

Michal Rovner

Israeli, born in 1957

Dark Light, 2024, from the Pragim series

Two-channel digital video installation, color, no sound, looped

Gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, and Arne and Marc Glimcher,
Pace Gallery, 2024-66a-b

In 2019 Michal Rovner began filming and drawing the wild poppies that grow in a field by her home in Israel. Titled *Pragim*—Hebrew for “poppies”—the ongoing project explores the power and fragility of the flower, a symbol of remembrance, hope, and resilience. In *Pragim* the artist evokes the human condition, which she has addressed in her work for over three decades, centering universal issues of identity, place, dislocation, and vulnerability.

The title *Dark Light* connects to complex regional conflicts of the past and present. The poppies, with their hypnotic fluttering movements and voluptuous forms, question the coexistence of beauty and violence in nature. Rovner states, “I present situations of conflict, tensions, fractures. I always begin with reality. I record it, and subsequently, little by little, I extract the image of reality, which [loses] its own definition and brings therefore something else.”

Gloria Bornstein

American, born in 1937

Public Document, 1977

Gelatin silver prints

Purchase: Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund and the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2002-27.1-7

In 1977 Gloria Bornstein staged *Public Document*, a feminist performance during which she draped herself in several layers of dark clothing—including a Hasidic Jewish man's coat and hat along with a dress that was her grandmother's—and donned other ceremonial objects in nontraditional ways. Many artists at that time were using performance art to challenge passive spectatorship, positioning the viewer in a complicated or complicit role. In this vein Bornstein staged a radical undressing, which concluded not when she was nude, as in a typical striptease, but with her body cloaked in a heavy black wetsuit that created a thick androgynous rubber skin. Here the camera, and by extension the viewer, witnesses the shedding of each layer as the artist unburdens herself of the symbolism of these garments, steeped in conventional gender roles and boundaries.

Deborah Kass

American, born in 1952

Double Red Yentl, Split (My Elvis), 1993

Screenprint and acrylic on canvas

Purchase: Gift of Joan and Laurence Kleinman, 1993-120a-b

Using a doubling technique made famous by the iconic Pop artist Andy Warhol, Deborah Kass takes on the subject of the movie *Yentl* (1983). In the film Barbra Streisand stars as an Ashkenazi Jewish woman living in the early 1900s who poses as a man to receive a Talmudic education. Kass reflects on the boldness of the movie's narrative and connects it to the role of being an artist: "The image of a woman dressed as a man in order to study sacred texts, denied her by law and tradition, a woman whose love for the living history of learning, spirit, and ideas overwhelms propriety and social norms, seemed to me to be the perfect metaphor for being a woman artist at the time." Conscious of the power images exert on a subject's reputation and visibility, Kass adds further layers to this work: she duplicates the image to underscore how Streisand has created a myriad of on-camera identities, from funny girl to peace activist to the yeshiva student pictured here.

Michal Chelbin

Israeli, born in 1974

Alicia, Ukraine, 2005, from the series *Strangely Familiar*

Chromogenic color print mounted on board

Purchase: Gift of Nathan and Jacqueline Goldman, by exchange and
Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2009–8

Michal Chelbin's series *Strangely Familiar* consists of portraits of young performers—acrobats, dancers, athletes, and circus entertainers—that combine artifice and naturalism to portray adolescents who seem mature beyond their years. Caught looking out from the protective confines of her father's car, the young gymnast Alicia is seen through two windows. One is open and the other closed, a metaphoric threshold for her ambiguous adolescence.

Dawoud Bey

American, born in 1953

Claire, 2004

Inkjet print and audio, 2 min., 38 sec.

Purchase: Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2006-44a-b

Dawoud Bey created this portrait as part of a series documenting students for the exhibition *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*, held at the Jewish Museum in 2005-6. Claire, pictured here, is of Ojibwe (Chippewa) and Russian Jewish descent. Throughout the series, the artist highlights the ways his subjects undermine narrow assumptions about Jewishness. This work also illustrates Bey's belief that young people "are arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment."

To listen to the accompanying audio segment excerpted from an interview by Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister, please use the earphones nearby.

Richard Avedon

American, born in 1923, died in 2004

Jacob Israel Avedon, 1969–73, printed 1980

Gelatin silver print

Purchase: Sara and Axel Schupf, Jack and Judith Stern, and Hyman L. and Joan C. Sall Funds, 1993–168.6

A renowned fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1940s and 1950s, Richard Avedon became one of the major portraitists of his generation, known for his iconic images of political, literary, and art figures. This photograph, however, is of a more personal and intimate nature. It focuses on his terminally ill father, Jacob Israel Avedon, whom Richard Avedon photographed regularly from 1969 until his father's death in 1973.

Born in Russia in 1889, Jacob Israel Avedon endured a difficult childhood in the United States, including several years in an orphanage. The starkly raw composition captures him at the end of his life. When asked how he felt about taking photographs of his dying father, Richard Avedon replied that these images represent “what it is to be any one of us.”

Michal Ronnen Safdie

American and Israeli, born in 1951

From Ethiopia to Jerusalem, 1994–95, printed 2000, from The Western Wall series Iris print

Gift of the artist in honor of Sara and Axel Schupf, 2001-7.4

The Ethiopian Jewish community, called Beta Israel (the house of Israel in the Geez language), is at least fifteen centuries old. One of the oldest Jewish diasporas in the world, Ethiopian Jews are variously thought to be the lost tribe of Dan; descendants of the biblical King Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba; or part of the early sixth-century BCE exodus of Jews from the kingdom of Judah. The community gained worldwide attention in the early 1980s, when persecution, civil war, and widespread famine led to its massive immigration to Israel via Sudan. By the mid-1990s, when Michal Ronnen Safdie photographed one of these new arrivals in this perceptive and warm portrait, over twenty thousand Ethiopian Jews had settled in Israel.

Kali Spitzer

Kaska Dena, the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations (Vancouver, British Columbia), born in 1987

Audrey Siegl, 2019, printed 2023, from the series *An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance*, 2014–

Digital print based on a tintype photograph
Printer: The Lab

Purchase: Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2023-118

This portrait of Audrey Siegl is part of the photographer Kali Spitzer's series *An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance*, which she began in 2014. Siegl, an Indigenous Jewish community activist, has worked to raise awareness of missing and murdered Native women as well as the fentanyl crisis. Spitzer creates striking portraits of individuals who, like Siegl, belong to her interconnected communities of Indigenous, queer, and mixed-heritage peoples. Spitzer's large-scale black-and-white images are based on nineteenth-century tintype techniques that deliberately recall ethnographic portraits meant to reduce people of Indigenous background to stereotypes. Artist and subjects collaborate to create the present arresting portraits, the subjects playing a central role in their own self-actualizations in front of the camera.

Vardi Kahana

Israeli, born in 1959

My mother, Rivka, and my children Gil and Roni, from the *One Family* portfolio, 2003, printed 2007

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Doron and Marianne Livnat, 2010–37.21

This poignant image of Vardi Kahana's mother, Rivka, a Holocaust survivor, with the artist's children, is part of her series *One Family*. Tenderly intertwined in the embrace of her grandchildren, Rivka's left arm bears her prisoner identification number from the Auschwitz concentration camp, which she brandishes defiantly, her face resolute. Members of the family had pledged to find each other after World War II and set up their homes together. In the artist's words, "Family cohesion was a sacred value to my parents and their siblings, a superior value, above all dispute over world view, ideology, or religion." Rivka and her two sisters, Leah and Esther, who also survived Auschwitz, went on to live in Israel. At the time this image was taken, the sisters had thirty-one grandchildren between them.

William Kentridge

South African, born in 1955

Mumsie Mulaudzi, Virginia Mzimba, Rhoda Sori, and Margaret Zulu (weavers)

Marguerite Stephens, Stephens Tapestry Studio
(tapestry direction)

Horse Series (Promised Land), 2008, fabricated 2015

Handwoven mohair wool

Purchase: Gift of the Kirsh Foundation in honor of Claudia Gould,
Director of the Jewish Museum from 2011 to 2023, 2024-7

In this dramatic tapestry, registered in bold silhouette, the artist William Kentridge explores “The Nose,” a story by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852). The tale follows a man who wakes up to find that he has lost his nose. When he goes out to report this abomination to the chief of police, he encounters the nose—clad in an imperial uniform and sporting a ceremonial sword—along the way. When confronted, the nose denies the man’s claims and continues to parade about the city, to the man’s great consternation.

Playing off the story’s satirical qualities, Kentridge invokes the power of humor and exaggeration in his own work. According to the artist, the nose is “a metaphor for those parts of ourselves in conflict, those impulses that stir up trouble because they have a mind of their own.” He identified with and modeled this nose on his own, “a good Johannesburg Jewish nose,” according to the artist. He was raised in South Africa in a family of Lithuanian Jewish origin; his parents were both prominent anti-apartheid activists (a legacy Kentridge has built upon in his art practice). This work was executed by a team of four expert weavers at the Stephens Tapestry Studio. In the 1980s Kentridge began collaborating with this multigenerational, family-run endeavor established in Swaziland (now Eswatini) in 1963.

ON THE PEDESTAL IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM

Arlene Shechet

American, born in 1951

Travel Light, 2017

Gypsum, resin, and candles

Commission: Contemporary Judaica Acquisitions Committee and
Judaica Acquisitions Committee Funds, 2018–2

In Arlene Shechet's sculpture, past and present are subtly intertwined. Her point of departure to create this work was a pair of candlesticks her grandmother brought from Belarus to the United States in 1920, the only material objects the family possesses from their country of origin. As she learned more about the history of these candlesticks, Shechet uncovered long-forgotten family documents that she used to track down previously unknown relatives. The artist has also embedded an image of a page from her grandmother's passport in the sculpture.

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Christian Boltanski

French, born in 1944, died in 2021

Monument (Odessa), 1989–2003

Gelatin silver prints, tin biscuit boxes, lights, and wire

Purchase: Melva Bucksbaum Contemporary Art Fund, 2003–11a-kk

Christian Boltanski was born in Paris in 1944, shortly after the end of the Nazi occupation of the city. His mother was Catholic and his father came from a Jewish family from Odessa. This installation memorializes individuals whose names are unknown. The artist sourced the images for this work from a 1939 snapshot of Jewish students celebrating the Purim holiday in France. By choosing these anonymous subjects, inevitably linked to those who perished during the Holocaust, Boltanski addresses themes of loss and death through the prism of memory. The lights illuminating their portraits thus become memorial candles, meant to honor and remember the dead. The empty, rusted tin biscuit boxes, a fixture in Boltanski's works, hold more than childhood treasures and memories—they hold unwritten histories of unrealized lives.

Theresienstadt bracelet, 1941–44

Theresienstadt (Terezín), Czechoslovakia

(now the Czech Republic)

Brass, porcelain, and cord

Gift of the Estate of Greta Perlman, JM 86–75a–t

These twenty charms were assembled by Greta Perlman (1904–1975), a Czech Jew, while she was interned in the Theresienstadt ghetto–concentration camp from late 1941 to late 1944. Four of the charms on the bracelet feature her prisoner number, “M433.” Some 140,000 Jews were deported to Theresienstadt, many of them musicians, writers, and artists. Forced to produce decorative objects and other works for the Nazis, they also secretly made personal pieces including charms such as these, which were often smuggled out of the workshops and could be exchanged for food. Much of the art produced in Theresienstadt was found bricked up in walls or buried, likely hidden by prisoners before they were deported to extermination camps. The objects were then recovered after World War II ended. Perlman survived Theresienstadt and later Auschwitz and was liberated from Bergen–Belsen, but most of her fellow prisoners perished. The impulse to create and own works of art—many of which, like Greta Perlman’s bracelet, were steeped in personal memories—underscores the quiet efforts prisoners made to preserve their individuality and humanity.

Israel Dov Rosenbaum

Austrian, dates unknown

Mizrah, 1877

Podkamen, Austria-Hungary (now Pidkamin, Ukraine)

Paint, ink, and graphite on cut paper

Gift of Helen W. Finkel in memory of Israel Dov Rosenbaum, Bessie Rosenbaum Finkel, and Sidney Finkel, 1987-136

A mizrah (literally “east” in Hebrew) is a plaque made for the east wall of a home or synagogue west of Jerusalem, indicating the direction of prayer toward that city. The elaborate scrollwork and vegetation, real and mythical animals, and lack of blank space on this papercut make it a prime example of Eastern European decorative art. The artist’s representation of a clock at the top of the building may hint at his profession as clockmaker to the local count. The mizrah is replicated as the background in Kehinde Wiley’s painting, also on view in this gallery.

Abraham Shulkin

American, born in the Russian Empire (now Belarus), 1852, died in 1918

Torah ark from Adath Yeshurun Synagogue, 1899

Sioux City, Iowa

Hand-carved, stained, and painted pinewood

Gift of the Jewish Federation of Sioux City, JM 48-56a-s

Abraham Shulkin was a father of twelve, peddler, junk dealer, and talented amateur woodcarver. He immigrated to the United States from the Russian Empire in 1897, part of the wave of Russian Jews escaping oppression, anti-Jewish riots (pogroms), and economic hardship. He applied the woodworking vernacular of his homeland to this Torah ark, which he created for the synagogue in his new home of Sioux City, Iowa. A profusion of openwork whorls inhabited by animals and plants was common in churches and many now-destroyed synagogues of Eastern Europe.

He proudly inscribed the ark in Hebrew with "This is the handwork of Abraham Shulkin" in the area flanking the Tablets of the Law, above the rampant lions. Below the tablets, two cutout niches house a pair of doves above a Hebrew dedicatory inscription: "This Torah ark was donated by Simhah, daughter of the esteemed David Davidson." Davidson, who owned the Davidson Brothers department store in Sioux City, provided the lumber for the Torah ark, which Shulkin accepted in lieu of payment.



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Kehinde Wiley

American, born in 1977

Alios Itzhak, from the series *The World Stage: Israel*, 2011

Oil and enamel on canvas

Purchase: Gift of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum Family Foundation; Gift in honor of Joan Rosenbaum, Director of the Jewish Museum from 1981 to 2011, by the Contemporary Judaica, Fine Arts, Photography, and Traditional Judaica Acquisitions Committee Funds, 2011–31

Kehinde Wiley's global project *The World Stage* inserts images of people of color from around the world into the Western tradition of portraiture. Wiley uses a realist style for his figures but sets them against flat, densely patterned backgrounds. *The World Stage: Israel* is a suite of nineteen portraits of young men—Israeli Jews as well as Muslim Arab Israelis. Here, Alios Itzhak, of Ethiopian Jewish descent, stands before a background inspired by a traditional Jewish ceremonial object: a nineteenth-century Ukrainian papercut in the Jewish Museum collection on display in this gallery. Itzhak's proud stance, with hand on hip and a direct, forward gaze, echoes the classic pose of noblemen and business leaders in commissioned portraits. With *The World Stage*, Wiley both globalizes the portrait tradition and claims a prominent space within it for people of color.



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Rachel Feinstein

American, born in 1971

IPPOLITA (fabricator)

Marriage ring, 2023

Gilt silver

Commission: Judaica Acquisitions Committee Fund,
Contemporary Judaica Acquisitions Committees Fund,
and Contemporary Deaccession Fund, 2023-110

Rachel Feinstein's work here draws on the iconic form and ceremonial symbolism of the Jewish marriage ring. These rings were historically engraved with the Hebrew phrase *mazal tov* (good luck) to echo the wishes typically recited at Ashkenazi weddings. A few extant medieval examples bear architectural designs that symbolize the new home the couple builds together. Alluding in its form to a Disney princess's castle, Feinstein's ring is enchanting, inviting, and characteristic of a fairy tale; yet it is also ominous as the delicate castle is perched upon a defensive knuckle-duster. The traditional Jewish wedding ceremony itself echoes this duality. After the joyful moment when the groom gives the ring to the bride, the couple poignantly breaks a glass to remember the destroyed ancient Temple of Jerusalem.

Joel Mesler

American, born in 1974

Rabbi for Rashid, 2023

Oil on canvas

Gift of Rashid Johnson, 2024-73

Joel Mesler is a painter known for using humor, often ironic and self-deprecating, to create surprising juxtapositions of content and tone. When he inherited two traditional portraits of rabbis, which had hung in his family home throughout his childhood, Mesler felt compelled to explore their cultural and personal significance. He soon became both an obsessive collector and maker of this type of imagery. Mesler's rabbis are an unlikely homage to artworks that can feel dated or even kitschy. Grouping a range of related works under the common title "rabbi paintings," Mesler converses with an artistic subgenre with a clear baseline: with ponderous beards and dolorous eyes, these rabbis serve as stock symbols of wisdom, pathos, and piety. They are also often steeped in nostalgia for Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust.

Isidor Kaufmann

Austrian, born in Hungary, 1853, died in 1921

Head of a Rabbi, early twentieth century

Oil on panel

Bequest of Edith B. Weisz, 2004-11

Isidor Kaufmann's portraits of devout Jews convey aspects of their traditions. Here the sitter's fur-trimmed hat, or *shtreimel*, and prayer shawl, or *tallit*, indicate his orthodoxy. For Kaufmann and his secular patrons (Jews and non-Jews alike), these portraits served a dual purpose. Hung in well-appointed parlors, they enhanced the social status of the paintings' owners and Kaufmann's prestige as a painter. The images also connected to Jewish heritage, linking the cosmopolitan world of acculturated Viennese Jews to a traditional lifestyle that endured outside the capital.

Carrie Mae Weems

American, born in 1953

The Jewish Ghetto—Ancient Rome, 2006, from the *Roaming* series

Chromogenic print

Purchase: Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2022–81

For the past thirty years, Carrie Mae Weems has produced a complex body of work probing everything from family relationships and cultural identity to sexism, class, and political systems. In 2006 while in residency in Rome, she began the *Roaming* series, which is centered on power and public architecture. This period yielded a haunting suite of images in which Weems's avatar—in a long, dark dress—turns her back to the camera, leading the viewer to sweeping landscapes and monumental buildings. Moving in and around the Italian capital, she acts both as a witness and guide to the past. In this photograph her spectral silhouetted figure walks past the exposed arcades of the Theater of Marcellus toward the Great Synagogue in the old Jewish Ghetto of Rome. Printed at large scale, Weems's performative images invite us to share in her perspective and confront historically and culturally charged sites. Weems's background—a mix of African American, Native American, and Jewish ancestry—presents a complex framework for understanding her inquiries into sites of historical trauma such as this one.