The New Authentics
Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation
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by Staci Boris

Foreword by Rhoda Rosen
Essay by Stephen J. Whitfield
Excerpt from The History of Love by Nicole Krauss
Artist essays by Sarah Giller Nelson and Lori Waxman
David Altmejd
Cheselyn Amato
Johanna Bresnick
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Jin Meyerson
Collier Schorr
Mindy Rose Schwartz
Ludwig Schwarz
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Shoshanna Weinberger
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Jewish Generation

Curated by Staci Boris
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Staci Boris and Rhoda Rosen
WE LIVE OUR LIVES SURROUNDED BY AN EVER-INCRESSING AMOUNT OF STUFF.

Stuff we find, stuff we're sent, stuff we eat, stuff we store, stuff we wear, stuff we buy, stuff we throw away. These everyday objects have an intended purpose, be it to feed, clothe, inform, or otherwise occupy us. But objects can also be used against their intentions, as demonstrated when Marcel Duchamp made a sculpture from a urinal, Meret Oppenheim from a teacup covered in fur, and Robert Rauschenberg from a stuffed angora goat. Such metamorphic tactics lie at the core of Cheselyn Amato's inventive body of mixed-media works.

How else to explain the transformation of a bucket full of scrub brushes into a work aptly described by the title Flower Arrangement (#1), 2003 (fig. 31)? The witty repositioning of quotidian things evident in this and Amato's other "bouquets" provides a fresh look at common objects rarely beheld for more than their cleaning power. The work's charm rests in the incongruity of finding prettiness in something banal, of the goods simultaneously existing as sweet flowers and crappy cleaning implements. A strikingly different effect ensues when Amato uses similar means but dissimilar materials, arranging twelve plastic guns on a wall in the form of a Star of David. Here too a magical kind of transformation occurs, of cheap toys morphed into a symbol central to both Judaism and Islam. Unlike the more innocuous floral apparition, Six-Pointed Star in Silver with Orange Tips, 2006 (fig. 30), blatantly mixes the sacred and the profane, questioning the intermingling of religion and violence, as well as one of the ways in which the latter becomes part of daily life, namely through children's play.

This transformation of ordinary material into something stranger and more meaningful can occur at various stages in an artwork's life, from studio process through viewer reception. In the installation Effluxes, 2004 (fig. 32), Amato makes this metamorphic moment visible within the exhibition space itself. Sheets of radiant film,
suspended between a series of lightweight wood and wire frames, colorfully refract the light of a nearby projector, throwing dazzling effects onto the wall. The artist describes these works as “visual events,” highlighting their ephemeral and spectacular nature, but also pointing to the importance of the act of creating, an act that occurs literally and repeatedly as the viewer witnesses Effluxes’ spectral shift.

The transformative power of the artistic process alights at a different but equally transitory moment in a series of fabric collages that Amato has been making since 2000. Rather than glue her material elements together, the artist reinvents the collage process by arranging her swatches directly on a digital scanning bed and printing the results, a method that allows her to reuse materials and even compositions from one work to the next. Amato includes textiles ranging from camouflage to a MacDonald tartan to psychedelic flowers and polka dots; by simply adding or subtracting, she can shift a work’s formal and thematic pattern (see fig. 33). Achieving a visual balance between these cacophonous juxtapositions is a primary goal of the work, and is helped by the seamlessness of the scanning technique. Nevertheless it’s a precarious equilibrium, growing even header when historical imagery enters the mix, as in Fabric Collage (Placemats, Napkins, & Deathcamps), 2004 (see fig. 5). Here, dully pleasant geometric patterns layer beside the deep maroon of a Nazi concentration camp plan, whose identification—encouraged by an explicit title—abruptly interrupts the expected aesthetic pleasure of viewing.

That promise of visual pleasure suggested by Amato’s rich swaths of color and pattern is also complicated by the underlying organizational concern of the series “Dot Collages/Tree of Life Chronicles,” 2000–2006 (see fig. 35). Here composition is predetermined in both form and meaning; it is based on the Tree of Life, a central symbolic icon of kabbalistic teaching that vertically diagrams the ten Sephiroth, which are commonly understood as the ways in which God is made visible in the world. In Amato’s many versions of this Jewish mandala, the Sephiroth materialize as small circles of paper cut from a variety of found printed matter, including packaging, children’s drawings, and advertising. These rest atop equally unconventional grounds, from wallpaper to sewing patterns, whose linear designs serve to connect the dots. Links between individual Sephiroth are also drawn in traditional Tree of Life schema, but here they are made playfully and aesthetically, the happy accident of overlapping stripes, dots, and curlicues. The double title of the series seems to suggest that a purely formal reading can be as valid as a spiritual one.

Amato’s use of base materials to fashion sacred symbols found a new challenge in Tablets, 2005 (fig. 36), for which she turned to that most ubiquitous of common goods, commercial product packaging, to create the image of biblical tablets and the tabernacle. By opening flaps and flattening boxes, and then laying the results one atop the other—complete with glue spots and torn paper—she created assemblages that elevate the ugly everyday not just to the level of aesthetic worth but even further, to that of religious icon.
This work harks back to A Temple in Honor of Everyday Life Lived Every Day—An Unfinished Song of Love, 1996 (Fig. 34), an early room-size installation for which Amato covered eighteen columns in twenty-five thousand paper balls made from twelve years of personal notes, junk mail, photographs, and so on, to create a kind of secular sacred space that symbolically aired the artist's personal life and freed her from it, or at least from the materiality of it.

Each of these acts is simultaneously iconoclastic and spiritual, recognizing potential in the lowliest materials and contriving to redeem them through imaginative and unexpected reuse. Like so much of Amato's work, the stuff-of-life columns and the box-top tabernacles evidence a Midas-like vision—she is able to turn everything from junk mail to cereal boxes to cheap toys into gold. It's a powerfully useful vision in the everyday world of direct-mail campaigns, supermarkets, and dollar stores in which we live.

—LOKI WAXMAN