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A female prism on the Torah

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A nine-year project with 54 artists comes to its culmination at the Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art.

Initiators of new cultural ventures often talk about starting a “new tradition.”

There are two problems with this turn of expression.

For starters, unless you are blessed with prophetic vision, you can’t really know if your new project has a shelf life past the here-and-now. Second, traditions can’t be “new” – they are by definition the result of a chronological sequence. And, as we all know, you can’t shift time.

Rami Ozeri admits he took a bit of flack over the name when the first Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art took place in the capital in 2013.

“I got some criticism for using the word ‘biennale’ because there hadn’t been a previous event two years

earlier,” says Ozeri, the event’s founder. “It was a statement of intent.”

Ozeri delves into Jewish heritage to support his argument.

“In Judaism, when you give a name to a baby, there is the belief that the name impacts on the way the baby will grow up, and how he will relate to himself in the future,” he says.

With the advent of the second installment of the Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art, which is taking place at various locations across the capital city until November 5, Ozeri’s adjectival “faux pas” has been fully vindicated.

“The biennale has grown into the original statement of event, and it is wonderful that it is happening again,” he says.

Ozeri and his team of curators have put together a highly impressive package, with big names and ambitious shows lined up at seven venues. All told, this biennale will showcase works by nearly 200 Israeli and international artists in 10 exhibitions. The Tower of David Museum will host the main exhibition – “Jerusalem. Passages” – showcasing five large-scale projects by five leading Israeli and international artists.

The geographic, cultural and historical positioning of the biennale informs all of the items on display, and the event is described as a vehicle for exploring “the places where contemporary art meets the Jewish world of content.”

The professionals come at the ethnic theme from all directions. Curators and artists with all kinds of mind-sets and styles – they span the continuum of Jewish identity, from secular to ultra-Orthodox, and include non-Jewish artists – come together within the biennale framework to give their own interpretation of contemporary Jewish art.

ONE OF the more intriguing slots is “Women of the Book: Jewish Women Recording, Reflecting, Revisioning,” taking place at the First Station. The exhibition is curated by art historian Dr. Ronit Steinberg and American-born social practice artist and Torah scribe Shoshana Gugenheim.

Even if we sidestep, for a moment, the idea of presenting what is traditionally a bastion of male domination through the female prism, the sheer logistics of collating and curating the works of 54 artists from 11 countries across five continents and from practically every religious stripe, might send most mortals to drink or, at least, quiet desperation. Gugenheim says she had little idea of what she was letting herself in for when she set off on her Women of the Book odyssey a full nine years ago.

“When I first started it and I went to Yair Medina, who is doing all our reproductions – we are not showing the original works because the gallery is not equipped to have parchment, so all the work is being reproduced and Yair Medina is doing all that – he said, ‘Are you crazy?’ He said it was a totally insane idea, and it is the most amazing project I have ever come across.”

The nine-year collaboration presents contemporary visual commentary on the core text of the Jewish people, the Torah. Each of the artists presented her interpretation of one of the 54 Torah portions – from Bereishit to V’Zot Habracha. It has been a slow train steadily coming.

“There have been two sifrei Torah [Torah scrolls] and two children born since I started on this project,” Gugenheim notes. “The latter is, naturally, a joyful familial development, while the former represents religious endeavor which is still struggling to gain mainstream religious recognition.”

With her artistic background and street-level experience, Gugenheim is clearly the right person for the job.

The roster of artists Steinberg and Gugenheim recruited for the job makes for stellar reading. It includes 83-year-old American photorealism painter and sculpture pioneer Audrey Flack, and septuagenarian feminist artist and educator Ruth Weisberg of California, who says she is “particularly nourished by the history of art, the history of the Jewish people, and by the unwritten history of women.”

Others include US-born Israeli printmaker and multimedia artist Andi Arnovitz, as well as Judith Margolis, who says she uses her art and writing to explore “tensions between consciousness, feminism and religious ritual tradition.”

Meanwhile, Bombay-born, US-based Siona Benjamin will bring a touch of the subcontinent to the Jerusalem fray, and multidisciplinary artist Nehama Golan will express some of the deliberations she encountered during her process of traversing the secular-religious divide.

Gugenheim has been at the forefront of getting Jewish women’s artistic and traditional work out there for some time.

“I was asked to write a sefer Torah, but the condition was that it would be a collaborative effort,” she says. “As other women scribes emerged, I wanted them to also be a part of the work. My goal in doing all this work, besides the fact that I love the work, is that I want to make a place for women, because there hasn’t been a place for women to do this.”

(When she started out in 2007, she was one of only three or four fully trained women scribes. But that number has more than doubled in the interim.) There were also less-technical aspects to the all-female Torah scroll production, more in the line of the current project.

“There were women artists who made the yad [pointer] and the covering, and it was a very beautiful thing to do,” says Gugenheim, adding that the Torah scroll assignment eventually spawned the biennale slot.

“‘Women of the Book’ was born out of my experience as a scribe. That was what initially inspired it,” she relates.

“Being a Torah scribe is not particularly creative work. You are copying and you are working on your writing, and it has to be perfect and it has to be according to someone else’s style,” she says. “So I became very interested in how to respond to the text as an artist, and to interpret that through the voices of many women, and to see how women would do that. That’s how ‘Women of the Book’ happened.”

From the outset, Gugenheim was keen to accommodate as many avenues of thought to come through, irrespective of religious leanings.

“This is not about religion per se,” she explains. “It is about women finding their voice in the text of our ancestry. How they relate to that text in terms of their daily lives was not as important to me as their having an encounter with the text that would evoke from them their personal voice and interpretation.”

While most quarters of Jewish Orthodoxy would have a problem using a Torah scroll written by women, Gugenheim says there is no official bar to feminine commentary on Scriptures. Even so, the latter activity has not exactly been encouraged through the ages.

“Parshanut [commentary] by women simply has not appeared, so the exhibition was, for me, a way for women to bring their voice and their commentary to the Torah. There is more room for doing that because that does not come up against a halachic prohibition,” she says.

Gugenheim posits that the female approach to scripture is, by definition, different than that of men.

“I believe there is a genetic difference, and the process behind creating a work of art is very important,” she notes.

More than anything, as befits any artistic undertaking worth its salt, Gugenheim wanted the work in the exhibition to be original, and not derivative.

“There is a work by Audrey Flack, the first woman artist to have a permanent collection of her work at the Museum of Modern Art [in New York], which was quite clearly based on a commentary by Rashi,” she says. “But this is Audrey and this is how she works, and, because she was true to her style, we felt we could keep her work [in the exhibition]. In her work she often borrows commentary and texts and interpretations, and she translates that into visual language. That’s her work.”

Gugenheim and her cohorts were also eager to present as wide a female take on the Torah as possible.

“We constantly reminded ourselves not to remain in one style. We wanted to maintain a balance. We didn’t want to have too many paper cuts or too much photographic digital imaging,” she says.

While the exhibition takes a definitively female slant, Gugenheim says gender does not come into artistic considerations as such.

“The subjects that are addressed and the thought processes behind a work are important, and they are representative of certain aspects of women’s thought processes,” she explains. “This exhibition has a certain feel to it, and there are certain patterns and color schemes that repeat themselves, and certain shapes and designs that repeat themselves. I find that fascinating.”

INDEED, IT ALL sounds fascinating, and the “Women of the Book” exhibition will hopefully open eyes and stretch some horizons. It might be going too far to suggest that the show can pave the way for greater female involvement in areas of Jewish practice that have been traditionally consigned to the male side of the gender divide, but at the very least, it should provide the public with a unique aesthetic experience.

The Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art agenda also takes in works by such leading figures on the local and international arts scene as Sigalit Landau, Ken Goldman, Ruth Schreiber, Motti Mizrahi and Maya Zack. And there is more female endeavor on offer at Hechal Shlomo with the unveiling of

“Presence=Present” by American-Israeli artist Alana Ruben Free in collaboration with Israeli artist David Gerstein, which is described as “New York theater meets Istanbul architecture with Jerusalem sculpture.”

For more information about the Jerusalem Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art, go to <http://jerusalembiennale.org/>.

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