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Kavana: Photography, Jewish Storytelling, and Memory

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

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By Hannah Altman

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Jewish thought suggests that the memory of an action is as primary as the action itself. This is to say that when my hand is wounded, I remember other hands. I trace ache back to other aches - when my mother grabbed my wrist pulling me across the intersection, when my great-grandmother's fingers went numb on the ship headed towards Cuba fleeing the Nazis, when Miriam's palms enduringly poured water for the Hebrews throughout their desert journey - this is how the Jew is able to fathom an ache. Because no physical space is a given for the Jewish diaspora, time and the rituals that steep into it are centered as a mode of carrying on. The bloodline of a folktale, an object, a ritual, pulses through interpretation and enactment. In this work I explore notions of Jewish memory, narrative heirlooms, and image making; the works position themselves in the past as memories, in the present as stories being told, and in the future as actions to interpret and repeat. To encounter an image in this way is not only to ask what it feels like, but to ask: what does it remember like?

SOMETHING ALIVE APPEARS (INTRODUCTION)

My mom believes that her late mother visits us intermittently in the form of a ladybug. I have no idea where her theory stems from, and admittedly when she first shared this notion with me, my first thought was mostly wondering if Jews even have thoughts on reincarnation. Turns out, they do; kabbalists call it *ibbur*, in which a deceased soul spiritually impregnates a living soul temporarily. I am not sure if my mom is conscious of this ideology, but in any case she told me about her ladybug theory about three months after her mother died; three months after tearing clothing, sitting shiva, a stranger planting a tree in her honor in Israel, my father similarly planting a tree in our front yard. Truthfully, I forgot about the hunch, until I was conversing in my studio a year later with another Jewish artist, Hope Ginsburg (who would later serve on my thesis committee) talking about my work. I do not recall specifics of the conversation; it was one loosely about photography and time repeating itself through Jewish experience. At any rate, an awed sigh moves from her mouth: “Woah woah woah. Hang on. A ladybug just appeared in your hair” (Figure 1). We looked at each other, a pointed silence. She took a photo, walked me over to the open window, and lifted its body to the fresh air. This is not a sugarcoated plot point; I did not instantly remember my mom’s ladybug theory in this moment as it landed on my head. The remembrance was slower, an afterthought while I was looking at the photo later that afternoon, and was reminded of my mom, of her mom, of ibbur, this impregnation of one soul by another, creating this constant interconnected narrative.

(Fig. 1)

My work often explores ideas of the body, of family lineage and Jewish storytelling. Much of this stems from a self portrait project with my mother that we have been developing over the last five years called *Indoor Voices* (2015-present) The project is an exploration of womanhood, performative feminine behavior, and the ways

in which learned action is carried down from mother to daughter. She and I have continued to make these photographs since its birth in 2015, and it has become a deeply intimate staple of our lives and the way we share our time. The process of making this is as primary as the work itself; it serves as the fabric of our memories photographically as they happen in real life inside and outside of the frame. The work manifests its own form of storytelling. And while the work primarily takes place in my childhood home, a very real space with its own weight and history, there is an aspect of this work that is constructed, usually in the details. Inside this space there are exaggerated motifs, a bit of fiction, a bit of performance. I make use of these small fictions to veil our photographic world in a thin layer of composure, one that I think accurately mirrors existing women outside of the frame.

This arranged nature also encourages my mom and I to use this project as a healing space to be able to tell stories, particularly that of an image titled *In Her Childhood Home While Her Mother Lay Dying* (Figure 2), made in 2017 as my grandmother, our spiritually impregnated ladybug, was dying of cancer after a long health struggle. We made critical, therapeutic work during the year after her death, and within these works, a balance developed between the memory of the portrayed and the photographic portrayal of a story itself. Such balance, this oscillation between action and remembered action, became central interests for both *Indoor Voices* as it continues as well as the work to become my eventual photographic thesis, *Kavana*, a project about performing Jewish action and memory.

(Fig. 2)

MATERIAL ARTIFACTS

At the time that this thesis work started to manifest, I had just moved to Richmond for my masters at Virginia Commonwealth University, but physically and mentally I was often travelling elsewhere, returning home to New Jersey when I could. My family spent a lot of time clearing out my grandma's closets, getting lost in documents of her memory. We found yellowed handwritten notes describing her time as a Holocaust refugee seeking asylum in Cuba; we also found notes that seemingly described nothing at all, possible descriptions of gifts and objects long past their

physicality. There were stacks of photographs after she immigrated to America, images posing my mom as a child, images with my mom pregnant with me, and onward. I kept returning to the mildew smell, deciphering, and keeping a firm grip on objects that nodded towards the answer to whatever my digging was asking. Notably, there was a lot of Judaica. Hebrew necklaces, *kiddush* cups, artwork; some bestowed specifically to me, some gnarled under the bed. I started using these objects in my work, for example photographing a necklace with a *chai* (חי), a Hebrew symbol of life, perhaps as a form of healing and sharing in the way that *Indoor Voices* also brings me solace.

The Judaica functioned like an active intersection; an active connection to my grandmother, my past, and a connection to myself, my present. There is a concept within Jewish cultural life called collective memory, the idea that all Jews by mandate share a past by repeating stories, performing rituals, passing down heirlooms. I started thinking more about these interitances, and how they expand beyond my immediate bloodline, and contribute to this idea of collective memory. And I began to consider physical Judaic objects, how they were used, how memory manifests in them through repeated notions, like a rhythm. As I began thinking about what forms a sense of memory that spans generations, the work started to flow past my own family, and into a stream of collective community.

The images then begin to operate at multiple intersections: considering Jewish ritual, the way we interpret and perform them, and the ways in which using such Judaica in imagery is perpetuating ideas of collective memory. I more deeply activated the

rituals within the spaces they were being photographed in and started incorporating (and other times completely ignoring) the ancestral connotations of the objects.

BODILY ARTIFACTS

The work started to shift from photographing physical representations of Judaica to something less tangible. The objects inside of the photographs were starting to feel idle, in the same way James E. Young discusses monuments in his reading *The German Counter Movement: Memory Against Itself In Germany Today*. He proposes the idea that a physical monument, once built and installed in a specific location, relieves the intended audience of its responsibility to actively remember what is honoring. It cements it in the past; by which, Young states "we might ask, in fact, whether an abstract, self-referential monument can ever commemorate events outside of itself. Or must it motion endlessly to its own gesture to the past, a commemoration of its essence as a dislocated sign, forever trying to remember events it never actually knew?"[1] Because of its objecthood, its stagnant lure, perhaps monuments (and by extension, Judaica in photographs), are an act of forgetting; perhaps form is a counter to active memory. By expanding beyond physical tokens that are meant to exemplify Jewish identity, memory, and experience, ongoing action becomes the vehicle through which to experience the breadth of Jewish memory.

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[1] Young, James E. "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 267–96. https://doi.org/10.1086/448632.

With this activated interpretation and usage of artifacts, I found that the artifacts were starting to reclaim stories of their own. And by they, I mean, the images themselves. It feels like the combination of these intersections–of ritual symbols, of constant performance, of memory–all sound like whispers rising to a cohesive chant. In the image *Washing the Dead (Funeral for Beetle)* (2019) (Figure 3), my research is focused on death rituals, specifically a cleansing process called *tahara*, in which the body of the recently deceased is washed before burial. I read the tremendous fictional novel by Michelle Brafman called *Washing the Dead* about both the ritual itself and the healing aspect of performing it.[2] And then, after letting this research and this fiction narrative sink into my skin, I lifted a dead beetle from my back porch because it was commanding my attention, and that is where the root of the image lies. It is as much about the ritual as it is about the translation of the ritual. Photographs in this project in this way are not only addressing the historical significance of certain actions, but using them as a source to initiate present-day stories.

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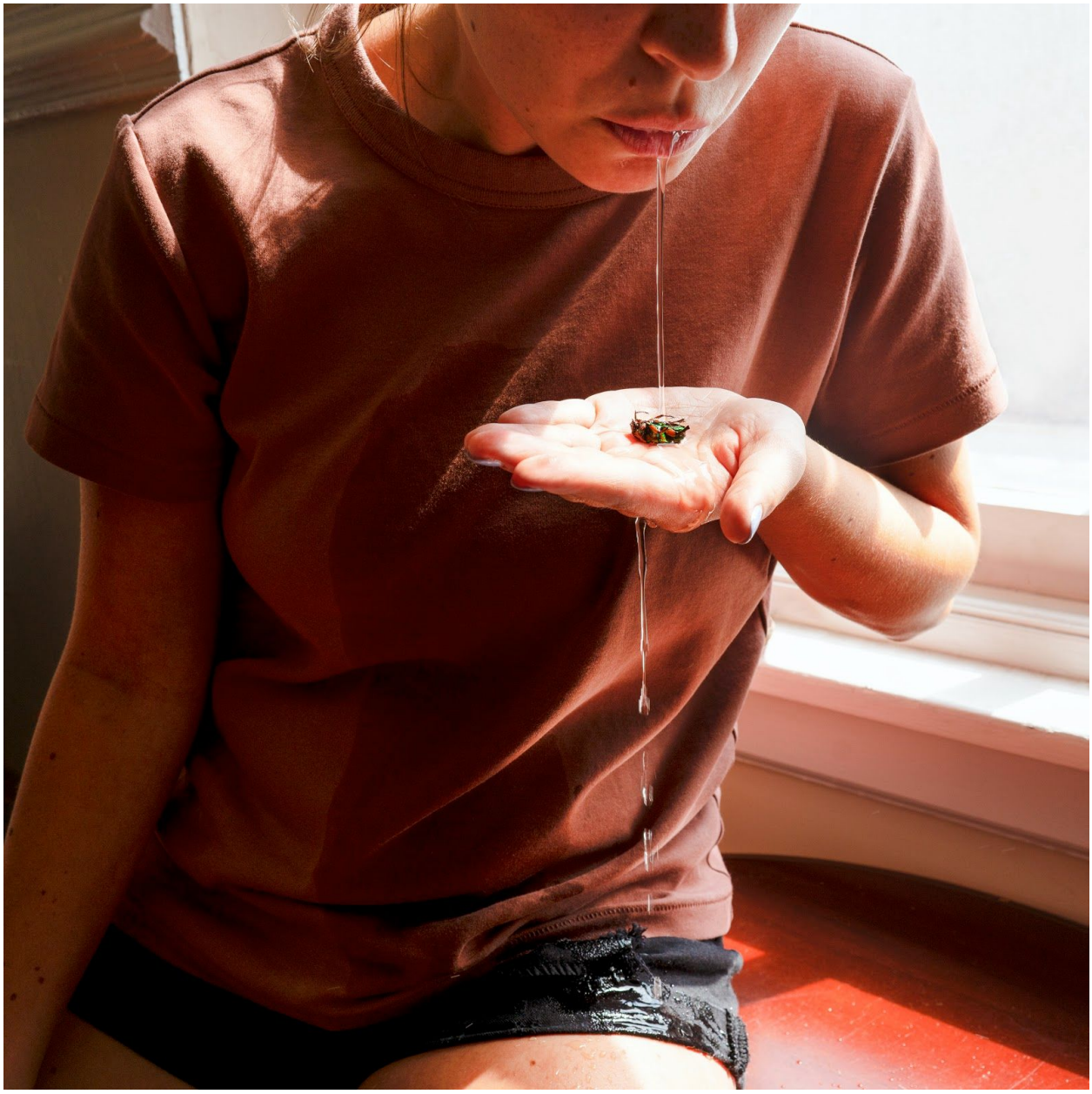
[2] Brafman, Michelle. *Washing the Dead: a Novel*. Altadena, CA: Prospect Park Books, 2015.



(Fig. 3)

FEMINIST FOLKLORE

On this note, I got to thinking about stories: specifically, Jewish folklore, its consistent structural components, and how such stories are told (in the context of this thesis, using the umbrella term “folklore” in this framework, I indicate the body of stories, legends, rituals, and objects, anything attached to perpetuating Jewish culture and their varying interpretations). I was looking for patterns within this structure, something concrete to point to and say “this is what makes this narrative a Jewish one.” I started this research by reaching backwards, looking into ancient folkloric texts, perceiving how femme characters are historically portrayed in these stories, if they are present at all. Unsettled women are often cast off as demons, a threat to mankind and Jewish peoplehood. Two examples include a female succubus called an *estrie* and a chaotic possessive spirit called a *dybbuk* (Figure 4). On the other hand, obedient women are often silent, even when they are the story’s heroine.[3] I am interested in the way these stories are held, told, and shared. In spoken folklore, in Yiddish theatre, in further commentative Talmudic and Midrashic religious texts, the narrative appears to be written in real life, in the concrete, but there is usually a presence–be it a symbol, an event, an action–that subverts traditional interpretations and opens up pathways for tangled understandings.

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[3] Elior, Rachel. *Dybbuks and Jewish Women: in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore*. Jerusalem: Urim, 2008.

(Fig. 4)

I am interested in the complicated nature of such a story, how it can have varying interpretations that reach different moral conclusions and applications. Not to mention that such multiple-answer approaches are really quite Jewish. It does appear, however, that Jewish feminist thought generally falls into two camps by either being adaptive or subversive of what one inherits. Amy Milligan, a scholar of Jewish feminist folklore, describes different interpretations of Judaica:

> "Many feminist approaches to religion eliminate, replace, and render patriarchal religious symbols egalitarian; in contrast, (folklore of the body) centralizes the narratives of women who use patriarchal symbols, allowing feminists to reform from within the masculine structures they inherited, by utilizing their bodies as they dismantle the larger symbol. While this acceptance of the traditional or the religious may seem initially at odds with feminist thought, it represents a progressive understanding of how the bodies of women become the literal intersecting point of contemporary identity politics."[4]

As such, you can either embrace the symbols you have inherited from your ancestors, or you can subvert traditional symbols. Either way, you're engaging them. I explore both of these veins in my work, exemplified in the discourse around the images *Mikveh Immersion* (2019) (Figure 5) and *Tzitzit (Threads)* (2019) (Figure 6). The former is made in a *mikveh*, a bath in which traditionally orthodox cisgendered married women immerse after their period to be ritually cleansed, in body and spirit. It is an immensely private ritual. I traveled to Mayyim Hayyim in Massachusetts, a *mikveh* space that has expanded the usage of the ritual space to foster new uses for the contemporary Jewish community of any background, like healing immersions following illness, celebration immersions for a birthday, and so on.

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[4] Milligan, Amy K. *Jewish Bodylore: Feminist and Queer Ethnographies of Folk Practices*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019.

Within this space I photographed a birthday immersion, utilizing the inherited space in a way that feels expressly Jewish to them. In contrast, the image on the right is more concerned with subversion, specifically here of historically masculine garb. Included in the image is *tzitzit*, the shirt with the threads, and a *kippah*, worn on the back of the head. This is clothing understood to be public, physical evidence of a cisgender man's commitment to Judaism and its commandments, and by anyone outside of that canon reclaiming religious garb through wearing it, there is once again this utilization of a symbol in a way that feels aptly engaged to them, whether that be subversive or adaptive, publicly or privately.

(Fig. 5)

(Fig. 6)

These interpretations are commentary themselves. I am interested in this varying commentary, especially as it regards a story itself. Because there are so many valid interpretations of action, Jewish thought in this context proposes that varying interpretations of a story are as significant to study and understand and perpetuate as the story itself. And this constant interpretation and performance of a story leads me back from this quite long tangent to once again propose the question: what makes Jewish folklore Jewish? Furthermore, what do these portrayed narratives look like photographically? I began looking for answers here not only in story and ritual themselves but in the expanded interpretations of meaning.

A few concrete examples point to several larger, interrelated themes which appear to be central in any anthropological attempt to come to grips with the complicated features of Judaic culture. One theme is the centrality of story. While other great traditions also relate themselves to sacred texts, the widespread influence of text, story, and action in daily life has been a notable feature of Jewish culture. Secondly, there is the question of performance, the realization and interpretation of ancestral patterns tied in multiplex strands to texts, in actual practice.[5] Jewish story, history, and memory are subjects around which we tend to revolve. We carry within us the vast chronicle of our beginnings, of our diaspora, our persecution. It seems essential that Jewish culture memorialize history by carrying it again and again through a yearly ritual repetition of stories and traditions.

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[5] Wolfson, Elliot R. *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

These ideas were considered in the making of the image *Keeping Time* (2019) (Figure 7). I explore the idea that in both my photographic work and in Jewish ritual at large, using the body as a tool to be centralized in Jewish action can be tied to enhancing a fluid sense of memory that is not fixed in time or space, and therefore participates in collective memory.

(Fig. 7)

By photographically engaging Judaism in a way the enactor deems to be a true iteration of storytelling, we apply ritual, Judaica, and individualism within a broad range of collective memory. This enhancement centers the body, emphasizes claimed use of space, and becomes an active participant in the interpretation and performance of folklore. If the way that we understand Jewish ritual is through enactment over time by family and environment, photographing the body in relation to themes and motifs of Jewish story in various ways allows us to infinitely engage with the folklore, interpret meaning, and allow the image itself to become a narrative heirloom.

SACRED TIME

While I have mentioned that history and remembrance play a central role in our understanding of Jewish identity and the way it's portrayed, time and space appear to be viewed very differently. The borderline stereotypes of being "people of the book" and "wandering Jews" present the concept of folklore being a sort of "portable homeland," accessible wherever one can engage with their body. It conveys that a central tenet of the Jewish experience, outside of the contemporary Israeli one, is one of profound displacements, exists in roaming diasporas, lacks a proper attachment to a physical place, and tends to privilege time and action and history itself over place and space. Because no place is a given, we prioritize time and the way we fill it. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel deeply explores this idea in *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. In this book he introduces the idea of an "architecture of holiness" that appears not in

space but in time. Judaism, he argues, is a religion of time: it finds meaning not in space and the tangible things that fill it but in time and the eternity that imbues it. In the same way that lighting candles on Shabbat makes them more than just candles, it makes them a ritual object, his theory means that when the sun sets on Shabbat, time is no longer ordinary, but sacred. He notes, "The Sabbath itself is a sanctuary which we build, a sanctuary in time."[6] We build it through action. I build it through image making. My work engages this secondary approach to space, as demonstrated in the works *Sunrise in New Jersey* (2020) (Figure 8) and *Sunset in Jerusalem* (2020) (Figure 9), in that the sun illuminates the same across the world. Heschel's words and this concept interlace with a yiddish word, *doykite*, a concept of "hereness," one that entails representation of lived Jewish space, its history, culture, and language, its stories, as well as the commitment to engage in time where you stand.[7] Jewish action, and henceforth these photographs that are portraying Jewish action, is cemented not because of where it takes place, but because of what occurs in the ritualistic timeline.

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[6] Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for the Modern Man*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

[7] Cohen, Madeleine Atkins. "Here and Now: The Modernist Poetics of Do'Ikayt." *Here and Now: The Modernist Poetics of Do'Ikayt*, 2016. https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Cohen_berkeley_0028E_16604.pdf.

(Fig. 8)

(Fig. 9)

This approach to the portrayal of time further dematerializes the potential stagnance of an idle monument. Its emphasis on repetition allows for a constant centering of the Jewish body, and as that constant stream of interpretation is engaged, the images are positioning themselves in the past as memories, in the present as stories being told, and in the future as rituals to interpret and repeat. This continuous form of interpreting, enacting, and sharing helps perpetuate a collective memory, and I want images in this project to contribute to this long chain of storytelling. In this sense

the photographs become heirlooms themselves, tales to pass on, actions to repeat. They are narratives in which Jewish memories are the center, using our bodies to exist in the past, in the present, in the future with our rituals, our symbols, our lives. Treating images in this body of work as stories with individual bloodlines of their own, I want to explore these notions of memory, intentional action, time, and image making. The work, then, not only prompts what the image feels like as a photograph, but asks, what does it remember like?

(Fig. 10)

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