

# MANHATTAN

## A Room Of One's Own

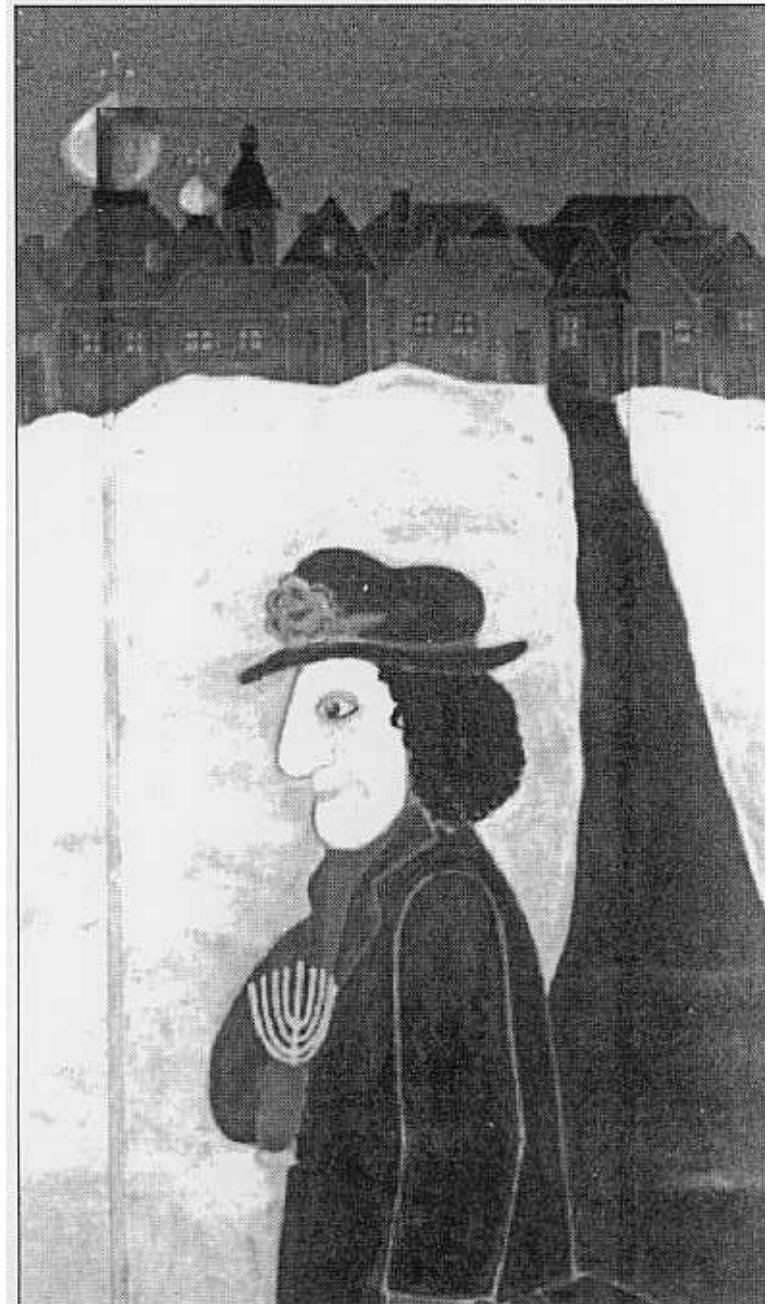


*The Jewish immigrant experience, through the eyes of six women artists.*

**SUSAN JOSEPHS**  
STAFF WRITER

as the American Jewish Experience.

Beth Grossman, an artist from Northern California who curated the show,





**I**n the stark and sterile dormitory rooms on Ellis Island, immigrants slept fitfully on flimsy cots, waiting to begin their new lives in *Di Goldene Medina*. Almost a century later, the ghosts of immigrants inhabit these rooms of peeling radiators and chipped tile floors. Only now they must share their space with a group of Jewish women artists who, like Virginia Woolf, know what it means to transform a room into their own.

Sponsored by the Organization Of Independent Artists and on display at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, "Passages: Jewish Women's Immigration & Family History" visually unfolds like a Jewish "Arabian Nights." Created by six Jewish women artists, each given a dormitory room to create her own multimedia installation, the exhibition tells many tales within the collective tale known

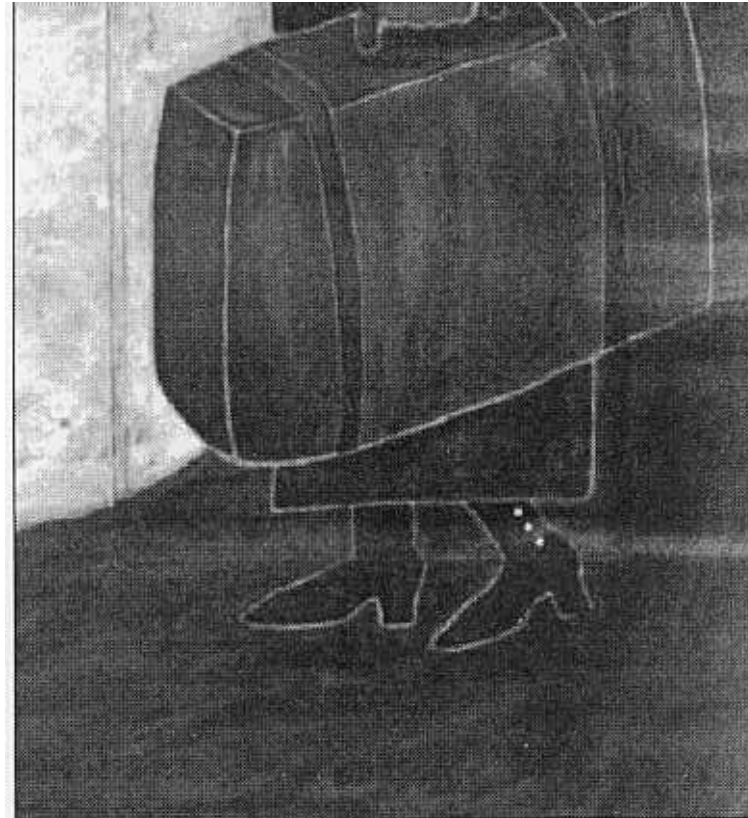
tale of her great-grandmother Bella. But "in researching and documenting Bella's life," Grossman expanded her vision to include other artists because "the relativism of [Bella's] history has become evident. Everyone has his or her own version of the story," she writes in her artist's statement.

In Grossman's room, Bella's story appears in "Passages" — seven painted doors of muted, gentle colors that spread out like an unfolded accordion. On the first door, Bella leaves Russia clutching a menorah; on the last door, she gives that menorah to Grossman, who is boarding a plane for

Ukraine to explore her family's roots. The doors in between chronicle a Jewish woman's life: immigration, marriage, family life and Jewish tradition.

Grossman astutely hints at Bella's fear and isolation through size and color. In the second door, for example, a tiny Bella dressed in blue looks up at an enormous Ellis Island immigration official swathed in red. Or in the third panel, Bella, having just arrived in Michigan, waits on a platform while her two brothers settle the deal with the man who agreed to marry her. Bella, small and blue, stands alone in the background while the men, of greenish hue and much larger, loom in the foreground.

This mild yet poignant style of commentary extends to "Home In A Suitcase," placed next to "Passages," a work dedicated to the "suitcase mentality" of the Jew always on the run from anti-Semitism. Grossman stacked two piles of suitcases to symbolize both Bella's arrival to America and her grandmother's life in America. The top suitcase in one pile displays the objects Grossman imagined Bella would bring with her — toiletries and



The multimedia installations of Carol Hamoy, left, and Beth Grossman tell many tales within the collective tale known as the American Jewish experience.

---

## MANHATTAN

photographs, and in a private compartment her menorah, a dreidel and other Jewish ritual objects.

In the other pile, the top suitcase opens to a domestic scene straight from a 1950s sitcom: Dad's asleep on the sofa; mother and daughter wash dishes, and the curtains in the living room open to glorious greenery. It all seems just peachy; only this family still lives in a suitcase, poised for the next move.

The next room pays tribute to the Jews who didn't pack their bags fast enough. In "Sh'ma," Franchiska Rosenthal Louw has juxtaposed seven large, unwieldy chairs and sand-filled shoes with the voices of Holocaust survivors and their descendants bearing witness to the horrors of the past.

Clothing covers some of the chairs, while another has been burnt and covered with rubble. The voices, reverberating through the room, connect with the chairs; it's not difficult to imagine people actually sitting in them as they tell their stories. Louw has made effective use of a room already ghost-filled. Yet despite its eerie, haunted-house quality, the installation exudes the message not of death but survival.

The ghosts of the past become even more tangible in "Welcome To America," where 30 white and gauzy robe-like garments hang from the ceiling and sway with the slightest breeze. Created by Carol Hamoy, an artist known for her extensive use of textile materials, the garments — made from bits of wedding gowns, tallitot, bed linens and bureau scarves — offer tantalizing glimpses into personal histories.

Sewn on each dress is the name of a Jewish woman, her date of arrival in America and a sentence or two about her life.

There's Chayeh Soreh, a "design prodigy" from Pinsk, whose "heart broke when she stopped working to please her husband." There's Sarah from Kiev, who changed her name to Shirley to seem more American. And there was Bertha, who "loved to dance." While these anecdotes may not represent defining moments in life, they imbue the garments with spirit and personality.

The past gives way to the present in "From Generation To Generation" by Adrienne Klein, the only installation that makes literal reference to the original use of the exhibit space. Attempting to contrast an immigrant's discomfort in a new land with a desire for cultural continuity, Klein has created dorm cots that match the starkness of the room. Bundles of sheets filled with old Jewish books hang from belt straps and resemble legs in traction. Here a good night's sleep seems impossible.

According to Klein, insomnia pays off. On the walls surrounding the beds are 300 individual chalkboards scrawled upon in Hebrew letters by schoolchildren — proof of the sustaining legacy of the immigrants who slept in the hard beds.

The Holocaust reappears in the next room, because for Gerda Meyer Bernstein, immigration had everything to do with the Nazis. Having escaped Germany on a kindertransport to England just after Kristallnacht, Bernstein's two-part installation, titled "Packaging," remembers that books both burn and endure. In the first part, a rusty, chain-link fence encloses a pile of ash-covered burnt books, grimly lit in dim, depressing tones. Near this scene of willful desecration lies a long, black table

piled high with Jewish books.

Like Louw, Bernstein wants viewers to walk away feeling not depressed but triumphant; to know that holiness prevails over evil destruction. Aesthetically, however, the first part of her installation makes a more powerful statement.

The final installation, "Dreams Of A Better Life" by Rhoda London, attempts to evoke a tenement kitchen where immigrants lived, worked and fantasized of better days. On the walls of the room, London has made black silhouettes of a sewing machine, a bathtub and other appliances needed for daily life. In the center of the room, a brown table has been inscribed with the names of hundreds of immigrant Jews, ranging from poets to politicians who have "made it" in America.

While it makes clever use of the space, this work, when compared with the other installations, lacks the presence of ghosts and consequently maintains a weaker connection to history. So the overall effect, like the silhouettes, seems a bit flat.

Yet each room of the exhibit, with its own distinct flavor, makes for unpredictable, stimulating viewing. At the same time, the themes of survival, success and hope consistently emerge in a way that most likely make the ghosts of the dormitories very proud of their descendants. □

*"Passages: Jewish Women's Immigration and Family History" is on display through April 21 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, Liberty Island. Museum hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily. Call (212) 269-5755 for ferry information and prices.*

---