

Andy Diaz Hope

KQED Arts

‘Artist as Maggid’ Offers a Modern-Day Twist on Classic Jewish Tales

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Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth Hope, 'The Woulds,' 2017. (Courtesy of the CJM)

In the Jewish tradition a maggid was a preacher who traveled from place to place, sharing folktales with their audiences. Most often these storytellers were human; other times, the maggid appeared as an otherworldly being — such as an angel — to share information. These storytellers often relayed knowledge, moral lessons and mystical information through their parables. The 16 artists in Jewish Folktales Retold: Artist as Maggid at San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum step into the roles of modern-day maggids, transforming classic (and beloved) Jewish folktales from around the world into contemporary visual narratives.

The exhibition invites visitors to shift perspectives and represent the metaphors, imagery, religious lessons and magic of the Jewish folktales in Howard Schwartz' 2009 collection, *Leaves from the*

Garden of Eden: One Hundred Classic Jewish Tales through a vast array of multi-media installations. Each artist chose a specific tale to inform their work; headphones are available to listen to the stories throughout the exhibit.

Dina Goldstein, who selected the story of “The Golem” (read by Joel ben Izzy) and a variety of others, including “The Hair in the Milk,” “The King’s Dream,” “The Princess in the Tower,” and “The Queen of Sheba,” presents a darkly alluring and somewhat satirical collection of ten large-scale black-and-white photographs entitled Snapshots from the Garden of Eden. Goldstein’s photographs reimagine the stories’ characters within a modern context, while drawing on the essence of the folktales, fairy, supernatural and mystical tales in which these characters traditionally reside. In Goldstein’s version, the ancient clay and mud Golem is assembled in a factory setting.

Tracey Snelling’s sculpture and video interpretation of “Lilith’s Cave” brings the tale to life as a modern-day scene, in which Lilith’s daughter possesses a young woman, leading her to sexually promiscuous behavior with supposed demons. Snelling recreates the scene in a small model of a teenage girl’s bedroom with the gold framed mirror — which serves as a portal to Lilith’s cave — propped over a dresser. Instead of reflecting images of the young woman, the mirror projects video clips of women in powerful roles, such as scenes from a Missy Elliott music video and Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Snelling’s reclamation of female empowerment is both evocative and timely.

“The Golden Mountain,” a Jewish folktale with origins in Morocco, serves as the inspiration of David Kasprzak’s installation, *The Diminishing, But Never Final, Sounds of the Dying*. In the story, an inquisitive young princess ventures off on an exploration only to find herself trapped inside a cave full of wondrous treasures. Among those treasures is a golden seashell, in which she can hear all of the sounds of the world (and which eventually leads her home). Kasprzak’s piece consists of a simple Australian trumpet shell (*Syrinx aruanus*; an extremely large sea snail), propped on a steel stand in a small corner room at the back of the exhibition. The shell emits an eerie recording of what Kasprzak describes as the ambient sound of a seashell along with a mysterious, unexplained sound recorded at several locations coming from the sky.

For many of the works in *Artist as Maggid*, the landscape becomes a portal through which folktale characters traverse. Mike Rothfeld’s large-scale cave sculpture, “It is tomorrow we bury here today,” manifests the metaphorical distance between one literal or figurative space and another. Drawing inspiration from “The Souls of Trees,” Young Suh and Katie Peterson offer a series of portraits of nontraditional families in forest settings. Laurel Roth Hope and Andy Diaz Hope show *The Woulds*, a dreamlike forest environment that draws visitors into what feels like the pages of a fairy tale. Carved and silver-painted trees, mirrors, ceramic birds, light and video form the backdrop for bird recordings from the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology: birds witnessing the passing of souls between worlds.

Dazzling painting, sculpture, video and more are also on display from Michael Arcega, Julia Goodman, Vera Iliatova, Mads Lynnerup, Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor, Chris Sollars, M. Louise Stanley, and Inez Storer.

Themes of struggle or darkness often dominate Jewish folktales, but in this exhibition, threads of discovery and the depth of human experience in relationship to time, place and the ethereal — beyond that of overcoming obstacles — are equally represented. The personal touches woven into each work provide an intriguing, accessible experience throughout. Artist as Maggid is an expedition to another realm, and one that's not to be missed.

'Jewish Folktales Retold: Artist as Maggid' is on view at San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum through Jan. 28, 2018.