

Understanding Jewish Art Jewishly: A Rationale and A Model for including Jewish Art in Canadian Post-Secondary Coursework

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Abstract: This paper surveys literature in art education that explores cultural inclusivity. It then surveys Jewish Canadian history in order to provide a sketch of the cultural context, providing a rationale for teaching Jewish art at Canadian universities. A brief history of the nature of Jewish art and its relationship to that of the dominant cultures in which Jews have lived will be described. It proposes a model for teaching Jewish art and art by Jewish artists in Canadian universities that can provide students with opportunities to truly understand the cultural context in which this work is created, using Israeli-Canadian Sylvia Safdie's *Dust* as an example.

Keywords: Diversity; Inclusivity; Jewish Art; Sylvia Safdie.

When I was an undergraduate art history student, I learned that Chagall was Jewish. I don't recall learning that either Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko were. I remember learning that Chagall was interested in depicting scenes of Jewish life from his childhood in Russia and that his style was surrealistic. I remember learning about the latter two artists in the context of Abstract Expressionism. Situating the work of these Modernist artists within the context of the stylistic movements that would have influenced the aesthetics of the images they created provides important understanding to their work. However, I would suggest that narrowly interpreting the work of Jewish artists only within the context of contemporary art movements limits our understanding of their work. We do not do this with Christian art. For example, when we teach undergraduate students about Caravaggio's work, we place it in the context of the Counter-Reformation, with its imperative to create emotionally moving works to which the uneducated peasants of the time could relate. Thus, we come to understand the religious-political context of the work, we understand how the work responds to the religious context in which it was created. While the work of Sylvia Safdie was not religious (Lewis, 2013), it is equally important to know that Safdie's explorations of presence and absence over the span of her oeuvre are situated within a context of a Jewish spiritual life, a spiritual life very different from that of today's dominant secular culture. To understand Safdie's approach to artmaking, the aesthetic of her work, students need to understand something about Jewish culture. Why is it we do not teach this to our students when we are quite comfortable teaching them about the Christian traditions that inform the work of Caravaggio? Perhaps it is because we are not sure how to do so.

In this paper, I will survey literature in art education that explores cultural inclusivity. I will then survey Jewish Canadian history in order to provide a sketch of the cultural context, providing a rationale for teaching Jewish art at Canadian university art history classes. A brief history of the nature of Jewish art and its relationship to that of the dominant cultures in which Jews have lived will be described. I will then propose a model for teaching Jewish art and art by Jewish artists in Canadian university art history classes that can provide students with opportunities

to truly understand the cultural context in which this work is created, using Israeli-Canadian Sylvia Safdie's *Dust* (2009) as an example.

Inclusivity in Art Education Today

In 1996, Graeme Chalmers published *Celebrating pluralism: Art, education, and cultural diversity*. As if speaking about the contemporary context, in his forward, David Pankratz, Program Officer for the Getty Education Institute for the Arts (publisher of the book), wrote, "*Celebrating pluralism... comes at a stage in this society's development when wisdom on pluralism in education is sorely needed. Backlash against pluralism either persists or takes on new forms.*" (ix). In this monograph, Chalmers (1996) set forth a vision for art education in kindergarten through grade twelve classrooms in North American that was based on the Disciple-Based Art Education (DBAE) approach that was structuring much practice on this continent at the time. Chalmer's program was predicated on a definition of multiculturalism that "means acknowledging more than just ethnic differences. Differences in gender, religion, sexual orientation, social class, economic status, language, age and physical ability are also cultural factors to be considered, respected, and celebrated..." (4). Chalmers' goal was to find a means through which educators could move beyond difference to identify similarities between cultural groups, particularly in the roles and functions of art while we "recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate racial and cultural diversity" and "address ... issues of ethnocentrism, bias, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and racism" (5).

This was a seminal work, recognizing the need for an approach to art education that moved beyond the superficial festival, folklore and heroes' approach to inserting non-Western content into art curricula in K – 12 classrooms. It was, by Chalmers' own admission (2002), perhaps overly optimistic and somewhat "gentle" in its suggestion that focusing on similarities between cultures would create bridges, building empathy and a "genuine appreciation" (2). It did, however, stimulate much needed discussion within the scholarly art education community regarding definitions of multiculturalism (e.g. Desai 2019; Gall, 2006; Young & Blandy, 1999), approaches to curriculum, instruction (e.g. Acuff, 2018; Chin, 2013; Desai, 2005; Manifold, 2016; Morris 2019), and pre-service teacher preparation (e.g. Delacruz et al., 2009; Erickson & Young, 2000; Manifold et al. 2016; Young 2011). The enduring importance of Chalmers' work to critical multiculturalism and the understanding of oppression and the institutionalization of unequal power relations finds forceful expression within Garnet and Sinner's (2019) *Art, culture and pedagogy: Revisiting the work of F. Graeme Chalmers*. The essays within this edited text witness the vital legacy of Chalmer's passion for inclusivity and diversity and his commitment to collaboration and social justice.

My own research has explored cultural inclusivity in art education. Of most relevance to this discussion is, I suggest in the article titled, "They can still act Chinese and be Canadian at the same time: Reflections on multiculturalism and the Alberta art curriculum" (Eiserman, 2009). This paper discusses the way in which the Alberta program of studies for art privileges western, European aesthetic values explicitly through its learning outcomes and implicitly through a very limited "approved" resource list. As a result, the Alberta program of studies exemplifies Singh's concept of "culture-blind multi-culturalism" (2004). Further, it also demonstrates how the Canadian Multiculturalism Act preserves the cultural hegemony of Canada's "founding peoples", the English and the French, through substantive commitments in the private sphere, while eschewing procedural commitments in the public – like programs of study in public education. "They can still act Chinese..." proposed a dialogical multiculturalism that would require real procedural commitments from our institutions to be engaged in on-going, responsive growth and

evolution with their constituencies. Alberta still uses the same art curriculum today that was originally written in 1985.

If we turn from the elementary and secondary contexts to that of post-secondary education, we find that there is a dearth of literature exploring cultural inclusivity within the undergraduate art and art history courses pre-service teachers are also required to take as part of their preparation to teach art. At the University of Calgary where I teach, we are working to make our curricula culturally inclusive in order to dismantle the systemic racism that permeates the university as a western, colonial institution. Our goal is to create a campus that is actively anti-racist. When I review our art and art history courses and their course outlines, I perceive a curriculum that is dominated by western content. The approaches to the content have evolved from those Modernist, essentialist approaches my professors adopted in the 1980s during my art and art history training toward critical, more decolonized approaches. However, we still do not hear often enough the languages of the artists and their ways of knowing in the approaches to the content. We still look from the outside in. We still speak, instead of listening. I suggest that one constituency we might listen to is that of our Jewish people.

Jews in Canada

In order to understand why it is important to teach Jewish art in Canada, one must appreciate the long history of Jews in Canada and Jewish contributions to Canadian culture. The Jewish population in Canada is the fourth largest in the world. The first Jew came to Canada in 1738 disguised as a boy and remained for a year before being sent back to France after refusing to convert (Tisdale, 2014). Jews fought for the British army in the French and Indian War and in the North American part of the Seven Years' War. In 1760, Jews were recorded to have been members and officers of the 1st Baron Amherst regiment that attacked and seized Montreal, winning Canada for the British (Rosenberg & Weinfeld, 1993).

Jewish Canadians in the early years were either fur traders or served in the British Army; there were a few merchants and landowners. In 1768 the first synagogue in Canada was built, Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Montreal. By 1850, there were only about 450 Jews living in Canada, mostly in Montreal. However, they had achieved equal rights with Christian Canadians under Canadian law (Abella, 1990).

Beginning in the 1880s, millions of Jews began to flee Eastern Europe for the West as a result of the Russian pogroms carried out in Eastern Europe and the growing anti-Semitism of the early 20th Century. Although most of these immigrants went to the United States, settlement programs offered by the Government of Canada and the Canadian Pacific Railway to develop Canada after Confederation brought about 150,000 Jews to Canada. In 1872, Henry Nathan Jr. was the first Jew to be elected as a Member of Parliament, representing Victoria, British Columbia. By 1911, there were Jewish communities in all of Canada's major cities (Abella, 1990).

Hence, Jews have been contributing to Canadian society since its earliest years. Artists of international stature like Sorel Etrog, Esther Warkov and Sylvia Safdie have brought Canadian visual arts to the world. Young artists like Sarah Teitel and Jess Riva Cooper are contributing to contemporary art in Canada. The Jewish community have been strong supporters of the arts, as witnessed by the many concert halls and art galleries bearing their patrons names (Martha Cohen Theatre and the Jack Singer Concert Hall, Calgary, for example). Given their place in the Canadian cultural mosaic, it would seem appropriate to provide opportunities for Canadian students to learn about the art of a people integral to Canadian culture.

Defining “Jewish Art”

In developing Jewish content, or courses in Jewish art, one needs to define what that content actually would be. The difficulty with isolating a definition for “Jewish” art is that trying to define what is “Jewish” is in itself problematic. Van Voolen (2011) expresses the issue thusly, “[Judaism is]...anything Jews have ever created and done over the past thirty-three centuries in any number of places. So, clearly no single Judaism ever existed... Many Judaisms existed and still exist next to each other, and often against each other” (p. 12). The issue is further complicated by identifying who is Jewish. Again, van Voolen defines a Jew as anyone born to a Jewish mother or anyone who converts to Judaism. However, Reform Judaism now recognizes patrilineal descent. Crypto-Jews, those whose families were coerced into converting to Christianity or Islam but who maintained their Jewish identity secretly, are also considered by some to be Jews. Ultimately, it is the rabbis who decide who is Jewish. However, the rabbis of different traditions do not agree on what the criteria of inclusion are. Regardless of these differing definitions, the one constant is that if one wants to join the Jewish people, one must convert in a religious ceremony; no secular admission exists. Given the wide diversity of Jewish identity, what keeps all these “Jews” together? According to van Voolen, it is the common memory of the past, the shared sacred language of Hebrew, common festival cycles and life-cycle events, a shared communal structure and a shared vision of justice and peace for all humanity that binds Jews together, regardless of their differences.

The issues that arise when one tries to define Judaism, are only complicated more when one tries to define what Jewish art is. Raphael observes,

The more recent consensus is that essentialist, normative accounts of Jewish art ignore irreconcilable differences and discontinuities between its histories. It is now common to assert that ‘there are no unifying theories of Jewish art or ways to study it. Margaret Olin speaks for many in proposing that Jewish may not be intrinsically Jewish but can ‘speak Jewish’ in certain contexts and to certain interpreters. (2009, p. 9)

She asserts that, “Jewish art is an expression of the very soul and spirit of Judaism and of the Jewish artist” (p. 10). Raphael (2009) identifies Jewish art as religious, philosophical, social and national. It can “open the curtain behind which Eternity is hidden” (p. 2). Raphael elaborates by stating that,

“... Jewish art should acknowledge its Jewishness in so far as it situates itself in Jewish history and the cultural and religious life of the global Jewish family, and consciously intends to illuminate the meaning of one or both of these...” (p. 10). She hastens to add that after emancipation, European Jewish identity and culture have included contents and styles that are related to Christian art and aesthetics and the history of modern art.

Thus, it is in relationship to the dominant cultures in which Jews lived that the qualities of Jewish art are best understood. Mitzoeff (2000) explores the nature of Judaism in the Diaspora. As a minority culture, Judaism in the Diaspora has always been relational. Jews living in the Diaspora exist as the Other to the norm of the dominant culture. Jews first experienced this Othering during the exile to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple and expulsion of Jews from the land of Judah in 586 BCE. When Jews were allowed to return in 539 BCE, some remained in Babylonia, initiating a diaspora that would continue for 2500 years and circle the globe. Jewish art evolved as a response to the visual cultures in which Jews lived.

Thus, we see Jewish art that responds to the iconoclasm of the Muslim world, the Christian Orthodoxy or Protestant asceticism (Raphael, 2009). It is this response to the art of those around

them, and not a direct result of how Judaism itself took up the prohibitions of the Second Commandment, that Raphael identified as the source of aniconic imagery in Jewish art. She points to the detailed description in the Book of Deuteronomy of figural imagery included in the Mishkan, the movable “temple” that housed the Ark of the Covenant and the altar on which the priests carried out their sacrifices. She cites the descriptions of the Temples of Solomon and Herod to support the thesis that Jews in the Biblical era engaged in figurative art. During the early Rabbinic era, the use of the figure in Jewish art is witnessed by the decoration at the Temple in Europos (early 3rd Century, CE), and on mosaic floors and liturgical vessels contemporary to it. During the Middle Ages beautifully illuminated haggadot (the texts that contain the order of the Passover meal), for example, were inspired by manuscripts created by Christians. These manuscripts bear images of the Prophets and the Sages pictured in architectural spaces as well as images of flora and fauna that would be excluded through a strict reading of the Second Commandment.

However, when Jews came into contact with Muslim and Christian Orthodoxy, they adopted aniconic representation in response to the dominant cultural ethos. Scholars like Raphael (1990), Mann (2000) and van Voolen (2006; 2011) believe this stance was adopted to avoid persecution. A similar phenomenon occurred in Northern Europe at the time of the Protestant Reformation when Jews lived within the climate of extreme asceticism. After the Emancipation, Jews had the opportunity to join guilds and attend the new art schools that were being established in Europe, we see a resurgence of figural imagery in Jewish art. Jewish artists created work that responded to secular as well as religious themes, as did their Christian contemporaries.

This brings us to the twentieth century. Kampf (1990) poetically describes how the upheavals of the twentieth century affected the Jewish experience and can be seen as major themes in Jewish art:

There have been the large migrations from east to west, from close knit communities to a strange atomized world. There was a meeting with the culture, ideas and art of the West. There are problems arising out of the struggle to survive. There is a need to strike roots in a new environment, to adapt, to assimilate, and yet to preserve one’s identity. There are tensions between tradition and innovation... There are roads that part, cross, and meet again. There are new beginnings, new landscapes, new cities, new planting, new work. There is a reconstruction and affirmation, a losing and finding, which is echoed in the work of artists whether born in America or Lithuania, whether setting up their easels in Sao Paulo or London, whether coming as immigrants in Israel or settling in Paris or New York, whether open or closed to religious thought and feeling, or merely indifferent. (p. 10)

Kampf, with Raphael, believe that to try to find a Jewish “style” is to simplify the nature of Jewish art in a way that does violence to its richness, its complexity, and its relationship with dominant culture. Kampf (1990) reminds us that Jewish culture existed, until 1948 with the founding of the State of Israel, as separate from dominant cultures of the places Jews lived. The evolution of Jewish culture, and its art, over does not share this same narrative of the evolution of the Nation State that has created a canon of periods and styles in Western art associated there with. Instead, Kampf observes that the Jews of Eastern Europe had more in common with each other, their shared history, language, and identity, than they did with the citizens of the nation states they lived within. The culture of Eastern European Jews spread across the globe with the migrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sustaining their ties “through their common ways of thinking and feeling, their language, their religious traditions, their publishing houses, and their unique historical

consciousness” (p. 11). Therefore, Kampf proposes a thematic study of Jewish art that engages in its complexities and reflects the experience of Jewish life in the 20th century. In this, Kampf echoes Raphael’s injunction that Jewish art is art that “speaks Jewish.” I will now turn to a discussion of how we might teach Jewish art in such a way that embraces its complexity and speaks Jewish.

Toward a model for teaching Jewish art

Mirzoeff (2000) engaged in a study of the visual culture of diasporic peoples. This examination yields important insights into the nature of Jewish art. In keeping with Kampf’s encouragement to retain the complexity of Jewish art in its study, Mirzoeff (2000) proposes the idea of “multiple viewpoints” as a means of engagement with the art of diasporic peoples. Recognizing the dynamics of diasporic cultures as they relate to those of the dominant cultures they exist within, Mirzoeff asserts,

Diaspora generates what I shall call a “multiple viewpoint” in any diasporic visual image...the visual is located “between individuals and communities and cultures in the process of dialogic interaction” (Shohat and Stam 1998:46). The multiple viewpoint moves beyond the one point perspective of Cartesian rationalism in the search for a forward looking, transcultural and transitive place from which to look and to be seen. (p. 6)

Mirzoeff links his concept of multiple viewpoint with Homi Bhaba’s “in between space” in which “...art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent, in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (p. 7). Thus, Mirzoeff asserts that art of diasporic peoples must be viewed as the result of a complex dialogical process in which we examine the space between what Bhaba calls “neither this, nor that”. In understanding the art made by Jews, we need to examine the space that exists between the nation state narrative of Western art history and the differing experiences of Jewish artists in their different contexts around the globe.

If we take up the challenge set before us by Kampf and Mirzoeff, then the study of Jewish art necessitates a different kind of approach than what might be adopted in studying the art from mainstream Western cultures. I suggest that an approach to the study of Jewish art based on the tradition of Torah study might respond to the need for a multiple viewpoint and the examination of the in between space. Each week of the Jewish liturgical year, a different portion of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew bible) is studied. These portions have been studied for thousands of years by rabbis and scholars, by minyans (groups of ten people assembled to study Torah) and individuals. Generally speaking, the understandings that one comes to as a result of this study are known as “midrash”. When studying Torah, one takes a multiple viewpoint. The acronym PaRDeS provides a model for traditional Torah study. One examines the simple or plain meaning of the text, the *peshat*. This is the meaning most simply derived from the text as it is presented. It is a contextual reading. The *remez*, or allegorical or symbolic meaning, of the text is also studied. The *d’rash* provides opportunities for comparative study with other texts, both biblical and midrashic. It can be thought of an exploration of metaphorical meaning. Finally, the *sod*, or secret, spiritual meaning, can be explored. The Kabbalists explored the *sod*, and it is felt that one cannot engage in this level of interpretation without great training and understanding of the *derash*.

One might explore the multiple viewpoints and the in between spaces required for the understanding of Jewish art through a similar process. I propose that when engaging with works that “speak Jewish”, one should begin with a simple, contextual examination of the piece. One

might think of this as the kind of formal analysis that we often engage in when first approaching a work of art. We describe, analyze and interpret the meaning of the work based solely on the visual information presented to us. How does it affect us? What associations does it bring about for us? We might characterize this as a **peshat** interpretation. Using the example of Sylvia Safdie's work, *Dust* (2009), one can observe a video that is 4:50 minutes long. What is pictured is a crowded dark space surrounded by tall stone walls that stretch beyond the confines of the screen. Toward the back, the space seems to enlarge. In this larger space, two strong electric lights are embedded in the stone floor. From each of these, a column of light stretches up, merging into one. Illuminated within this column dust dances in an elegant choreography upward and out of the frame. There is no sound; the video is completely silent. We are told in supporting materials that this space is located in an abandoned synagogue in Amzrou, Morocco. The simple reading of *Dust* might be that the video witnesses the emptiness and silence of a place once filled with the vibrant life of a synagogue. Where once people came together to pray through the poetry of the spoken word and through song, now there is simply dust.

We can then examine the **remez** meaning of the piece, its symbolic or allegorical meaning. As one watches the video, the dust rises from the floor of the abandoned synagogue into the unseen space beyond its frame. One might begin to see the dust as a trace of the words, both spoken and sung, within these walls. The dust becomes not a symbol of all that has been lost, but of all that still remains, of what still lives on. One is reminded of the story of the creation of *adama* in Genesis, from dust, and brought to life through the breath (*ruah*) of God. The dust of the synagogue is stirred by the movement, the breath, the spirit (*nefesh*) of those who visit there. A **remez** reading could be that the video symbolizes the continued life of the synagogue. Many generations later, the words are brought to life as they are uttered from the lips of the descendants of those who once worshipped there, and of those who never knew this place, but who speak and sing the words, wherever they might be located.

If we then move to the **d'rash**, we would begin to explore how *Dust* compares to other work that Safdie created. What can we learn by examining *Dust* within the context of the body of work created in Morocco? Of her other work? In an essay about her video work, Lewis (2013) identifies absence/presence, transformation and breath to be recurring themes in all of Safdie's work, drawings, paintings, sculpture, installation and video. He describes a process of evolution within her body of work, a striving, indeed a transformation, as she explores each medium, seeking out its potential for revealing the nature of absence, and presence in absence, of processes of transformation and the role breath therein. In the video, Lewis perceives, Safdie found a way to fully engage with these phenomena,

Where once Safdie transformed nature and place by physically taking rock and earth and producing pigment from them to depict the human form, she now through video, directly effects this transformation ... Safdie's video, when considered diachronically and developmentally, can be seen as exploring a variety of themes, which, upon their resolution, allow her to bring the breath (and importantly her own breath) back into the world. (p. 43)

In Morocco, Safdie explored the phenomenon of displacement. "Her long concern with the depiction of both absent bodies and bodies in transformation made the diaspora a natural subject of interest" (Lewis, 2013, p. 66). As a Lebanese Jew of Syrian decent, a Jew whose people now exist entirely the diaspora, Safdie is finely attuned to the experience of displacement. The site of the abandoned synagogue in Amzrou, southern Morocco became an opportunity for Safdie to

explore the dynamics of memory, residual presence, and absence. “Reflecting on this series, Safdie said, ‘These pieces have so much lament, much memory’” (p. 70) Through diverse media, from drawing to painting to sculpture to video, and with materials as different as mud and light, Safdie’s work has engaged the themes of absence and presence and breath. With the Moroccan videos, and *Dust* in particular, Safdie begins the journey of giving witness to those absent, whose lives still resonate in the present. It is a journey that eventually would lead her to Auschwitz, its absence presences and a haunting body of work.

If we take up a **sod** reading of *Dust*, we begin to explore the work from a spiritual viewpoint. Safdie says, “the dust found me, and I found the dust.” (Lewis 70). The dust, as discussed above, is symbolic of the dust from which all living creatures originate. It is the dust to which we will all return (Genesis 3:19). According to the story found in Genesis 2:7, *adama* came to life when God’s breath filled him. Life is the result of an inspiration. Through the video camera, and her creative inspiration, Safdie re-animates the space of the synagogue, giving it and the absence presences it shelters, renewed life.

Thus, in using an ancient approach to Torah study, we have been able to understand Safdie’s *Dust* from a multiple viewpoint, examining the space in between. PaRDeS allowed us to situate the work within a Jewish context appropriate to that of its creation. Using PaRDes as our model, we are able to come to understand how deeply rooted the work is in issues central to Jewish spirituality: What is the nature of Creation? From where does our Life come? How do we live *l’dor v’dor*, from generation to generation, as Jewish people often separated from our land, from our roots? How do we keep the memory of those absent present? These questions riddle Torah; they have preoccupied Jews for millennia. *Dust* has been poetically interpreted by others, like Lewis, quoted and cited in this essay. However, Lewis situated his interpretation with a Christian iconographical context, understanding Safdie’s exploration of spirit through the Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit. Understood in its Jewish context, Safdie’s spirit is both the *ruah* (breath, inspiration) and the *nefesh* (the spirit that is married to, inseparable from, the body). Spirit and Body are inseparable in Judaism, they are inseparable in Safdie’s work. Through PaRDes, *Dust* can speak Jewish.

Conclusion

Through this discussion, I have developed a rationale and proposed a model for the study of Jewish Art. I have argued that given the long and important history of Jews in Canada and Jewish involvement in the arts, it is important to provide students in art and art history courses with an understanding of Jewish art within an appropriate pedagogical context. I have proposed a method of Torah study, PaRDes, as one way of listening to how works by Jewish artists speak Jewishly. I have demonstrated the effectiveness of this model through a study of Safdie’s work *Dust* (2009). This is a simple method, and I encourage those of you teaching art history, especially Modern and Contemporary art history, to incorporate it into your existing coursework when you discuss works made by Jewish artists. I encourage the development of coursework that focuses on Jewish art, outside the dominant narratives of Western history, to adopt a multiple viewpoint and explore the in between spaces as syllabi are built. I urge you to allow Jewish art to speak Jewishly.

I further urge you to explore ways to develop coursework that allows the work of artists from other non-Western cultures to speak in the ways that they need to speak, using the languages and forms that are needed for these artforms to function fully. Seek out the artists, the makers, from these cultures, learn from them. Create curricula that speak their languages.

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