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The Arts

A New Take On Text Messages

A crop of emerging women writers and artists is teasing out fresh interpretations from traditional Jewish texts.

Randi Sherman
Staff Writer

After immersing herself in the language and storyline of Genesis, poet Carly Sachs — who had never connected her work to her heritage — is now writing a series of poems



Actor-dancer Etta Abramson is giving new life to little-known biblical figure Serach bat Asher.

KAE HEWCOOMB

about Adam and Eve. "At this point in my life, I'm thinking about relationships, romance, what being in a relationship really means," says Sachs, 29, who has been studying at Drisha, the advanced Jewish learning center for women on the Upper West Side.

Sachs, whose debut collection in 2006 garnered a Washington, D.C.-area writers' prize, says, "My studies have provided a whole new tapestry to weave into my poems."

Etta Abramson, a 24-year-old actor

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and dancer, is also grappling with Jewish texts, finding new meanings in ancient words and stories. After months spent learning Gemara and halacha at Drisha, Abramson chose as the subject of a new solo performance piece the biblical figure Serach bat Asher, "a witness to Jewish history." In Abramson's hands, Serach eventually bears witness in modern-day New York. "There is a shrine to Serach in India," says Abramson. "She is a vessel of all the events in time."

For documentary filmmaker Laura Wiessen, whose new film focuses on converts to Judaism, her study at Drisha helped provide a deeper understanding of the conversion process. The lesson she learned from those making the long journey to a Jewish life, she says, is that "each person has the right to read the text and argue with it, struggle with it." Wiessen is now working on how to weave Jewish text into the film; it will certainly be found in accompanying educational materials, she said.

The three artists are among 16 who just completed Drisha's Arts Fellowship program, double the number in last year's inaugural class. Working at the intersection of Judaism, feminism and art, the Drisha fellows spent a full year at the institute, some taking courses in biblical Hebrew and interpretation, others studying Talmud and halacha. They are part of a widening trend that finds women artists increasingly reinterpreting — and challenging — Jewish tradition. In a sign of the growing acceptance of such art, when San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum opened in June, it chose as its first major exhibition the text-inspired "In the Beginning: Artists Respond to Genesis." Three of the seven artists featured are Jewish women.

And later this year The Jewish Museum here will feature the work of 31-year-old muralist Leola Bermanzohn, referred to as "an emerging artist" by museum chief curator Norman Kleeblatt. She will create a mural based on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

This new crop of artists follows on the heels of Jewishly knowledgeable visual artists such as Helene Aylon, Bruria Finkel and Ruth Weisberg, all of whom have wrestled with, questioned and confronted "the patriarchal premises embedded within Judaism," according to Gloria Feman Orenstein, a University of Southern California comparative literature professor who has written on Jewish women artists and gender issues.

Author and Jewish feminist Nessa Rapoport has been

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After her Drisha study, poet Carly Sachs is now working on "relationship" series based on Adam and Eve.
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observing this trend as it has developed. "This is the first era, and it's very recent, that Jewish women in critical mass can be Jewishly literate," she said. "I think it is easier for women to make art that draws on or engages with the Jewish textual tradition because we were never authorities in rabbinic Judaism."

Eve Grubin, the arts fellowships coordinator at Drisha, believes there is "tremendous interest right now" in Jewish women artists who blend text and art, not only at Drisha but in other fellowships, journals and programs. She noted the increase of poets like Sachs in this year's class, who now make up a quarter of the fellows.

"It's an explosion from all different places, a celebration of our Jewish heritage... There was a time when many Jews felt you couldn't be an artist and be [religiously] observant," Grubin said, but those times are gone.

"[Our arts fellows] are steeping themselves in Jewish learning, taking that experience to the work they do as professionals," Grubin said. "They are grappling with tradition... creating transcendent connections to tradition."

Abramson, now 24 and living in New York, has been trying to forge those connections since she was in college. As a senior at York University in her native Toronto, she created a theater company that focused on women in Jewish text. Although the project "never got on its feet," it resonates in an excerpt from her work-in-progress, "The Consistency of Flour," which she performed at the Drisha fellows' end-of-year performance event on June 16. After immersing herself in Gemara and halacha, Abramson — with director Yoni Oppenheim — conceived the piece, a solo performance in which she acts, sings and dances.

Abramson's piece follows the immortal Serach all the way to contemporary New York. The work incorporates song and dance to help bring the text alive. "Judaism lives inside your body," says Abramson. "It takes a place inside yourself, not just in your mind. Let the text become a song, become a piece of theater. Instead of just putting it in a ketubah, put it in the body and let it grow."

Wiessen, who lives on the Lower East Side, had been writing and directing for the news media for "a long time" before she decided to turn a serious eye to docu-

mentary filmmaking. At the Drisha performance, she screened for the first time parts of "More Beloved by Gd" [her spelling], her film that follows a diverse group of Jews-to-be through the conversion process. Among them are a hip-hop artist named Yitz, a young mother named Jennifer and a young woman named Rain. (The trailer can be seen on YouTube.)

"I had been living in Jerusalem, traveling back and forth to New York," Wiessen said of the film's genesis. "I was meeting really interesting converts from all cultures and backgrounds" — African, Dominican and Dutch — "and I was fascinated by what drew them to Judaism." Wiessen was compelled by their stories and determined to teach others about the little-publicized conversion phenomena.

While so many organizations focus on Jews intermarrying and becoming more secular, "people are not looking at who is coming in and why," she said. "What is it to be a Jew in the 21st century?"

One of the things that draws converts to Judaism is text, Wiessen believes. "[They] tell me this a lot... [Text] isn't just for the priestly class, the teachers."

As one of only three visual artists in the Drisha program, Lia Lynn Rosen combines Jewish elements with European and Native American artistic traditions of ceramic art. She also brings a unique perspective, as a Jewish woman living in Albuquerque, N.M.

Her work consists mainly of ritual objects, chanukiot, ceremonial goblets and prayer bowls for anything from a wedding to breast cancer survival, as well as mezuzot and an indigo women's tallit-poncho. Her Web site, ClayKodesh.com, is "making a holy place for the visual, ceremonial arts," Rosen said. "My work is more about the ceremonial, the practice and prayer, tradition than halacha."

Rosen's work is also creating "groundedness" for Judaism. "This is a way to say we have a corporeal culture that's going to last," she said. "Living in the Southwest, the people who made pottery stayed in one place, creating. Now it's as if we have a landed past."

Rosen sees herself as continuing the long Jewish tradition of "taking from where I live," adding Jewish calligraphy to the art methods she observes in her surroundings.

As an artist-educator, Rosen will use the knowledge she gained at the Drisha program in her work with students from kindergarten through 12th grade, and even beyond if she is hired as director of education at her local synagogue. "I want to teach what I've learned. You can teach Hebrew, Talmud, through the arts," she said. She sees



Fascinated by converts' interest in Jewish texts, filmmaker Laura Wiessen is looking for ways to work Jewish tradition into her documentary on the conversion process.

her work [Jewish] through : month, sl to the East teach a co Pueblo p New Jerse clair Art A

Sachs debut po lection, " sequence, 2006 Wa Writers' F House Bc and who creative v

George Washington University, a connection to Judaism in her v when she began the collection as] ate thesis at The New School.

"I thought I was writing about v said, telling how the theme of wat into a narrative about a female I survivor. She had seen an exhib Brooklyn Museum, "Art Auschw as usual, "life was filtering in. You for it; it just explodes onto the pag

Her learning at Drisha has had lar effect. After a class on Ger focus is on Adam and Eve and Raba, considered the classic, T era legends that illuminate the E work brings the words of wom fore. In most of the texts the gri ed, "there was no women's w here needs to be," she said. " to wonder, if there had been a voice, what would she say?"

This kind of implicit challengi dition can be liberating for artists

Artist/educator Tobi Kahn, a w artist in Jewish circles whose work abstraction and Jewish tradition, that, as outsiders to tradition, we take more artistic license. "If you something is applicable to you, much more freedom when you de he says. "It's a matter of obligati the power of choice."

For the night of the Drisha perf Sachs worked with two other fe dancer and choreographer Dage and composer Basya Schechter — that incorporated passages from " sequence" along with music and c

"[Poetry] is my form. I'm so c with the page, a tiny world not r ger than a napkin," she says in her recent collaboration with pe artists. "Moses breaks the tablet; letters fly off; that's what it's lik laborate." The result is that, from idea, a completely new and differ ence is born.

Sachs reports that her exper Drisha was so moving and he her work that she's applied to ei fellowship another year. "It's r that you look around the room so much talent and energy. "Tha want to stay." ■