

Like Jacob, we lay our heads on a pillow of stone to dream of angels. Bound to earth, dust to dust, we can—through art, through love—construct a ladder to transcendence, compelled to make something beautiful of loss, of limitation: the rent fabric of our unredeemed world.

All of my work has been a quest to distill what we remember into essential images, into archetypes that allow the past to be transformed by imagination. Art responds to the capacity of the soul to be at home in the world while signaling transcendence, to be faithful to ancient truths while leaping toward a future at the horizon's curve. Although Judaism has emphasized words and interpretation, I have found the visual elements of the tradition equally illuminating. For me, the life of the spirit is integrally bound up with the beauty of

the created world. My work is abstract, and yet always in relationship to the physical world, conveying its grandeur and simplicity.

TOBI KAHN *has been committed and steadfast in the pursuit of the redemptive possibilities of art in all mediums including painting, sculpture, meditative spaces and photography. His work has been the subject in over sixty solo museum exhibitions following his selection as one of nine artists to be included in the 1985 Guggenheim Museum exhibition, New Horizons in American Art. Kahn's work is in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum; the Houston Museum of Fine Art; the Phillips Collection; the Jewish Museum, NY; the Yale University Art Gallery; the Albright Knox Art Gallery; the 9/11 Memorial Museum; and the Minneapolis Museum of Fine Art, among others.*

Douglas Rosenberg

Song of Songs

In a moment in which we are experiencing a generational shift among Jewish identifying artists to a more inclusive and polyvocal, fluid understanding of Jewish identity, the politics and visual culture of Jewishness are foregrounded in astounding new ways. From graphic novels to digital art and highly charged dance and performance, to theater, music and literature, we see both a return to ritual and a search for new narratives of the contemporary Jewish experience. Thus, the field is expanded even while acknowledging its own histories.

While trying to define it, the modernist art critic Harold Rosenberg has referred to, the "ambiguous situation" of Jewish Art.¹ Such ambiguities are the product of resistance; a denial by artists of a Jewish visual canon, and of the constituents of an accepted visual

*Song of Songs is a
performance without an audience,*

in a quiet empty space,

*a no-space surrounded by
objects that move me,*

*dried and bronze cast sunflowers
from my garden, a small bell,*

tended to with love and affection,

*and excerpts from Song of Songs
printed on fabric that I can
wrap myself in,*

like a tallit,

*imagined on
quiet contemplative walks.*

Douglas Rosenberg. Song of Songs performance. Design and layout by Jacob Li Rosenberg. Dance Today (Mahol Akhshav) 38, August 2020.

Song of Songs is a rumination on our ability to recast narratives of faith into embodied performance.



Douglas Rosenberg. Song of Songs performance. Photos by Michael Eckblad. Dance Today (Mahol Akhshav) 38, August 2020.



Douglas Rosenberg. *Song of Songs performance*. Photos by Michael Eckblad. *Dance Today* (Mahol Akhshav) 38, August 2020.

culture of Jewishness generally. Staci Boris, who curated *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* at the Spertus Museum in 2008 alludes to the idea that contemporary Jewish artists are “Free to choose their affiliations, they are Jewish culturally, religiously, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, partially, biologically, or invisibly” further expanding Rosenberg’s notion of the “ambiguity” of Jewish art to include a kind of ambiguous Jewishness as well. And as the culture shifts into a post-modern present, a fluid and indeterminate present, Jewish culture itself becomes a space in which issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, politics, history, and nationality are transposed into a new visual culture; it’s art is conceptual and often performative. It poses questions gleaned from a history of wandering; through landscapes, through ideas, through identities, and through texts both sacred and otherwise. Artists of what Boris calls, the *Post-Jewish Generation* do not lack faith. Perhaps they have given into the hallucinatory effects of faith. As Rosenberg noted,

“To be engaged with the aesthetics of self has liberated the Jew as artist”

Perhaps this “engagement with the esthetics of self” has created a liminal space for the creation of a new version of Jewish Art, one situated within unfamiliar territory.

Imagine wandering in the desert for 40 years with little food or water. Imagine ethnic cleansing and Holocaust, imagine a biblical degree of suffering and the onerous confines of practiced faith itself. What sort of images might that conjure in the mind of a wanderer if one who asks the right questions?

The idea of epigenetic traumaⁱⁱ proposes that we carry the biological traces of our ancestors’ experience. Perhaps the transgenerational effect of such a condition is a rethinking of the world in a new and confusing visual culture, one that looks unfamiliar and even grotesque at times. Yet, we recognize something of ourselves in its aura.

Song of Songs is a rumination on our ability to recast narratives of faith into embodied performance.

DOUGLAS ROSENBERG is professor of Video/ Performance/ Installation in the Art Department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an artist working with performance and photography.

i Rosenberg, Harold, “Is There a Jewish Art,” first presented as a lecture at The Jewish Museum in New York and subsequently published in *Commentary*, 1966.

ii Carey, Benedict, Can We Really Inherit Trauma? December 10, 2018, *New York Times*.