

# Jewish look at roots of feminism

**Smadar Sheffi**

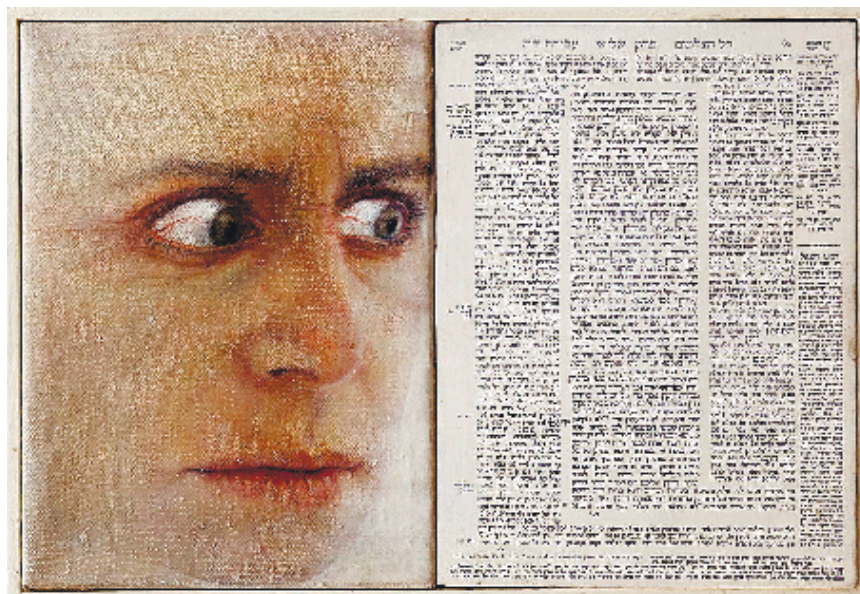
Group exhibition: "Matronita,"  
Ein Harod Museum of Art

"Matronita" is one of those exhibitions that expresses and even defines the spirit of the times. It was curated well before the "exclusion of women" made headlines, alongside crazed proposals to prohibit women from singing in state ceremonies. In this regard, the exhibition seems to offer a counterpoint to these backward phenomena. But most of all, the work in the present exhibition reflects the profound change in the self-consciousness of religious Jewish women over the last two decades.

The selection of art on display is fascinating from a number of perspectives. In terms of artistic vocabulary there is extensive use here of textiles and soft materials, but the show avoids celebrating media traditionally identified with women (patchwork, needlework). It includes very personal works that incorporate exposing biographical narratives, alongside pieces that intellectually wrestle with important Jewish rituals.

In light of the fact that a number of pioneering American feminists were Jewish, including activists and theoreticians like Betty Friedan and artists like Judy Chicago, the exhibition suggests that there is room for a decidedly Jewish look at the roots of the feminist movement. These Jewish women, like Friedan, were daughters of immigrants who, while not necessarily observant Jews, were certainly aware and familiar with Jewish customs.

The curators of "Matronita," Dvora Liss and David Sperver, selected artists who identify themselves as religious and observant of Jewish customs. In this way, the exhibition distinguishes itself from shows in which secular male and female artists address Jewish themes. Occasionally shows of this nature are tinged with a sense of distance and champion "progress" as it were. Also, sometimes it seems easier to talk about discrimination



**SELF PORTRAIT:** Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's diptych "Reading Faces," 1998.

in other communities as opposed to talking about gender discrimination in public service for example.

Helene Aylon (born in 1931), a formerly Orthodox American Jew, presents a feminist critique of Jewish tradition and her works are the most impressive on display. The installations "My Bridal Chamber" and "My Clean Days," both from 2001, are shown together and formulate a statement that is both poetic and straightforward. Covered in white handkerchiefs, the bed is called "Marriage Bed" but also brings to mind shrouds. "My Clean Days" is a menstrual chart of the decade of Aylon's marriage, indicating the days in which she was permitted to have sex, according to Jewish law. These pieces foreground the policing of intimacy and the dichotomous division of purity and impurity with respect to the female body.

These appear to be charts made in desperation, marking the passage of a time that holds no promise of liberation at its end. The catalogue compares this work with a very familiar piece by Carolee Schneemann, "Blood Work Diary" from 1971 (in which Schneemann, also a Jewish artist, used toilet paper stained with menstrual blood). But Aylon's work is actually closer in spirit to "Post-Partum

Document" by Mary Kelly from 1973-79, in which she intricately charted her relationship with her son, and her changing role as a mother.

Another very beautiful work by Aylon is "My Notebooks" from 1998, an installation comprised of 54 notebooks folded in such a way that they create a fan. These are empty single-rule notebooks that represent religious classes from her childhood, in which women were never named as sources of inspiration.

The work by Hadassah Goldvicht (born in 1981) "Exercises in Reading and Writing No. 1" from 2011, was already shown at the Maamuta Gallery in Ein Karem and as part of the Fresh Paint art fair; but the strength of this piece really comes through in the present show. Goldvicht appropriates the Hasidic custom that introduces Jewish boys to literacy by letting them lick the honey-smeared letters of the Hebrew alphabet on their first day of school, a common custom in a variety of Jewish congregations since at least the Middle Ages. Very moving in terms of its message about the love of learning, this ritual, however, is not performed for girls and Goldvicht appropriates it with an ambiguous gesture that expresses both insult and the object of her heart's desire.

Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov (born in 1961), who immigrated to Israel from the U.S., foregrounds a state of ambiguity and deliberation in "Reading Faces" from 1998 and "Prayer Rug 3" from 2003. Stylistically this is a figurative painting – that is, founded on the tradition of Christian religious painting.

The diptych "Reading Faces" features a self-portrait shown beside a silkscreened page from the Avodah Zara tractate, which discusses the prohibition of portraying a realistic human face. In her portrait, the artist looks terrified, as if the page from the Talmud threatens her existence.

In "Prayer Rug 3" Kestenbaum Ben-Dov painted herself again, accompanied by the caption "Know before whom you stand," in what looks like a Muslim prayer rug. In this way she crosses gender, cultural and religious boundaries, while the caption expresses an anxiety similar to that evoked by the portrait from 1998. Taken from Pirkei Avot ("Look at three things and you will not come to do any sin: Know from where you come, and to where you are going, and before whom you will have to stand in judgment and do an accounting"), the quotation naturally refers to men only. The artist's self-portrait, showing her

with a brush in hand and entrapped by the architecture depicted by the rug, effectively conveys the sense of a dead-end.

Andi Arnovitz (born in 1959) shows a number of standout works that incorporate needlework and textiles, what was not too long ago the surest way to be ignored by the art establishment. "Vest of Prayers" from 2009 is made of found pages from Jewish prayer books, rolled up and threaded into a kind of overcoat that makes reference to the custom of reading psalms by groups of Jewish women as an act of grace and devotion but also as a place of female empowerment.

"Dress of the Unfaithful Wife" from 2009 is a skirt and shirt made from rice paper that contains hair, ashes and Hebrew letters from the Sotah (wayward wife) tractate. The tractate from the Nashim (women) order of the Mishnah discusses a dramatic situation in which a wife is charged with adultery (without witnesses) and given the opportunity to take part in a ritual involving the drinking of water that is supposed to divulge the truth or end in divorce, without her dowry. Recently artist Ofri Cnaani addressed this subject in a quite spectacular installation. Arnovitz's work refers to a state in which the humiliation of women in the tractate is woven into clothing that acts like a woman's second skin.

In a series of photographs taken inside the women's quarter in a synagogue poet and artist Myriam Tangi, based in Paris, undertakes an examination of the gaze. Shown alongside many other strong works, including "Hama-vdil," a video and sound installation by Dafna Shalom from 2008; and "The Invisible Part of the Children of Israel" from 2001, a work that incorporates text and dresses by Carol Hamoy – this is an excellent exhibition that challenges conventional readings of art as well as the secular view of religious women.