Across Divides:
Borders and Boundaries in Contemporary Art

Englewood curator brings exhibit to Riverdale Jewish museum page 28
Thinking about walls

Hebrew Home at Riverdale’s show looks at the views from both sides

JOANNE PALMER

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

Oh, a reader might sigh. Such a cliché. Trotting out Robert Frost, the way people always do then they’re writing about walls.

But Frost knew something — but of course — and of course as he went on to tell us — there is far more to a wall than that.

Something there is that loves a wall, and something there is that is deeply fascinated by walls, by their inherent duality, by the way they keep in and keep out, protect and imprison. By the very many ways they can be defined.

Reba Wulkan of Englewood has been fascinated by walls, boundaries, borders, and the connections that bridge them for a long time, and now she is the curator of an exhibition, Across Divides: Borders and Boundaries in Contemporary Art, at the Derfner Judaica Museum at the Hebrew Home at Riverdale in the Bronx.

Boundaries — separation of one thing from another — are an essential part of being human, and of being Jewish, Ms. Wulkan said; there is an inherent tension in them always.

In the Bible, God began creation with binary separations — of light and darkness, day and night, heavens and earth, water and dry land. From there, God moved on to the finer distinctions that separate different living beings from each other.

As we have learned throughout human history, walls often divide us in ways that we try to overcome. This exhibition is a look at walls and boundaries, good and bad, factual or metaphoric, through the lenses of contemporary Jewish artists.

The exhibition is part of the massive Hebrew Home complex, a small set of rooms that appears much bigger — that appears massive — because of the enormous streams of light that come through its huge windows. The view out of those windows is majestic — it’s of the Hudson River, the huge ships that ply it, and New Jersey on its far shore. The view plays a perfect backdrop to the exhibition, showing the natural border that is the river, the traffic that goes north and south, using it not as a border but a connection, and showing as well the way the two states, New York and New Jersey, are intimately connected by commerce, demographics, and family ties.

Ms. Wulkan, who has lived in Englewood with her husband for about 35 years — she’s been a member of Congregation Ahavath Torah there for all that time, starting before the tenure of the about-to-retire Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, during the time of
the formidable well-respected Rabbi Isaac Swift—grew up in Brooklyn, first in Crown Heights and then in Flatbush. For as long as she could remember, Ms. Wulkan was interested in the arts; she has sculpted and worked in other forms, but now, she said, her art lies mainly in curating and cataloguing collections.

Ms. Wulkan’s parents, Miriam and Israel Wertentheil, were American-born, and her mother was very interested in culture. “She got her master’s at Brooklyn College,” Ms. Wulkan said. She went back to school after her children were born for that degree; in fact, “she graduated with my sister,” Ms. Wertentheil’s daughter reported proudly. Ms. Wulkan also graduated from Brooklyn College, with a degree in art history. Later, she earned a masters, again in art history, from the State College of New York in Purchase.

Art, as her career has made clear, always has been an important way for Ms. Wulkan to understand and engage with the world. After her parents’ death, she and her family “commissioned a family chuppah by a weaver,” she said. That weaver, Ina Golub, was a well-known Jewish artist, a weaver who eventually moved over to beadwork. The brightly colored chuppah she created has a big star at the top for Miriam and Israel Wertentheil, and a star is added for each marriage over which it stands unfurled. “It’s been used for about a dozen weddings so far,” Ms. Wulkan said.

Ms. Wulkan was the curator of contemporary art at Yeshiva University’s museum for 16 years; later, she curated a show on the abstract painter Ruth Abrams.

So she knew many Jewish contemporary artists and was ready for a dive into the question of boundaries. Which side are we on? Which side should we be on? Need we choose sides? Do we need boundaries? Can we live with them? Can we live without them? The Jewish world is filled with such boundaries. Some are temporal—Shabbat, say, is
walled off by sunsets, marked with candle-lighting and havdalah. Others are special. The Orthodox world features the mechit-zah — the boundary that divides men and women at prayer; Ms. Wulkan does not have any work showing them. The observant world — from parts of the Conservative movement through much of the Orthodox world — uses the eruv, the often legally fictitious wall that separates private from public domains and so allows objects to be carried within them on Shabbat and holidays.

There are works in the show in Riverdale that look at the eruv, including one installation, by Ruth Schreiber, that’s a lit, cutout map of the London neighborhoods surrounded by the city’s first one. Another, by an American-born artist, Ken Goldman, is a photo of the artist as he balances three feet above the ground on the eruv that surrounds his kibbutz in Israel. The photograph – with a red rope, blue sky, and a white-shirted, black-trousered, barefoot man with his arms out, soaring and teetering over irrigated fields and the Judean hills – is striking; what it means is up to the viewer.

“I started with the eruv, and then I expanded to all borders and boundaries,” Ms. Wulkan said. “It’s about gray areas too; it’s about psychological, ethical, religious, and halachic boundaries.

“I’m from a religious background, but I didn’t restrict myself to that. I want to be unbiased and open.”

One of the pieces, by Sarah Klar of Brooklyn, who grew up observant but is no longer — and had a residue of anger toward religious life although now “she’s come to terms with it,” Ms. Wulkan said – is called “Je Suis Juive, I Am You (Talmud Dreds and Tefillin Bindings).” It’s an abstract work that seems to be a gored bull, with red blood and shredded pages erupting from it; from closer up, it’s clear that the shredded pages began as talmudic text.

Another artist, Flo Razowsky, “a photographer and activist, takes pictures of border walls,” Ms. Wulkan said. She’s printed them on translucent fabric and hung them; they show, among other walls, the one that surrounds parts of Israel. “It’s called ‘Up Against the Wall,’” Ms. Wulkan said. “It’s for anyone who looks at it to take it any way they want to. There is no opinion stated.” Still, to have left it out would have been untrue to her theme, she added.

Laura Murlender, an Argentinean painter, grew up during the junta, and was disappeared (as that kind of political terrorism was called), but somehow, after 11 days, she reappeared. In ways that none of us lucky enough never to have experienced such horror can never know, she has been haunted by that trauma. In this show, she is represented by an abstract work, mainly in blue and white, that like much of her work, Ms. Wulkan said, is about the walls she has had to construct and then surmount. “Her work expresses movement and fragmented time within the grid format meant to establish boundaries and barriers consistent with her personal history of repression and resilience,” she wrote on the show’s website.

Some of the work in the show represents a look at Jewish identity, which often requires some element of walling off from outside influences, and some porosity in that wall as well. Siona Benjamin, an Indian Jew, reflects on her dual identity; “Lilith in Pardes” explores the theme in colorful and fascinating depth.

Some of the works are more or less literal. There is a lovely photograph by Angela Strassheim of a young woman, praying, alone in her garden, facing a wall. It’s twilight, a time when nature crosses boundaries; the feeling you get from her posture is that somehow, to some extent, at least in her own mind, she is crossing the boundary between herself and God. It is a lovely image.

Another photograph, Andrea Robbins and Max Becher’s “Following the Ten Commandments: Lyon County Court-house, Yerington, NV,” shows a stone engraved with the Ten Commandments. It’s about the wall between church and state, breached right there.

Other pieces are not at all literal. Andi LaVine Arnowitz, like so many of these artists an American-born Israeli, looks at the
experience of exile with “Exile,” an installation of tiny porcelain houses in silky bags, hanging off a wall. Home is fragile, it tells us; exile is frequent. But you can bring some things, small things, with you, in gossamer webs of memory and hope.

Ms. Arnovitz has another installation in the show. Called “Garments of Reconciliation,” it’s a collection of small-child-sized tallitot kattan, little prayer vests, hung in the wall on a grid. Made to be worn by little Jewish boys, the elaborate and beautiful embroidery that marks each of them has been made by Arab women; in that way, they cross the boundaries between men and women, adults and children, Arabs and Jews, as, Ms. Arnovitz hopes, they point the way to peace.

Another photograph in the exhibition is even more overtly about crossing boundaries; it’s a photograph, taken at Purim in Tel Aviv, of two men lusciously cross-dressed in bright red. Both stare at the camera, one doubtfully, one daringly. They are crossing boundaries, and if you don’t like it, well, too bad for you.

Walls are very good sometimes, and not so good at other times. Sometimes they keep us safe. Sometimes, as Robert Frost goes on to tell us, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offence. Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down.”

Or, as Woody Guthrie says, in “This Land is Your Land,”

As I was walkin’ — I saw a sign there And that sign said — no trespassin’ But on the other side .... it didn’t say nothin! Now that side was made for you and me!

There is one other, perhaps ironic, certainly practical note that must be made about the exhibition. It’s free and entirely open to the public, but given the grim realities of life, it’s not easy to get to. There is just one entrance to the massive, beautiful complex that is the Hebrew Home, on 5901 Palisade Ave. in Riverdale, and it’s small and unprepossessing.

You must bring photo identification, and the identification will be checked. A driver’s license is fine. You might have to wait on line, but eventually you will get through, and the wait is worth it.

It’s open from Sunday to Thursday, from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and the exhibition will close on July 30.

There’s more information at (718) 581-1786 or www.riverspringhealth.org/derfner-judaica-museum