

# riverdale **REVIEW**.

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## Collage art on display at the Hebrew Home

By **PAULETTE SCHNEIDER**

The medium is at least part of the message in Rachel Leibman's pleasing collages on exhibition at the Hebrew Home.

Leibman's unique medium—cut-up copies of ancient manuscripts—calls on modern technology to channel random writings from antiquity. She searches the Internet for colorful reproductions of manuscripts in Hebrew, Latin, Arabic and other languages. She prints them out on special photographic stock using archival inks that resist fading. Then, she cuts the printouts into fragments that are each small enough to be applied like a dab of paint but large enough to reveal a recognizable ethnic script.

After sketching out a pattern, she glues selected tiny shards onto a board. She applies an acrylic leveling agent and then a few coats of varnish.

Most of the images on display are non-representational. They are vivid, full of organic shapes and filaments. They juxtapose the different languages in concentric circles and undulating bands.

One piece seems to depict a cross-section of a hill with distinct archeological layers. Another resembles a group of fringed fabric shawls draped beside each other. Others evoke bacterial cultures seen through the lens of a microscope. But all are intriguing and universally likable.

Up close, the written texts are visible, but the letters blend into swaths of color. Leibman described the relationships between the colors as "separate, but reaching out to each other," like people in New York or in her hometown of Montclair, NJ.

Her message is that people from diverse cultures have managed to get along with each other since the distant past, and there's no reason why they shouldn't get along today, retaining their distinctions while comingling in a common space.

Searching for her own artistic voice, she came to consider her ethnic identity as American, and she conveys in her collages the American "tapestry" where anyone can just as easily study Kabbalah as join an African drumming session.

"My work is paying homage to our human ancestors who made us who we are," Leibman said. She calls her pieces "illuminations"—though an illumination in the ordinary sense is a single embellished letter within a manuscript, the designation suggests that the artist is illuminating some commonality among the diverse manuscripts in each collage, which serve equally well as components in a harmonious whole.

One of the few themed works displayed is a whimsical piece named "Convocation," depicting a group of ornately clad beaked creatures engaging in conversation. It was inspired by a New York Times article several years ago reporting on a rare accord among Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders: They all agreed to ban a gay pride parade through the streets of Jerusalem. Leibman pointed out that hybrid creatures, such as those in the piece, are common to the visual art of more than one religion.

About 50 people attended the exhibition opening last week—mostly residents of the home, almost half in wheelchairs. Many asked questions about methodology and shared observations. One lady said, "I think your methods are certainly original." A gentleman asked the artist why she doesn't sign her work on the front. (Answer: She signs on the back. According to contemporary trends, unless you can make the signature part of the art, it doesn't belong on the front.)

Another man proclaimed, "This is one of the most thrilling exhibits I've seen in a long time."

Leibman's work has appeared in the Broome Street Gallery and other Manhattan venues and in a number of New Jersey galleries. The exhibition at the Hebrew Home at Riverdale, 5901 Palisade Avenue, is on view through April 25. For information on its exact location within the home, contact the curator's office at 718-581-1596 or [eoleary@hebrewhome.org](mailto:eoleary@hebrewhome.org).