

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE



Deborah Kass, "Blue Deb", 2000

Shades of Warhol

Jewish painter uses famous artist's style to express 'Jewishness'

by Toby Tabachnick, Staff Writer, October 26, 2012

It might be fair to describe Deborah Kass as a 21st-century, Jewish feminist Andy Warhol.

The artist, who has the chutzpa to substitute her own face for that of Elizabeth Taylor in her Warhol-inspired self-portrait "Blue Deb," has in many ways followed in his footsteps — but with a decidedly ethnic agenda.

Kass will be at the Andy Warhol Museum this weekend for the opening of her exhibit "Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever," a mid-career retrospective featuring 75 works, many of which focus on the subject of Jewish iconography and Jewish contributions to the psyche of American culture.

Like Warhol, Kass studied fine art at Carnegie Mellon University. In the 1980s, she successfully showed landscapes and abstract paintings, but in 1992, switched gears to present celebrity portraits in the style of Warhol — with a twist.

The celebrities Kass painted were Jewish: Gertrude Stein, Sandy Koufax and Barbra Streisand. In "My Elvis," she depicts Streisand in yeshiva garb from the movie "Yentl."

While Judaism has nothing to do with her paintings, photographs and sculptures, Kass says, "Jewishness" does.

In focusing on Jewish subjects, Kass said she is filling a void in artistic representation of an ethnic group largely ignored in modern cultural discourse.

"My work comes out of the multicultural moment of the late '80s when 'the cultural politics of difference,' to quote Cornel West, was very much in the air," Kass wrote in an email to the Chronicle. "There was a ton of theory around queerness, blackness, and feminism, but nothing about Jewishness," she said. "It was the feminist literary critics and historians in academia who started women's studies by investigating the history of literature through the lens of gender and power."

Kass said she was influenced by feminist writers — many of whom were Jewish — as well as black public intellectuals, who were "examining the law, literature and art through the lens of race and racism."

"But at the center of the multicultural discourse was an obvious absence," she said, "and it was Jewishness. Fifty years after the Holocaust this was very surprising and disturbing. Given the enormous cultural production of Jews in the 20th century in America, I thought it deserved attention that it has yet to be given."

Kass' newest work — "feel good paintings for feel good times" — addresses this absence directly, she said, as well as underscoring "the cultural contributions of Jews to Broadway, music, and the American narrative." Lyrics borrowed from the Great American Songbook are featured in these paintings, dealing with history, power, gender and ethnicity.

The exhibit opens Saturday, Oct. 27, and runs through Jan. 6, 2013. Kass will be discussing her work, Friday, Oct. 26, 2 p.m., at a panel discussion at the Warhol Museum along with David Carrier, former professor of philosophy at CMU, and Eric Shiner, director of The Warhol Museum.

"I think she is so attuned to the popular culture of this age in the same vein that Warhol was tuned into the popular culture of his age," said Shiner of Kass.

"Jewish identity is as much a part of the American fabric as any other identity," he continued. "She is making sure that Jewish identity is part of the conversation."

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