



Harvest Home

The poignant imagery of Eastern European Jewish shtetl life informs the art of Emmett Leader

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IT'S A SHORT WALK from ceramic artist Emmett Leader's home to his backyard workplace, but one that bridges more than a century in time, moving quietly from the landscape of contemporary western Massachusetts to that of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. Descending a few steps from his modern kitchen (which is large enough to include plenty of cooking space, a sofa, and a clawfoot bathtub), along a flagstone path, and into his expansive, two-story studio (formerly a horse stable), one is teleported to a magical, mysterious universe populated by terra cotta bird-people in conical hats and peacocks, rams, fish, doves, gazelles, lions, and chickens. In this long-ago world, symbolism, ritual, and a connection to the land were essential components of people's everyday lives.

This fall, the Ferrin Gallery in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, will offer visitors a window into the almost-vanished world of Eastern European Jewry when it exhibits a major installation by Leader. Entitled *Sukkot: Celebrating the Impermanent*, the room-sized creation depicts his personal vision of a *sukkah*—the temporary dwell-



ing traditionally built by Jews during the joyous period of Sukkot, the annual harvest festival. (The name of the holiday echoes Biblical times, when Moses and the Israelites lived in huts as they wandered the desert for forty years before reaching the promised land.)

The three walls of Leader's *sukkah* installation are lined with fancifully engraved earthenware tablets, clay ritual objects balanced on shelves and in wall niches, and carefully placed found objects on narrow mantels. An assortment of family photos and traditional items specifically connected with the holiday—the *lulav* (palm frond) and *etrog* (citron fruit)—as well as Biblical quotations, such as "A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted," are integrated into the structure; in this way Leader's personal narrative is interwoven with universal tales. The work is done in a vernacular style, one in which the artist brings to life what he calls "a sacred space within a rural setting."

"As an artist and as a Jew," he says, "I find myself very excited when I see images of *sukkot* built over the centuries. Whether it's a highly decorated *sukkah* in eighteenth-century Germany, or one hastily assembled during the Yom Kippur War, the best examples resonate and connect me in a very deep way to my traditions." To Leader, these *sukkot* not only tell a personal and communal story,

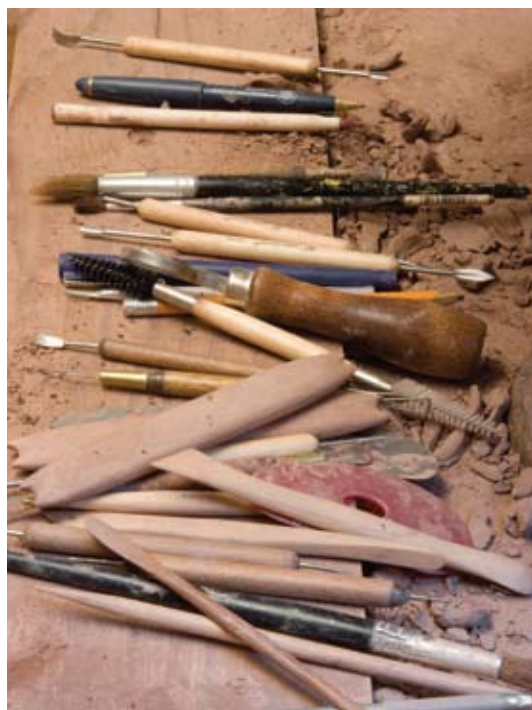
but also serve as inspirational examples of the Jewish ethic of *hiddur mitzvah*—the enhancement of a mitzvah (a religious obligation) through aesthetic presentation.

The theme of yearning for home and a sense of belonging is implicit throughout Leader's work—whether expressed through doves in flight returning to their cote, or in his architectural “shelter menorahs,” some of which look like miniature, self-contained shtetls (Eastern European villages)—so it seems only natural that he would be drawn to the idea of creating a large-scale *sukkah* installation. In this work, he also plays with the alternating perspectives of insider and outsider, another theme that has held a lifelong fascination for him.

A resident of Northampton, Massachusetts, Leader is a nationally known creator of singular Judaica earthenware. He has been working for almost two decades in this medium, helping to bring it from relative obscurity to greater public attention. His art has been showcased in numerous juried and invitational national shows; most recently it was featured under the umbrella of Ferrin Gallery at the prestigious SOFA (Sculpture Objects and Functional Art) Expo in New York, an event that is widely thought to exhibit only the best of the best. His 2007 SOFA creation was an instal-

lation called *Slonim Revisited*, an homage to the shtetl where his grandparents lived; this year's was entitled *Dayenu* and depicts pilgrimages made by people bringing offerings to the great temple in Jerusalem.

Leslie Ferrin, owner of Ferrin Gallery, has known Leader for more than twenty years, since the heyday of Northampton's Pinch Pottery, when he was making colorful, jazzy tableware that she sold in her shop. She has



Feet of Clay: A work-in-progress in Emmett Leader's studio. (Opposite left) The figure in this *sukkot* panel is holding the traditional palm frond; (opposite right) a sculpted box titled *Orgeyev V*.



seen the evolution of his work and a “growth in his thinking and artistic development. I am not a religious person but I have always had an appreciation for the objects Emmett makes and the meaning behind them,” she says. Ferrin feels that the exposure he has received at the SOFA expos is vital to his career, firmly establishing his place in the context of contemporary decorative arts

and making him visible to the professionals who can position his work in both public and private settings. “The New York community of collectors is probably the most educated about the source material that Emmett draws upon and can respond with knowledge and acquisitions,” she notes.

Leader's use of an ancient Mediterranean method of glazing called *terra sigillata*, his



meticulous engraving of biblical quotations in Hebrew text throughout his work, his signature colors (terra cotta, peacock green, and Mediterranean blue) and fanciful imagery render his work instantly recognizable. Although he is currently moving toward doing more large-scale commissions, he still finds a tremendous sense of purpose, as well as an outlet for his playful sense of humor, in creating smaller ritual objects for exhibition at galleries and crafts fairs. The walls of his studio are lined with eye-catching *tzedakah* (charity) boxes, seder plates, menorahs, spice boxes, and *mizrachs* (decorative plaques hung on an east-facing wall, indicating the direction of Jerusalem). A favorite *tzedakah* box depicts a whale swimming through the waves with a set of cartoon-like human legs protruding from its mouth—Jonah on a bad day.

Primarily using clay, but often incorporating wood, archival materials, and found objects, his earthenware communicates the

narrative, texture, and spirit of real and imagined places that once existed throughout the Jewish world. He finds inspiration in the paintings of twentieth-century Israeli primitivist Shalom of Safed, gravestone carvings and favorite Bible stories, but, most of all, in the wooden synagogues and shtetl village architecture of Eastern Europe.

While he sees his art as being connected to the past, he feels that it also can be viewed as “a contemporary midrash [interpretation]” combining aesthetics and functionality. His hope is that his work will be integrated into the rhythm of people’s daily lives, encouraging them to retain a visual link to Jewish ethics, tradition, and history. His art references what he calls “the enduring story of the Jewish people”—one of ongoing exile and return, the interweaving of the temporary and the permanent. (His ritual objects and building-shaped sculptures are often mounted on wheels and have ropes attached at the front;



Detail of Sukkot: Celebrating the Impermanent



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this not only recalls Leader’s favorite childhood plaything, but also suggests that in their wanderings, Jews have had to be ready to pick up and leave at a moment’s notice.)

The grandson of a rabbi, Leader was born in Andover, Vermont—a rural “church-driven” community where he often felt out of place as a member of the only Jewish family in town. His left-leaning parents, Herbert and Miriam, like their neighbors, were intensely interested in agriculture and farming, but they were considered somewhat eccentric. Herbert was an outspoken Socialist whose frequent letters to the local newspaper (addressing everything from the “unbridled power” of the FBI to the advantages of drying clothes outdoors) netted him a thick file with the agency; under the Freedom of Information Act he learned that he had been spied upon by a local postal employee and even by a next-door neighbor. Both Herbert and Miriam, though, remained committed to a rural-subsistence lifestyle

like that of Helen and Scott Nearing, who were their friends and mentors.

Leader spent his first seven years at Popplewood, the family farm; there, he says, “Our lifestyle was highly improvised, to put it mildly; the feeling was that life was not scripted and that the day was mine to invent. I grew up feeling very comfortable using any available material—wood, stone, string, metal, whatever—to make what I needed.”

The medium of pottery was a natural draw for him, a rural occupation with a direct connection to a multitude of elements with which he had always been familiar. “Digging clay, building wood-fired kilns, building a studio, and improvising equipment were what I’d always done; the bonus was that with clay, there was the possibility of personal expression on a truly meaningful level.”

His family eventually moved to Northampton, but he continued to spend summers, weekends, and vacations in Vermont. When he was seventeen, he moved back there by himself and finished high school. He gradu-

ated from Bennington College in 1976 with a BA in ceramics and sculpture and then became studio manager of Greenwich House Pottery in New York City. In 1981, his spiritual quest took him to Israel, where he worked as a cabinetmaker in a carpentry shop on Kibbutz Yagur; in this he followed in the footsteps of his parents, who had worked in the fields on several kibbutzim, communal villages, during the years just before and after the state was granted independence. (Miriam, now eighty-nine-years-old, is violinist for the much-celebrated Young@Heart chorus that was the subject of a recent documentary by the same name.) Leader served a stint in the



Sadgora

Israel Defense Forces, returning to Vermont in 1985.

The uneasiness Leader had felt during his youth was the beginning of a lifelong engagement with the complexities of living as a Jew in the diaspora. As a child he had loved the sights and sounds of Vermont's rural landscape—the farmhouse, the barn, the grange, church, and town hall. All of these reflected and expressed an intimate social and communal world, a world in which he felt sometimes included, but often was the “other.” While still a youngster, he was transfixed by the “cathedral-like grandeur” of Vermont's barns; he envied their splendor and the sense of purpose that must have gripped their builders, but simultaneously felt a disconnect that perplexed and disturbed him.

At the age of thirty-seven, Leader serendipitously discovered some photographs of synagogues and gravestones in Eastern European shtetls. This moment proved to be revelatory: introducing him to a world much like the one his grandparents had left behind, providing the personal narrative he had been seeking for so long. His ongoing search for identity and belonging found resolution in these compelling and instantly relatable photos. It was at this time that his work made a dramatic shift from functional pottery solely to Judaica. “I feel very lucky,” Leader notes. “Just as I was tiring of making functional pottery, I found a new sense of purpose in creating Jewish ritual



Trip to Snyatin



Stories From After



Ancient Days: Emmett Leader's *Dayenu* is visible through the studio door.

objects. A cup or bowl is useful, but this work connects me to something very dear to my heart.”

Leader's recent commissions include a lively installation that fills and revitalizes a formerly drab entrance corridor at his home synagogue, Congregation B'nai Israel of Northampton, and a wood-and-tile entryway surround for the Northampton Food Co-op that integrates agrarian and communal motifs into the new building's design. In the works is a series of tiles that will frame the seven-foot gateway to the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut.

Leader describes his *sukkah* installation in Pittsfield as “in some ways a dream project,” because it is an aesthetic and ritual environment crafted entirely from his own imagination and skill. He is, in essence, building the home that he has held in his mind's eye for decades, realizing a favorite verse from the *Song of Songs*:

Like the gaze of doves toward their cotes, His eyes are fixed on the waters of Torah, bathing all things in clarity, established upon creation's fullness. BI

Journalist and musician **Judy Polan** writes about the arts, culture, design, and architecture for *Modernism*, *Style 1900*, and *Pakn Tregger*.

THE GOODS

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Sukkot: Celebrating the Impermanent
Emmett Leader Solo Show
October 11–November 9
Ferrin Gallery
437 North St.
Pittsfield, Mass.
413.442.1622
www.ferringallery.com