

An Icon Inside an Enigma?

Robin Cembalest

A few years ago, an intriguingly titled book landed on my desk: *Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art* (Thames & Hudson). Its author, Anthony Julius, who is better known as Princess Di's lawyer, did not display a deep sophistication in matters of art. But he did make an interesting case for the inherent Jewishness of the Soviet expatriate duo Komar & Melamid, a (now split) team of conceptual artists who played havoc with Stalinist statuary. Despite the fact that their mock-heroic images are figurative, Julius argued, their theme is subverting idolatry – the ultimate expression of the spirit of the Second Commandment.

For Julius, as for many of us, the process of defining Jewish art, or what is Jewish in art, is both parlor game and intellectual exercise. When I was arts editor of the *Forward*, I quoted Ross Bleckner defining himself as Talmudic, which was rather a stretch. I covered the movie *Basquiat* because Julian Schnabel put his ethnic-looking parents in it. In other venues, I teased out the Jewish aspects of conceptual art by figures like Lawrence Weiner and Sophie Calle. Clearly such efforts reveal as much about who is doing the assessing as they do about the figures we are claiming for our team.

The latest book to land in my pile of publications that seek to define, explicate, expand, or restrict the genre of Jewish art is *My Grandparents, My Parents and I: Jewish Art and Culture* (Prestel), by Edward van Voolen, curator of the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam. The lavishly illustrated volume features some of the usual suspects found in such roundups: those who might be termed “Jewish Artists” (Marc Chagall, R. B. Kitaj); Jewish artists (Barnett Newman, Christian Boltanski); and artists whose work has Jewish content (Larry Rivers, Grisha Bruskin, Ilya Kabakov, Nancy Spero, William Kentridge). Van Voolen also includes some less usual ones: the photographer Nan Goldin, for example, appears under the category “rebellion against conventions” – speciously, I thought, until I remembered her 2004 autobiographical slide show *Sisters, Saints*,

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and Sibyls, in which she appears burning her arm with a cigarette. Is this a strategy for relating her own suffering to the Holocaust, whether conscious or not?

The one picture that definitely does not belong in van Voolen's book is Frida Kahlo's 1936 autobiographical painting *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)*, which gives the volume its title and cover. This painting has long been viewed as a depiction of the artist's hybrid identity – European, Jewish, Catholic, Mexican. But as the German scholars Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle report in their recent biography *Frida's Vater: Der Photograph Wilhelm Kahlo*, Guillermo Kahlo, as the photographer was known in Mexico, came not from a Hungarian Jewish family but from a German Lutheran one. While the revelation throws an awkward shadow on the multiplicity of efforts to tease out the Jewish identity of the multiply hyphenated Frida, it also raises the question of why we may have been a bit too eager to believe that she had one. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe her art as crypto-Lutheran.

Which brings us to what might be called crypto-Jewish art. A couple of years ago, I attended a conference of the Council of American Jewish Museums titled "Converso as Metaphor," an apt image for the submerged Jewish identity of many modern and contemporary artists. Take Man Ray, who was notoriously guarded about his Jewish heritage. Although the artist, the son of a Russian tailor, took pains to conceal from the public his immigrant upbringing, it did creep into his work, as Milly Heyd of The Hebrew University has expounded in detail: consider those sinister images of irons, coat hangers, and peddlers. Comte de Lautréamont's famous adage "beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" provided the inspiration for *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, Man Ray's mysterious assemblage of a sewing machine wrapped in a blanket. This readymade sculpture, conceived in 1920, is considered an icon of Dada. But in an age of assimilation, perhaps it could also be considered an iconic representation of Jewish identity in art.