semitism.

As Jewish content was increasingly taking over my work, I felt that I had to connect emotionally and physically with the ancestral land of Israel which led me to embark on two major series of paintings; The Negev (1997) and Galil/Golan (2006). Only after spending prolonged periods of time in Israel – wandering, painting and imagining did I begin to have some inkling into the mystical levels of Judaism which became my predominant creative interest over the past 20 years. In collaboration with a Melbourne rabbi we engrossed ourselves in the study of the 2nd book of Tanya which resulted in 10 limited edition silk screen prints. The process of study as a prelude to creating visually has become my regular routine.

I find most Jewish texts, especially the Torah very visual yet surprisingly very few Jewish artists have engaged with them. Numerous Christian artists have created masterpieces based on images derived from Jewish texts (or rather

their Christian interpretations of them) yet there are no Jewish equivalent masterpieces. This fact disturbed me for years! After studying numerous Christian Biblical paintings, some of which are my favourite paintings ever painted and realising how far these artists diverged from the original Jewish texts, often resulting in misinterpreted iconography, I decided to 'balance the ledger' (so to speak) and create my own, Jewish Biblical interpretations. This culminated in a series of paintings that made up an exhibition and limited edition book *Painting the Torah* at the Jewish Museum in Melbourne in 2008. I painted all of the 54 parshot (weekly portions) of the Torah intentionally and specifically from a Jewish perspective.

Having painted the Torah, how does one top that? Fortunately we Jews have a never ending depth of ideas, texts and image possibilities. The Song of Songs that Rabbi Akiva regarded as the 'holy of holies' amongst Jewish texts was just screaming at me to tackle. Together with my long-time collaborator, poet Deborah Masek z'l we interpreted that classical text in a contemporary, Jewish way, she through words and me through visual images. This project culminated in an exhibition and book launch in 2012.

With every major Jewish project I undertake like the Australian Haggadah, Images of Tanya, or *Painting the Torah* (to name a few) I want to contribute to and help create the Jewish visual art tradition. Sometimes I'm pioneering new works, visualising major Jewish texts for the first time ever, at others, for the first time in the Australian context. My aim is to contribute and thereby enrich this however humble (at this point) Jewish visual art tradition and hopefully to help set a somewhat easier path for future Jewish artists to work within it.

Another motivating factor (for me) and perhaps even more central to my artistic practice is that I want to create a Jewish art with specifically Jewish content, symbolism, metaphors etc so that whoever views my paintings will get a deeper and more meaningful understanding of Judaism. In the Midrashic tradition that is so important to Judaism, I would like to think that my art works are a kind of my personal, visual Midrash, my personal take on and exploration of my Jewish culture, tradition and aesthetic. I do and think this without fear of career sabotage or cultural cringe that so many Jewish artists in every country of the globe seem to succumb to.

To me Jewish art is not merely a concept, it's not just an accidental result of my being born Jewish, it's a conscious effort on my part to infuse everything I paint with layers of meaning that are inherently Jewish. For me Jewish art is not just a distant dream, it's a reality right here, right now, although its great potential is only beginning to be realised by artists, historians and cultural commentators. It now requires a united effort by Jewish artists across the globe to take up this challenge and need and I'm convinced that our combined abilities will result in a great Jewish visual art. The world will come to know that Jew's are not only the 'people of the book' but people of aesthetics and art as well, as we were destined to be, from our very beginnings.

Now is the long overdue time to act!

- It is time for Jewish artists to embrace and celebrate their heritage, history, religion and culture and create great Jewish visual art.
- It is time to create a Jewish art free of victimhood.
- It is time to take a proactive role in defining and creating an art that speaks from our experience – not one imposed upon us by others!
- It is time for a Jewish aesthetic to take its place as equal and unique amongst cultures.
- It is time for Jewish artists to create a Jewish art as our cultural weapon against hate, violence, bigotry, anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism but especially against the silence of the world once again to the plight of Jews.
- It's time for Jewish artists to create a Jewish art that will elevate man's potential to the inspirational rather than point to man's capacity for the limited or destructive.
- It is time to create a Jewish art that is free from self hatred, inferiority complexes or self-denigration. A non-criinge Jewish art.
- It is time to create a Jewish art that is Jewishly diverse and inclusive, ranging from the secular perspective to the orthodox one and every nuance in between.
- It is time to create a Jewish art that can never be TOO JEWISH!



A Manifesto for a contemporary Jewish visual Art

1. At its essence, Jewish Art is connected to and inspired by the Torah and all other Jewish texts / interpretations / understandings from a specifically Jewish / Hebraic form of discourse.
2. Jewish Art is an art of revelation. Whether, personal, social, cultural or spiritual; it reveals insights into whatever or however one defines reality in all its levels and dimensions.
3. Jewish Art is grounded within 'this world' as we continue to know / understand it. The ultimate purpose of it however is to influence and hopefully help to complete and transform (elevate) it and our experiences of it.
4. Jewish Art is an art of unity. No matter how fractured its individual parts may be or how many separate facets it may employ or contain, its ultimate purpose is to reveal the underlying unity (purpose) of existence. It deals primarily with fusion rather than deconstruction. It is about integration, a coming together, a coupling, an orgy of couplings! A cosmology of couplings!
5. Jewish Art is multi-faceted. It deals with ideas that address issues beyond the purely visible or surface level of appearances. What you see is definitely not (just) what you get. The visible is purely the first (lowest) layer / level of its meaning. Although this surface level is perfectly sufficient in its own right, Jewish Art is capable of including references to other levels of existence together with other layers of meaning. Depending on one's level of knowledge and understanding of this multi layered content, one is able to decode and unravel the (possible) levels in order to appreciate the full range of meanings contained within it.
6. Jewish Art is an art that deals with all levels of human experience; physical, emotional, imaginary, spiritual and G-dly. This art is not limited by logic as we know it. It may employ it or aspects of it but not be limited by it. It is free to explore all kinds of possibilities outside logic or pragmatic understanding.
7. Jewish Art does not depend upon any specific technology. It embraces all technological developments as they evolve in the service of discovery, revelation or understanding.
8. Jewish Art is not restricted by any style or modes of representation. It readily borrows from the past, embraces current tastes, fashions and styles and is also open to stylistic variations and future stylistic inventions or hybrids. The ultimate goal however is to evolve its own, unique and original modes of representation.
9. Jewish Art springs from the artist's personal identification as a Jew and ones relationship with/to Judaism. This may encompass a range of deeply committed, observant modes and practices of Judaism as well as a range of possibly 'strained', questioning relations through tension and argument. It may be inspired by deep connections with or to the land of Israel, or by Diasporic experiences.
10. As with all art, global implications are inevitable but the main purpose of Jewish Art is to celebrate Judaism in all its complexity, in a pro-active and from an intentionally Jewish perspective.

V.Majzner October 2010 – revised March 2012 ©