

The image shows a wooden structure, possibly a miniature house or a display case, with a central door. The door is made of vertical wooden planks and features several rectangular panels with reddish-brown clay reliefs. The top of the door has a decorative pattern of small triangles. The walls are also made of wood and are decorated with various objects, including clay figurines, paper models, and other found objects. The floor is made of horizontal wooden planks. The overall style is rustic and artistic.

Slonim Revisited  
*Images of Home in Emmett Leader's Art*

*Article by Urmila Mohan*

*Slonim Revisited, 2007, earthenware, wood, paper, found objects, 3 x 2.7 x 1.7 m*



*Slonim Revisited* (Detail of mantle), 2007, earthenware, wood, paper, found objects, .74 x 2.7 m

Emmett Leader's latest work *Slonim Revisited* is an installation that is a window into the world of Judaism and the Jewish Diaspora. It weaves two stories, one dealing with his youth in rural Vermont, US, and the other based upon the pre-World War II Eastern European Jewish shtetls of his grandparents and their ancestors. As part of the only Jewish family in his town, Leader felt separate from the local community. This became the start of his lifelong engagement with the complexities of living as a Jew in the US, the search for identity and sense of place. As a young man, Leader studied ceramics at Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont and worked as a cabinet maker in a carpentry shop on Kibbutz Yagur, Israel. Back in the US, he continued to make pottery until he came across some photographs of wooden synagogues (destroyed during the Holocaust) and gravestones. These images had been taken in Eastern Europe in the early 1900s, and introduced him to the world of Slonim, the shtetl that his grandparents had left for America. As a Jew and a visual artist, he emotionally identified with their architecture, imagery and highly visible symbolism. Slonim, although it no longer existed, appeared more real to him than anything else. It seemed like a Jewish version of his own rural background in small town America. The titles of Leader's installations and ritual objects – *Slonim*, *Beltsy*, *Sadgora*, *Snyatin* and *Kosov* – pay homage to these towns and the memory of their Jewish inhabitants.

*Slonim Revisited* is, among other things, an argument for the importance of visual imagery in contemporary text-based Judaism. Jews are known as the "People of the Book" because Judaism is most often viewed and experienced as a religion whose focus is based on the Torah and other Jewish texts. At the same time it is a religion of practices and rituals. Candle lighting for Shabbat (the Sabbath) and holidays, affixing a mezuzah to a doorpost, the Passover seder, all constitute part of the core of Jewish life. Into this

relationship between texts and rituals, Leader inserts the use of visual images and creates a new material culture through his art and craft. His work also refers to a popular eighteenth-century Eastern European Judaism that integrated visual imagery, textual references and architectural details, and incorporated them into worship.<sup>1</sup>

The installation is a visual feast made up of a wooden shelter with earthenware panels on the walls, a large pair of doors, clay ritual objects on wall pedestals and various clay and found items on mantles. The artwork uses a folk, vernacular style and the overall effect is of a barn cum shrine; a holy space within a rural setting. As an artist, Leader's study of Judaism is ultimately translated into visual images, providing a new, visual dimension to 'midrash', or the use of interpretation in the understanding of Biblical text in Judaism. He has developed

a vocabulary of images that range from the ark (known in Hebrew as 'Aron Kodesh' or the holy cabinet which contains the synagogue's Torah scrolls) to scenes from nature. These images are used on clay wall panels, sculptures, and the surfaces of



*Beltsy III* (Tzedakah box), 2007, earthenware, terra sigillata, 35.6 x 33 x 15.2 cm

ritual objects like the 'tzedakah' (donation) boxes.



*Slonim Revisited (Detail of mantle)*, 2007, earthenware, terra sigillata, paper, found objects

A good example of this translation of religious text into visuals can be seen in the clay panels on the doors, which illustrate passages and events from Exodus, such as inhabiting the tabernacle, and the celebration of Sukkot, as well as text from the ‘Song of Songs’. Sukkot is a harvest festival originating during the time when the Israelites lived in the wilderness in temporary dwellings called sukkahs. The symbolism is one of home although unsettled, exposed and vulnerable to the elements. The panel illustrating it depicts a bird-headed man holding a ‘lulav’, an arrangement of palm, myrtle and willow branches, with an ‘etrog’ (a lemon like fruit) holder in front of him. Displayed on the upper mantle of the installation are the actual ‘lulav’ and ‘etrog’. By staging these elements in such detail, Leader recreates the festival of Sukkot and conceives the entire installation as a sukkah or shelter.

A shelter whether temporary or permanent, religious or secular, is a space created for human habitation and like all inhabited space it bears the essence of the notion of home. The symbol of the shelter as house/home is the conceptual core of the installation around which Leader overlays various images. The metaphor of home permeates the images whether they are of the

sukkah, of doves flying to their cote, or the wooden structure within which the images are housed. Also implicit in the theme of home is the artist’s awareness of the phenomena of displacement. Leader jokingly refers to the installation as an opportunity to make a space and sell it but still have a house to live in, thereby combining the experiences of home and exile, and the temporary and the permanent. The recurring use of wheels and ropes on his house-shaped sculptures and ritual objects, are not only references to his favorite childhood pull toy but also subtle reminders that in the search for home, Jews have to be ready to pack their bags and go somewhere else. It

is this yearning for home and belonging along with the associated memories of childhood that give the work its poignancy. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard says in his study of human spaces that the house is experienced in “...its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.”<sup>2</sup> He also emphasizes the ability of such a combination of memory and imagination to move people. Leader’s art is powerful because it integrates recollection and invention, enabling the viewer to experience the full poetic range of the image of home.



*Slonim Revisited (Detail of Sukkot panel)*, 2007, earthenware, terra sigillata, 25.4 x 43.2 cm



*Sadgora*, 2006, earthenware, terra sigillata, gold leaf, rope, 40.6 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm

After (or rather within) the image of the sukkah, the most frequent image is that of birds. In the clay sculpture *Sadgora*, the dovecote as a symbol of home is translated into architectural details on the roof of a synagogue. The triangular forms on the roof refer to historical manmade bird coops that can be seen even today in caves in Israel.

The sides of the sculpture *Trip to Snyatin* portray doves in flight, accompanied by torah scrolls and allude to the human need for shelter (and in this context, the Jew's refuge within Judaism). These images along with the large dove's head on the roof evoke a range of meanings commonly associated with birds, such as freedom, co-existence, and the connection between heaven and earth, man and nature. In addition to being signifiers of transition events in Judaism and mediators between realms, birds are universal symbols of flight, motion and transformation.



*Trip to Snyatin*, 2007, earthenware, terra sigillata, gold leaf, rope, 30.5 x 33 x 23 cm

This idea of flux is visualized through a morphing of images in *Slonim Dreams* – a house/synagogue-shaped sculpture that appears to be a manifestation of the artist’s fantasy. The structure is built out of bits and pieces of molded images, flowing into one another and culminating in a giant peacock, a symbol of paradise, on top. Similarly, although on a larger scale, the installation *Slonim Revisited* is built out of layers of overlapping images, born out of Leader’s memories and imagination, constructing a rich narrative.

The theme of birds extends to the representation of human figures in the installation. The recurring image of a bird-headed man can be seen in works like the Sukkot panel, *Trip to Snyatin*, and *Kosov*. He is based on the depiction of humans in the 13<sup>th</sup> century German Bird’s Head ‘Haggadah’ (a text read during the Passover Seder recounting the story of the Exodus). Scrupulousness in Jewish law among the Ashkenazi



*Slonim Dreams*, 2006, earthenware, terra sigillata, gold leaf, rope, 48.3 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm

Jews of the period led to their strict observance of the biblical prohibition of creating graven images and the depiction of humans with bird’s heads for faces. The bird-headed men portrayed in the ‘Haggadah’ (and in Leader’s works) wear the conical ‘Jew’s hat’ which was compulsory for Jews in Germany at that time. Leader’s usage of the bird’s head in a contemporary context is intriguing and somewhat ambiguous. Similar to Art Spiegelman’s animal headed characters in ‘Maus’, Leader’s representation of the man with a bird’s head turns it into a mask – hiding but also revealing the interplay between the perspectives of insider and outsider.<sup>3</sup> This paradox is related to the artist’s self-perception as being both part of the Jewish community and yet slightly detached from it.

By engaging his own personal story as well as the larger stories of Judaism, Leader channels the conflicts that arise from his need as an artist for the outsider’s critical perspective and the insider’s sense of identification. He uses the concept of scale to help us identify with his dilemma and make the journey with him, from the outside to the inside. *Slonim Revisited* combines artworks of different sizes from the largest wooden shelter to the smallest house-shaped objects. By creating these spaces, Leader encourages us to investigate and then inhabit them. When we cross the



*Kosov*, 2006, earthenware, terra sigillata, 61 x 28 x 28 cm



*Slonim Revisited (View from window)*, 2007, earthenware, wood, paper

threshold to enter the shelter we encounter a space of human scale. The window in the side wall of the shelter looks out onto a black and white photo of a wooden synagogue and provides a view of a long vanished East European landscape. Looking up we see similar pictures bordering the edges of the walls. Elements like these make us feel like the inhabitants of the shelter. When we look at the smaller house-shaped clay objects on pedestals and peer into their doors and windows, we become spectators, on the outside looking in. Prominently displayed on the central wall is the set of doors bearing the clay panels which could symbolize the doors to the ark or even doors to other worlds. Their meaning like much else in this installation depends on where we choose to position ourselves – on the inside or outside. It is in this dialog between self and location that the vitality of Leader’s images of home can ultimately be experienced and understood.

The theme of *Slonim Revisited* is a complex one dealing with the individual and shared experience of Jewish history. It recollects the lost spaces and material culture (houses, synagogues, ritual objects) of an Eastern European Jewish community. As a ceramist and woodworker, Leader chooses to deal with the enormity of the subject of loss and exile by creating a living memorial, one that is a symbolic home for himself, the Jewish community, and their stories. Home

is the earliest space that most human beings experience, strongly associated with security and peace, where being and belonging are one. By evoking universal symbols and sentiments like home and the search for identity, Leader’s art becomes relevant to the human condition.

#### REFERENCES:

1. For more information on how visual imagery was inspired by Jewish religious texts see Marc M. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature*, 1997, and Thomas C. Hubka, *Resplendent Synagogue: Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth-Century Polish Community*, 2003.
2. Gaston Bachelard, ‘The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut’, in *The Poetics of Space*, 1958.
3. James E. Young, ‘Art Spiegelman’s Maus and the After-Images of History’, in *At Memory’s Edge*, 2000.

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