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The Jewishness Is in the Details

By KEN JOHNSON



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

A sampler from "Elaine Reichek: A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited" at the Jewish Museum.

Twenty years ago, the Jewish Museum commissioned Elaine Reichek, the artist known for embroidered and knitted social commentary, to create an installation about being Jewish. What she produced and exhibited in 1994 was "A Postcolonial Kinderhood," an exceptionally savvy and elegant instance of identity politics in art.

Now, with "A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited," the museum is reprising that exhibition with some minor additions. A pair of bulletin boards display reviews, letters and other materials documenting the original show, and a beguiling short film made from flickering home movies of Ms. Reichek's in-laws on their honeymoon in 1934 is shown

through a porthole in one wall, along with the sound of a piano playing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

But the basic production, which the museum owns, is the same. It resembles a Colonial-era room in a historic-house museum. Framed needlework samplers hang on walls painted grayish green, and a four-poster bed stands in the center on a braided rug. There are also framed groups of snapshots of a well-to-do family, dating from the mid-20th century. You understand that what is actually being evoked is the lifestyle of a modern family whose ancestors might have arrived in the New World on the Mayflower. The antique furniture (in reality, reproductions purchased for the exhibition) has presumably been handed down from one generation to the next ever since. There’s a child-size rocking chair stamped with the Yale University coat of arms, signifying, no doubt, a legacy of Ivy League graduates.

Further inspection peels back another layer. In one corner of the room, there are white hand towels hanging on a drying rack, each embroidered with a monogram made of the letters J, E and W. The samplers, you discover, have stitched into them quotations contributed by Ms. Reichek’s relatives and friends. One advises: “Don’t be loud. Don’t be pushy. Don’t talk with your hands.” More seriously, another reads: “I used to fall asleep every night thinking of places to hide when the SS came. I never thought this was in the least bit strange.”

This is the story of a Jewish family so determined to assimilate into American high society that it almost entirely erases evidence of its own ethnic heritage. Indeed, Ms. Reichek grew up in just such a family and married a man from a similar background. But you don’t have to know the autobiographical details to get the point.

The implicit lesson is that there is a price to pay for hiding certain parts of yourself. What is repressed on the outside may come back to haunt you and your descendants on the inside. Someone brought up in such circumstances might feel a secret, three-pronged shame: shame for pretending to be something you’re not; shame for being something that mainstream society regards as repulsive; and shame for lacking the courage to be publicly what you really are, whatever the prejudices of the dominant culture.

Identity understood from this perspective verges on the sacred. That people should honor their ancestral traditions and not turn their backs on them is an ancient imperative. In the industrialized West of the 1960s, romanticizing ethnic, racial and other sorts of identity was part of the countercultural reaction against the soulless 1950s, when everyone wanted to be like everyone else.

One of the virtues of Ms. Reichek’s installation, however, is that it doesn’t hammer home a message but instead leaves questions hanging. You might wonder, for example, what would a room representing a family that had not suppressed its Jewishness look like? What if Ms. Reichek had grown up in an ultra-Orthodox family?

You might also question a notion of identity that takes ethnicity as essence. Is the truth of who and what you are inseparable from your ancestry? How deep does Jewishness — or blackness or Asian-ness — go?

Historically, there have been good reasons for disguising or rejecting traditional identity. If you live in a society that regards your kind as inferior and unworthy of opportunities afforded its own, it may be pragmatic to unburden yourself of that part of you and pass if you can — a big if for some minorities — as a member of the dominant group.

In a more positive sense, many people have come to this country partly to enjoy the freedom to reinvent themselves. Why not change your name, religion and whatever else in your profile that might impede you in your new home?

These are complexities and contradictions that Ms. Reichek's installation doesn't try to resolve, and they give it a resonance that a more didactic work would lack. But those contradictions might be among the reasons that identity art has faded for younger artists, who evidently are suspicious of identifying labels and the limiting expectations that can accompany them. Freely changing identities, putting them on and off like clothes, may be the order of the day, if Miley Cyrus's appropriation of signifiers from black hip-hop culture is any indicator. The political energy stirring art society today is different and more pointed. Now it's all about money.

"Elaine Reichek: A Postcolonial Kinderhood Revisited" runs through Oct. 20 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street; (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.

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