

Can Art Change the World?

JEAN BLOCH ROSENSAFT, LILITH (MAY 16, 2023)

<https://lilith.org/2023/05/can-art-change-the-world/>

Do artists have a responsibility to address social issues? If they do, can their creativity motivate us to heal our world? Two exhibitions at the Heller Museum at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in New York offer new artistic responses to these questions.

The works in these two exhibitions share a common purpose, but the scale, forms, materials, and personal outlooks vary. They are rooted in Jewish text, ethics, wisdom, and family history, while exerting a universal message of justice, compassion, and healing. *One Nation* and *Tzedek Boxes* exemplify the Heller Museum's mission: to encourage the interpretation and renewal of Jewish values, tradition, and practice through the creativity of contemporary artists that will advance justice in our world.

One Nation features works by 48 artists confronting the systemic racism, attacks on human rights, and rising antisemitism that divide our nation. Their subjects include the immigration and refugee crises, the January 6th storming of our Capitol, prison reform, and the reactionary pushback to diversity in our country.

They also express America's capacity for resilience and healing when we embrace our differences to forge a more just society.

Tzedek Boxes: Justice Shall You Pursue launches a new Jewish ceremonial object, spurring us to answer the Jewish call for justice in **Deuteronomy 16:20**. Vessels contain an aperture in which to slip notes recording righteous deeds are to be opened on Pesach Sheini, the biblical holiday for second chances, to review our actions and motivate us to do more in the future, in an initiative led by HUC-JIR rabbinical ordinand Dr. Andrew Mandel '23. This exhibition builds upon our Museum's groundbreaking *Miriam's Cups*(1997) and *Living in the Moment: Contemporary Artists Celebrate Jewish Time* (2000), which introduced and popularized innovative Jewish ritual art.

ONE NATION

***Ronit Levin Delgado, The Kissing of the Liberty,
2021 (lipstick on canvas)***



Composed of bright red lipstick kisses, this Statue of Liberty evokes feminine power and the immigrant artist's appreciation for American rights, including the freedom of expression.

Beth Grossman, *Searching for Democracy*, 2012 (quill pen ink on canvas bag)



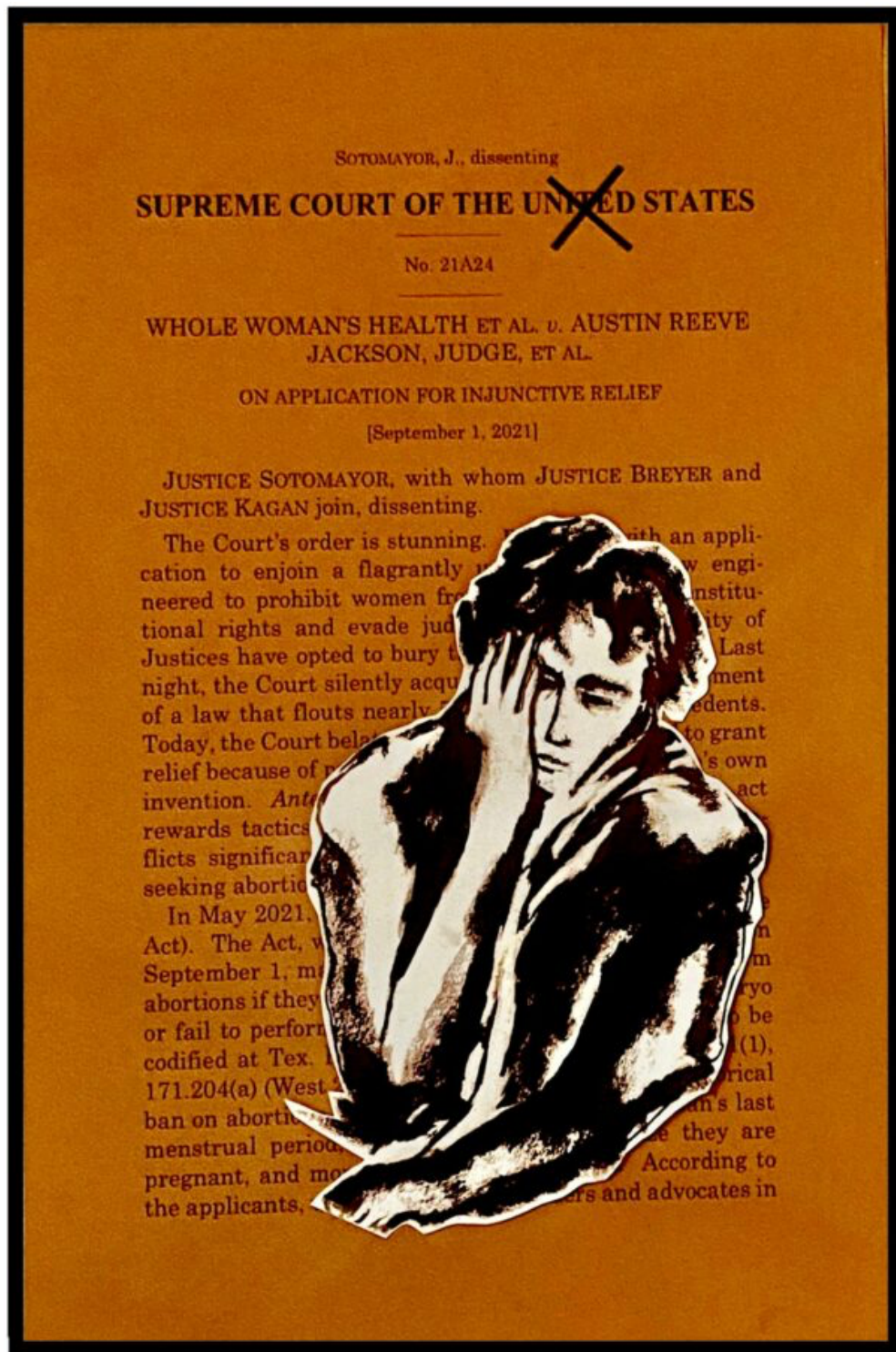
This U.S. Mint bank bag, inscribed with our Constitution's values, alerts us to the dangers of money's influence on our elections.

*Debbie Teicholz Guedalia, Post No Hate,
2021 (photograph)*



Masonite boards protecting store windows during the pandemic serve as urban canvases for graffiti artists' advocacy for tolerance.

*Elizabeth Langer, Sotomayor, J. Dissenting,
2022 (collage)*



A distraught woman hovers over Justice Sotomayor's dissent to the Supreme Court decision permitting Texas to ban women's constitutional right to an abortion.

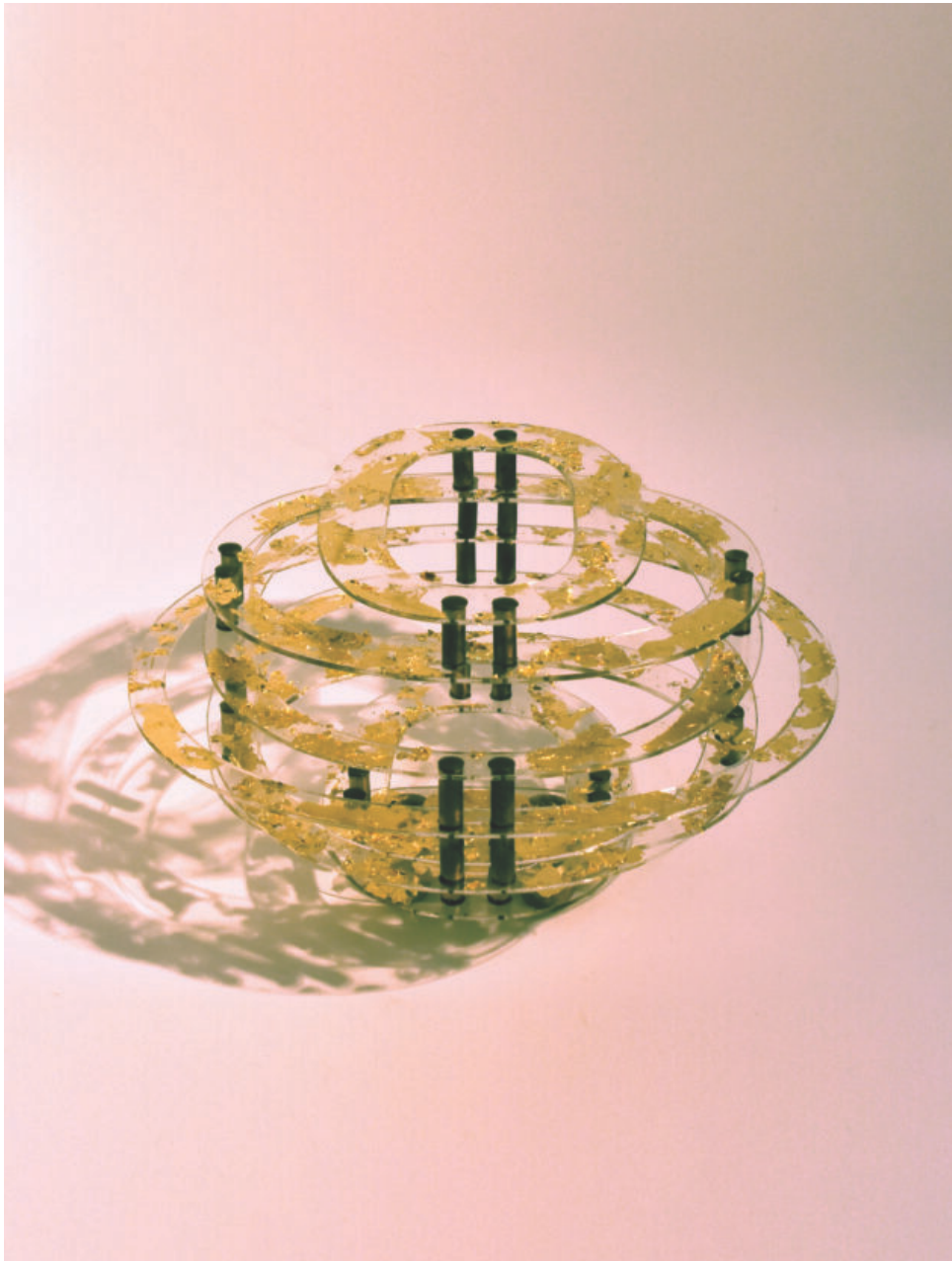
Miriam Stern, Pekelakh, 2020 (oil on canvas)



Immigrant and refugee bundles, evoking wandering, loss, expulsion, and relocation, challenge us to confront our attitudes towards racism and injustice.

TZEDEK BOXES: JUSTICE SHALL YOU PURSUE

Mar Martinez, Vayakhel/And He Assembled, 2022 (gold leaf, transparent acrylic, mixed media)



The gold-flecked acrylic concentric rings recall the precious gold the Israelites contributed toward the collective, collaborative construction of the mishkan (tabernacle) in the desert.

Marisa Baggett, Freeflow, 2022 (acrylic, silver leaf, resin)



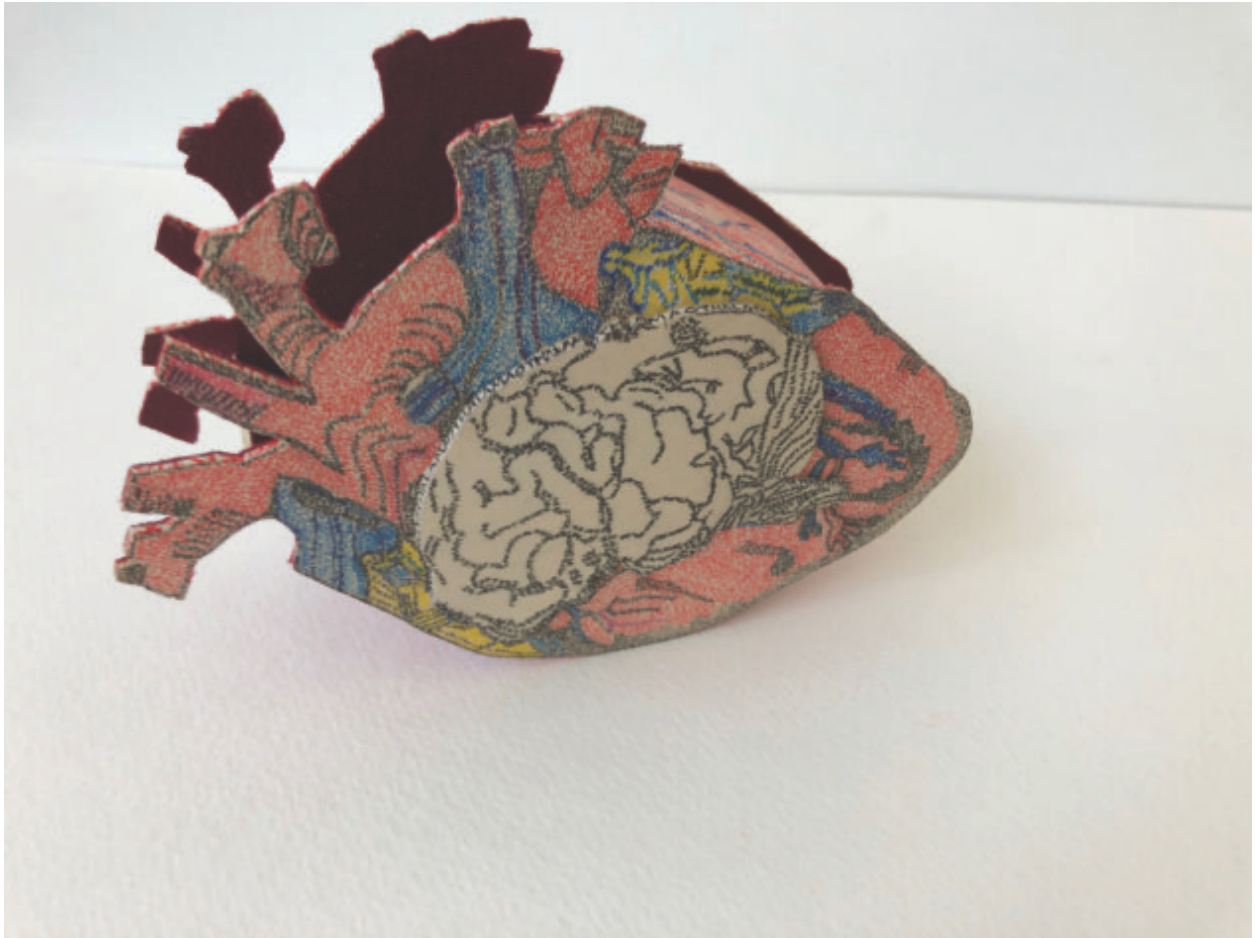
*Just as water, when blocked, works its way to create a new path, justice must flow freely to fulfill the prophetic command in **Amos 5:24**: “But let justice well up like water, and righteousness like an unfailing stream.”*

***Judith Brown, Gifts of Justice, Sparks of
Awe, 2022 (artglass, walnut hardwood)***



*Dedicated to regathering the sparks of creation, this vessel emits sparks of light whenever a righteous deed is inserted, as inspired by **Psalm 97:11** and **Psalm 36:10**: “Plant seeds of light by doing right...in your light, we see light.”*

Susan Dessel, Ha Lamaot (The Whys), 2022 (wood, linen, archival ink micrography)



An open, heart-shaped vessel with the micrographic inscription of tzedek tzedek tirdof, justice shall you pursue, connects our emotional motivation with our investment of time, energy, and resources to effect positive change.

***Dorit Jordan Dotan and Judith Joseph, Cast our Bread
Upon the Waters, 2022(photographs and bottle installation
and video link)***



Righteous deeds and intentions, inscribed in Hebrew and English on strips of paper joined like prayer flags, are sealed in a bottle set upon the Mediterranean Sea to reach an unknown shore where it will inspire another human being to take action.

**Holly Berger Markhoff, Justice Knows No
Other, 2022 (wood, paper, gold paint)**



Fragments of prayerbooks from a genizah (storage of damaged or discarded sacred books and relics) generate wholeness and holiness, while an interactive scroll records our deeds in a continuous chronicle of righteousness.

Tina Marcus, The Collection Box, 2010 (found object assemblage)



Barbed wire and jagged, rusted metal holding stones from the Dachau concentration camp express the imperative of “never again” by taking action in our own time.