

***Abracadabra:
Myth, Magic
&
Monsters***

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2014

Joshua Abarbanel
Gary Baseman
Ellen Cantor
Steven Wolkoff
Karen Frimkess Wolff

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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
היברו יוניון קולג' - מכון למדעי היהדות
3077 University Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90007-3796

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Abracadabra: Myth, Magic & Monsters

Over two millennia, the Jewish esoteric tradition has played a role in shaping Western metaphysics and mysticism. Kabbalistic teachings have informed fields of thought and practice as varied as alchemy, numerology, dream interpretation, astrology, amulets, divination, healing, and altered consciousness.

Judaism has had a mixed relationship with the occult. Scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures are undeniable incidents of magic—from Joseph’s proclivity for interpreting dreams to Moses’ copper serpent amulet used to heal snake bites, and from Saul’s meeting with the necromancing Witch of Endor to Isaiah and Ezekiel’s ecstatic visions of the Divine. Yet, both Biblical and Rabbinic sources also contain warnings against the use of such arts, generally forbidding consultation with fortune tellers, soothsayers, or mediums.

In this exhibition, art works by Joshua Abarbanel, Gary Baseman, Ellen Cantor, Steven Wolkoff and Karen Frimkess Wolff explore the complex encounter between Judaism and magical, mystical, and folkloric practices. The exhibition’s title draws inspiration from the popular magical incantation: “Abracadabra,” which likely derives from the Aramaic phrase *a’bra k’dabra*, meaning “As I speak it, so I create it.”

The exhibition begins with a cabinet of curiosities, displaying examples of herbs, an amulet, and other materials thought to have healing powers. This case offers a glimpse into the complex world of magic, ritual, and healing. Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis lists all items displayed in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism*.

Joshua Abarbanel explores the use of Hebrew letters to invoke magic using one of Jewish folklore’s best known stories in his *Golem* (2013). Abarbanel’s Golem, just like the original created by Rabbi Loewe of Prague, was molded out of clay and then covered with what appear to be dozens of *alef’s*, *mem’s*, and *tav’s*. The letters combine, making up both the life-giving word “*emet*” and the death-bringing word “*met*”, both crucial to the magical process of bringing the Golem to life and controlling him. Similar to Rabbi Loewe, Abarbanel grew cautious about the power of this incantation, and created a hidden second step of the activation process, in order to keep his creature at bay. **Gary Baseman** delves into the real and imagined histories of generations past, interpreting the Holocaust and its lasting effects on culture and identity. While visiting the Ukraine and Poland in 2012, Baseman heard numerous stories of Jewish history in Eastern Europe, including many that seemed to him to contain fairytale elements. In turn, Baseman creates his own “mythical homeland” full of characters that are at once adorable and fearsome.

Ellen Cantor’s breathtaking series “Prior Pleasures,” is displayed in the spiritual space. In this series, the artist recalls the joy of reading fairytales and classic childhood books. Drawing from her personal collection, and using multiple images in camera, the artist photographed the books’ end pages, illustrations, and text to create the illusion of reading the book and seeing the drawings simultaneously. **Steven Wolkoff** uses a method of painting he developed where he creates three-dimensional piles of words out of acrylic paint. For this exhibition, the artist layered the word *mitzvot*, 613 times—honoring the six hundred and thirteen commandments contained in the Torah. Wolkoff, like Abarbanel, explores the power of sacred letters and numbers to fill words with power and mystery.

Karen Frimkess Wolff explores the use of folklore and mythological storytelling in her powerful drawings and paintings. In “Escaping Goat,” she explores the ancient Yom Kippur ritual of releasing a goat to “Azazel” (Leviticus 16:8-10). Scholars have long debated Azazel’s true identity—with some believing it to be a pagan demon or even Satan himself, while one Talmudic source intriguingly suggests that it might be the Serpent that tempts Eve in Genesis 3. As the goat is sent off into the mysterious wilderness, the viewer is left behind to engage in their own search for redemption.

Anne Hromadka
Exhibition Curator