

# A right royal show



• By BARRY DAVIS

It was the sheer magnitude of a building that initially set Raya Bruckenthal in the direction of her current exhibition. The show, which goes by the right royally impressive name of “Welfare of the Monarchy,” is up and running at two sites in Talpiot: the Art Cube Artists’ Studios and in Bruckenthal’s own studio on the same floor of the building at 26 Ha’uman Street.

The name comes from the prayer, recited in Diaspora synagogues the world over, for the Lord to bestow His kindness and protection on the country and state authorities in question. In the hassidic context, the regal inference refers to the monarchical ethos that has run through the hassidic movement since its inception. More specifically, Bruckenthal casts her seasoned artistic eye over the Belz Hassidic community in Jerusalem and the aesthetics that characterize it, as a case study.

Another important source of inspiration for the current exhibition, which opened last month and runs until December 16, was a website called Chasidish Plus. There you can find practically anything your heart may desire if you are looking to add a little oomph to some publication or advertising material with instantly recognizable icons taken from various spheres of religious life, such as synagogue architectural elements, down to diminutive ornamental features.

Bruckenthal was partly drawn to the cut-and-

paste figures by their seeming naiveté.

“The symbols come from a very large image bank – Chasidish Plus,” she says. “I bought a few from the site. There are lots of useful figures in there. I use them to examine hassidic aesthetics. These symbols give you a cross-section idea of the aesthetics, of the visual taste, of that community.”

Some of those figures found their way into what Bruckenthal calls a “wall of inspiration,” which is something along the lines of a wall with donor plaques that you can find in any number of public buildings up and down the country.

“You could call them kitsch,” she notes. “Others may call them decorative elements.”

In fact, all kinds of visual and cultural factors appear to come into play in the hassidic graphic embellishment accoutrement lineup. There is, for example, a nicely fluted pillar item, curiously with a luxuriously leafed Corinthian-style capital at both ends. Could this format allude to, for example, the celestial beit din and the terrestrial beit din?

“That’s taking it to quite a deep level,” Bruckenthal interjects. “The person who made that symbol didn’t know about the history of the pillar design. Part of the charm of this [catalogue of icons] is that it’s a sort of copy-paste collection taken from all sorts of worlds. They take them and use them, without going into them too deeply, as long as they convey a sense of something monarchical.”

Anyone with some background in art history, or, maybe, archeology, will probably recognize palmette shapes, and various kinds of other flora-derived details that served, for example, the ancient Greeks and Romans pretty well when they put up their temples a couple of millennia or so ago.

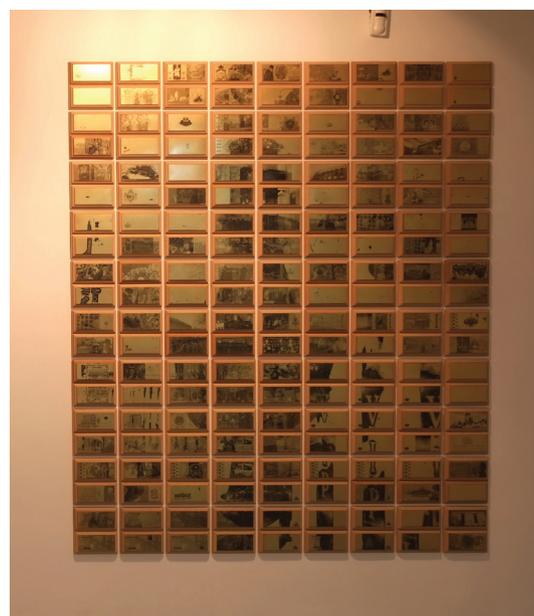
“This aesthetic style requires something grandiose, decorativeness and the regal context,” Bruckenthal adds.

The aforementioned gargantuan edifice is the Belz Synagogue located in Jerusalem’s Kiryat Belz district. If you are driving, cycling or walking anywhere in the vicinity within a radius of anything up to a couple of kilometers or possibly more of the spot, you simply cannot fail to notice the build-

‘Some believe in living in austerity, while others want to glorify their synagogues with incredible riches’: Artist Raya Bruckenthal. (Shalom Hager)



Bruckenthal's video work 'In All Her Glory' conveys something of the woman's role in the Belz Hassidic community. (Stanislav Levor)



ing soaring far above the much more modestly proportioned structures in almost imperious fashion. We are talking huge here. To convey some idea of the scale, the synagogue, which was completed in 2000, can accommodate in excess of 10,000 congregants in one go. There are quite a few soccer stadiums around the country that would be delighted to boast such a capacity.

Bruckenthal was drawn to the vast building, and went to check out its interior. It made for some eye-widening viewing. For starters, the synagogue area includes no fewer than nine enormous grandly fashioned chandeliers. The artist used this unmissable item as the starting point for the centerpiece of her exhibition. This is a video called *In All Her Glory* that features a group of clearly ultra-Orthodox girls' seminary students creating a large crystal chandelier.

"They are actually actors," Bruckenthal explains. "I wouldn't be able to get actual ultra-Orthodox girls to appear in a video like this."

Real-deal factor notwithstanding, the work comes over as authentic and conveys something of the way of the life of the Belz community or, for that matter, any hassidic group. There is an antithetical side to the project, which comes through in various places. If this were an actual effort to make a chandelier for the opulently tailored Belz synagogue, the female workers would be cognizant of the fact that they do not occupy pride of place in the community hierarchy. Even so, the girls immerse themselves in their sacred work, and the creative process offers them a rare opportunity to achieve a sense of involvement and even ecstasy, despite the inference of being exploited to provide their male counterparts with sumptuous synagogue artifacts.

The equal and opposite equation comes in the exhibition equilibrium. On one hand, Belz Hassidim devote themselves to a life of prayer, learning and matters of a lofty spiritual nature. On the other, the colossal dimensions of the Kiryat Belz synagogue and the lavishness of the interior design imply a keen interest in tangible earthly wealth.

The generally accepted view of hassidism is that the members of the various rabbinical "courts" are more interested in furthering their spirituality than, say, making sure they have the funds to install nine humungous crystal light fittings in their house of prayer. Bruckenthal says it takes all sorts to make up the hassidic spectrum.

"Some believe in living in austerity, while others want to glorify their synagogues with incredible riches," she says. The Belz community undoubtedly follows the material/spiritual two-pronged mind-set.

The Donor Wall work in the gallery comprises 180 brass plates of various sizes. Close inspection reveals that the plates contain visual details that, together, make up the shape of a chandelier. There are numerous details on offer in the wall, with a wide array of images that pertain to Jewish Orthodoxy.

Bruckenthal's studio houses the *Index of Forms* installation, which functions as a sort of dynamic work space, or an amenable source of inspiration for an artist. It contains dozens of decorative motifs printed on A4-size sheets of paper set out in a sort of typological arrangement. The work spells out the artist's take on the tastes and stylistic leanings of hassidic aesthetics, taking such oft-used icons as Torah scrolls, richly decorated wine goblets and other elements that could just as easily come from rococo art. There appears to be a rhyme and reason to the motif layout, although the figures are employed by members of the hassidic communities without any art history-oriented intent.

"Welfare of the Monarchy" provides some fascinating insight into the stylistic take of a sector of the Israeli public with which most of us are not familiar.

For more information: [www.artiststudiosjlm.org/](http://www.artiststudiosjlm.org/)

'The Donor Wall' references donors' plaques in synagogues while also conveying a sense of the Belz take on aesthetics. (Gustavo Sagorsky)