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Worlds of Oppression Are Interwoven in a New York Show

An exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz at the Jewish Museum comes in response to rising episodes of anti-Semitism, but doesn't stop there.

By John Schwartz

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Ben Shahn's "We Fight for a Free World!" demonstrates the political activism at the center of his work and is part of a new show. Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY;, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

In the early 1940s, the artist Ben Shahn created a painting for the Office of War Information with images depicting suppression, starvation, slavery, torture and murder. He called it "We Fight for a Free World!"

The painting was supposed to lead to a series of propaganda posters, but the government rejected the project. Still, the original painting survived and has a new life today as the heart of a show at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan: "We Fight to Build a Free World: An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz."

The exhibition, which is to run from March 20 through Aug. 2, examines the ways that artists have taken on issues like oppression, intolerance and authoritarianism, and raises questions about anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia. With about 80 works in a range of media, the Jewish Museum covers a great deal of ground in sometimes startling ways.

During a recent conversation at the museum before the works were hung, Mr. Horowitz and museum officials did a virtual walk-through, describing their plans for the exhibition.

Mr. Horowitz is an artist based in New York whose wide-ranging and eclectic work includes sculpture, video, photography and more. Born in 1966, his thoughtful and politically conscious work is steeped in Pop Art and issues like consumerism and identity. In an interview, he said the museum approached him about creating an exhibition that would address “the resurgence of anti-Semitism in America.”

“I chose to approach the subject within a pretty broad framework,” Mr. Horowitz said, “thinking more generally about the rise of authoritarianism and xenophobia that we’re witnessing.”

“Power” (2019) by Jonathan Horowitz, the artist who created the wide-ranging show.
Jonathan Horowitz, via Sadie Coles HQ, London; photo: Robert Glowacki

The result is an exhibition that abounds with unexpected juxtapositions, with works by a multiethnic roster of artists who include Robert Colescott, Huma Bhabha, Enrique Chagoya and Andy Warhol, along with posters created by 36 artists, including Baseera Khan, whose work often refers to her Muslim heritage.

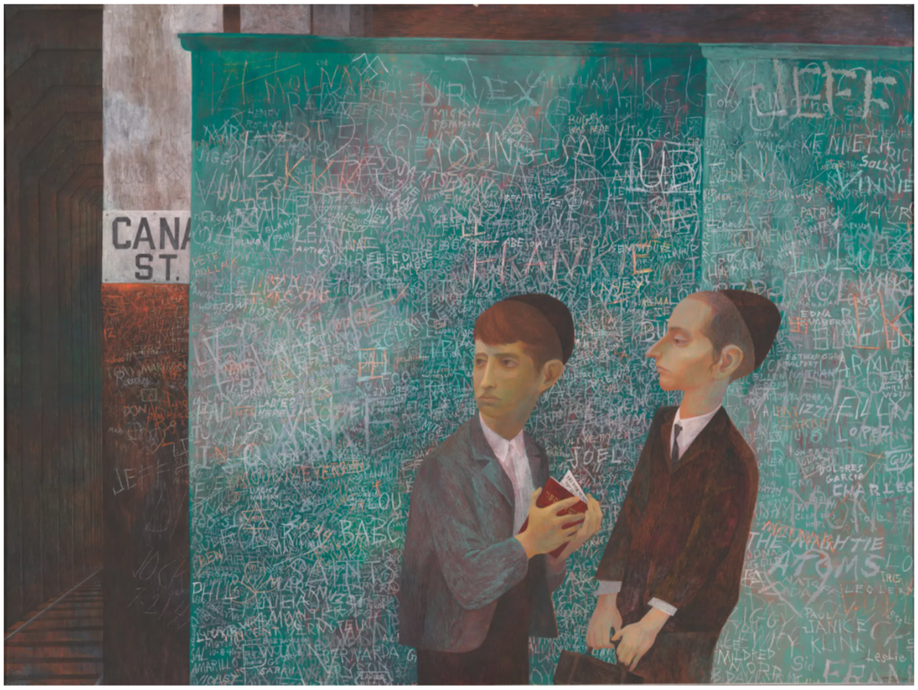
"I'm not a curator, I am not a historian," Mr. Horowitz said, "but I do combine pre-existing imagery in my work. It was not such a big leap to do that with actual works."

Ruth Beesch, the museum's senior deputy director, said the far-reaching show was "very much in keeping with our mission here to put Jewish culture in the broader context" and to explore art and Jewish culture "for people of all backgrounds." And so, she said, "It's absolutely in our wheelhouse" and shows that "Jewish culture does not exist in a vacuum."

In each room, the various artworks will play off each other as if in conversation. One gallery has works along the loose theme of assimilation, with wallpaper based on Warhol's many portraits of Jewish subjects as well as one of the earliest portraits of a Jewish American: Gerardus Duyckinck's painting of the wealthy colonial merchant Moses Raphael Levy.

Nearby, a satirical painting from 1975 by Colescott, a black artist, "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware," plays on the famous painting of George Washington but features stereotypical depictions of African-Americans.

There is also "Orthodox Boys," a 1948 painting by Bernard Perlin showing two youths in skullcaps huddled in the Canal Street subway station in New York City against a wall showing anti-Semitic graffiti. A piece by artist Glenn Ligon, meanwhile, shows the repeated sentence "I do not always feel colored."



Bernard Perlin's "Orthodox Boys" (1948). Bernard Perlin, via Tate

The juxtapositions suggest the relative privilege of Jews compared with blacks, but also the insecurity that many Jews can still feel in America, and the connections between the two groups' experiences.

Mr. Horowitz has included several of his own works in the exhibition. One is a sculpture that reproduces, in pieces, the "Arbeit Macht Frei" sign from the gates of Auschwitz. The sculpture serves as a symbol of evil, of course, but in this context also more broadly "relates to the current debates over what to do with Confederate monuments" and other items that encapsulate bigotry and oppression.

"What does it mean," he asked, "to preserve such a thing, or to destroy such a thing, or even to copy such a thing?"

In the same gallery will stand a sculpture modeled on a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee that was the focus of far-right protests in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017 — but covered with a black tarp.

It will be joined by a painting by Abraham A. Manievich of a pogrom, and a reproduction of a painting by Thomas Hart Benton that the artist made after Pearl Harbor for propaganda purposes; it contains racist imagery of Japanese attackers.

There is also a work by Henry Sugimoto, a Japanese-American artist who was held in an internment camp during World War II. “The connection to the present is obvious,” Mr. Horowitz said.

Another gallery will hold the Shahn painting, surprisingly small and richly powerful, showing the political activism that stood at the center of his work. He adapted the images within it from work by other artists, including one of German descent and a Japanese-American, the choice of artists being “very deliberate,” Mr. Horowitz said.

While pointed, the exhibition does not comment explicitly on the current political situation in the United States because of its status as a nonprofit, which prevents it from taking part in electoral politics.

At the end of the exhibition, Mr. Horowitz said, two mirrors will stand facing each other to create an infinite reflection for those who pass between them. Each mirror bears words: “your land” and “my land” in endless argument. The point, as we’ve seen played out over and over throughout history, he said, is that “claiming land as belonging to you or me is inevitably fraught.”

Beyond that, will be a sign with a slogan from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, that states, “Think about what you saw.”

As final thoughts go, it’s hard to imagine a better one.

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