

The Jewish Identity Project

Anyone wandering in to “The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography” at the Jewish Museum in New York could be excused for wondering if they’re in the right place. Staring down from the walls are faces that are Asian, African, Latino, Iranian. These are Jews? Of course, that’s the whole point of this ambitious and compelling show. Especially in the last century, conversion, intermarriage and adoption have added new layers to Jewish identity, while Jews from places as far afield as Ethiopia and Cuba have come forward to claim their heritage. As the show proves, reducing Jewish faith and culture to a few Jackie Mason jokes and a bowl of matzoh ball soup just won’t cut it any more.

How do you represent an identity that’s endlessly evolving? Start with some very talented photographers, says curator Susan Chevlowe, who commissioned ten original projects for the show. Artists like Dawoud Bey, Nikki S. Lee and Chris Verene “were already creating works that explored issues of ethnic and racial identity, or geographic displacement,” Chevlowe says. Whether Jewish or not, these artists “were sympathetic to taking up the challenges we were putting forth,” the curator adds.

Take Nikki S. Lee. In previous work, the Korean-born photographer inserted herself into various subcultures, photographing herself dressed as a punk rocker, an elderly woman, or a Midwesterner. For the Jewish Museum show, Lee “came up with the idea of staging a Jewish wedding,” Chevlowe says. Cindy Sherman couldn’t have pulled it off

better: in five vibrant color images that open the show, Lee is a glowing bride attended by smiling guests and a fatherly rabbi. The images are so joyful that questions of race and ethnicity begin to seem unimportant.

But being part of the tribe isn’t always that easy—especially if you’re a minority within a minority. Several works in the show deal with issues faced by Jews with mixed roots. In Dawoud Bey’s gorgeous, large-scale color portrait “Samantha,” a teenage girl slumps on a table, projecting typical adolescent ennui. In an accompanying audio interview, Samantha explains that her mother is Catholic and her father Jewish, but “I’d feel so uncomfortable calling myself Catholic-Jewish.” Similarly caught between cultures, Avishai Mekonen is an Ethiopian Israeli who spent his first days in the United States wondering where all the Jews of color were. His video installation, “Judaism and Race in America” (made with Shari Rothfarb Mekonen), uncovers this hidden minority. It’s a video project, but the camera often lingers on faces for seconds at a time, showing the subjects’ beauty and dignity.

The focus on diversity is particularly notable because in the past, Jewishness has often been pictured in a limited, stereotypical way—even by Jews. Chevlowe cites a 1978 book, “Behold a Great Image: The Contemporary Jewish Experience in Photographs,” which, she says, like Edward Steichen’s famous 1955 “Family of Man” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, glossed over differences between people in an attempt to heal



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On view at New York’s Jewish Museum: “Postville: Triplets,” 2004 (opposite page) and “Jacob, 2005” (above).

wounds after World War II. More recently, Frédéric Brenner’s 1996 “Jews/America/A Representation,” while visually stunning, focused on “iconic moments” in mainstream Judaism, Chevlowe says—though

his subsequent book “Diaspora” was more far-ranging.

In addition to examining the diversity of Jewish identity, “The Jewish Identity Project” also looks at how identity is affected by location. The ultra-orthodox Jews in Andrea Robbins and Max Becher’s “Brooklyn Abroad” series live in Postville, Iowa, where they moved in the 1980s to establish a kosher meat processing plant. They wear prayer shawls and skullcaps at all times, but can also be seen engaging in typical small-town activities like lawn-mowing and fishing. Chris Verene’s quiet, thoughtful “Prairie Jews” series shows Jews in Verene’s hometown of Galesburg, Illinois, who have blended seamlessly into their environment (“no one...would know who is Jewish without asking,” Verene writes). Still, Judaism remains a point of pride—and in a funny twist, a teenage girl Verene photographs in a Jewish cemetery later admits that she “isn’t really Jewish, but wanted to be.”

In the end, the exhibition is about individual stories within a larger story—something you don’t have to be Jewish to appreciate. “This is an exhibition not just about Jewishness, but about the experience of being American,” Chevlowe says, adding, “I just want people to be touched by the stories that they hear and they see.”

—Sarah Coleman

“The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography” is on view through January 29 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, New York. (212) 423-3200. Web site: www.thejewishmuseum.org. In March, the exhibition will travel to the Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 North Sepulveda Boulevard in Los Angeles. (310) 440-4500. Web site: www.skirball.org.



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