



Elyssa Wortzman

Fine Arts

How did you come to be an artist?

I feel like I have been creating my whole life. However, it took going to law school to propel me into serious, professional artmaking. After studying art history at McGill University, law school was a visual wasteland, so I journeyed each summer to France to study painting. It was my mentor there who eventually encouraged me to have my first exhibition and from then on there was no looking back!

How did you come to select the work you are exhibiting?

I am normally a very intuitive and fast painter, but in beginning a new painting recently I was suddenly mesmerized by the blank space around my first gestures and decided to experiment with a process of withdrawal, what Kabbalists call *tzimtzum*. When G-d first created the world, as the myth goes, G-d poured too much light into the vessel of the world and it smashed into pieces. G-d then withdrew G-d's self somewhat to make room for creation (*tzimtzum*). As an artist engaging in my own process of creation I began to withdraw, leaving varying amounts of blank canvas to create space for the viewer to exist and create. In these pieces the primary gesture is spherical, alluding to the sephirot in the mystical Tree of Life. On a meta-level, this series is part of a larger exploration of creating as a manifestation of process theology.

How does the work you are exhibiting fit into your Jewish journey?

As my Jewish learning and experience grew to become a more forceful and fulsome part of my life, my work began reflecting Jewish ideas, even if, with my abstract expressionist style, those themes were not visible on the surface or pshat of the piece.

Biography

Influenced by Fauvism's approach to color and the interior explorative nature of abstract expressionism, Elyssa Wortzman calls her work "spiritual conceptualism." The role of women, their place as transmitters of wisdom, and the oppressiveness of cultural norms become a major theme. A critical goal of her work is to encourage the active participation of the viewer in the artwork, often in the form of community art projects. Wortzman sees the creative process as a way for everyone to enter into the flow of divine energy that connects us all: "The image carries the power of a messenger, in a constant state of evolution, as it is witnessed by the other." Dr. Wortzman is a spiritual director, educator and artist. She is the recipient of the Rabbi Samuel Sandmel Award for her innovative doctoral thesis on art as spiritual direction with youth from the Graduate Theological Foundation (2016). She was artist-in-residence at ArtKibbutz (2013) and Kol Ha Ot (2023). Wortzman has taught workshops across the country, including at the Academy of Jewish Religion, SUNY Purchase and Spiritual Directors International. Exhibitions include the Derfner Museum, the San Francisco Jewish Library and the Koslowe Judaica Gallery. Residencies include Kol Ha Ot (Jerusalem) and Art Kibbutz, (New York). Born in Toronto, Canada, in the 1970s, her work has taken her to France, New York, San Francisco, Montreal, Ottawa and Dayton. For more information, go to www.elyssawortzman.com.