

ELAINE REICHEK

JEWISH MUSEUM

Elaine Reichek's "A Postcolonial Kinderhood" was the first show in the series "Cultural Conversations" developed by the Jewish Museum to "address issues of Jewish identity." This installation suggested, however, that the museum's project is bound to short-circuit itself, if, as Reichek posits, contemporary Jewish identity has been reduced to anxiety over its own absence. Ever since the "emancipation" of European Jewry in the 19th century, the problem has been how to postulate an irreducible difference that, one immediately hastens to add, makes no fundamental difference at all. While the accompanying pamphlet moralized about "the trap of self-negating over-assimilation," the installation itself gave rise to gloomier doubts about the possibility of ever achieving a "correct" relation to the big Other: goyish culture. As the sociologist John Murray Cuddahy has observed, "The cultural collision, the *Kulturkampf*, between *Yiddishkeit* and the behavioral and expressive norms we call the Protestant Esthetic and Etiquette came to constitute the modern form of the ancient *Judenfrage*." Reichek shows this struggle finding its only resolution in self-deprecatory Jewish humor—a representation of an intelligence able to see through its predicament but unable to see its way out of it.

A fantasia on the American colonial-style bedroom of the Dutch colonial house the artist was raised in, the installation included a four-poster canopy bed and a child-size Yale University rocking chair. The walls were hung with reproductions of family photographs such as one in which two relatives on a vacation "out West" pose with what the pamphlet anachronistically calls a "native American," and with a dozen traditional samplers whose texts, instead of the expected didactic sentiments, are quotations from the artist's family and friends. The entire ensemble carries the overwhelming suggestion that, at the level of formal and material culture, the Jewry Reichek knows had nothing of its own to contribute, only an empty mimicry of what, forty years ago, might really have appeared "native" to first-generation Americans. It is only through language that originality is found. Embroidered on the samplers, Woody Allen-ish lines such as, "As a child I fell off the merry-go-round at Coney Island. My parents were very disappointed. They knew I'd never be part of the



Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (Lenore Oremland)*, 1993, embroidery on linen, 20³/₈ x 12³/₄".

horsey set," or, "The parents of Jewish boys always love me. I'm the closest thing to a shiksa without being one," ruefully remind us that this inability to identify with our desire—and the ability to articulate the problem with humor—are the living legacy of Jewish difference.

Reichek's pun on the term "postcolonial" ironically signals the problematic intersection of her project with other contemporary investigations of subaltern cultures under the aegis of multiculturalism. Well aware that some cultures are more "multi" than others, Reichek perfectly captured the Jewish predicament: never assimilated enough, never ethnic enough.

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