SEPTEMBER 23, 2022

BLOWING THE HORN FOR CANADIAN JEWISH ART

On Sunday, Jews around the world will listen to sounds of the shofar—a ram's-horn trumpet created in ancient times—to mark the start of Hebraic year 5783 and fall's High Holidays. In celebration, we're ringing out a roster of artworks exploring the cultural vibrancy of Judaism in Canada.

Jacqueline Kott-Wolle, *Our Turn to Host Rosh Hashanah*, 2019, courtesy of Jacqueline Kott-Wolle.

"I have this theory," says the Toronto-born, Chicago-based artist Jacqueline Kott-Wolle, "that you are not officially a grown up until it is your turn to start hosting the family for holiday observances." A commemorative recognition of her first foray into welcoming loved ones for the Jewish New Year, which begins at sundown this Sunday, *Our Turn to Host Rosh Hashanah*, 2019, tenderly captures four generations sharing a meal—gefilte fish, apples and honey, chicken soup, and matzo balls—around the dining room table. Ever since Eastern European Jews began arriving in Canada in the late nineteenth century, they have played a powerful role in shaping the landscape of this country's visual art. Alongside Kott-Wolle's intimate depiction of the High Holidays, representations of the religion are remarkable and far-reaching. To mark the start of the Jewish year 5783, we are featuring selections by Canadian artists that engage with Judaism. We hope you enjoy them, and to those celebrating, we wish you *Shanah tovah*.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

GROWING FORM

by Oscar Cahén

Oscar Cahén, *Growing Form*, 1953, RBC Corporate Art Collection.

Jagged shapes and intense reds characterize the ominous visual language of *Growing Form*, 1953, by Oscar Cahén (1916–1956), the acclaimed Toronto-based Jewish Canadian artist and founding member of Painters Eleven. As a young man, Cahén fled the terrors of Nazi Germany and eventually made his way to Canada, where he went on to become one of the nation's most celebrated illustrators and abstract painters. When *Growing Form* was first unveiled at Toronto's Hart House Gallery in 1954, critics were not prepared for this tour-de-force, which brings together some of Cahén's most recognizable figurative motifs—grabbing hands, thorny roses, gaping mouths—into a cacophony of bold forms, combining the oy and joy of Jewish life. As Jaleen Grove, author of ACI's *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* writes, the composition presents "a recognition that transformation and flourishing growth accompany pain and suffering—that there is no rose without thorns."

Read more in ACI's

THE IMMIGRANT

by Regina Seiden Goldberg

Regina Seiden Goldberg, *The Immigrant*, c.1921, private collection.

Migration is a theme close to home for many Jewish Canadians. In *The Immigrant*, c.1921, Montreal-based artist Regina Seiden Goldberg (1897–1991) infuses her subdued portrait of a young woman with a tension between beauty and vulnerability. The date and title of the work point to a troubling cultural context that was personal for Seiden, who was the daughter of Galician Jewish parents: in 1919, Canada passed the Immigration Act, a discriminatory piece of legislation that restricted who was allowed to settle in Canada. Seiden's infusion of honesty, protest, and resilience into the genre of portraiture was characteristic of the bold new directions being taken by Montreal's famed Beaver Hall Group—of which the artist was a member—and is ever-present in this striking image of a Jewish newcomer to this country.

Learn more about Regina Seiden Goldberg

AIN'T NO CHALLAH BACK(PACK) GIRL

by Chloe Wise

Chloe Wise, *Ain't No Challah Back(pack) Girl*, 2014, © Chloe Wise / SOCAN (2022).

In 1978, *Time* magazine wrote that 80 per cent of American stand-up comedians were Jewish. The Montreal-born, New York-based artist Chloe Wise (b.1990) proves that Jewish humour is as much in the studio as it is on the stage. Her signature tongue-in-cheek wit is in full force with her *Ain't No Challah Back(pack) Girl*—a nod to pop-star Gwen Stefani's millennial anthem "Hollaback Girl" and part of a series of oil-painted, urethane-coated "bread sculptures" that were some of Wise's first works to gain critical attention for their uncanny Surrealist undertones. The Jewish Canadian artist describes this series as "a symbol for status and wealth (think 'the breadwinner' or the use of the term 'dough')." In this piece, a braided challah—a bread of Ashkenazi Jewish origin—is branded with a Prada logo, an aesthetically jarring combination that invites us to rethink the role of consumption in contemporary culture.

Learn more about Chloe Wise

HASIDIC HEAD

by Sorel Etrog

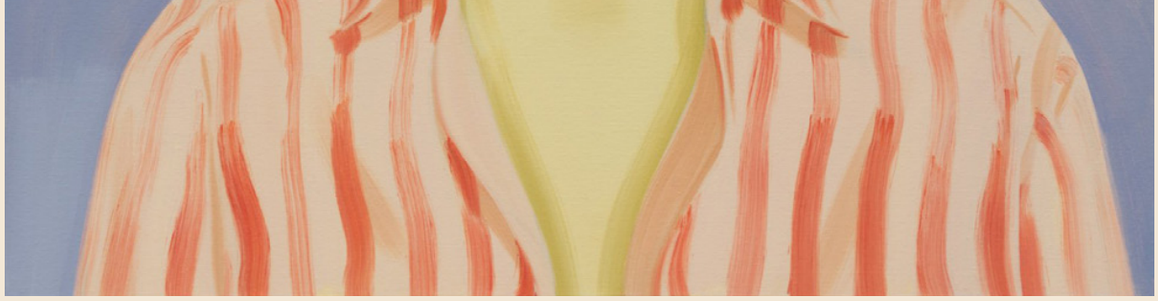
Sorel Etrog, *Hasidic Head*, 1966, courtesy of Sotheby's.

As a child living in the Jewish community of Iaşi, Romania, Israeli Canadian artist Sorel Etrog (1933–2014) experienced first-hand the anguish of the Second World War and its residual traumas—a context that re-emerged in many of his modern sculptures from the 1960s. This was an important moment in the artist's career, as he notes: "After working with flat shapes all these years I felt I was ready to work in three dimensions and this transition came naturally to me." *Hasidic Head*, 1966, is one in a series Etrog commenced in 1959 after befriending Jewish Canadian art collector Samuel J. Zacks, and it likely makes reference to Orthodox Judaic communities whose cultural practices have roots in Eastern Europe.

Read more in ACI's
Sorel Etrog: Life & Work by Alma Mikulinsky

FAR OFF

by Sarah Letovsky



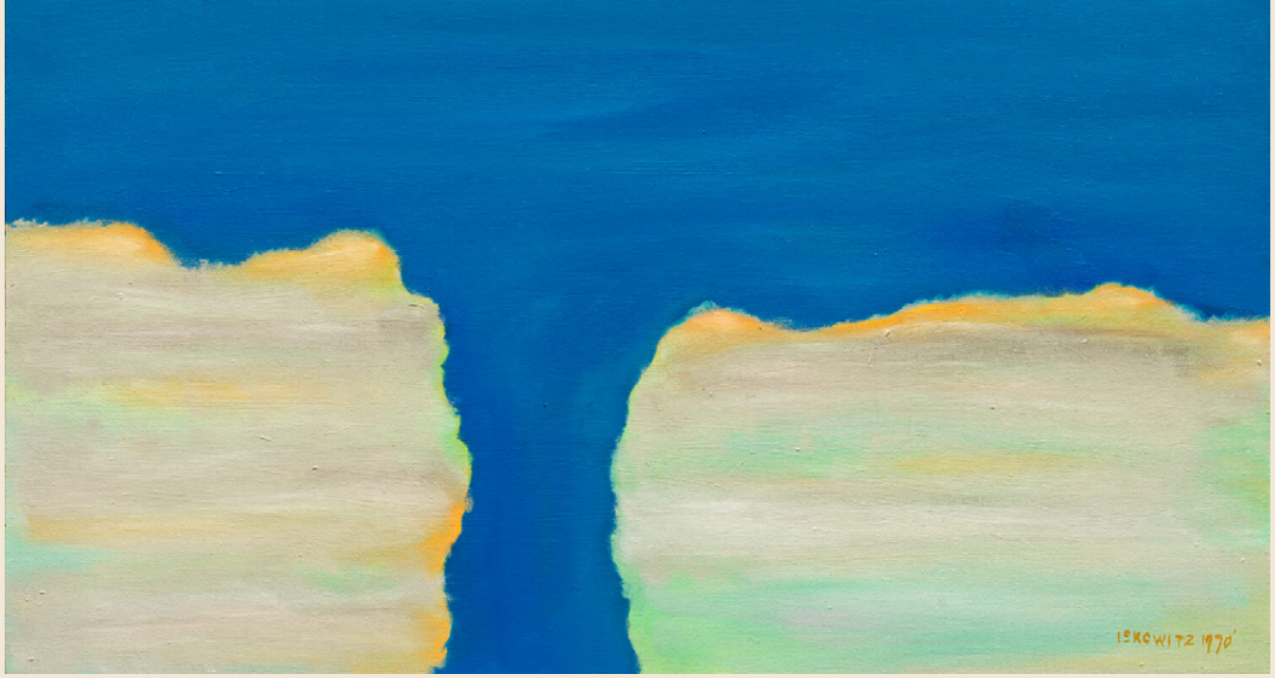
Sarah Letovsky, *Far Off*, 2022, courtesy of Sarah Letovsky and Patel Brown Gallery, Toronto.

In her large-scale, intimate portraits of female sitters, Toronto- and Edmonton-based Jewish Canadian artist Sarah Letovsky (b.1987) examines agency, identity, and personal narrative—themes that are shared across diverse genres of Jewish Canadian art. *Far Off*, 2022, is part of a new series of works featuring women in moments of contemplation, reflection, and awareness. As artist and writer Stanzie Tooth explains, "Letovsky's paintings are all of women at a particular stage of life—that time of life where one has to decide. Faced with questions of the future, of biology, of tradition." Although they may appear detached or aloof, Letovsky's subjects look deeply inward to determine the course of their lives and who they want to become—a precious freedom that their foremothers were not necessarily afforded.

Learn more about Sarah Letovsky

LOWLANDS NO. 9

by Gershon Iskowitz



Gershon Iskowitz, *Lowlands No. 9*, 1970, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Lowlands No. 9, 1970, exemplifies the radical change that occurred in Polish-born Jewish Canadian artist Gershon Iskowitz's (1920 or 1921–1988) practice in the late 1960s, when he shifted from his haunting memory works documenting his experiences as a prisoner at Auschwitz and Buchenwald to his vast, expressive abstract canvases. The Lowlands series was inspired by a 1967 trip Iskowitz took to Churchill, Manitoba, where he experienced aerial views of the northern landscape from an airplane. With broad swaths of colour, the artist evokes the land and water as seen from a bird's-eye perspective, captured in the small, saturated specks that represent aircrafts flying overhead. The optimistic bursts of colour in *Lowlands No. 9* stand in stark contrast to his sober early-career works—a testament to his remarkable personal journey.

Read more in ACI's
Gershon Iskowitz: Life & Work by Ihor Holubizky

JEWISH IMMIGRANTS ARRIVING ON THE PRAIRIES

by William Kurelek

William Kurelek, *Jewish Wedding in Calgary*, 1975, courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

Born in Alberta to Ukrainian Canadian parents, William Kurelek (1927–1977) was deeply interested in the nation's cultural mosaic and the experiences of Canadian newcomers. *Jewish Immigrants Arriving on the Prairies*, 1975, is part of a series of works titled Jewish Life in Canada, which he created as a tribute to his friend Avrom Isaacs, an art dealer in Toronto who was an early admirer of Kurelek's talents. Although not Jewish himself (Kurelek was Catholic), the artist was committed to depicting the people and their traditions. The series is currently on view at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario.

Read more in ACI's
William Kurelek: Life & Work by Andrew Kear

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THE CENTER

by David Altmejd

David Altmejd, *The Center*, 2008, courtesy of David Altmejd and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels.

Montreal-born Canadian artist David Altmejd (b.1974) grew up in a household where he was taken to Mass on Sundays by his Catholic mother and synagogue on Saturdays by his Jewish father. His fantastical large-scale sculptures, such as *The Center*, 2008, are reminiscent of the golem, a sentient being composed of mud or clay in Jewish folklore. Celebrated for his dazzling exploration of the grotesque, Altmejd toes the line between beauty and repulsion in his practice, inviting us to look more closely at the stories, myths, and associations that occupy his imagination. Describing the infusion of the personal in his work, Altmejd says, “I’m Jewish, hence the Star of David, I love pastel colors. My work is a more intense version of myself. But even though it has my genes, it’s also an independent thing with its own history and its own internal logic.... It comes from me, but it becomes something else.”

Learn more about David Altmejd

VEST

by Betty Goodwin

Betty Goodwin, *Vest*, April 1972, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

With her series Vest, Montreal artist Betty Goodwin (1923–2008) gives haunting presence to those who came before her. Goodwin's father—a Holocaust survivor who died when she was a child—made his living as a vest-maker, and the garment appears as a recurring motif in the artist's work. Paying tribute to her parent and to those who were lost in the Holocaust, Goodwin developed a printing technique that involved a process of placing vests directly into an etching press, honouring the precious physical remnants that reach across generations. The resulting works are affecting reminders of lives lost and family remembered during the Jewish High Holidays.

Learn more about Betty Goodwin

I AM MY FAMILY: PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORIES AND FICTIONS

by Rafael Goldchain

Rafael Goldchain, *Self Portrait as Pola Baumfeld, b. Ostrowiec, Poland, 1910s d. Poland, early 1940s*, 1999–2001, courtesy of Rafael Goldchain.

Rafael Goldchain, *Self Portrait as Naftuli Goldszajn b. Krasnik, Poland, early 1800s d. Krasnik, Poland, late 1800s*, 1999–2001, courtesy of Rafael Goldchain.

Intergenerational knowledge is central for many who identify with Judaism, and it is at the heart of *I Am My Family: Photographic Memories and Fictions*, a series of photographic works created by Chilean-born Canadian artist Rafael Goldchain (b.1953). Of Polish-Jewish descent, Goldchain created fifty-six portraits of himself performing as his ancestors, and for him, the inspiration for the project was personal: "*I Am My Family* started many years ago when my son was a child. I realized that the role of parent included the responsibility of passing on to him a familial and cultural inheritance. I thought of all that was lost and will never be known of my family history." Together, the images and accompanying archival materials invite reflection on the preservation of cultural memory and the celebration of Jewish history.

Learn more about Rafael Goldchain

BONSECOURS MARKET, MONTREAL

by William Raphael

William Raphael, *Bonsecours Market, Montreal*, 1880, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Widely considered to be the first Jewish professional artist to establish a career in Canada, William Raphael (1833–1914) made a name for himself as a talented portraitist and dynamic genre painter. This vivid depiction of Bonsecours Market—today located in Montreal's "Old Port"—is one of Raphael's best-known mature works, and it bears witness to the urbanization of the city at a time of rapid social and cultural change. Born in Prussia to Orthodox Jewish parents of Polish descent, Raphael arrived in Montreal on April 23, 1857, and fell in love with the city's landscape and lively buzz. He was soon entrenched in its art scene, gaining portrait commissions from the iconic photographer William Notman (1826–1891) and becoming a celebrated teacher at such storied institutions as the Art Association of Montreal.

Learn more about William Raphael

TALI WARSHAWSKY ON THE DAY OF HER BAT MITZVAH

by Braulio Rocha

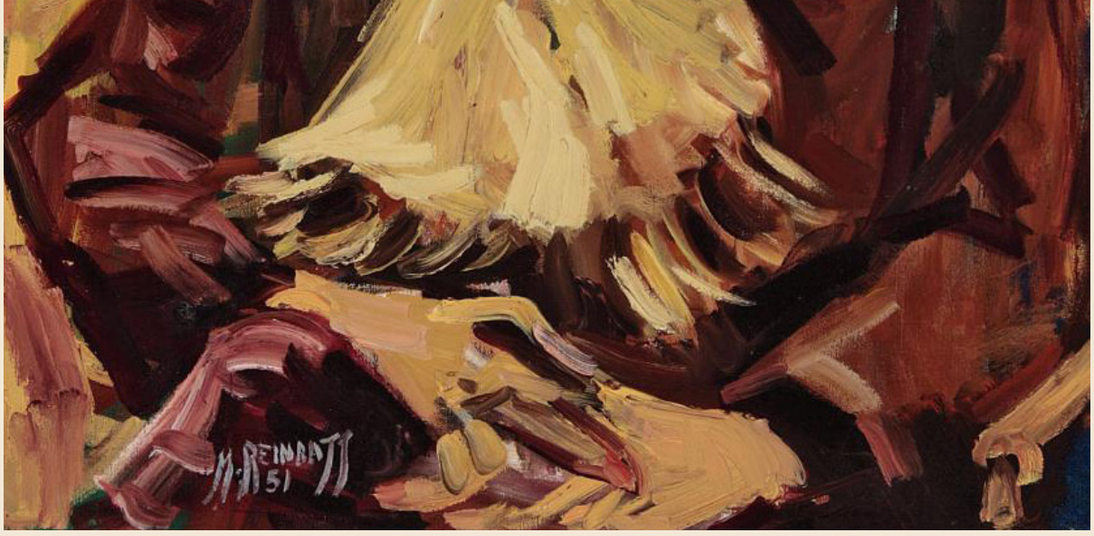
Braulio Rocha, *Tali Warshawsky on the day of her Bat Mitzvah*, n.d., courtesy of Braulio Rocha.

"Once a Janitor, Now the Bar Mitzvah Photography King of Montreal," reads the headline of a recent *New York Times* article shedding light on the remarkable talents of photographer Braulio Rocha. Born in Portugal to a Roman Catholic family, Rocha was working as a custodian at Montreal's Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue in 2015 when he started receiving commissions to shoot bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings, and other cultural celebrations in the congregation. He soon earned a reputation for himself as a skilled portraitist, gaining the trust of families, subjects, and spiritual leaders across the city and becoming known for the intimate artistry that he brings to the genre. In works like *Tali Warshawsky on the day of her Bat Mitzvah*, Rocha integrates a warm, ethereal glow emanating up from the book being cradled in the subject's hands—a recurring motif in many of his portraits that, as he says, "blesses, protects and guides them."

Learn more about Braulio Rocha

ALEXANDER BERCOVITCH

by Moe Reinblatt



Moe Reinblatt, *Alexander Bercovitch*, c.1951, McCord Museum, Montreal.

Alexander Bercovitch (1891–1951), the subject of this portrait, and Moe Reinblatt (1917–1979), the work's creator, were both members of the "Jewish Painters of Montreal." This group of early twentieth-century artists captured the struggles of the Great Depression and the interwar years while also paying tribute to the spirit of modernity. During this period, Montreal was an important artistic centre for the proliferation of cutting-edge Canadian painting—an approach that prioritized expressive brushwork, the use of bold colour, and the creative representation of contemporary city life by those who participated in it. Reinblatt's loosely rendered portrait of Bercovitch exemplifies the new direction many artists were taking at this time.

Learn more about Moe Reinblatt

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