



OTHER LIVES, OTHER TIMES

Whether it's functional pottery for the home or ceramic pieces for galleries and museums, Emmett Leader's work draws vitality from his sense of Jewish community.

BY SARAH WERTHAN BUTTENWIESER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL SHOUL

Describing his own artistic evolution, ceramicist Emmett Leader says, "One thing feeds another." Clearly, his largest work—a multi-media installation based upon a temporary structure built for the Jewish holiday Sukkot—serves as a reflection on themes Leader has contemplated throughout his life.

The installation—comprising a three-sided wooden structure big enough to walk into, a temporary "room" where, traditionally during the festive holiday, families eat supper—is adorned with images and objects that speak to select Jewish texts, aspects of Jewish history and the Eastern European Jewish experience, including ceramic tiles, objects and

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This page: Emmett Leader in his Northampton studio.
Opposite page: Leader's ceramic panels connect the artist to the Jewish world of the past.

depictions of gravestones. Shown initially at last spring's New York SOFA (Sculpture, Object, Functional Art—a major show for contemporary 3-D works), the installation travels to New York's Hebrew Union College in September, 2008. Leader hopes the piece can continue to tour. Before sending it off again, though, he plans to rework it: "I'd like to create better integration between the individual components and the whole, visually and functionally."

Leader had already begun working on some larger pieces before being asked to participate in a residency at Maine's

panel—his was ceramic tile—for a festival at the National Yiddish Book Center. With Leslie Ferrin's encouragement to push still further, the installation came to fruition next.

While Leader likes the way his work looks in galleries and museums, he especially enjoys when his work embeds itself into the fabric of daily life. A ceramic panel in the entryway to his local synagogue, B'nai Israel in Northampton—complete with Tzedakah box for donations to community service efforts—exemplifies this. "Formal art settings may create vocabulary about the work and interest in it," he says. "But I

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Watershed artist retreat with other Ferrin Gallery artists. There he began carving in wood. "I spent so many hours carving these Eastern European influenced synagogues," he says, "I felt like I was inside them, not peering in." After the retreat came a couple of serendipitous invitations. He participated in a group show organized by filmmaker Joel Saxe that explored the intersection between political and Jewish roots, for which he created clay panels and collages that included photographs of his parents and their letters (exploring Zionism and political action), Torah text and images of activism: "I was interested in these two manifestations of how people pursue justice." He also was asked to create a Sukkot

love when my work can be integrated into community."

Eastern Europe is far from rural Vermont, where Leader spent his earliest years. When he describes his childhood, Leader recalls both his deep attachment to country life and his sense of isolation there. In Vermont, Leader experienced his Judaism as practically invisible—invoking something close to shame for him—while noting that so much about that landscape and community, from classical regional architecture to the holidays, was driven by religions. It's no wonder that he is profoundly inspired by architecture and gravestones of Eastern Europe. Through his work, he's attempting to create "an environment to reflect what I'm about."

Affinity for country life was part of what drew Leader to clay. “Having grown up with a farm in the family, cutting wood, growing food, those were not only part of my life but ideals for me, the influence of my parents to care about community made a deep impression,” he explains. “The Japanese model of potter/farmers was very appealing to me.”

Leader’s sister Susan Leader also became involved with pottery, and the pair shared a love of clay throughout adolescence. “We built a wood kiln together in 1972,” he recalls. “We dug clay in Lake Champlain.” Today Susan is a potter and lives on a piece of the family farm.

Fascination with how craft, tradition, and culture coexist—that quest to discover and dive into community life—drove Leader to explore traditional forms of pottery. After graduating from Bennington College, Leader went to study with Warren MacKenzie, a renowned Minnesota-based potter, who had studied traditional pottery in England in the 1950s and brought those traditions back to the States, influencing many potters, including Leader. “I was fascinated with folk traditions—Japanese, medieval English—the materials and the rituals surrounding eating,” says Leader. “At the same time, these weren’t my traditions.”

That desire—to find community and his connection to his own traditions, if not so clearly articulated or understood at the time—probably informed Leader’s decision to move to Israel, where he lived during the early 1980s: “I wanted

to see what it was like to live in a Jewish world. I went to museums. I made a few pieces,” not functional pottery, “that represented a turning point in my work.” Although once back in the States he returned to being a studio potter for a few more years, he slowly evolved from studio pottery to individual pieces with Judaic themes. Living in Vermont

and doing this work enabled him to delve into Jewish community and Jewish life, and to make these explorations visual: “Judaism had always seemed, for the most part, non-visual, and the visual was my response.”

With ambivalence, he left Vermont once more, about a decade ago, to return to Northampton (where he’d lived from second grade through much of high school), lured by a sense of community and by a Jewish day school. He misses country life, though his backyard, bordered by a vegetable garden, and the woodstove-heated outbuilding that serves as his studio offer a very countrified feel. Yet it is clear to him that this Northampton community offers “essential” sustenance.

“In daily life, conversations, which can take place happenstance here, are rewards. I know—although it’s a com-

promise—that we are in the right place,” he explains. Besides the vegetable garden, his family has been granted use of a piece of land in Worthington, where they’ve set up a platform tent. “The woods are beautiful,” he exults. “It’s a place to just go.” Enjoying nature, he’ll probably discover the next thing that will feed him.



Leader’s themes are informed by biblical stories, synagogue architecture, ritual objects and gravestone carvings from Israel and Eastern Europe.

