

## NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

# How “Triple Elvis” Spawned Quadruple Barbra

by Jamil Ragland | Nov 13, 2024 8:33 am



Deborah Kass, *4-Color Barbara (Jewish Jackie Series)*, 1992

*A Jewish Perspective on Deborah Kass's Single Red Yentl with Rachel Spiegel Gerstein  
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford  
Dec. 12, 2024*

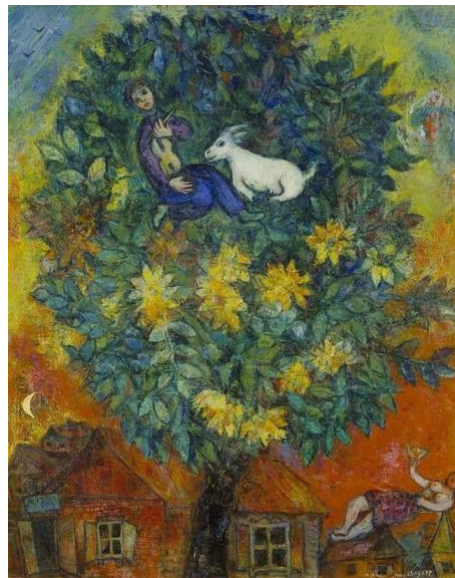
How much does identity matter when it comes to art?

For art historian Rachel Spiegel Gerstein, it's impossible to separate the artist from the art, and identity is a crucial component of the story of any work of art. She is working with scholars at the Wadsworth Atheneum on the Jewish Art & Culture Research Project, where “artworks from across the permanent collection are examined through the lens of the Jewish experience, that is, considering Jews as a religious, ethnic, and cultural minority.”



*Minette* by Camille Pissarro

She gave a talk on Tuesday about some of the artwork in the Atheneum's collection that went without any indication as to the background of the artist. She began with *Minette*, by Camille Pissarro, a Jewish artist who lived in France during the 19th century. The painting is of Pissarro's daughter Minette, who tragically died two years after the painting was completed at the age of 9. Eventually, the painting was seized by the Nazis from a Paris bank vault during World War II, before eventually being returned to its rightful owner by the Allies at the end of the war. Gerstein argued that the story of the painting's "afterlife" — the time after the painting was removed from Jewish hands — is not just a matter of historical trivia. It is an important element of what makes the artwork special. The description for the painting was updated to include the story.



*Autumn in the Village* by Marc Chagall

Gerstein also discussed *Autumn in the Village* by Marc Chagall, another piece which had a history with the Second World War. Chagall was explicit about the connection between his background and his art, writing: "If a painter is a Jew and paints life, how is he to keep Jewish elements out of his work! But if he is a good painter, his painting will contain a great deal more. The Jewish content will be there, of course, but his art will aim at universal relevance." His piece was also updated to include reference to his identity. The main focus of the talk was the work of Deborah Kass, a queer Jewish woman who creates art through a fascinating process called appropriation, in which artists borrow, copy and alter existing works to create their own art. According to Gerstein, Kass was obsessed with Andy Warhol, recreating his works and putting her unique spin on them to insert herself into an artistic world where she didn't often see herself.

She did see herself in Barbra Streisand, though. Her love for both artists led her to appropriate Warhol's *Triple Elvis*, replacing him with the image of Streisand from the movie *Yentl* (pictured at the top of this review). The movie puts a large emphasis on Jewish identity, culture and history, so it's no surprise that Kass decided to use that image of one of her heroines as the basis for her work. Gerstein makes a compelling argument against the "[death of the author](#)" theory where the artist ceases to exist when the audience interacts with their work. In Gerstein's view, such an approach denies the very essence of the work itself, and the history and culture which gave rise to the artistic expression. I've always been a death of the author guy myself, but Gerstein has given me reason to reconsider that position, at least when it comes to how the past informs the present of art.