



Norman Kleeblatt, ed. *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Jewish Identities*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 1996. xx + 187 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2327-9; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2326-2.

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Jewish Art and Jewish Identity in Contemporary America

This volume, which serves as the catalogue for an exhibition held at the Jewish Museum in New York last year, is a welcome edition to a growing literature on Jewish identity. As curator Norman Kleeblatt explains, American artists in the last two decades have increasingly turned their attention toward explorations of their own identities—racial, sexual, gender, geographical, generational, religious and ethnic. While many Jewish artists have participated in these trends, it is only in the last decade or so that a critical mass of artists have made their Jewish identities a primary area of exploration. The justification, then, for this project—exhibition and book—rests on self-conscious reflection on the part of the artists themselves as part of a larger project of American—and Jewish—reflection on identity at the end of the twentieth century.

In many respects, the art and the art criticism in this book are part of a postmodern project which plays with traditional boundaries and ingrained stereotypes, depends on appropriation and repetition of borrowed images (as Kleeblatt points out), and above all, rejects assimilationist rhetoric. At the same time, however, the work is revealing as the cultural production of Jews in the quintessentially modern situation of being free to not only reflect on, but to create, their own Jewish identities. *Too Jewish* contains a number of interesting reflections on Jewish identity in the modern world generally and in post-war America more specifically. Linda Nochlin's forward is a meditation on Jean Paul Gaultier's Hasidic fashion collection of 1993. Using the Gaultier show as a starting-off point, Nochlin's essay poses the interesting question of what the "too Jewish?" of the title can mean. Is it the "excessive" Judaism of the Hasidim or the high-camp outrageousness of the Gaultier designs that is "too Jewish?" Most fruitfully, her discussion of her own conflicting reactions to the Gaultier show raises another question that runs through many of the essays—when does "too Jewish" become antisemitic?

A number of the essays focus on the body of the Jew as a crucial component of the cultural stereotypes that have defined Jewishness. In a short recapitulation of some of the themes of his previous work, Sander Gilman traces the history of some aspects of "The Jew's Body." Most prominently (no pun intended), Gilman describes how the concept of a distinctive Jewish nose was an important component of nineteenth-century ideas of Jewish racial distinctiveness. In conjunction with the Jewish nose, Gilman notes that the circumcision of Jewish men also marked a Jewish distinctiveness in Europe. Here, however, Gilman notes the novelty of the American setting in Jewish history. When circumcision became standard practice in twentieth-century America, the Jewish man's body became less distinctive. Gilman concludes by noting a curious paradox in the perception of the Jew—while the Jewish body is marked as different, it is also seen as adapting to its environment.

While Gilman focuses primarily on the male Jewish body over two centuries, Riv-Elle Prell's essay, "Why Jewish Princesses Don't Sweat?" is a close examination of the negative stereotypes of American Jewish women. Her interesting argument ties the emergence of such insidious stereotypes as that of the Jewish American princess to the American Jewish embrace of the middle-class consumer culture that has come to dominate post-war American life. Also interesting is Maurice Berger's taxonomy of the various antisemitic portrayals of Jewish men on American television—the effeminate or cross-dressing comic, the weak father, the sidekick, the inter-married husband, and perhaps most ubiquitous, the "crypto-Jew" whose Jewishness is never explicitly acknowledged.

Along with Kleeblatt's survey of the exhibition and its setting within a newly multiculturally-oriented art world and Margaret Olin's essay on the assimilationist criticism of Clement Greenberg and others, the essays by Gilman, Prell, and Berger constitute the main scholarly

contribution of this volume. Two other pieces constitute more personal and inevitably quirkier reflections on Jewish identity. Rhonda Lieberman's "Jewish Barbie" is an often hilarious, often disturbing fantasy of the life of the "Other Barbie" living with the cultural stereotypes described by Prell in her essay. Tony Kushner's "Notes on Akiba," performed at the Jewish Museum in April 1995, is a midrash of sorts on his family's Seder. It is entertaining and well-written, but seems less connected to the major themes brought out in the other chapters.

The essays in this volume as well as some of the illustrations of exhibit items offer much food for thought on the question of American Jewish identity in our time. As with many collections of essays, some contributions seem more related to the promise of the title than others. In addition there remain some significant lacunae—the volume represents the work of primarily secular artists and the essays represent examinations of primarily secular aspects of American Jewish culture. Religion plays a crucial role in the formation of most Jews' Jewish iden-

tity. Aside from some comments in Kleeblatt's survey, however, it is mostly given short shrift—especially Orthodox Judaism, one of the most vibrant streams of American Jewish life. (Kleeblatt acknowledges the lack of Orthodox artists in the exhibition despite his best intentions to include some; I am suspicious, however, of the essentialist assumptions behind his conclusion that there is a dichotomy between Orthodox Jews who "must accept certain authority and hierarchies" and "the critical self-examination" of the artists represented in the collection.) It would also be interesting to know what the trend is in terms of reflection on Jewish identity in the Israeli art world. Despite these (relatively small) faults, *Too Jewish?* is a useful and interesting book for anyone interested in the issue of Jewish identity in the modern and contemporary world.

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