

## ART REVIEW

# Capturing the Torah Of Their Lives

By FRED B. ADELSON

CAMDEN

SOME people say we are the books we read. In a new exhibition on the campus of Rutgers-Camden, the artists are the books they make.

"Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes" is an exhibition of 117 book works by 70 Jewish female artists from around the world here at the Stedman Gallery. The

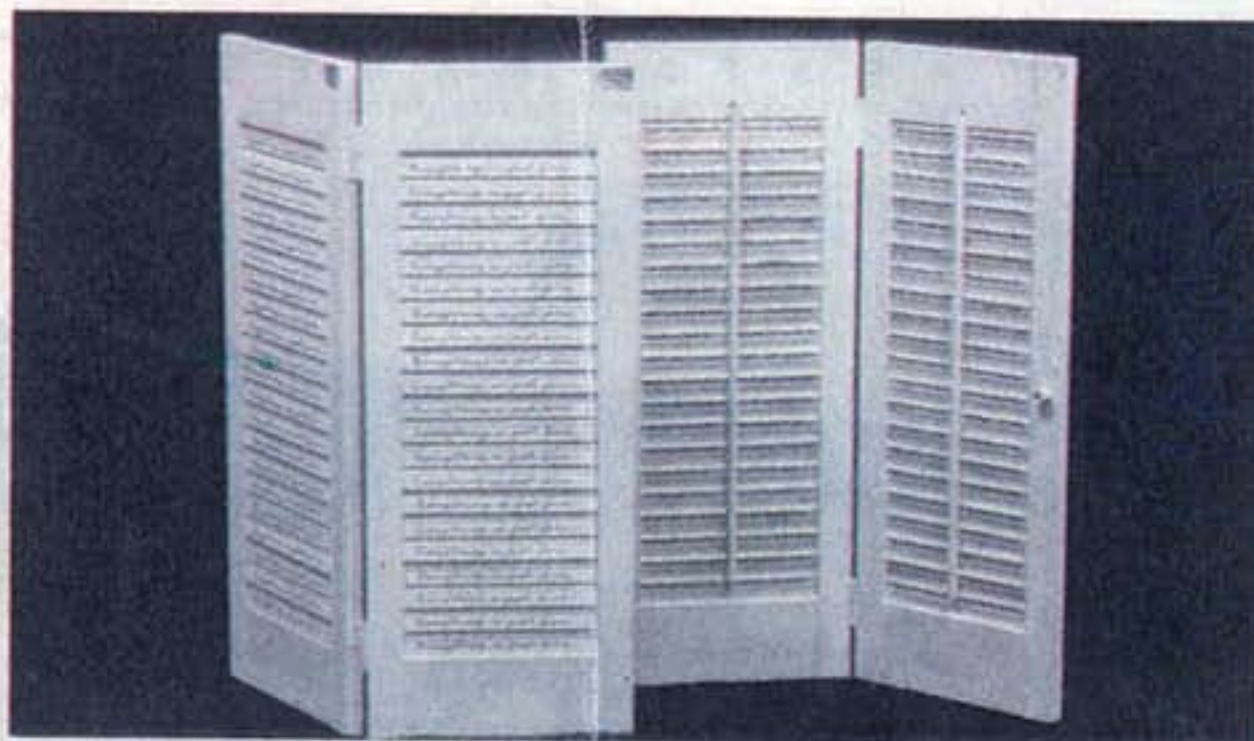
show focuses on issues of faith, identity, anti-Semitism and the lingering pain of the Holocaust.

As an independent curator, Judith A. Hoffberg has worked with artists' books for several decades. But she did not focus on Jewish themes until 1996, which manifested itself in a comprehensive exhibit that traveled around the country from 1997 to 2001. She has now resurrected that exhibition, substituting almost a third of the objects for newer artworks. In the original catalog, Ms. Hoffberg wrote, "This exhibition expands the notion of Jews as being the 'People of the Book,' to embrace the Jewish woman as a creative being who is also part of that People." In a recent interview, she emphasized that the exhibit here still deals with "content more than context."

However, the exhibition is at its most visually captivating when artists transcend the conventional idea of a book.

Miriam Schaer turns her work called "Eve's Meditation" into a purple flexible form that seems to slither across the table. Each page appears to be eaten away by a die-cut apple shape. The hand-stitched binding depicts a serpent embellished with trinkets from Canal Street in Lower Manhattan.

In a different vein, "Branded" by Paula Levine dramatically brings faith and politics together. Respond-



"Views" by Beth Grossman, at the Stedman Gallery in Camden.

ing to the "conflicts and deaths taking place in Israel/Palestine," the artist has used branding irons to sear the Hebrew word for life, "chaim," into a Koran and its corresponding Arabic word, "hayat," into the Torah.

Rose Ann Chasman's "Stuffed Nose" uses a cast of Michelangelo's "David" to comment literally and figuratively on ethnic profiling. The exterior is covered with typed anti-Semitic references from literature and popular culture, while calligraphic lines from Aramaic and Hebrew prayers flow from the work's interior like a cornucopia.

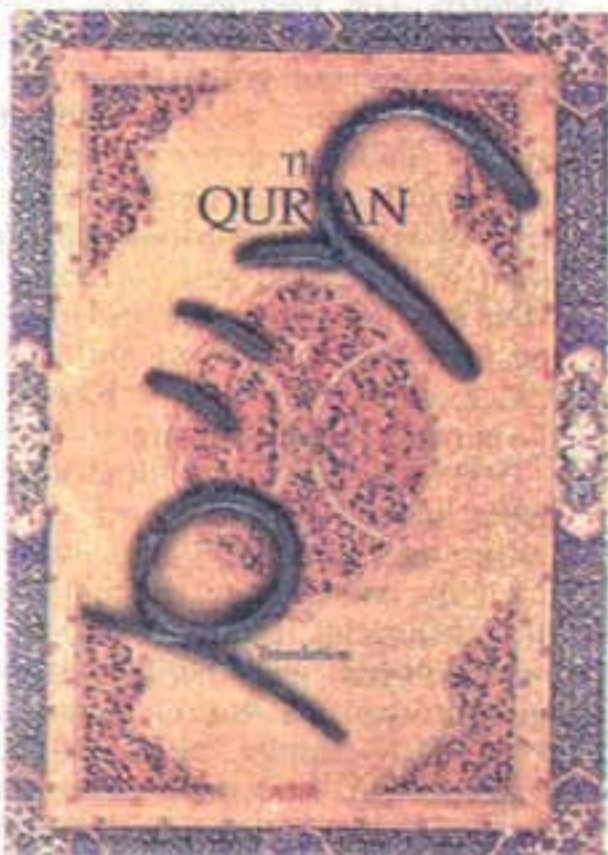
Many of the artists deal with self-discovery and family matters. In "Sepher Torah," Sonia Benjamin of Upper Montclair — the only New Jersey artist in the show — creates a mixed-media hinged construction inspired by memories of the ornate synagogues from her childhood as an observant Jew in Bombay. On the ex-

terior, she paints a self-portrait that emphasizes her multiculturalism.

Gayle Wimmer uses 12 of her late father's handkerchiefs as pages to create a "diary" similar to an illuminated manuscript. On 10 of them, she prints her own M.R.I. brain image to accompany his remarks from conversations during the last two years of his life, like, "How can you teach them art if they're not born to see?"

Indeed, there are dozens of personal tales, providing an almost voyeuristic opportunity to eavesdrop. In "Views," with shutter slats used as a grid for her text, Beth Grossman tells two stories. On the inside, her first-person narrative is honest, private and unguarded. To the outside world, "Everything is just fine."

"Women of the Book" is at the Stedman Gallery at Rutgers-Camden through May 28. Information: (856) 225-6350.



From "Branded" by Paula Levine.