
Perils of a Nice Jewish Girl In a Colonial Bedroom

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DECOR can speak volumes. Seemingly innocent furnishings, like guest towels, beds, washstands and rockers, can be threads in a web of memories that tie together cultural differences, social divisions and personal identity.

Elaine Reichek, who grew up in Brooklyn in the 50's, remembers her bedroom on the top floor of a pseudo-Dutch Colonial house, with its ersatz colonial canopy bed from Ethan Allen's 1776 Collection, its braided rugs and its faux-Early American fire screen. Her parents, Hilda and Jack Reichek (he was in the furniture business), were "first-generation Jews." But, she said of her parents, "being Jewish was not discussed." She continued: "There was no Judaica in the house, nothing that remotely suggested Jewish culture."

More than 30 years later, Ms. Reichek, 50, has transformed the bittersweet memory of growing up in an assimilated home into a provocative art installation, entitled "A Postcolonial Kinderhood," that will be on display until Aug. 28 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92d Street. The exhibition is the first in a series at the museum entitled Cultural Conversations.

"Decors have subtexts," said Ms. Reichek, who explained that decorating in a traditional style offered a safe passage to the American way of life for many affluent and socially aspiring families.

"My parents had the hope that they could access a past; a family history that wasn't their own," Ms. Reichek said. "There we were, three little Jewish kids with our Schumacher wallpaper and matching Schumacher cafe curtains. My sister, Wilma, and I wore white gloves and had our hair cut at Best & Company. My baby brother, Yale, was always in a little blue Eton suit. Thanksgiving was the only holiday we celebrated. That was the American holiday."

The artist has transformed the impressive high-ceilinged space at the Jewish Museum -- once the grand dining room of the Warburg mansion -- into the alienated landscape of her childhood bedroom.

The four-poster bed is there, as is a wrought iron lamp, an Early American-style fire screen and the so-well-remembered braided rugs, in a series of pristine vignettes. The photographs and samplers are hung on the walls at a child's eye-level; a black lacquer rocker with its Yale University insignia in Hebrew is child-size.

"It's all seen from the perspective of a child," Ms. Reichek explained. "The room is about the anxiety of assimilation" that she felt growing up.

The room, whose aura of loneliness and nostalgia may strike a responsive chord for many visitors, includes a collection of 12 samplers sewn by Ms. Reichek in the last year and based on those produced by young women in the 18th and 19th century. Visitors are invited to take a closer look at the statements and quotations sewn on the samplers, the chair pillow and the bedspread. And to sort through a drawer overflowing with old photographs: Aunt Ellie with a hoop, Dad golfing, Mom in a glamorous pose. And Margery and Ellie with a horse. "They're part of the German side of the family," Ms. Reichek said of her husband's family. "They rode."

The samplers, on which Ms. Reichek has embroidered quotations from family and friends about their experiences of being Jewish in America, are both witty and poignant.

Her daughter, Laura Engel, 25, suggested the words for one sampler: "The Parents of Jewish Boys Always Love Me. I'm the Closest Thing to a Shiksa Without Being One." Ms. Reichek smiled. "She went to Bryn Mawr, and is apple-cheeked and outdoorsy," she said of her daughter. She also has a son, James, 23.

Ms. Reichek uses knitting and embroidery as another artist might use watercolors or clay; her pieces, she said, have "a feminist element."

"By using a woman's medium subversively," she explained, "I was undermining various assumptions about woman's work and art. I was seizing control of an art form that had been stuck in the craft ghetto, with its suggestion of nostalgia, domesticity and passivity."

Commenting on identity is a familiar theme for the artist. While this show is about her own family and friends -- and by extension, what she called "my ethnic family, my race" -- her previous work has centered on the identity of American Indians and how they were represented by people outside their culture.

"Even as a child," she said, "I had the idea that Native Americans were doing a lot of the giving and not getting any of the thanks."

At age 20, Ms. Reichek married George Clark Engel Jr., whose Jewish family "celebrated Christmas, with the full regalia, stockings and plum pudding, but not a creche."

About a year and a half ago, Susan Goodman, the chief curator of the Jewish Museum, suggested Ms. Reichek explore her own Jewish identity. "It was something I hadn't really thought about," Ms. Reichek said.

Norman Kleeblatt, the curator of collections at the museum, sees Ms. Reichek's work as part of larger context. "A number of Jewish artists who grew up in suburbia during the 1950's and 1960's experienced the tension between the pressure to embrace the image of the American as promoted in popular culture, and the reality of their ethnic and cultural difference," he said. "They are using these emotionally laden biographical memories as the subject of their art."

Ms. Reichek uses the sampler, historically a socializing and educational tool for young women, to comment on what she described as "issues of class." She said, "Class is something that people don't talk about in America because it's supposed to be a classless society." But there is "an elitism about having an ancestor who did a sampler," she added.

The notion of class is also reflected in Ms. Reichek's museum towel rack that holds freshly laundered antique towels, all monogrammed "JEW."

"Just having such pretty hand towels implied having people to embroider them and launder and press them," she said.

But it is the towering four-poster bed that takes center stage. On the headboard, a quotation from George Washington welcomes "the children of the Stock of Abraham" to America. On the footboard, a quotation from President Richard M. Nixon reads, "Aren't the Chicago Seven all Jews?" Ms. Reichert said, "There I was, trapped in the middle."

In the center of the spread, embroidered in German, is: "Was willst du von meinem Leben?" Ms. Reichek said, "They translate as, 'What do you want from my life?' "

What indeed?

Photos: Sampler by Elaine Reichek on assimilation. (pg. C1); Elaine Reichek in the installation at the Jewish Museum that depicts her childhood bedroom.; Antique linen towel is monogrammed "JEW."; From top, a sampler, a photograph of Ms. Reichek's mother-in-law and her brother with an American Indian, and a rocker are part of the room's decor. (Photographs by Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times) (pg. C7)