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[Home](#) > [Blogs](#) > [Gloria Kestenbaum's blog](#) > Psalmic Muse

Psalmic Muse

Submitted by Gloria Kestenbaum on Mon, 09/29/2014 - 00:16 [Well Versed](#) [Archie Rand](#)
[Dorfner Museum](#) [painting](#) [psalms](#)

Keeping in mind the Chasidic custom of reciting Psalms during the days leading to Yom Kippur, now would be a perfect time to head up to the scenic [Dorfner Judaica Museum](#) for Archie Rand's visual renditions of Psalm 68.

Rand, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship recipient, has a long history of collaborating with artists and poets including John Ashbery, Clark Coolidge and Kenneth Koch; his collaboration with the ancient poet of the Psalms seems a natural progression. As a precocious teenager, Rand graduated high school at 15 and was part of a prestigious gallery show by 17. Through the subsequent years, Rand has explored a diverse palette of subjects ranging from jazz to the Bible and Jewish history and self-avowedly enjoys tackling difficult subjects. Psalm 68, often acknowledged as the most difficult of the Psalms, is a worthy challenge.

Lacking narrative or theme, replete with puzzling phrases, unsourceable terms and untraceable references, Psalm 68 offers fertile ground for artistic interpretation. Initially drawn to Psalm 68 because of its 36 stanzas, a "double chai," Rand was further intrigued by the "messiness" of the Psalm, whose "main face is that of conflict, internal confusion, emotional contradiction and psychological contradiction." In the contradictions between its "militaristic paeans" and counterbalanced celebration of women, "a classic and effective mixture of startling story and loving propositions" Rand found a muse that "affords re-reading." Although Rand painted the series 20 years ago, the themes of chaos and conflict remain as relevant today as when the paintings and the Psalms themselves were created.

The text of each of the verses is simply written in hand-drawn black letters on each one of the 36 small pieces, atop a light border resembling nothing so much as a piece of masking tape casually placed across the painted canvas. Largely abstract expressionist in form, the paintings owe their inspiration to a wide array of sources, from Clifford Still to Franz Kline to Mark Rothko, with a recurring motif of unidentifiable circling splotches harkening back to Matisse's dancing figures (68:25), pointillist renderings going back even further (68:30) and even an occasional nod to comic book graphics. The museum's excellent exhibit brochure is a welcome guide for the artistically perplexed.

The paintings do not so much illustrate the text as provide the mood, the feelings, and the emotions that the artist retrieved from the aura of the particular verse. The intensely colored, exuberant paint strokes are laid heavily across the varied canvases and the viewer can spend

hours trying to reconcile the written word with the painted image. The work rewards the effort.

Archie Rand: Psalm 68" is on view at the Derfner Judaica Museum at The Hebrew Home at Riverdale, 5901 Palisade Avenue, Riverdale, NY, through January 4, 2015.

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