

moment

We Fight to Build A Free World: An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz

BY FRANCES BRENT | Arts & Culture, Latest



Installation view of We Fight to Build a Free World: An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz, October 1, 2020-January 24, 2021, The Jewish Museum, New York. Photo: Kris Graves

When you step into the Jewish Museum's current show, "We Fight to Build a Free World, An Exhibition by Jonathan Horowitz," on view through February 7, 2021, you will be surrounded by a visual mash-up. In the first room, floor to ceiling wallpaper of Andy Warhol portraits, arrayed in photobooth-like strips, creates a hyper-energetic backdrop. On one wall hangs Bernard Perlin's rendering, painted in the meticulous style he developed as an artist correspondent for *Life* and *Fortune* magazines in the 1940s, of two Orthodox Jewish boys standing behind a graffiti-covered newspaper kiosk. Across the room, is the colossal African-American artist Robert Colescott's raucous and vitriolic 1975 "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware." What does Perlin's delicate realism have to do with Colescott's brash and cartoonish parody? And what do either of them have to do with Gerardus Duyckinck's early-18th-century depiction of merchant trader Moses Levy prominently displayed on wainscoting above the mansion's Gilded Age marble fireplace? The architectural decoration surrounding the august portrait is a reminder that the Jewish Museum was once the private home of Felix M. Warburg, a member of the large, extended Jewish banking family. And that's an important clue, since the exhibition—essentially a four-room installation of work selected, duplicated, or created by the conceptual artist Jonathan Horowitz—is intended to focus attention on questions of personal identity, Jewish identity, attacks on identity, and, ultimately, on the liberal tradition of fighting for social justice. The curatorial juxtapositions purposefully slow you down and keep you off balance because Horowitz is challenging the viewer to join him in a process of reflection and self-examination.

In 2017 the Jewish Museum invited Horowitz, who is based in New York, to create an exhibition that would consider the troubling escalation of anti-Semitism; but in the ensuing years the project expanded in response to increased attacks against immigrants, Blacks, Muslims, Latinx and members of the gay community. Working with sculpture, video, sound installation and photography, Horowitz, who was born in 1966, has always been associated with the Pop Art era's tongue-in-cheek sensibility as well as philosophical questions about authenticity and mechanical reproduction first raised

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by the German Jewish theoretician Walter Benjamin. Both his ironic discernment and his interest in copies and pairings ground the exhibit in an idiosyncratic and highly personal logic.

The title of the show is based on a subtle and powerful painting, “We Fight for a Free World!” by Ben Shahn, which is on display at the center of the installation. Shahn, born in Jewish Kovno, came to the United States as a child and became known for lyrically expressive and socially conscious murals during the Depression years. Just after America entered World War II, Shahn, who for a while worked for the United States Office of War Management, invited a number of artists to make posters illustrating how democratic values stood in opposition to fascism. Although the preponderance of the requested work was never executed, Shahn, in a modest and tightly composed composition, reproduced small versions of five of the pictures, painting them in a horizontal strip: “Suppression” by Edward Millman, “Starvation” by Kathe Kollwitz, “Slavery,” which Shahn did himself, “Torture” by Yasuo Kuniyoshi and “Murder” by Bernard Perlin. By including German, Jewish and Japanese artists in the project, Shahn underscored his conviction that we must distinguish between national enemies and individuals from enemy nations. At the same time, the images of slavery and torture were a reminder of America’s own bloody narrative of violence, racism and injustice. As a tribute to Shahn’s uncompleted project, Horowitz invited 36 contemporary artists to contribute posters with political slogans (Brooklyn-based Rico Gatson’s vibrant extended arm and fist in “You Are Power” is a standout) and he’s arranged them on the wall facing Shahn’s composition.

Horowitz is interrelational both as a curator and as an artist. His most famous work is a life-size replica of the broken fragments of the famous sign, Arbeit Macht Frei, at the entrance to Auschwitz. It commemorates both the death camp and a strange episode in its postwar history when a group of Swedish neo-Nazis stole the sign and broke it into fragments with the apparent intention of selling it on the black market. When Horowitz duplicated the broken artifact, it became a metaphor that could be used to show how Auschwitz itself has been transformed from a site of mass atrocity to a place where the mass atrocity is remembered or even where that memory might be defiled. At the Jewish Museum, he’s matched his provocative sculpture against the bold and dark Cubistic painting “Destruction of the Ghetto,” which the Russian-born artist Abraham Manievich completed in 1919, commemorating the pogroms in Kiev that took place the same year his own son was killed in the Russian Civil War. The two pieces represent the crucible of 20th-century history that challenged the survival of the Jewish people, shaping Jewish identity ever after. They’re followed by an equally disturbing set of works that draws attention to American atrocities. In this case, New York-born Philip Evergood’s horrifying depiction of white shrouded clansmen surrounding a black man who’s been lynched on a tree that is set on fire, a tiny but grizzly painting, is contrasted to Horowitz’s gigantic black sculpture in the shape of a tar-covered equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee, a memorial to the tragic 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.

As the mood of the galleries shifts, you feel Ben Shahn’s slogan “We Fight for a Free World” challenged by the unarticulated question that is now on everyone’s mind: How much longer can our society tolerate the dream deferred from so many groups of people? A collection of color photographs by the Chicano artist Harry Gamboa Jr. is particularly upsetting (“Cruel Profit,” a photo of a doll with her hair on fire, stands out). Huma Bhabha, a Pakistani-American sculptor who is best known for her magnificent 2018 installation “Welcome in Peace” on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has also produced a beautiful and deeply alarming sculpture, “Sleeper,” half-Greek kouros and half-alien, an amalgam of humanness with something barbaric or extraterrestrial. Perhaps the figure is a member of a sleeper cell intended to bring our civilization down or maybe he represents the “other” that is so anathema to our intolerant society. Bhabha has sunk him, from the knees down, into an inexplicable white cube and it’s hard to know whether this is a reference to our unsettling future, our disconcerting present or our troubled past.

For a virtual tour, go to: <http://jonathanhorowitz.us/freeworld/>

Access a video tour at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKbf1i95bAw>