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Ruth Weisberg: Transcendence of Time Through Persistence of Imagery

GILAH YELIN HIRSCH

Ruth Weisberg was born in 1942 into a second-generation American Jewish family of Russian, Polish, and Austrian descent. Her father, Alfred, an architect who had received a Beaux-Arts architectural education in Chicago, supported the early 20th-century crafts movement, whose leading advocate was Frank Lloyd Wright. It was while visiting artists' studios with her father that the young Ruth became intoxicated by the smell of turpentine and oil paint and the creative imaginations of artists.[1]

Ruth's maternal grandmother was a leftist intellectual involved in the early feminist movement. Her maternal grandfather, who had returned to Russia for six years during the 1930s, helped found at this time Birobidzhan, a socialist-Zionist colony in Siberia. Ruth's mother, Theresa, spent her early childhood living in a socialist-Zionist colony in Clarion, Utah, and as she grew older became active in liberal social and political causes. (She was appointed to Illinois's first commission on the status of women.) These parallel strands—art and social commitment—have become intertwined in Ruth Weisberg's life.

The Weisberg family values were rooted in Jewish tradition: there was an emphasis on family and on social responsibilities. Because of family losses, indeed, Jewish losses in general during the Holocaust, Ruth and her sister Naomi were taught to value the past ("remembering is redemption"), to make life meaningful, and to use their gifts productively.

Ruth's specialness was noticed early. She was sent to Saturday art classes at the Chicago Art Institute and at age six announced with full confidence that she would become an artist. The Institute became her second home. Soon, she intimately knew the collection, which includes fine works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Isabel Bishop, and Mary Cassatt. As a teenager she studied with Emanuel Jacobson, an exceptional drawing teacher to whom she attributes her continuing interest in the figure and in content in art.

Until age 16 Ruth spent summers with her family at the Wilson Sand Dunes, a community of about 100 families in Indiana, where there was no electricity, goods and services were bartered, and material wealth and competition were disdained. In this ideal, pastoral environment, the community members sought harmony with nature. In 1959, at age 16, she entered the University of Michigan, but wanderlust and romantic

Fig. 1. Ruth Weisberg, *Moon Bone Child Stone* (1972), lithograph, 30" x 40".

myths about expatriate artists in Europe led her, the following year, with full family support, to enroll in l'Accademia de Belle Arti, Perugia. For two and a half years she immersed herself in art and art history, which became more meaningful as she toured the European art centers and saw many masterworks *in situ*.

Despite the prevalence of Cubism in l'Accademia, Ruth's work there was surrealistic, populated by people and animals. She earned a lauria in painting and printmaking from l'Accademia in 1962, and returned, apprehensively, to the University of Michigan. After receiving her bachelor's degree she went with her first husband (the marriage was short-lived) to Paris where she worked with Stanley William Hayter at Atelier 17. On her return to Ann Arbor in 1964 she became active in radical politics and, with painters Al Loving and

Fig. 2. Ruth Weisberg, *La Commedia è finita* (1977), lithograph, 29⅝" x 37⅜".

Wynn Cortes and lithographer Stuart Klein, among others, investigated psychology, mysticism, and the other philosophies that captivated the imaginations of 1960s intellectuals. Using a combination of paint and collage, often articles of clothing, her work during this period was frankly erotic.

After receiving her MFA from Michigan in 1965, despite initial discouragement because of her sex, Weisberg went back to Paris to work again with Stanley William Hayter. Upon returning to Michigan the following year, Weisberg married Kelyn Roberts, a graduate student in psychology, and began using the lithography facilities of Professor Emil Weddige. Later, in a rambling Civil War-era house she shared with her husband in Ann Arbor, she set up a Norwegian intaglio press purchased in Europe. From 1966–69 Ruth taught studio and art history courses at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, while Kelyn completed his graduate studies. Her work during this time moved through mystical references, surrealistic and erotic transformations, in and out of animal forms. For a period, influenced by the expressionism of Max Beckmann, her figures became distorted and compressed. The struggles were painful, and satisfied with little she had done in the previous two years, in 1968 she destroyed it all.

Destruction, however, is often the precursor of construction. The new work dealt with personal history and memory. In 1968 and 1969, she painted her early life at the Dunes and her life in Ann Arbor, often featuring her artist friends in art-historical contexts. One was reminiscent of Courbet's *The Painter's Studio.* Expressionistic distortion was gone, and in its place were emotional and human concerns. By the time Weisberg and Roberts left Ann Arbor for Los Angeles (where Roberts accepted an assistant professorship at UCLA) in 1969, she had had solo exhibitions in Toronto, Ann Arbor, and Seattle, and her work had been included in an American Academy of Art exhibition and a major print show at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

In the fall of 1970 Weisberg began teaching printmaking and the art of the book at the University of Southern California, where she is now a full professor. In the same year Weisberg received a Ford Foundation grant to write and illustrate a limited edition book, *The Shtetl, A Journey and a Memorial.* (A year earlier she had designed and illustrated her first large format book, *Tom O'Bedlam's Song.*) From earliest childhood, Weisberg had been stunned by the horrors of the Holocaust and the tales of family members and others lost to the Nazis. She became imbued with that history while doing research for *The Shtetl* at the Institute for Yiddish Research (YIVO) in New York. It became for her an expiation ritual. As she wrote: "I might have been among them, but I was born in Chicago in 1942. I am a branch, a resting place for their souls. This book is my life's journey in place of theirs."[2]

The images in the book, all etchings, include a circle of children against the background of a high wooden gate, shopkeepers, day laborers waiting for work, and an old woman shouldering her meager belongings on her back. The figures emerge through layers of texture suggesting the effects of time's passage and the transience of memory. Copies of *The Shtetl* were acquired by museums and rare book libraries, including those at the Chicago Art Institute, Harvard University, and New York's Jewish Museum.

While working on the book, Weisberg also created a series of paintings about friends she had left behind in Ann Arbor. Each couple or family group was depicted on multiple canvases, their gestures and compositions suggesting successive moments of time. The use of stained colorfields as backdrop to the figures added a hallucinatory effect to the paintings. This was the artist's way of recapturing the social and intellectual excitement she had left behind, and of dealing with the isolation she felt in Los Angeles. The paintings were exhibited in 1971 at the Pollack Gallery, Toronto.

After *The Shtetl* was published, Weisberg returned to lithography, working in a larger scale and with stronger gestures. She also began experimenting with wash techniques. She produced a series about American Indians whom, she believes, like Jews, are survivors in exile, displaced from their homeland, their mysticism untethered from its sources. In *Moon Bone Child Stone* (1972; Fig. 1), the head and shoulders of a Mojave child are framed by a necklace of bones. The meaning of the lithograph was articulated in a Weisberg poem:

> The moon was closer then
> Each place had a name
> The bird and the spider
> A wolf, a mountain
> A wheel
> Are all that is left
> Moon bone child stone
> is gone again
> Sliding safely behind
> The moon
> You whose death
> has already been
> forgotten

Weisberg used her pregnancy in 1973 with her first

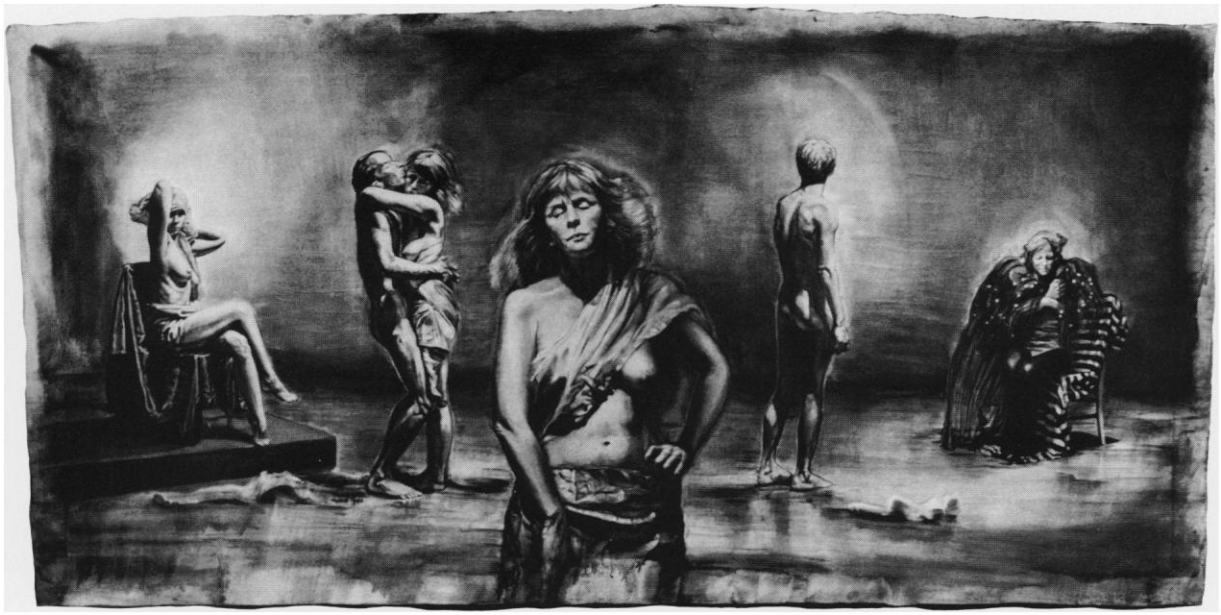

Fig. 3. Ruth Weisberg, *Aura of Becoming* (1983), oil on canvas, 5′ x 11′. Photo: Mary McNally.

child Alicia as inspiration for another series of paintings and color lithographs. In both the painting (70½″ x 70″) and lithograph (40½″ x 30⅛″) *Waterborne*, the artist uses liquid blues and the orange of her hair as she depicts herself afloat as both pregnant mother and fetus. A beautifully drawn image, it captures both the mystery and ecstasy of birth.

In the mid-1970s Weisberg began a series of prints and drawings with art-historical references. In the lithograph *Disparity Among the Children* (1975), she quotes from Velásquez's *Las Meninas*, adding her own image in place of the master's self-portrait and a fleeting glimpse of her daughter running, which contrasts with the confined figure of the Infanta. Weisberg frequently casts herself in the observer's position and, clothed as Gilles (the harlequin created by the Commedia dell'Arte and used by Watteau), she draws the curtain open on views of life arranged in theatrical settings. Using theater and ballet scenes, she focuses on the vulnerability of the performer: "I pull aside the curtain and you see an image of the artist pulling aside a curtain."[3]

In a group of six prints and drawings, the artist drew the curtain successively on a jostling carnival crowd (1977; Fig. 2), isolated dancers, and, most startling of all, in the lithograph *Fin*, a dark void. By the end of the 1970s the artist was using multiple curtains, which were raised and lowered to reveal disguised figures or their reflections in mirrors. The growing sense of turmoil culminated in the 24-foot drawing *Children of Paradise* (1980), recently acquired by the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum. A sequence of five scenes follows the spiraling movement of a crowd of revelers. The focus of each episode is a mime figure who appears to be drowning in this surging crowd of humanity. The long scroll of Arches watercolor paper has been unevenly darkened with black ink. The figures, all clothed in similar white costumes, are delineated in transparent layers of white ink which give them an air of incorporeality.

The birth of the couple's second child, Alfred, in 1977, inspired in the next several years a series of drawings and prints portraying the continuity of life. Life-size and in mixed media, they examine the relationships between generations, siblings, spouses, and children. Unlike the horizontal, scroll-like *Children of Paradise*, the family members are portrayed in groups of three, arranged by height in a vertical format. They are strong totemic images, with their emphasis on the family unit rather than on individual family members. One drawing shows Weisberg's mother, sister, and her six-year-old self arranged in descending order, as they

Fig. 4. Ruth Weisberg, *The Past: The Great Synagogue of Danzig* (1984), oil on canvas, 70½″ x 70″. Collection Skirball Museum, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles.

appeared in 1948. Another smaller drawing uses her father at the top of the column of figures.

When in 1979 she viewed a survey of her work from the previous 10 years at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park (curated by Josine Ianco Starrels), she was able to clarify her vision, to see herself in relation to her history as reflected in her imagery. She wrote:

> I have the need to hold onto history and to do my own history, even though part of me recognizes that this is impossible. I think that this causes my images to be more transparent and ethereal . . . . I need to preserve things from destruction or death. In wanting to carry on a tradition, a continuity, I preserve a love of humanness.[4]

Weisberg was already involved in women's issues when she attended the Cal Arts Conference on Feminism in 1972. She was active with the Crenshaw Woman's Center and in 1973 joined the National Woman's Caucus for Art. (She founded the Los Angeles chapter in 1976.) Since 1975 she has been writing criticism, primarily for *Artweek* (a West Coast weekly arts publication), focusing on reviews of works that embody her own concerns, i.e., the figure, art history, or feminism. Indeed, she has found that writing not only clarifies her thoughts about her own work, but puts her into a dialogue with other artists.

In December 1980 Weisberg participated in performance artist Rachel Rosenthal's DBD (Doing By Doing) weekend workshop. Various archetypes from myths and folklore were used as roles through which participants explored open-ended situations. Each person's latent cast of characters was permitted to emerge in relation to those of other participants. These short miniplays became arenas for vigorous engagement on emotional, physical, and intellectual levels. Spontaneous live music, high intensity theatrical lighting, and a full array of props and costumes heightened the force of the experience.

Ultimately the DBD experience launched the series of paintings (later called Phantoms and Lovers) which deals with the issues of passion, compassion, relationship to one's self, and the relationship between men and women. A conversation in Spring 1981 with feminist painter Miriam Schapiro "gave her psychological permission" to deal with these uneasy subjects and resulted in a series of 18 drawings, paintings, and photographs, completed two years later. She developed a cast of characters in an intense theatrical setting. Individual personalities as well as aspects of herself appear as costumed men and women, old and young, caught in dramatic gestures—embrace, confrontation, repulsion, flight—frozen moments in a mysterious unfolding drama.

Weisberg employed this dramatic vehicle to explore the maturation process—pain and ecstacy of intimacy, angst of jealousy, despair and wisdom of aging. Beginning with a compelling idea, she followed what she called "an urgent core of mystery" through layers of revelation. Using both self-portraits and portraits of others, a cast of interchangeable characters was created to populate the proscenium stage on which a very personal drama was enacted.

The series features one or two protagonists in a variety of intimate scenes. In the lithograph *Turning Point* (1981), two women, who may represent two moments of a single individual, confront a nude male and then turn away. The painting *Phantoms and Lovers* (for which the series is named) also depicts two women, the one on the right posed in a blatantly erotic, come-hither manner, while the woman on the left, the artist's image, is wrapped in cloth, shivering. In the center is a couple embracing, he more passionate than she. In the last work, *Aura of Becoming* (1983; Fig. 3), a single woman at center stage assumes heroic proportions. Behind her in a pageant-like tableau are the two women, positions reversed, the embracing couple from *Phantoms and Lovers*, plus the rear view of a nude man. Taken as a whole, the Phantom and Lovers Series constitutes a process of transformation; even Weisberg's palette brightens with each successive work as if to illuminate this process of gradual enlightenment. The later paintings deal with the evanescent quality of spiritual and emotional integration as portrayed in the translucent radiance of the figures.

One can also see in the series the wedding of Weisberg's expertise in various media. As a lithographer she has perfected sensuous washes; as a draughtswoman she has grasped form. The paintings are created by many layers of turpentine washes gradually building up surfaces which float in light and color. The slow change from opacity to translucency and ultimately to color as energy seems to echo the psychological and emotional metamorphoses inherent in the images. Both the painting method and the narrative point to the shifting nature of reality and the heightened sense of life that art can make manifest.

When the works were shown at Jack Rutberg Fine Arts in Los Angeles (September 1983), a reviewer wrote:

> Weisberg's figures are reportorial and honest, proud to be fragile and human. They do not omit the frailties and defenselessness of the persona as they act in staged situations that both reveal and conceal. Speaking to the audience as does a storyteller, they are enriched with sensuality and angst, evoking the experience of loss, the intimacy of an embrace. They represent both dream and life.[5]

When Weisberg had surgery for breast cancer in the fall of 1983, her interest in the life cycle was renewed and strengthened. In an ambitious 12-painting series called The Circle of Life, new images such as doors and portals emerge. Through the use of both landscape and architectural space, she is seeking the relation between culture and nature. She is also using myths, autobiographical elements, and Jewish sources. Other recurring images are circles of people, children, and figures moving toward the viewer.

Through force of memory she alters images and makes them "bleed through each other." In the first painting of the series, *The Past: The Great Synagogue of Danzig* (1984; Fig. 4), two images with this double-exposure effect represent two aspects of pre-World War II Jewish experience: the hard life in little towns, called "shtetls," and the flowering of Jewish culture as seen in the synagogue of the free city of Danzig. The circle of children represents those children killed in the Holocaust whose souls she feels she must redeem through her life's work. A drawing from the series, *The Destruction of the Great Synagogue of Danzig*, has her

daughter Alicia standing as witness in front of a drawing of the destruction. Her daughter also represents the survival of the Jews and their continuity as a people.

In the third painting of the series, *The Dunes: The Persistence of Memory* (1984), images again "bleed through each other." From a light-filled, panoramic background, the small figure of the artist as an adult (in mid-ground left of center) steps forward, her hands on her hips, her hair bathed in an aura of sunlight. On the right four large, carefully drawn figures of children take the viewer back to the artist's childhood. In this pictorial space the past is thrust forward as it often is in the act of remembering. The paintings from the series are almost monochromatic in their washes of blues, blue-greens, and blue-violets, with contrasting browns and brown-oranges added to delineate form.

The layers of conscious and unconscious knowledge merge and deepen as the artist searches for metaphors in her art large enough to accommodate the full scope of her vision. By this means she can hold onto both memory and people despite the transience of life. Indeed, Ruth Weisberg's life and art are mutually reflective. Her complex personality perceives the universe through myriad, deeply felt visions. Although her work has often been set against theatrical or epic backdrops, what emerges is not a vague, isolated drama, but a sensitive individual's experience that profoundly affects the viewer. Each time she "raises the curtain" on yet another aspect of human life, whether tenderness, joy, grief, or pain, we recognize ourselves. She captures time and memory through imagery. Risking personal revelation, she seeks the universal; using imagic metaphor drawn from literature and history, particularly the history of art, the history of the Jews, and the history of woman, Ruth Weisberg has created an archetypal body of work. •

1. All information on the artist was gathered in lengthy conversations during the summers of 1983 and 1984.
2. Ruth Weisberg, *The Shtetl, A Journey and a Memorial* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Kelyn Press, 1971), 4.
3. Ruth Weisberg, "Artist's Statement," in "Survey Exhibition, 1971–79" (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park, October 30–November 25, 1979).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Mac McCloud, "Ruth Weisberg: Dream and Fantasy," *Artweek* (October 8, 1983), 1, backpage.

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