

Cheselyn Amato  
Artist's Statement  
New Work/Old Story, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, 2010



My Seder plate is composed of six 12" round aluminum screens with handles (splatter covers for pots) mounted on the wall like plates/platters – handles bent at a 90 degree angle with the screens then at a 90 degree angle to the wall - in an elliptical form holding a variety of shaped pieces (i.e. Magen David) of radiant film as well as a number of other objects that are lit from above. Colored light phenomena occur by reflection above the screen plates and by projection below due to the radiant film and shadows that are also cast by the objects. The six screens represent the six symbolic categories of the Seder plate. In one variation, a hexagonal metal hand-held food grater presents like an archetypal synagogue; like Mount Sinai as a canopy over Israel; like the great cloud that settles over the camp in the desert; like the blood of the lamb that protects from death...

Always in my work there is a play between G-d within and without, that is, the relationship between the names Adonai, Yud Hey Vav Hey, Before You I Stand Always and Shekinah, Indwelling Presence.

And so, amidst the everyday every day, by the grace of ordinary objects that represent the six symbols, the numinous is revealed and presents itself. So much presence occurs in light and color by virtue of minimal actual material. I feel that one of the gifts of Judaism is that it gives a way of being and becoming human, and all the tools we need are embodied in the six categories of the Seder plate and the Seder ceremony. This is the key to growth as a human being, and which ultimately leads us toward tikkun olam and wholeness.

The reflection and projection dynamic plus the unexpected objects that represent the symbols are meant to arouse awareness and sensation regarding the past, present and future, of continuity within difference and evolution, that we can be moved to recognize what is to be recognized by the gift of spectacle, by the joy of seeing, by the work of art as catalyst and carrier, bearer and witness.

All becomes whole in the active dynamic between above and below...

I am engaged by the power of ritual, of cycles and repetition, by what is revealed in the opportunity to think, feel and act in response to a structure for experience that you can continue to choose. Repetition is a tool for heightened consciousness – because it is a circumstance to take notice of subtleties; it is a marvelous armature for learning, teaching, renewing, reinventing, rewriting. Pesach and the Seder plate are powerful and constructive iteration and reiteration of being human given through a very specific form, and I think that we as humans deeply need and enjoy forms by which we can engage. Specifically, about the Seder plate – I love the six “pneumonics” – the six different territories that are delineated (beitzah, z’roa, maror, charoset, chazeret and karpas), that parallel the six points on the Magen David and the six days of creation. Not only do I love the meaning, the significances, but also how beautiful the elements look together on the plate announced and celebrated – and familiar – and honored again and again and again. Rituals are active not passive in the sense that historical time is suspended in a certain way, and we are then and now at the same time.

I am passionate about meaning, about the exquisite delimitation that identity brings to the experience of being. And, I say delimitation, which has a very different meaning than limitation. Delimitation is a way of freedom that occurs because of the choice to affiliate, to identify with, to embrace the reverberations of authenticity that become clear...because of listening, because of being available to receiving, because of desire that belongs to being human. Authenticity’s presence can be recognized, known, seen, felt, heart, touched as one travels deep into the territories of inheritance as well as in the worlds that we come to know through the discernment of affinities and by the good fortunes of true influences.

What never ceases to thrill me and give me strength in this life is that there is always something offered, something given and so available to receive – when I pay attention with all my soul – in Torah and the day-to-day way of living, including the ordinary days of the week, Shabbat and the holiday cycle that Judaism offers in all the many different practical forms that now coexist.

Passover – Pesach – is given to teach how to see back and forward in the present – to be infinite and eternal while being finite, bound in time and in space, mortal. As mortals, as human beings, we remember and forget; this is what makes us what we are, eternally engaged in re-discovering

ourselves, in a perpetual acting of creating. The Passover ritual is given as a (re)enactment of the dialectic between forgetting and remembering which is the only way humans do/can exist.

The blood on the doorpost means that we can be victorious in our efforts to overcome negative limitation; it signals that we have made successful effort.

The symbols/signs on the Seder Plate are/represent the means at our disposal to assist in tikkun olam - healing of worlds – the self to the whole globe itself, and even beyond perhaps. The blood is like a chuppah – as challenging an idea as it may first appear – blood is covenant; it is the commitment that we make to what counts. Of course, within the context of contemporary discourse – that is, topical conversation at any historical moment – the particular language used – the images, poetics, metaphors that appear – can be difficult to receive. And so, again, a choice is offered to find your way in it, or not. As you can, as you will.

About the symbols: Where there is light, there is also darkness. I think the Seder plate symbols work together dynamics to talk about the oppositions that exist to keep us awake and attentive in this life.

Beitzah, the roasted egg, is to me both a symbol and sign of the potential for wholeness and (re)birth; it represents the strength and totality that each of us is and has so speak. At the same time, a roasted egg indicated an aspect of vulnerability. The egg roasted points more to the inevitability of and ever-present possibility of death. It becomes a symbol of mourning, and it also points to the requirement of sacrifice; that it takes hard work to become whole; and that we must be appreciative of the opportunity to become whole. Where there is bitterness (maror); there is sweetness (charoset) and vice versa. Where there is binding force and sweetness (charoset), there are also forces of fracture and bitterness in differing degrees (maror and chazeret). Karpas, embodying the simplicity that can abide, simple innocence, fresh and uncomplex, is then made poignant by dipping in salt water that represents tears. These can be tears of suffering, but also of redemption. Also, green leafy things that have so much in common can also operate very differently – so pay attention is the message. And, z'roa is a reiteration and reinforcement of the idea that we must admit who and what we are including our ability to be hunters, in the sense of doing what must be done, of being strong in the face of necessity and challenge. To admit the contradictory nature of life, and in this case, that there is loss on some level in the process of gain, that sacrifices are made to honor life – we are asked to acknowledge the actions we take to survive, to live, to be victorious, to honor Yah, YudHeyVavHey.