

TRANSCRIPT

Haptic Encounters Audio Track
by Georgina Kleege

**CONTEMPORARY
JEWISH MUSEUM**

Introduction to *Haptic Encounters* by Georgina Kleege

I'm Georgina Kleege and I'm happy to be here at the Contemporary Jewish Museum to give you a Haptic Encounters tour of the Jewish Folktales Retold exhibit. What "haptic" means is basically pertaining to touch. So all aspects of touch, both texture, temperature, density, but also aspects of touch that have to do with moving around a piece of art. I came to this work because I am the blind daughter of two visual artists. So I grew up in artist studios and art galleries, and spent a lot of my childhood handling works of art and art materials. As an adult, I've also taken advantage of touch tours at museums around the world. So I have a lot of experience touching art and have developed specific techniques to do so. And I think museums are often understood to be visual spaces but I think there's something to be gained by considering the other senses and how those can inform our understanding of a work of art. I've learned that different works of art seem to invite, or incite, or provoke different kinds of touching. So some works require very delicate handling with the fingertips, while other pieces seem happy to be

handled and manipulated with the whole hand. And there are even pieces that can inspire a kind of muscular handling with the hands and the arms and the whole body. The other qualification that I bring to this work is that I am an English professor, I'm a writer. I teach at the University of California, Berkeley. So I know a lot about how stories work and I've been interested in how these visual artists have translated the stories they've chosen into visual media. And so as I move from piece to piece, I'm also talking about what it is that I'm feeling, but I'm also kind of engaging with, and reinterpreting the artist's reading of the stories that they give to us in their pieces. These Haptic Encounters are available at listening stations around the gallery. You can put on the earphones and listen to them. And I hope you enjoy encountering the work this way.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #1

Michael Arcega, *The Enchanted*, 2017

This is the piece by Michael Arcega, which is inspired by the story "The Enchanted Island," and the first thing to say is that this piece is mostly suspended over the central staircase of the museum, so visitors encounter it first as they're walking up the stairs, so what they see is the bottom of a black table. They can see two legs hanging down, but they may not necessarily register that it's a work of art, and then when they come around the corner, they can see the top of the table and the arrangement of objects on it, and then the part of the piece that extends into the gallery space. And this is a story about a choice that the main character makes; the main character, Wolf Kitzes is shipwrecked, and he is very hungry and thirsty, but then at the last minute, he finds himself on an enchanted island, and then in a mansion or a grand house. But there's nobody there, but there is a table, and on the table there are two objects which he has to choose between; the first object being a cornucopia, a horn of plenty with lots of fruits spilling

out of it, and the second object being a ram's horn, or the shofar, which he as rabbi would use to call the faithful to worship. And he has to make a choice about which of these objects to choose, and he ends up choosing the food, because he's hungry, but at least he makes the right decision and prays before eating the food, so that's a good thing. So the piece is about choice, but it's also about the possibility; is this a dream? Is it a hallucination brought on by hunger? So the piece moves between the natural and the supernatural, so at the end that comes into the gallery, we have a section sloping down towards the floor, which is representing the plank of wood that Wolf is floating on in the ocean, and this is painted in a way to make it look like it's really weathered wood that's been at sea for a long time. And actually, the texture also gives that illusion, so it feels like it's an old ship, but it's also thick and sturdy, so it feels like its rough hue, but it's quite sturdy and robust. The objects I got to touch; I can't reach them from here, but I got to touch them when the piece was being installed, and first, the fruit is cast in silicone, so it has the actual form, the shape of real fruit, so there's a squash, there's a quince,

there's a papaya, there are some bananas, and the forms resemble what the fruit is. And the sort of skins also preserve the texture of real fruit, but they're made of silicone, so when you pick them up, they're kind of squishy and drape-y; they feel a little bit like a half-filled water balloon, so the first time I picked one up, I could only laugh, but it was very appealing; I enjoyed handling them, it was a great pleasure to handle them. The shofar on the other hand, is not made to look like an actual ram's horn; it's very abstracted, it's made of strips of wood and a kind of pentagon shape, sort of gradually getting smaller and smaller to suggest the spiral of a ram's horn. And I think what the artist is playing with is moving from the very solid, very real feel of the boat to the sort of abstracted fruit, it feels like fruit, but it doesn't feel like fruit, which is also connected to how it looks visually, that it's not colored like fruit, it's white, it's sort of translucent. There's light shining through it and projected on top of it so it's sort of sparkly, and then the shofar, which is the furthest away, and a sort of very abstracted from what it would be in reality, so it emphasizes the choice that the character has to make, and emphasizes almost

the thought process, where the needs of his body, he's hungry, supersede his spiritual needs represented by the shofar.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #2

Mike Rothfeld

It is tomorrow we bury here today, 2017

This piece by Mike Rothfeld references a couple of different stories, such as milk and honey, and the city of Luz. And the artist is interested in how many of these stories have some kind of magical portal that transports the characters from reality into some supernatural place. And so he's created this construction to give viewers that experience. But even before walking through the portal, I wanted to point out how massive this piece is and how, even without touching it, I think you can feel how it looms above you and occupies this space, this corner of the gallery. When you touch it, the surface has the texture of rock, as if this is the opening to a cave. But it also has the texture of what the artist has made it out of, which is styrofoam. And in fact when I stroke it, it even has the sound of handling

styrofoam. But I think the artist is playing with ideas about how when we read stories, we are asked to suspend our disbelief. And ignore the details that aren't entirely realistic. Anyway, so I can walk through the cave. And feel, for instance here, a kind of deep jagged groove, as if water has dripped down the sides of this cave. And then I come out on the other side, everything is different. And so this side, the natural archway of the cave opening seems as if enhanced with human-made carving, and a deep groove around the archway to emphasize it. So you feel like, okay, this is no longer just a random cave, this is something that has been ornamented by human beings. And especially in these large, there are large ornamental bits framing the archway that have sort of circular protrusions and maybe we're supposed to imagine that these are some kind of jewel-encrusted ornaments, suggestive of this magical portal into a different realm. What you come into is this almost shell-like enclosure which sort of surrounds you on all sides, kind of enveloping you with its very rough and complex texture.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #3

Elizabeth Higgins O'Connor

blame/thirst, 2017

lullaby/lament, 2017

This is the Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor piece, which is referencing the story, The Golem. And in the story, the golem is a creature, a man, actually, human figure made of mud who has some supernatural powers. Here the artist has given us two golem, which seem to be more animal-like, though of course they're much larger than life. They're kind of mythological creatures. So, the one that you would encounter first coming into the gallery is maybe like a wolf or a dog or a fox figure, has a pointy nose and has pointy ears. And it also seems to have breasts, so maybe it's a female figure. And it's in a kind of dynamic pose, as if falling backward. So one of it's arms is extended and bracing against the ground, and the other arm is up raised as if fending off or trying to balance. And then the other one seems to be some kind of bull. It has apparently, I can't reach them, but horns, above it's head. And it's also in a very dynamic pose, but it's sort of lunging towards

the other one, with one of its hands almost outstretched. Maybe reaching towards the other one. So, it's unclear if somehow they are engaged in some kind of battle or conflict. The figures are made up of a lot of different materials. So, there are scraps of cloth, there's cardboard, there's paper, there's ribbon, there's twine and string, there are pins that are holding things together. And it's all sort of piled up, it's many, many layers. So, when I explore underneath some of these layers and try to find what's holding it together, it's not that easy to do, because each layer reveals another layer underneath. In the story, there's a detail about the piece of paper that's in the golem's mouth that has written on it the name of God. And so, naturally, I wanted to reach inside the figure and see if I could find that piece of paper. But it's not there. But it does allow me to explore the tongue, here, which has a very sand-papery, unexpected sand-papery texture. And then the bull figure, when I reach inside its mouth, and this is even a little scarier, there's a kind of a webby, sort of crochet, slightly rubbery texture, feeling in there. And if I go further back, there's some strings and cord, almost as if I'm feeling the

vocal chords of the animal. And what's striking about these pieces, the piece as a whole, is even though these figures are so big, and so dynamic, and potentially scary, they're supernatural, the surfaces are so encrusted with different layers, that they feel almost like they could be blown away with a gust of wind. But one detail I just want to come to is the feet of both creatures, which are made of wood that's not at all finished or polished. There are splinters, rough edges. But it makes them, it reminds you how large they are. And makes them feel very, very rooted in the earth. And I think that's significant because in the story, of course, the golem is a creature that's made of earth and then eventually returns to the earth.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #4

Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth Hope,

The Woulds, 2017

This piece is by Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth Hope. And it references several stories, and I was interested in how many of these folk tales are located in forests, where humans are interacting with

the natural world. Sometimes in a good way and sometimes in a bad way. And just to situate you, or draw your attention to, here we're in a corner of the gallery where it's darker than the other spaces. We have a construction of what look like semi-abstracted trees, three of them vertical. Arranged in almost in a triangle, and then one that's like a tree that's fallen. So it's on the ground. And suspended around the construction, are four crystals, or gem-like objects, that are transparent and very sparkly. When I touch the crystal, the surfaces are very smooth of course, but the edges are quite sharp. I wanna handle it with care, because it feels a little dangerous. And there are video projections that are being reflected by those crystals and by pieces of mirror which are hidden inside the tree trunks. Also scattered around the trees are tiny little clay birds, which are resting on branches, but are not exactly attached. So I'm not gonna touch them. What's interesting about these trees is that the texture does feel like bark, but it feels quite sharp and rough. I don't really wanna rub my hands over it, it feels a little bit dangerous. Similarly, when I reach inside the tree trunks, I encounter pieces of mirror and pieces

of glass that also feel just a little bit on the edge of dangerous. So I feel kind of tentative in my explorations of this piece. And I think that's part of maybe what the artists were talking about, is that we're in kind of a natural setting, but it's not exactly a benign natural setting. And that makes me hear the sounds of the birds a little bit differently. Because typically we think of birdsong as something that's beautiful and friendly. But we know that birds may be calling to their mates. But they also may be declaring territory, threatening other birds. So that there's something about the atmosphere here, the sparkles, the lights, the general darkness, and the sharp textures throughout, that emphasize that the relationship between humans and nature is not always peaceful. When I reach inside the log that's on the ground, I feel the mirrors, its as if it's lined with mirrors. And the mirrors are almost like, balanced in there, so I can feel the sharp edges of them. They feel almost like shards of mirrors. But I'm trying to reach through, to see if I can come out of the stem or the stump on the other end, but I come up against a, I guess a glass wall. So it's a very unexpected feeling for the inside of a tree. And the

same thing, of course, happens, if I reach in from this hole. Trying to see if I can get through to the other side, but I just encounter more glass and more mirrors.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #5

Julia Goodman, *200 Year Present*, 2017

This is the Julia Goodman piece. Which is inspired by the story, *The Bird of Happiness*. And it's a hanging construction that consists of 18 panels. Nine on each side and then there's a central passageway that people can walk through. And the artist is focused on the final scene of the story. Where the hero of the story who is now king performs a daily ritual of going into a shack behind his palace to look at and dresses himself in rags because that's where he came from. And then looks at himself in the mirror. And the point of him doing this is to remember his humble origins. And to have that knowledge always inform his decisions and choices as king. So the pieces made, the different panels are made all made of hand-made paper. And if you've ever handled hand-made paper you know

that there's a huge range of different textures. So some places are quite rough. Other places are very smooth. Almost slick. And some places have even sort of raised stripes fanning out from a central point. When a viewer stands between two parts of the piece, the surfaces of the different panels have in addition to the textures have different colors. And you have this illusion of moving through space to the back of the piece. But one of the big appeals for me in touching this is not the more colorful front sides of these panels but the back sides which are all white. And often have bits large sections of cloth that hasn't been fully incorporated into the paper. So you can feel the different textures. It's like bedsheets or like t-shirts. The rags, the scraps that went in to making the paper. And I think that just reinforces the point of the story. Where it's not just about the beautiful surface on the front but it's also about the origins of the paper. That the paper came from these rags.

HAPTIC ENCOUNTER #6

David Kasprzak

The Diminishing, But Never Final, Sounds of the Dying, 2017

This is the piece by David Kasprzak illustrating the story “The Golden Mountain”. And before I get to the piece itself, I should say something about where it's displayed. It's in almost a separate room that's darker than the rest of the gallery, and there's a spotlight that's shining on the shell, on the piece itself. And the shell is mounted on a black metal stand, so I think for sighted people, it almost appears that the shell is floating in mid air. It is a shell. It's a natural shell. A good sized, maybe 18 inches long, and about a foot tall at its tallest point. And like all shells, it's very interesting in terms of its texture and form. There are ridges, there are knobs, there are pointy bits. The interior of the shell, you can reach your hand in, and it feels very shiny and smooth, very polished. And the outside is a little bit rougher textured. As in the story, the shell is emitting sound, and when I reach inside there, I can find the actual speaker that's making the sound, and it

vibrates like an animal or an insect, as if there's some living creature inside there. So that's kind of satisfying. And the sound is very mysterious. It's unclear what it is. It sounds a little bit maybe like a chorus of human voices singing, or it may be some kind of echo, echoing of other sounds. So the experience of touching it, on the one hand, it's a shell like you could handle if you found such a shell on a beach, but it also has this otherworldly quality that comes from the sound and the slight vibration of the sound you can feel through the shell.