

Treats For The Eye

A new JCC exhibit focuses on creative interpretations of the Jewish holidays.

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Contributing Editor

We all think we have a good idea of what Jewish holiday art looks like. For most of us, more than anything, it looks familiar, much like the objects we have in our own home — a cherished *menorah*, a *seder* plate, a *kiddush* cup.

Familiar, recognizable, traditional. Well-loved, of course, but exciting? Edgy, even?

Not likely.

A new exhibit sets out to shake up those preconceptions but good.

"Holiday Art: So Jewish," now being exhibited at the Park Heights Jewish Community Center gallery, gives us a chance to see what happens when 18 artists take on the idea of holiday art — and run with it.

Suffice it to say, what emerges is definitely not your parents' *menorah*.

How different can it be, you ask?

Well, Pennsylvania artist Peter Handler's *menorah* is made out of anodized aluminum, one of the mediums he prefers. The candleholders stand separately, tall, willowy, in glowing metallic shades of blue, pink, lavender. Each bends slightly, as if in a breeze. They glisten, reflecting light, seeming almost to sway.

Local artist Doug Swartz, on the other hand, constructed his *menorah* and Chanukah table, the exhibit's largest work, out of various woods, giving it a solidity and permanence, though subtle painted shadows play over the table's surface.

And Washington, D.C., artist Tamah Graber's *menorah* is of fused glass, brightly colored dancing candles embedded on a deep blue backdrop.

Each of the artists, working in a wide variety of different mediums, has brought his or her own special vision to bear. The result is a show that is by turns thought-provoking, witty, entrancing, surprising — and delightful.

A treat for the eye.

Claudine Davison, the gallery curator who conceived and organized the show,

has managed the almost Herculean task of displaying the works in the gallery's small space in a way that enhances the overall effect.

A viewer is mesmerized by the sheer variety of art displayed — meticulously realistic dolls, a drop-dead gorgeous embroidered *tallit*, a small quilted *hamantaschen*, a stained glass Shabbat fish.

One couple, Melanie and Harry Dankowicz of Illinois, who have been collaborating since they designed their *ketubah* together, concentrate on paper cuttings — which sound like something your kindergartner might bring home but are actually as delicate as the finest lace work.

Not everything is of equally high caliber, of course. Some of the offerings are charming, but not unlike the typical Jewish art one finds in a high-end mall gallery. Just this side of kitsch.

But then there are others. On the far wall, for instance, hang several astounding paintings by Silver Spring resident Nathan Moskowitz, works that seem torn directly from the unconscious, with their exploding color, odd figures, many of them biblical, trees, flowers, words from Hebrew and other ancient languages. Not remotely the sort of art you'd ever find in a mall.

This is the premiere exhibit for Dr. Moskowitz, an Orthodox Jew who is also chief of neurosurgery at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville — a far-from-typical background for a primitive painter. In a lengthy artist statement, Dr. Moskowitz said that a common theme in his art is "the portrayal of adults with fetal appendages and umbilical cords, conveying the transience of life ... thus as soon as a fetus is conceived, within the blink of an eye it is already near death."

His paintings are both disturbing and exhilarating. "Sometimes, it's a little grotesque," Ms. Davison said of his vision. "But there's a reason for everything."

Another wildly original work is a large rendering of Ezekiel's vision of a

chariot, made up of paper cuttings, and, according to New Jersey artist Debbie Ugoretz, a deconstructed lamp.

"The piece is a literal depiction of something that defies interpretation," the artist said in her statement. In black and white, with four large wheels, a paper cut of a man (presumably Ezekiel), lion, horse and several less identifiable bits, the piece comes close to defying description as well. But it is remarkably riveting.

The exhibit also includes a painting called a "Rosh Hashanah Meditation," and two tiny pencil drawings, by Michael Muchnik of New York, a painter with "a huge international reputation," according to Ms. Davison.

The painting, which has a dreamy, surreal feel, slightly reminiscent of Dali, is clearly the work of a professional artist. Yet it is the minuscule pencil drawings — of Elijah's cup, of a Shabbat table — that hold the eye longest.

In one nook, rests a pile of *kippot*, each tailor-made for a different holiday. The Passover *kippah* is covered with frogs — because of the plagues, it was explained to a confused viewer. These, apparently, have proven immensely popular elsewhere. "They're very hot in the Washington area," Ms. Davison said.

Yes, some of the works are for sale, though a surprising number are not. Among them D.C. artist Bonnie Korr's soft sculpture dolls, for instance — one who sits knitting a Chanukah gift, another who relaxes on a picnic cloth, enjoying a Shabbat afternoon, at least according to the artist (at times a little creativity was needed, to tie the art in with the holiday theme — but what's a little creativity to an artist?). Her smaller hanging dolls — good-luck kitchen companions, she calls them — are available, however.

"We hope people will be drawn to the visual effects," said Ms. Davison, and that they will see "how inspirations can translate into artworks that are so different — from the same kind of theme."

Hard to imagine anyone who won't be drawn, who won't delight in this jewel of a show. □

"Holiday Art: So Jewish" will be on display through Nov. 20, at the Park Heights JCC gallery. Hours are 10-5, Monday-Wednesday; 11-3, Thursday, 10-2 Friday, 12-2 Sunday. Artists in the show will hold a workshop in which they demonstrate various craft skills, 10-12, Sunday, Oct. 23, at the Owings Mills JCC. Call Claudine Davison, 410-542-4900, ext. 239, for ticket information.