



HARVEY BREVERMAN

A Decade of Drawing 2005–2015

(Idiosyncratic Amalgams and Disparate Composites)

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

State University of New York at Fredonia

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Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

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Ginsberg in Fès X, 2008, conté and pastel, 30 x 22 inches

Foreword and Introduction

“Everybody knows Harvey,” I recently said as a response to a question about Harvey Breverman’s prominence. To which the asker replied, “That sounds like a sitcom.”

Everybody loves Harvey and his inseparable partner of fifty-seven years, Debby Breverman. They are adored and admired by innumerable friends, colleagues, and former students. Throughout his career Harvey has exhibited his paintings, drawings and prints across the US and Europe, but fame is not his concern as much as remaining relevant as an artist, educator, and global citizen. That he has done. After teaching at the University at Buffalo for forty-four years and receiving the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association in 2005, Harvey continues to seek opportunities to interact with students and to develop his artwork. Harvey and Debby’s intellectual curiosities have compelled them to repeatedly travel across the globe and to attend hundreds of lectures by writers, poets, artists, musicians, and scientists. Harvey is a lifelong student of the Holocaust (Firmin 2004, 30), and often references his Jewish identity in his artwork. Like R.B. Kitaj, whom he pays homage to in several of the exhibition’s drawings, Harvey is a brilliant draughtsman who remained a figurative artist regardless of the current ‘ism’, which during his career has ranged from Pop Art and Minimalism to a plethora of post-modern movements. But he is not a pure realist either. In an interview with Sandra Firmin Harvey commented, “Artists like Kitaj appealed to me, as did Hamilton, because both were grappling with the inclusion of the figure in odd, contemporary contexts that simultaneously embraced a larger European continuum” (23).

Never one to be complacent, Harvey has expanded his creative approach to printmaking and drawing over the years. His 1960s to 1980s portraits of mysterious figures in front of abstract backdrops or in odd architectural settings have given way, in the twenty-first century, to larger and more complex collages that unite the secular with the religious and the tangible with the impalpable (25). “I am trying to make twenty-first-century illuminated manuscripts. They focus largely on a mélange of materials, the linking of fragmentary forms and elements, combining ancient architectural floor plans and elevations, Hispano-Iberian illuminated manuscripts, Masoretic texts, marginalia, folkloric symbols, and ceremonial artifacts. I take fragments from several worlds, allowing them to collide, intersect, and be superimposed” (30).

I am grateful to Harvey and Debby for their diligence and attention to detail throughout the planning of the exhibition and this publication. Thank you to Biff Henrich and Allison Rivera at IMG_INK in Buffalo for supplying digital files of artwork for the exhibition catalog.

Special thanks are due to essayist and Emeritus University at Buffalo English Professor Howard Wolf for his insightful essay and to Fredonia’s Jason Dilworth for his thoughtful catalog design. We are extremely grateful to Cathy and Jesse Marion and Friends of Rockefeller Arts Center for their support of this and all gallery programs. Lastly, I wish to thank President Virginia Horvath, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Terry Brown, College of Visual and Performing Arts Dean Ralph Blasting, and Department of Visual Arts and New Media Chair Michele Bernatz for their ongoing support of the Marion Art Gallery.

Barbara Racker, Director, Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

Firmin, Sandra. “Conversation: Sandra Firmin and Harvey Breverman.” In *Harvey Breverman: Humanist Impulse*, 23-31. Buffalo, NY: University at Buffalo Art Galleries, 2004.

Graphic Biography: Figures in the Field

As impressive as any one work of an artist may be, each work gains significance and added meaning in the context of earlier and later representations. This is especially true for an artist such as Harvey Breverman who has been *immersed* in the unfolding life and history of his time at personal, academic, national, and international levels.

Too comprehensive in his commitments to be the disciple of any one theorist or school, Breverman participates nonetheless in the modern awareness that we live in *and through* History and Time. His work demonstrates that the past is prelude and the present a recapitulation and re-vision of the past.

It might be said that Breverman's compositions make use of artifacts, icons, and symbols, all of which resonate with historical significance, in the service of illuminating as well as casting shadows over the human condition *after* the Holocaust and other modern catastrophes (Sarajevo).

Breverman's field of vision, his ethical and aesthetic palette, is one of pastel chiaroscuro, a field in which order and disorder, wholeness and fragmentation, collide and confront each other in drawings that combine Renaissance exactness with Degas-like partial realizations of the human figure.

As much as his art is embedded in nineteenth-century cultural and literary values, his visual narrative, or *codex literati* as he calls it, has something in common with the modernist and collagist conclusion of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land": "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." But where Eliot's use of fragments (literary allusions) is elegiac, Breverman's inclusion of objects and texts (shofar, Hebrew letters) provides an expanded range of meaning.

Breverman's repeated depiction of phylacteries, for instance, in the context of surrounding imagery, functions as a reminder of the fate of European Jewry during the Nazi period. This was an imperiled world in which traditional morning prayers would have become obsolete because there would have been no Jews left to pray. At the same time, they remind us of the enduring sacredness of existence.

In his *Two Jews in Tangier III* (Shofar), 2009-2010, Raymond Federman and Leslie Fiedler, two of his favorite subjects, sit in the foreground against the background of a city that is suffused in a luminous light that appears at the same time to be incendiary. Federman's left arm is a graphic synthesis of a phylactery and a prosthetic limb.

This unified combination of sacred and profane objects is a central opposition in Breverman's intellectual and visual field. Transcendence and destruction become one under a snake-like shofar that floats over them as a signifier which suggests protection and apprehension. Layers of meaning meld on a graphic plane that itself is drawn with mixed media.

His "immersion" includes: autobiography (the complex life of an artist); biographical images (colleagues, poets, novelists, intellectuals—those people whom Breverman typically has sketched as an inaugural act of composition during a "live" performance: a reading, lecture, social event); Jewish history, ancient and modern (from sacred images to the crematory flames of the Holocaust); an awareness of art history and the art of his contemporaries to which he both pays homage and revises in the collisions of his associational imagination.

His *Mélange III*, 2005 is typical of many Breverman mural-like drawings in



Codex Literati (Foucault, Serres, Thomas, Fuentes, Rushdie, Gerard), 2010, conté, pastel and graphite, 30 x 44 inches



Two Jews in Tangier III (Shofar), 2009, conté and pastel, 30 x 44 inches



Mélange III (Howe, Parker, Danticat, Fiedler, Federman, Clark, Christian, Jackson, Feldman, Creeley, Carson, Palmer, etc.), 2005, charcoal, conté, and pastel, 24 x 54 inches



which a literary coterie of colleagues and visitors to UB (Michael Palmer, Edwidge Danticat, Anne Carson) occupy a space in which they both balance each other and exist separately. There are blank and interconnected overdrawn areas that suggest both a sense of community and articulated separateness. Our eyes go back and forth from the individual to the field. Order and disorder coexist—a flux of shifting pictorial alignments.

Of all the associations that emerge from his inner life and role as artist and academic, creator and mentor (associations that include crowns, dreamlike traces, glasses, hats, scepters, prayer shawls, prosthetic limbs, garments, tools), none figure more importantly than the representation of **faces**: alone, in dialogue, and in groups.

Like George Orwell—whose primal memory of the Spanish Civil War in *Homage To Catalonia* is the animated and welcoming “face” of an Italian militiaman—Breverman’s art encourages us to understand ourselves; looking at faces that have looked into the depths of the human condition offers hope for recovery.

For this reason, rarely is a work absent of people. Paradoxically, the artist himself is often represented from the back or at an oblique angle—a Hitchcockian gesture of modesty and involvement, the biographer yielding to his subject, a synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity.

Nothing explicates his art more than his devotion to the plasticity and individuality of the human face and how its representation dramatizes our evolved capacities for conversation, intelligence, self-expression, social life, and sensitivity to space (both architectural and natural).

We urgently need this homage at a moment in American history when digital technology threatens face-to-face encounters and when “selfies” replace introspective autobiography and “likes” displace biography. In this way,





Codex Literati (The Wolf Amalgam), 2013-14, conté, oil bar, and pastel, 22 x 90 inches



Nights in Warsaw I, (H.B.), 2006, conté and pastel, 30 x 22 inches

Breverman's art finds equal and balanced expression, including his graphic field depictions of the challenges facing modern mankind.

It is precisely the encounter between these two images of man that constitutes a significant element in this artist's *oeuvre*. It's as if Rembrandt and Giacometti were vying for the same space. Or, to put it in literary terms, as if Dickens and Kafka, Borges and John Updike, were to try to become co-authors. Breverman's world reflects the binary nature of the human condition. His style expresses the effort to reconcile opposing forces of enlightenment and threat in a dangerous world.

In many ways, the academic world in which Breverman has lived, taught, and flourished as an artist has enabled him to enact this "double vision" of our historical predicament: the tug between Humanism and anti-Humanism (in many forms); between the typical (or archetypal) and idiosyncratic, the unified and disparate.

The relationship between artist and university can be a complicated one, but the State University of New York at Buffalo during Breverman's tenure (1961-2005) functioned as his Left Bank. He arrived in 1962, just when the formerly private university (The University of Buffalo, founded 1848), was about to become the State University of New York at Buffalo making the dynamic 1960s a transformative period for the university *and* the country.

The new UB included the appointment of the legendary Albert S. Cook as Chair of the Department of English. Professor Cook, polymathic poet-scholar, facilitated the appointment of accomplished writers (mainly poets) and critics who had established national reputation through innovative and challenging work like many of their colleagues in the then avant-garde Department of Music.

These literati made the department buzz with intellectual and creative electricity. The Niagara Power Plant had the turbines; the English Department had the literary dynamos. Some of the stars included Lionel Abel (critic, playwright), John Barth



Articulating Venice I, 2009, conté and pastel, 30 x 44 inches



To the Glasgow Station (clockwise from left to right: Toshiko Mori, Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Walker, Johanna Drucker, Ann Lauterbach, Edwidge Danticat, Marilyn Hacker), 2008, charcoal, conté, and pastel, 30 x 22 inches



Creeley and Company (Snyder, Howe, Dennis, Ginsberg, Creeley), 2005, charcoal, conté, and pastel, 24 x 19 inches



The Disappeared (Creeley, Kitaj, Duncan), 2008, charcoal, conté, and pastel, 22 x 30 inches

(meta-fictionist), Robert Creeley (Black Mountain School poet), Irving Feldman (Jewish American poet), Leslie Fiedler (man of letters), John Logan (poet), and Mac Hammond (poet).

New stars rose among the younger faculty: Charles Bernstein (Poetics), Carl Dennis (Pulitzer Prize poet), J.M. Coetzee (Nobel Prize novelist), and Bruce Jackson (folklore, penologist). And there were, of course, many luminary visitors and short-term comets: Donald Barthelme, Samuel Delaney, Michel Foucault, Dwight Macdonald, Michel Serres, Tom Wolfe, and many others.

For an artist such as Breverman, with generational, literary, and international interests, a lively and prominent constellation of characters had come to UB that he would turn into a portrait gallery. A literary café had come to town.

Main Street's Bethune Hall and the university's lecture and "reading" venues might as well have been the Deux Magots or Cedar Tavern for the artist who could be seen sketching tirelessly. UB was a perfect *mise en scene* for Breverman.

His subjects' commitments represented in broad outline important oppositional forces in the general culture: French deconstruction versus American pragmatism; lyric poetry (rooted in ordinary language) versus *projective verse* and *language poetry*; tradition versus experimentation; the human figure versus abstraction; realism versus symbolism.

Nothing less was at stake in UB's literature departments than how the human condition could best be represented: Beckett's and Federman's existentialism versus Fiedler's mythopoeia; J.M. Coetzee's fabulist meditations versus Carl Dennis's post-Wordsworthian reflections on daily life—often life in Buffalo.

The image of man was the battlefield, some legacy of Leonardo da

Vinci's Vitruvian model versus a variety of abstract schools (Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Conceptualism, to name few). The "divide" suited Breverman's interests.

His version of symbolic or iconographic realism reflected the tensions between the mimetic legacy of Rembrandt-Rodin-Renoir and the anti-realist tendencies of Picasso-Duchamp-Pollock. His work counters Girard's "mimetic rivalry" in which individuals vie for supremacy; Breverman's luminaries form an imaginary community.

But what was true for UB was true also for the general culture of advanced aesthetics in the modern period. Experimentation and innovation (Dada, Happenings, Rauschenberg's erasures) were favored over what Philosopher of Aesthetics Suzanne Langer calls *life patterns* and what Art Historian Ernst Gombrich's emphasizes as the importance of biomorphic forms.

The prominence in Breverman's interfaces and Chagallian rearrangements of the figures of Beckett, Coetzee, Federman, and Foucault—who have called traditional notions of meaning into question—may help us understand why important artists such as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and R.B. Kitaj (School of London) have been seen as anti-modernist contrarians.

These visual artists continually revisit the realist, naturalist, and humanist traditions within the context of twentieth-century experience. Look closely, and it becomes clear that none are anti-modern; they simply refuse to abandon a quest for meaning and dignity in a world that too often undermines what Wordsworth calls the "still, sad music of humanity" and Robert Frost calls "the tribute of the current to the source."

Breverman's images are modern with a human face or human faces portrayed with inflections of modernism. Neither Wyeth nor Matisse, neither Norman Rockwell nor De Kooning, his amalgams are idiosyncratically his own. Like Wordsworth, he both *half-perceives* and *half-creates*. He neither imitates nor invents, but combines, synthesizes, and unifies.

His *Creeley and Company*, 2005 is a classically balanced composition in which figures both dissolve into a shapeless abstract field and emerge from the field in delineated forms. Breverman wants us to be aware of the fragile state of the human condition in which disappearance shadows appearance. The word "disappeared" has all too much meaning in our time.

No image better illustrates the state of humanity than the human face. And no part of the face communicates more awareness and emotion than the eyes. Emerson comes to mind: "The eye is the first circle ... this first of forms."

But eyes are not more important than the expressive hands that figure so prominently in Breverman's work. From Dürer and van Dyke through Rodin to Breverman, artists have used hands to define essential aspects of our humanity. We use our hands to touch, to reach out, to hold, to protect ourselves, to write, to paint. Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* captures this physical and social extension of mankind's inner life.

Hands figure prominently in *The Disappeared*, 2007-2008. Creeley, Kitaj, and Robert Duncan seem to be three separate portraits that have come together somehow. At the same time, both Duncan's fingers and Creeley's point towards Kitaj whose fingers point to his forehead above which is the sacred box of the phylactery. All of this is set against a background of Parisian windows and rooftops. They share a world, but, as artists, enter and leave it with unique identities and

styles. In much the same way, Breverman employs his unique style in the service of preserving the life of others.

Goethe's last words are said to have been "*Mehr licht!*" Breverman's body of work, wonderfully visible in this exhibit, helps us see more light, even in dark corners, as he insists on finding meaning in our faces and has found a style, at once lyric and strained, to express and unify the tensions.

Though the Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery exhibit is wonderfully representative of Breverman's work, it doesn't reveal the full extent of this artist's achievement, one still in progress. Henry James says in "The Art of Fiction" that "humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms."

The Marion Art Gallery exhibit and the life's work of this artist are a testimony to that immensity of humanity. At the end of the day, we value most those artists who portray with the greatest amplitude and insight the meaning of our lives on this often-good earth. Harvey Breverman is one of these artists.

Howard R. Wolf

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Contemplating Jerusalem II (Fiedler), 2007, conté and pastel, 30 x 44 inches

Biography

Harvey Breverman is an influential educator and an internationally recognized master printer and figure painter. Born in Pittsburgh, PA in 1934, Breverman attended Carnegie Mellon University where he earned a BFA in 1956. From 1956 to 1958 he served with Army Special Services in Korea. In 1960 he earned an MFA from Ohio University.

Breverman has exhibited in major cities around the world including: Amsterdam, Barcelona, Basel, Belgrade, Bologna, Caracas, Cracow, Honolulu, London, Milan, New York, Oslo, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, Tokyo, Toronto, and Vienna. He has been awarded more than eighty-seven solo exhibitions. Among the New York galleries that have represented him are the Associated American Artists Galleries, FAR Gallery, Nardin Galleries, and Babcock Galleries.

Breverman's work can be found in the permanent collections of more than 150 museums including: the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Jewish Museum in New York; Burchfield Penney Art Center and Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo; National Museum of American Art and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.; British Museum in London; and Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Breverman received grants and awards from the Tiffany Foundation in 1962, Netherlands Government in 1965, New York State Council on the Arts in 1972, National Endowment for the Arts in 1974 and 1980, and American Academy and

Institute of Arts and Letters in 1980 and 1981. Representing the United States, he participated in international print biennials in Bulgaria, China, Egypt, England, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, Macedonia, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey.

Breverman has been a visiting artist at Ohio University, Brigham Young University, University of Michigan, Indiana University, Illinois State University, Skidmore College, Maryland Institute College of Art, College of William and Mary, Oxford University's Ruskin School in England, Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art in France, and Jagiellonian University in Poland.

Breverman received numerous prizes from the National Academy including the Ralph Fabri Prize in 1993, Leo Meissner Prize in 1995, first Benjamin Altman Figure Painting Prize in 1999, Adolph and Clara Obrig Painting Prize in 2001, and William H. Leavin Prize in 2005.

Hired to teach at the University at Buffalo in 1961, Breverman was promoted to full professor in 1969. Thirty years later he received the rank of State University of New York Distinguished Professor of Art. In 2003 he received the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association. He retired from the University of Buffalo in 2005. In 2013 the Burchfield Penney recognized Harvey Breverman as a "Living Legacy" artist.



