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Gavriela Weitzman

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WHO IS SHE?

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ABSTRACT

I grew up in observant Jewish spaces with liberal, open-minded parents. Looking back, I feel like I received competing messages about womanhood. The role of women in religious spaces of Orthodox Judaism is very traditional. On the other hand, liberal feminism seeks to deconstruct those very traditional ideals of womanhood. I began reckoning with the question of the extent to which I have to disavow my tradition in order to be a good feminist? Is there a way to reconcile these two elements within me? I chose to address these questions by exploring the relationship between hair and identity. I am interested in how these strands that stick out of my head are so integral to my image, so beautiful, yet once they fall off, they are rendered disgusting and disconnected.

My thesis work interrogates the idea of hair as an abject substance. Decontextualized from the body, hair becomes an uncanny reference to the power of the corporeal feminine. I combine feminine long hair together with masculine Jewish ritual objects to create genderless beings that challenge the idea of gender as two distinct categories. I use a feminist lens to reclaim Jewish prayer and ritual, inserting a female voice where it has previously been absent. I use images of myself in my work to reclaim the Jewish woman as an unreadable, shapeshifting being. I see printmaking as an allegory for how culture is inscribed on the surface of the body. I use this to explore the internal versus external dichotomy of personhood, what appears on the surface, and what is hidden beneath. The body is both a site of personhood and a reflection of society’s expectations of gender, religion, race, class, etc. Our bodies are encoded with the cultures and environments we come from. It is for this reason that I see the body as an important vehicle for reclamation. In my work, I use language and my body to create work that seeks to reclaim the feminine as something to be celebrated. I will never state, feminism is right or tradition is wrong, rather I present how the intersection of these two challenge each other. Although at times seemingly contradictory on the surface, I demonstrate how deep within the intersection, the complementary beauty of each is revealed.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Birchot Hashachar** A collection of call and response prayers said daily during *shacharit*, the morning prayer service.

**Gemara** A component of the Talmud comprising rabbinical analysis and commentary on the Mishnah, oral tradition, written around 200 – 500 CE.

**Halacha** Jewish law.

**Hasidic** The Hasidic community is a sect of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

**Kippa** Hebrew word for yarmulke (skull cap).

**Mechitzah** A partition in Orthodox synagogues that divide the men’s section from the women’s section during prayer. It is meant to shield the men from seeing the women during prayer, so they do not get distracted.

**Minyan** In Orthodox Judaism, certain elements of prayer cannot be said without the presence of 10 men. Women do not count for a *minyan* in Orthodox Judaism.

**“off the derech”** A colloquial term in Modern-Orthodox Judaism that refers to being off the Jewish path (i.e. no longer observant).

**Payot** Refers to sideburns. *Payot* are worn by some men and boys in the Orthodox Jewish community based on interpretation of the injunction against shaving the “sides” of one’s head.

**Shacharit** The morning Jewish Prayer. (See *tfillah*)

**Sheitle** A wig worn a married Orthodox woman as a way to observe the law of head covering

**Shitelmel** A circular fur hat worn by the men in the Hassidic community on Jewish holidays and Shabbat.

**Shul** Hebrew word for synagogue.

**Spectrum of Jewish Religiosity** In order from most to least observant: Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi and Hasidic), Orthodox, Modern-Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist


**Tameh and Tahor** These concepts convey concepts of ritual purity.

**Tefilah** Jewish Prayer. Jews pray three times a day. *Shacharit*, in the morning, *mincha* in the afternoon and *ma’ariv* in the evening.

**Tefillin** Hebrew word for phylacteries, a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah. Are worn by observant adult Jewish men during weekday morning prayers.

**Tzitzit** A four-cornered undergarment garment worn by Jewish men.

**“yashar koach”** A congratulatory expression that conveys strengths. Used by community members during a service after someone reads Torah or gives a sermon.
I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding Gender

I understood the concept of gender very early on. My twin brother Micah and I grew up as counterparts, two paths from a single origin. In Modern-Orthodox Judaism, ritual is inextricably tied to gender, and as we reached the age of Bar and Bat Mitzvah, our paths diverged. I watched from behind the mechitzah as my brother led elements of the prayer service for the congregation. I sat on the sidelines and watched as he was able to do things I was not. We are different. He is a boy, and I am a girl. I wondered what it would be like to be him. To lead the congregation. To read from the Torah and be congratulated with a “yashar koach” when the last note left my breath. I wondered what it would be like to sit with my dad in shul. To be counted for the minyan. To wear a kippa, tzitzit, tefillin – physical reminders of our tradition that are described in the Torah. I watched as his body was inscribed by these ritual objects while my body lay blank, unreadable, indistinguishable.

Micah and my dad wear a kippa as a daily reminder of their subservience to God and as a signifier to the world of their identities as Jewish men. They especially like to wear crocheted kippot with rings of colors and patterns that revolved around their heads, accessories that helped construct their identity. Micah had accumulated a number of kippot, and like outgrown items of clothing, he gave them to me when the fashions changed. These objects were cast off from their original owner, waiting for the day to be worn again.
Who is this woman? Who is the Jewish woman? I am freed and constrained. Hidden and revealed. Who is she? I am the untidy, unclean, immodest, disorganized Jewish woman they told you not to be. I transform. I perform. On the outside, I am organized, tidy, clean and modest. I am everyone and no one all at once. I am ambiguous and specific. My body is my medium. I use it. I depict it. I transform it. My work has to do with acts of translation, a communication of ideas. To the untrained eye, I am unreadable.

Hair

My hair is a big part of my identity. I must tame and control it; defrizz it, bringing order as I beautify myself. I change its form, from rough and disordered to soft and groomed.

My hair is a luscious, desirous, evocative and erotic accumulation of lines. A line holds a personal history, a lineage. A finger that points to the people who came before and passed down their traditions, their likeness, their mannerisms.

A line defines a boundary – the limit of the body, the curve of a hip, the border of land. It creates a separation, making one into two. Lines can be crossed, but not without consequences. A line can also a path, something to follow, the way one must go. How one should act, what one should do. Even so, paths and lines, much like hair, are rarely straight. They warp and bend.

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1 Unbound by religious objects, the Jewish woman has the ability to transform and perform different expressions of Jewishness. There is an inherent agency in this. Much like the unreadability of the Jewish woman, my work deals with very specific topics related to the Jewish community and will therefore be, to an extent, unreadable to the general population.

2 In a 2007 issue of the Jewish quarterly, Nadia Valman talks about the fascination of the Jewess in 19th century British popular culture. She explains that while the Jewish man “whose physique is indelibly marked by the sign of his religious or racial difference, the body of the Jewess is unreadable.” Unlike the Jew, the Jewess could then be idealized and used reflect society’s anti-Semitic, misogynistic views.
I think of my Jewish childhood with lines begging to be crossed, rules to be broken, boundaries to be transgressed. If Judaism is a path, what keeps me on track are the beautiful swirls, the rituals, songs that bring me to happy memories of love, tears, togetherness, afternoons of relaxation with friends, quiet spaces for reflection and long nights of discussion, but the path grows weak with time. It needs maintenance. It becomes harder to follow. How far can I stray before I am completely off course? What will that mean? Who will I be then? A stranger in a strange land, cast off from my community, my history, myself.

Figure 1. Adina’s hair, cut April 18, 2021.

Abjection: an act

My roommate’s friend Adina came to stay with us and she asked me to cut her hair. It had been a while since she visited a hairdresser before the pandemic started, and social distancing restrictions caused her to push it off even longer. She decided it was finally time to relieve her hair of its dead ends. We brought a stool into the living room and placed a plastic sheet beneath our feet. I wrapped a hair band around her hair and began to cut. Its thickness caused me to move slowly from right to left, severing the strands bit by bit. When I carefully placed the five inch ponytail in her hands, she smiled. “Finally,” she said looking down at the tuft of hair, “I feel so much lighter.”
Abjection: a feeling

I am in exile. I have been cast-off and must start anew. I was part of her. But now, I lay tangled between the spikes of her comb. I define her, and she defines me. But now I have become something other than what I once was – a reference, a record of her prior existence, her physical DNA. I was bound to leave her head. I served a purpose, kept her warm, made her beautiful. I did my job and now it’s time for me to go. What is next for me? Will she mourn my absence?

Abjection: a definition

It is inevitable that we expel parts of ourselves both physically and metaphorically. Our bodies exist in a constant state of change. We excrete involuntarily. We enlarge as we consume. We slim as we exert. We sag as we age. Parts of us grow outwards and eventually fall off – our nails, our hair. Judith Butler writes, “the ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other’.”3 The abject serves as a reference to the original body but exists in isolation, by its separation. The subject, the original body, is defined by and defines the abject Other.4

The Power of the Abject

The abject as a concept bothers us because it is a reminder that we do not have control over our bodies. It makes us angry. Within the abject lies a power to repel – it disgusts, it offends, it disturbs. Every month a woman involuntarily expels herself and is rendered impure

3 Judith Butler, “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” 133.
4 Julia Kristeva also talks about the abject in her essay “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection” (1982). Kristeva states the abject refers to the horrified reaction to the breakdown of meaning that is caused by the disintegration of the distinction between the self and the other. Kristeva’s primary example is the corpse, which traumatically reminds us of our own mortality, but also includes other biological excrement, such as blood, sewage, even milk. The abject disturbs identity, system, and order and does not respect border, position, or rules. Kristeva writes, “the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.” For the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on the abject as a thing, something that has been expelled from the body and rendered as Other.
because she has been in contact with death. According to *Halacha*, she must ritually bathe herself to become pure again. A long time ago, a man decided that her involuntary, bodily act rendered her unsanitary. A stain of red appeared in the bed and sent him running away. In her expelled egg, was a power.

II. RECLAIMING RITUAL, TEXT AND IMAGE

And the Lord God built the side that He had taken from man into a woman, and He brought her to man.

And man said, "This time, it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called ishah (woman) because this one was taken from ish (man)."

Genesis (2:22-3)

This can be considered the beginning of man’s dominance over woman – and man, not God, said this one shall be נשים, a derivative of של, the man, the subject. Man has continued to assert his dominance over woman through language. In contemporary times, a Jewish man says the morning prayer of *Birchot Hashachar* and reminds himself of the things he should not take for granted. First, he thanks God for giving him the ability to distinguish night from day. Then he thanks Him for not making him a heathen or a slave. And then he says: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.”

In this statement, man proclaims his status through defining what he is not: woman. Butler writes about this phenomenon. She explains, “the construction of the ‘not me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject.”

Woman, the other, the abject man, is thus defined by the fact that she is not man and must then remain in a state of “Otherness.” “Not me,” he says.

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5 Butler, 133.
I began to think about this statement of alienation, how it has impacted my own understanding of my identity as a woman but also how it has constructed the perception of me by Jewish men.

Figure 2. Gavi Weitzman,icolonel für not making me a woman), photo installation, 55” x 144”, 2019.

icolonel for not making me a woman (2019) was my attempt at visualizing the alienating effect of this prayer. I document myself recreating the Hebrew phrase out of everyday objects – candles, nails, tampons, soap, string, and human hair. The phrase permeates my environment as the lines between ritual and life, holy and not-holy, are blurred. The large display of images is overwhelming and repetitive like the nature of prayer. I show the viewer how many times this phrase has been said. I show them how it feels to hear this over and over again, that its impact is amplified by repetition. The prayer has influenced Jewish gender and power dynamics with a reiterated declaration of Otherness.

The problem with this prayer is not only that it further entrenches the gender binary, but that it is a symbol of Judaism’s phallocentric history. These words alienate me. This one sentence is symbolic of the absence of female voices in Jewish ritual practices. It is a sign to me that these prayers were written by men and not made with me in mind.
I started to think about alternatives: what would it look like if women’s voices were retroactively added to Jewish discourse? I turned to the *Gemara* and replaced its rigid structure with a repetition of the phrase “ינשעש אשה” (for making me a woman). I see language as an important component in the process of changing perspectives. Luce Irigaray talks about the importance of reclaiming language in her essay “Any Theory of the ‘Subject’ Always Has been Appropriated By the ‘Masculine’.” Irigaray explains that language has been used to define women as passive, but through reclaiming language, women can restore agency by defining themselves in their own image. Inspired by Irigaray, I began to think about how this sentiment can be applied to the prayer “ש肼יא אשה אשה” (for making me a woman), becomes a battle cry, a proud declaration of femininity. Through reclaiming this phrase, I insert a feminine voice into Jewish ritual and invite others to join in.
This phrase became the inspiration and title for a series of prints in which I explore religious performativity and the identity of the Jewish woman. In my נשים אישה (for making me a woman) (2020) series, I turn the camera on myself and explore the image of the Jewish woman. Who is she? What does she look like? What are her priorities? How does she perform her Jewishness?

The title of the first print Ha’Ah’varyanit is a feminization of the word “ha’a’veereen” which means “The Transgressor.” According to Halacha, one is not allowed to dress in the clothes of the opposite gender. In this print, I push against this rule by presenting myself as a Hasidic man with the recognizable shtraimel and long curly payot. It is both a playful and serious gesture. In the background there is a print I formatted in the style of a page of Gemara, replacing the words with the repeated phrase נשים אישה “women.”

Ha’Tzanu’ah is a feminization of a Hebrew word meaning “The Modest One.” In this print, I show myself dressed as a religious woman wearing a sheitl and holding a baby. The
artificial wig serves to contrast the tufts of human hair embedded beneath, a direct reference to the hair beneath the wig that is lost from view when a married woman covers her hair.

The final in the series is Ha ’Ah’cheret, a feminization of the word “ha’ah’cher” which means “The Other One.” This image was printed and then kissed with lip-gloss. Here I show myself as a provocative woman, fully able to display her sexuality as she is not bound by religious observance and modesty.

In each of these works, I confront the viewer with my gaze, as if I am yelling the phrase “שןש.assertNot איש” which is printed at the top of the page. As these personas, I stare back and confront you. I tell you who I am. There is not right or wrong answer as to which one of these is the correct expression of Jewish womanhood.

This work is both inspired by and in conversation with 1970s feminist artists Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke who used photography and self-transformation to interrogate the intersections of gender, cultural identity and representation. Sherman’s famous series, Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980) show the artist dressed up as familiar yet unidentifiable film heroines. Sherman plays with feminine stereotypes – the seductress, the femme fatale, the ingénue. We construct our own narratives of who these women are and are implicated in this voyeuristic act.

Figure 5. (left) Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #2, 1977; Figure 6. (right) Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #10, 1978.

Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, Art and Feminism, 144.
As a photographer, Hannah Wilke used herself as subject and object in her work to combat the idealization of the female form. With Intra-Venus (1992), Wilke confronts the idealization of the female form by documenting her body as it succumbs to cancer. By showing an uncensored view of her body as it deteriorates, Wilke provides an important voice that’s disrupts our presumptions about the feminine body. She presents it as visceral and human. The result has a similar effect to the abject – it repels, it repulses. But it is also empowering and intriguing.


Both Sherman and Wilke’s work are deeply rooted in Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze” as explored in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey explains how women are often presented as objects for male consumption in popular media. Sherman and Wilke show themselves as objects for consumption, using the language of the “male gaze.” However, they gain agency through existing as both subject and object of their work. Sherman and Wilke appropriate the male gaze, transforming it into a female gaze. In doing so, they work “critically with the existing order, exposing latent cultural meanings as well as the paternal authority inherent in notions of artistic originality.” With השם אשה (for making me a woman)
I similarly seek to reclaim Jewish womanhood through appropriation and reclamation with image and language.

III. THE SELF AND THE FAÇADE

The process of printmaking utilizes pressure to combine ink with substrate. As an artist, I lay things out on the page, roll the ink onto the matrix and run it through the press. The force of the press pushes the ink into the paper, creating an inseparable bond between image and substrate. I see this process as similar to the way the body is inscribed by culture; the pressures of fitting in leave marks on the body as we desperately try to reflect our surroundings. However, to assume that the body passively reflects culture is to deny the agency we have over our ourselves and our image. It denies our individuality. These inscriptions, while portrayed on the body, do not become the self. They are mere reflections and only work to construct the body’s external façade, not the internal core. The exterior can change, but the Self, the person, the individual will remain the substrate.

Mary Kelly once said, “although the body is not perceived as the repository of truth, it is seen as a hermeneutic image, the enigma of femininity is formulated as the problem of imagistic misrepresentation which is subsequently resolved by discovering a true identity behind the patriarchal façade.” In בְּנֶאֶה הַרְאוּל (Beneath the Veil) (2021), I use printmaking to explore the

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8 In “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” Butler describes the body as a “passive medium” which becomes inscribed by “a cultural source figured outside the body” (129). She explains how gender is performed through acts, gestures and desires which “produce the effect of an internal core or substance” on the surface of the body(136). In this, Butler establishes how “the figure of the interior soul understood as ‘within’ the body is signified through its inscription on the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility” (135). This play between interior and exterior is important in establishing the connection between identity and performance and the role of signifiers in identity production and perpetuation. With this, Butler makes a distinction between the self and the body. I want to push back on this and say that the body is not a passive medium, but is instead an active entity, a symbol of agency. The exterior is a façade of signals that shields the self from being seen.

body’s internal versus external dichotomy – the interior self, versus the façade, what is hidden and what is revealed.

A print’s value is determined by its rarity. Monoprints are special because they exist as one-of-a-kind, a result of a single configuration of ink on plexiglass. For שמה תחת המגן (Beneath the Veil) I created two monoprints that I made using wigs and hair extensions. The intricate line quality of the hair is captured and built upon in each layer of the print.

These wig monoprints are irreplicable, a result of a single configuration of hair, ink and pressure. The making of these works was both unpredictable and exciting. I never knew what was going to be produced, how the strand would fall on the page, what would stick and what would not. Like people, each print is a distinct and unique individual.

But these individuals are obscured by overlays which display a self-portrait. The images reflect one another, one positive and one negative, one cyanotype and one silkscreen. The processes of cyanotype and silkscreen involve photoreactive chemicals. Their accuracy stands in contrast to the monoprint’s ambiguity. While lacking representation, the elusive, irreplicable monoprints become individuals in ways that the photographic images cannot.
Printed on hair, the silkscreen overlay becomes a curtain, a veil, obscuring a view of the monoprint beneath. While the monoprint process uses force to bind ink with paper, silkscreen requires the ink to penetrate through a screen. The ink then sits on top of the paper as an acrylic film, a façade, merely surface level. It is a mask. Beneath, lies the monoprint, the individual, the self. In מתח לתאת (Beneath the Veil), the paper becomes an allegory for the self. Each unit becomes a stand in for the ways we hide beneath external façades.

IV. COMBINING GENDER SIGNIFIERS

My interests in appropriation, abjection transformation, gender, hair and Jewish ritual lead me to make Kippot (2021). In this piece I take Micah’s kippot, signifiers of his masculine identity and appropriate them by combining them with signifiers of the feminine. The hair is not only a reference to the feminine body, but also to the sheitle. Combining these elements produce an ambiguously gendered object. With hair attached, the kippot become uncanny, bizarre, even humorous – they intrigue and repel. There is something powerful about this new hybridized form. Hung on the wall, each kippa piece becomes a body and as a group evoke a sense of the communal, the beginning of a minyan.

Figure 9. Gavi Weitzman, Kippot, yarmulkes with hair extensions, installation shot, 2021.
My Kippot are in conversion with Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum’s piece *Keffieh* (1993), in which the artist also uses her religious and cultural identities to comment on the masculine/feminine binary. In *Keffieh*, Hatoum embroiders a *keffieh*, a black and white head scarf worn by Arab men, with women’s hair. Tamar Garb’s essay discusses the significance of Hatoum’s addition of women’s hair to the traditionally male headscarf. She states, “the embroidered hair brings the external signifier of female sexuality, usually covered in Arab society, into bodily contact with the potential male wearer of the scarf.”¹⁰ In this piece, the *keffieh*’s linear decorative pattern is recreated with women’s hair, subverting the linear pattern’s formal function and instead registering it with the experience and markers of the feminine. In *Kippot*, I seek to do a similar thing, infusing the male head covering with markers of feminine.

In the essay, Garb expands on the significance of hair in Hatoum’s piece saying, “Hair, the residual human substance, is inserted into an alien context in order to register the subjectivity and sexuality of its maker or user. Loaded with references to custom and culture, sexuality and gender, hair as a signifier disturbs the stylization and rhetorical devices of art by registering the obdurate physicality of the body.” Much like Hatoum’s *Keffieh*, *Kippot* uses women’s hair, something covered in religious Jewish spaces, and places it on the *kippa*, a male head covering, thus playing with gendered ideas of covered and uncovered, hidden and revealed.

V. WHO I AM

People are quick to throw things away. We abject. We discard. We forget. Judaism is not the wearing of a kippa or the covering of an elbow. Those things can be removed. Judaism is part of the inner core, the self. It is who I am. It is my childhood. It is my memories of nights of

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1 Garb, 263.
singing and dancing, laughter, feelings of togetherness and community. In Judaism, we analyze tradition and adapt it to fit the times. We change. We grow. We evolve. With my work I do a similar thing. I take what was given to me and I adapt it. I choose to nurture my inner core by reclaiming and adapting what it means to be a Jewish woman. My Jewish identity is not a façade. It is beneath, within, hidden, a hidden beauty.

It is simply who I am. I will be as I will be. 

12 Exodus 3:14.
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