

NEW WORKS  
OLD STORIES  
80 ARTISTS AT THE PASSOVER TABLE

The Dorothy Saxe Invitational

ORGANIZED BY THE

CONTEMPORARY  
JEWISH MUSEUM

This catalogue was published to accompany The Dorothy Saxe Invitational exhibition *New Works/Old Story: 80 Artists at the Passover Table*, on view at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, February 27 through June 2, 2009.

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#### In Gratitude

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THE WORLDS OF ART, CRAFT, AND DESIGN traditionally were isolated in a hierarchical system that placed art at the apex of a triangle, with craft and design occupying the lower angles. This has changed dramatically in the past decade. The triangle has been transformed into a circle; today the fields are so interlinked, their boundaries virtually nonexistent, that a new class of objects that partakes of all three has emerged. Individuals once known as designers are also making one-of-a-kind objects, while artists identified with the "fine arts" of painting and sculpture are learning traditional handcraft techniques and using craft mediums to achieve their art. What we used to call "decorative arts" are now described by a world of objects in which practical and cultural functions are seamlessly merged. This phenomenon holds true in both the secular and the sacred arenas, and has special significance in the realm of ritual objects.

Rituals and traditions, like language, are bridges from the past to the present. Rather than being static, however, they evolve to reflect and express their own time. When the Contemporary Jewish Museum began a series of design Invitationals for ritual objects a quarter century ago, it recognized that rituals, and the decorative arts and designs through which they are celebrated, are perennially renewed with each generation; while such objects are forms that confirm and restate traditions, they are also important indicators of trends, tastes, issues, and concerns that engage both their makers and their owners. The charge to participating artists and designers was to "creatively explore traditional concepts and ideas and highlight their universal and ongoing relevance for a contemporary and diverse audience." This year's exhibition, a gathering of seder plates, reveals the diversity of approaches and intentions of the makers of an object central to the most widely celebrated Jewish holiday—Passover.

## The Seder Plate: Form and Evolution

DAVID REVERE MCFADDEN

Some of the designs submitted this year underscore traditional and even conservative values, while others challenge expectations. Materials called into service for this year's exhibition ranged from the familiar—ceramics, metal, and wood—to the more exotic and innovative—Plexiglas, paper, and even light. Many of the designs celebrate visual beauty through their rich patterns and colors, such as ceramist Bennett Bean's lush polychrome and gold leaf layered squares. For Bean, physical beauty is the appropriate way to express spiritual values: "The more rich and beautiful I can make the seder plate, the more it contributes to the experience." Richard Marquis offers a focus on tangible and physical beauty in his *Crazy Quilt Seder Plate (Thinking of Klaus)*, as does Robert Lipnick in his colorful evocation of



family stories through familiar motifs of landscape, architecture, household furnishings, and animals that crowd the surface of his seder plate.

The Passover meal reiterates profound family values and conveys them from one generation to another. Not surprisingly, several artists have designed seder plates that are especially “kid friendly,” such as Suzanne Silver’s charming *Seder Kit*, which encourages children to rearrange moveable elements to create their own design, or Kim Kelzer’s “puzzle” seder plate. With his typically wry and playful sense of humor, master furniture maker Garry Knox Bennett has created his own variation on the puzzle theme—a box in the form of a Star of David with secret drawers, hinged doors, and hollow receptacles with removable covers



each designed to fit a specific space. Bennett says he tried to “imagine children trying to fit it back together.”

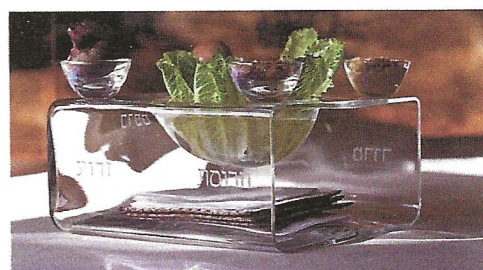
Garry Knox Bennett  
*Puzzle*, 2008  
Honduras rosewood,  
fabricated brass,  
23k gold and silver  
plating, paint

Fiber and the textile arts, which have been part of human culture virtually from its dawning, are powerful and persuasive agents of memory. The familiar, domestic nature of fiber conveys security, warmth, and protection, sentiments that are highlighted in the communal and nurturing context of the Passover meal.

Traditional handcraft techniques used to create the doily-like crocheted plate and cups titled *Grandmother’s Lace*, made by silversmith and jewelry artist Arline Fisch from silver and coated copper wire, privilege visual form over practical use. Nancy Koenigsberg’s conceptual work in knotted wire presents a structural shadow of the seder plate, delicate nets that, for the artist, “bring back memories of past people and past seder dinners.”

Ina Golub’s lush and complex embroidered and appliquéd seder plate symbolically evokes the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea. The recollection of Exodus takes a different turn in Norma Minkowitz’s wall-mounted seder plate. The artist has cast the plate in the form of a uterus, suggesting fecundity and birth as essential to the theme of liberation, freedom, and renewal. Minkowitz also uses the uterus as a metaphorical retelling of the parting of the Red Sea, a miraculous act that parallels the miracle of birth itself.

While these artists’ works in fiber tend toward complex forms and intricate details, other artists work within a mode of contemporary design that stresses simplicity and clarity of form. Hélène Aylon’s seder plate is made from colorless transparent glass that suggests the transparency of truth and the virtues of simplicity and humility. It is also intended to acknowledge, in the artist’s words, “the need for the liberation of [the] earth and for the liberation of its animals, its women, its oppressed and enslaved.” Josh Owen’s



Hélène Aylon  
*The Two Tiered Seder Plate:  
For the Earth and For the  
Enslaved; The Oppressed; The  
Animals; The Women*, 2008  
Glass engraved and cloth



clever folding seder plate is a ritual object “physically activated by use.” An abstract beauty of material and form is achieved by Richard Deutsch in his seder plate made from a single block of delicately striated marble carved with seven simple concavities to hold the symbolic foods of Passover.

Bringing to the design of the seder plate their own personal histories, narratives, and anecdotes, the artists frequently make use of ordinary objects of daily use that have become intimately connected to these stories. For some, the creation of a seder plate is an opportunity to recall and reflect upon family history. For example, Elliot Ross’s unusual seder plate—an enameled advertising serving tray from a bar, positioned atop an empty bottle of Budweiser

and containing an ashtray with cigarettes and a cigar, a shot glass, and a glass beer flute—recalls the story of his grandfather, Jake Rosenbloom, who ran Jake’s Liquors and Jake’s Tavern in Chicago, a business inherited by his father and his two uncles. The four men are depicted in a black-and-white photograph on the serving tray, a poignant tribute to family and history entirely in keeping with the celebratory meal. Nancy Selvin also uses family memorabilia, selected from research on her parents’ “tumultuous lives.”

*Abundance in Lean Times* is Mildred Howard’s installation work made for the exhibition. It is composed of 28 Manischewitz wine bottles that have been modified by attaching new labels bearing portraits of the artist’s friends and family. The work speaks to the universal values of suffering and joy, and issues of freedom and bondage as experienced both by Jews and by African Americans. For Howard, Manischewitz wine is a parallel to *Night Train*, an affordable sweet wine imbued with cultural meaning. Wine can serve as a mode of exchange and a catalyst for understanding. Howard feels that when the Manischewitz wine bottle is “considered as part of a ceremony or an exchange between people, its role within a complex network of memories and associations emerges.”

In contrast to relationships that bind friends together, as in Howard’s work, relationships between strangers who may never meet are at the core of Rachel Schreiber’s wall installation of six discs printed with photographs that acknowledge the life and importance of the workers that produce the foods used in the seder. “Passover,” observes Schreiber, “provides us with a time to reflect upon the invisibility of the people who grow our food, build our buildings, and generally produce the goods and services we use daily.” The placement of the six images on the wall is important to the artist, as it causes the viewer to look directly at the face and into the eyes of the stranger, rather than looking down at the various foods arranged on the seder plate.

As I studied the seder plates in the exhibition, an especially pertinent theme emerged. As stated at the outset, traditions and rituals evolve to reflect current concerns, issues,



Mildred Howard  
*Abundance in Lean Times*,  
2008 (detail)  
28 bottles  
Installation/assemblage  
Courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim,  
San Francisco (co-published  
at Magnolia)

and ideas, thus renovating and bringing new life and meaning to the objects that are essential to the ritual. The work of a considerable number of artists and designers in this year's exhibition was informed by the maker's awareness of the current state of our environment, and our need to nourish and repair the earth (*tikkun olam*). Many of the artists recycled discarded, overlooked, and ordinary materials and transformed them into objects of new meaning. Barbara Ravizza uses a stack of humble paper plates with pop-up cutouts for her seder plate. The artist focuses on hope and freedom; her cutouts are familiar motifs such as a rainbow, a bridge, a doorway, and remind the viewer of hopes and aspirations to create a more peaceful and nurturing world. Paper plates are also highly portable, possibly a subtle reference to the consumption of food by the Israelites as they fled Egypt.

Harriete Estel Berman is known for her works—sculpture as well as jewelry—built from deconstructed tin cans, found objects, and various metals. Her *Eons of Exodus*, built from tin cans and vintage toy appliances, references the ancient Egyptian pyramids as well as the angularity of Daniel Libeskind's design for the new Contemporary Jewish Museum building. Exodus is depicted in a procession of silhouetted figures, partially drawn from a 1923 Union Haggadah used by her family. The four sides also depict landmarks important to the story of the Jewish people and their long-sought-after liberation. In addition to creating a poignant reminder of history, the theme of the work is tolerance and understanding; the artist's decision to use recycled materials also speaks to her belief in the importance of healing the world.

Karyl Sisson and Amy Berk both employ traditional handcraft techniques. Sisson's seder plate recycles plaited strips torn from a family tablecloth. Berk's *Why?* is embroidered on a stained linen cloth that belonged to the family of a friend who had converted to Judaism. It is displayed in an embroidery hoop that the artist intends to reference "the seder plate as well as the continuity of tradition and fertility/rebirth." Wendy Wahl's conceptual seder plate—a low wooden table with a coiled extension of cut paper—reuses a Haggadah to evoke the sense of continuity and endless renewal of meaning embedded in the Passover ritual. Kay Sekimachi is an artist known for her work in fibers ranging from paper to synthetic monofilament. In *Order of the Passover & 36 Shells* she underscores the meaning of seder—order—by cutting up and incorporating the beginning text of the Haggadah, which contains a list of the steps in the Passover seder ritual.

Other artists using found and revalued materials include Liz Mamorsky, who has used wooden foundry patterns from a shipyard, and Lisa Kokin who shreds and re-forms *The Jewish Book of Why* as a conceptual plate. A variant view of recycling is taken by Beth Kattelman, who deals with our "complicated relationship with beauty and consumption" in



a ceramic work with elements cast from the throwaways and detritus of popular culture—souvenirs, knickknacks, and kitsch.



Lynne Avadenka  
*World Book*, 2008  
Cardboard globe, wood,  
paint, ink

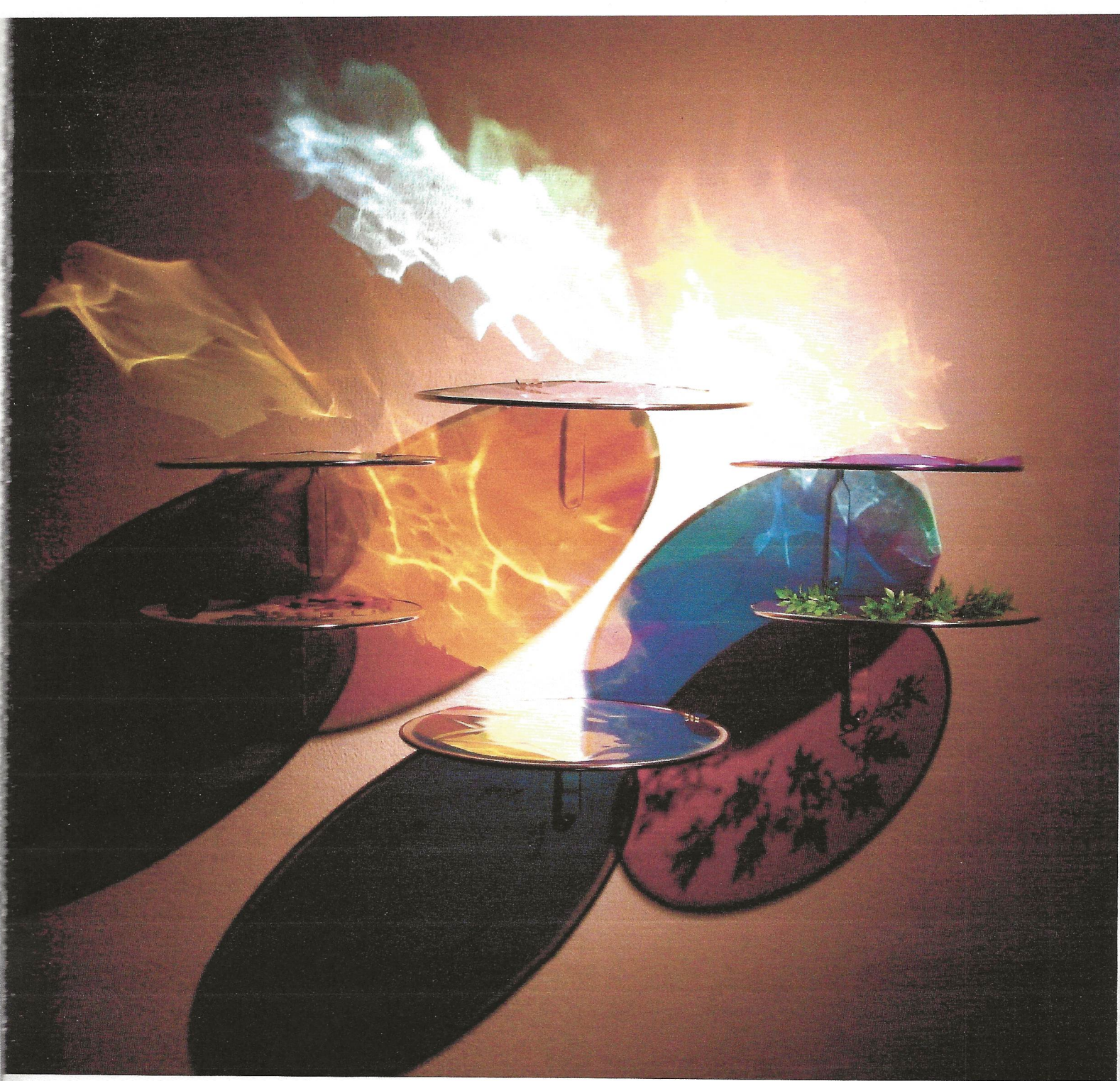
Several works seem to express the spirit of both the exhibition and the Passover tradition with particular finesse. Lynne Avadenka presents a cardboard globe inscribed with the entire text read at the seder to suggest “a cycle, renewal and infinity.” It is also intended to express the universality of the ethical and moral principles outlined at the seder. Harley Swedler’s *Frozen in Time* is created from recycled disposables—packaging from Passover foodstuffs. His conceptual plate, a collage of words, colors, and patterns, is, for the artist, a critical commentary on the “value placed on ritual and meaning,” as well as on consumer culture.

Light as a metaphor for the soul is central to Cheselyn Amato’s installation of six screen discs fitted with transparent color gels to create an aura of radiant and colorful light. While the six discs obviously represent the six symbolic foods of the seder, it is the invisible presence of light that engages the viewer, something the artist believes is “recognized by the gift of spectacle, by the joy of seeing, by the work of art as catalyst and carrier, bearer and witness.” For all of the lessons learned in the seder, it is joy that binds them together. And this seems a fitting way to conclude this overview of the Invitational exhibition.

Are the works featured in this year’s exhibition art, design, or craft? I believe that these categories are insufficient to capture the tangible and spiritual significance of the works. They were made by individuals who identify themselves as artists, designers, or craftspeople. Their ultimate value to those who view them may be in what they express, more than what they are called.

*David Revere McFadden is Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.*





**Cheselyn Amato**

*Seder Plate*, 2008

Color radiant mirror film,  
splatter covers, letters,  
symbols, sprigs, clips, thread