Anna Shteynshleyger January 3 – February 14, 2010

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago



The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago 5811 South Ellis Avenue 4th floor Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5pm Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5pm Closed Mondays http://www.renaissancesociety.org The Renaissance Societ; at The University of Chic 3811 South Ellis Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60637 Phone: (773)702-8670

Anna Shteynshleyger

January 3 - February 14, 2010

Opening Reception: January 3, 4:00–7:00 pm Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm place

Pronounced //jtein/leigsr/

I am an observant Jew. I pay very close attention to the things around me as if they were foreign to me. Charles Bernstein

It's ironic that the word "spirituality" is largely taboo in the art world. Anna Shteynshleyger

Front and center, a young couple sits in a rowboat. The composition is built on a strong diagonal. A tranquil river arcs from upper left to lower right. An otherwise informal moment has been converted into a highly formal portrait. He is of thick build, she petite. They are turned toward one another in casual intimacy, their pose forming something of a triangle. His legs straddle hers. She welcomes his possessiveness, her wedding band clearly visible as she tenderly grasps his forearm. The setting is idvllic. casting them as a latter-day Adam and Eve on one of Eden's riverbanks. In this context, marriage is biblical ritual, an observation underscored by the man's slightly cocked yarmulke. The woman's wristwatch is conspicuous, standing outside an ahistorical moment where a Jewish couple has been frozen in time and

This portrait is a social conservative's ideal of marriage. It displays the couple's commitment to one another and to religion. It also conforms perfectly to a stereotype of the difference between the sexes. In addition to the contrast in physique, here played out starkly, he wears brown and she pink. She is attractive. Cute. however, is the word that more readily comes to mind given the color coordination between her Junior Miss shirt, with its cartoon insignia of a Persian cat, and her manicured fingernails. He is handsome, assured, stern. The dense nucleus of personal effects in his pants pocket seems disproportionately affected by gravity. These are a man's things, masculine by virtue of their weightiness

The couple stares into the camera. Their directness complements the image's formal clarity. According to their facial expressions, having their picture taken is serious business. They are comfortable with the photographer reciprocating her gaze with one of equal focus. The alternating current between observer and observed puts in effect the tension-filled act of "othering" already endemic to photography. The yarmulke formalizes this, making difference visibly manifest. One sees a Jewish couple choosing to be seen as such. Yarmulke and camera constitute an equation in which the terms self and "other" are predicated on vision; religious affiliation is given over to the lens as a matter of fact.

This photograph, however, is not about difference. The short distance between couple and photographer suggests a familiarity with one another. Although the couple is Jewish, the photograph's subject is not religious ceremony but love and leisure. If anything, the act of "othering" is being defused so as to see life outside of any perceived difference. The couple could be black, Muslim, gay, Hispanic, or Christian. The act of "othering" depends on who is viewing whom, making them a couple no different than any other.

Chicago-based photographer Anna Shteynshleyger (b. 1977) took the photograph. She is an observant Jew. Like the poet Charles Bernstein, Shteynshleyger pays "very close attention to the things around [her] as if they were foreign to [her]." She does not, however, use the camera to gain access to her subject; instead she uses it to establish a critical distance from her subject. After several years of spiritual and emotional turbulence, Shteynshleyger needed to craft a mirror in order to psychologically ground herself. Her

photographs represent people, places, things, and moments that are her life, making the practice an exercise in the "othering" of self. Her portraits, particularly those of couples, three of which are in the exhibition, are less about identity and more about identification. Paradoxically, it is perhaps more difficult for

Shteynshleyger to see past the couple's being Jewish than it is for a non-Jewish viewer to do so. Shteynshleyger turned Orthodox at age sixteen. Despite an identity secured through religious belief, fault lines began to emerge as she felt unable to see herself for who she had become since then.

Shteynshleyger was born in Moscow. Neither of her parents was ever observant. In the Soviet Union, they were legally Jews, i.e. by birth, which *de jure* meant exclusion from much of the nation's political, social, and cultural life. She vividly recalls the day her father drew two stars, one five, the other six-pointed. "This is our star. That is their star." In informing his daughter she was Jewish, Shteynshleyger's father was not transmitting a religious heritage or way of life but a factual matter used against them. The intense wave of nationalism triggered by the Cold War was accompanied by an equally intense Statesponsored campaign of anti-Semitism, as Jews' loyalty to the State was forever in question. The dawning of Shteynshleyger's "us versus them" consciousness was sadly confirmed early on in her Moscow grade school. On the class roster next to her name was the word "Jew."

From the late 1960s through the early 1990s, nearly one million Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel, Europe, and the United States after being allowed to apply for exit visas on religious grounds. Shteynshleyger and her parents were among them. Her father came to the United States in 1987. After earning enough money, he sponsored his wife and daughter's relocation to the United States in 1992 when Shteynshleyger was fifteen. For Shteynshleyger, the transition from Moscow to Gaithersburg, Maryland was a culture shock to say the least. In addition to being hopelessly alienated from her peers, she describes every sensation as having been new. Shortly after their arrival, Shteynshleyger's father bought her a Pentax K 1000 from a pawnshop. Although Shteynshleyger's father was an amateur photographer who kept a darkroom setup in the bathroom of their tiny Moscow apartment, she links her interest in photography to the fact that everything, especially language, was foreign to her. As a total outsider to her environment, vision was her primary way in.

Shteynshleyger characterizes herself at that age as a spiritual seeker, driven by suburban Maryland to question the meaning of it all. A voracious reader, her diet included Eastern philosophy, Herman Hesse, Jewish mysticism, and Gershom Scholem to name but a handful of texts. Her choice to practice Judaism was a proactive decision and in small part circumstantial. During a trip back to Moscow, Shteynshleyger felt an urge to express her spiritual aspirations in language. She borrowed prayer books from the only people she knew of any religious persuasion, and they were Jewish. A full two generations removed from the last observant family member. Shtevnshlevger surprised her parents by informing them of her religious interests. By the time she began attending the Maryland Institute College of Art as an undergraduate in 1995, she had become Orthodox.

After receiving her MFA from Yale University in 2001, Shteynshleyger moved to New York where she did freelance work. Between 2001 and 2003, she made three trips to Russia, out of which came her first mature body of work, Siberia. Steeped in the Romanticist rhetoric of nature as the supreme source of beauty, these photos document a landscape renowned for hosting the Soviet Union's notorious forced labor camps collectively known as the Gulad. Criminals and political prisoners that disappeared from society only to reappear in the Gulags disappeared yet again, this time from history. In their skirmish with the Sublime, Shteynshleyger's melancholic pastorals, with only the bleakest of human traces, suggest a nature willfully oblivious to human affairs no matter how dark. According to her, "If these places stand any chance at redemption, it is through beauty." The subtext of her attraction to Siberia, however, was the theme of exile.

In 2003 she moved to Des Plaines, Illinois to be with an Orthodox man whom she would marry and with whom she would have two children, now ages six and four. Orthodox communities are tight-knit. Shteynshleyger found herself in one knit even tighter by Des Plaines. Less than an hour from Chicago's downtown, Des Plaines' slogan is "The City of Destiny." These words spelled an irony whose cruelty, in the cool, bitter reality of its unfolding, was thoroughly Russian by Shteynshleyger's standards. Although Orthodox, Shteynshleyger, before moving to Des Plaines, reconciled a secular art world with her religious practice. Des Plaines threw this balance hopelessly out of kilter. Hers had quickly become a Hassidic family life nestled within a bedroom community. Love aside, Moscow is to Gaithersburg, Maryland what New York is to Des Plaines. Illinois. Although she befriended couples, one or both of whom hailed from Russia, Shteynshleyger once again felt herself on the outside. The question is, outside what.

In Des Plaines, Shteynshleyger's perspective had been limited to its small Orthodox community. Portraiture became the mainstay of her work. Formally photographing family, friends, and in particular couples, was Shteynshleyger's means of asking how much of herself she saw in others. As portraits of adolescence, *Chaya Mushka* and *Elisha* register in supple fashion the hairline cracks in Shteynshleyger's faith. Roughly the same age as Shteynshleyger when she arrived in the United States, both youths, a girl and a boy, have downcast gazes suggesting a withdrawal from the viewer. Shteynshleyger's identification with her subjects is one of cool sensitivity. In these portraits, she used it to solicit a tentativeness of personhood doubling as her own uncertainty of self.

The earliest photographs in this new body of work were taken in Moscow when she was working on *Siberia*. This work is tinged with the kind of redemptive beauty Shteynshleyger deployed in *Siberia*, except here it is combined with religious and art historical references as in *Masha*, which is a beatific, Belliniesque portrait of her cousin, and *Father and Son*. Although the allegory is hopelessly illegible, *Father and Son* is still recognizable as a being indebted to paintings of the Annunciation in which the Angel Gabriel presents a lily to Mary announcing the Immaculate Conception.

In 2007, Shteynshleyger and her daughters moved to Chicago's far north side where they currently reside. She then fleshed out this body of work by documenting her quotidian life. Shteynshleyger's comfort with the staid genres of portraiture, landscapes, interiors, and still life is notable for its forthright conservativeness relative to the role staged photography played in the so-called "identity politics" of the early 1990s. Of the codes prey to photography (race, class, gender, sexuality), religion seems the least assimilable to a postmodern self-fashioning. Shteynshleyger confirms this at the end of her artist statement accompanying Siberia: "It's ironic that the word "spirituality" is largely taboo in the art world." It is not nearly as ironic, however, if one considers the 1989 controversy surrounding Andres Serrano's infamous photograph Piss Christ (1987). But Shteynshleyger was a full decade removed from that controversy. More important, her relationship to staged photography was not in the least dialectical. Although she is comfortable with labelling her work "straight" photography, her use of a tripod-mounted 4x5" view camera demands all her photographs be staged to some degree. As a result, she sees no distinction between overtly staged works such as Covered and Nylon Challah, and other works in the exhibition. From this historical vantage point, staged photography is a genre amongst many, and as firmly established as, say, still life.

Shteynshleyger's turn to Orthodox Judaism came from the inside out rather than the outside in. It was a form of self-imagining rather than an act of conformity. Religion was not handed down to her, she had to actively take ownership of it. Her embrace of a tradition-bound religion represents the necessity for religion's reinvention by each successive generation if it is to remain vital: "each generation had first to become Israel." Belief must be an act of choice in order to give its requisite rituals genuine meaning.

Shteynshleyger's choice, however, hardly took place in a vacuum. On the one hand, it coincided with a resurgence of orthodoxy amongst young Jews from non-observant backgrounds. This was bolstered by newly found freedom exercised by Jewish émigrés previously unable to practice in Russia. On the other hand, Shteynshleyger's artistic maturation took place under the rubric of a postmodern critique aimed at precisely the kind of essentialism to which Shteynshleyger had subscribed. The balancing act between her religious practice and her art practice resulted in a generative doubt that emerged through the former only to precipitate into the latter.

Cultural baggage, however, is something we all negotiate. Baggage is baggage regardless of its color, gender, or religion. The only time baggage is not seen as such is when its weight is evenly distributed over that which goes by the name of "community." In any case, regardless of who is viewing her photographs, Shteynshleyger refuses to cast off of any cultural/ethnic baggage. Instead, she favors opening it up, unpacking it, repacking it, and having complete ownership over its contents. When asked if her baggage has been with her the whole time, and if she packed it herself, she can answer that question literally and metaphorically in the affirmative.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION Sunday, January 3, 4:00 to 7:00 pm Featuring a talk with the artist in Kent Hall room 120 5:00 to 6:00 pm

LECTURE

Sunday, January 10, 2010, 2:00pm Margaret Olin

Senior Research Scholar at the Yale Divinity School Jewish Space

As a Senior Research Scholar at the Yale Divinity School, Margaret Olin's current research concerns documentary media, Jewish visual culture, and theories of witnessing and commemoration. This talk is part of a project called "Jewish Space," which examines sites identified as "Jewish," or in which Jews have a stake, as they mingle with others in imagination or reality. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 106. 1025 East 58th Street (on the Main Quadrangle of the University, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE

LECTURE

Sunday, January 24, 2010, 2:00 pm Jan Schwarz Senior Lecturer in Yiddish

University of Chicago

Porfolk: Portraits of Married Couples in Yiddish Literature

Schwarz is a professor of Yiddish culture. He is currently the Barbara and Richard Rosenburg Fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, researching "Yiddish Literary Testimonies: Mordechai Strigler, Leib Rokhman, Eliezer Wiesel." This event will take place in Cobb hall room 409, just down the corridor from the gallery. FREE

LECTURE

Sunday, February 7, 2010, 2:00pm Leora Auslander

Professor of Modern European Social History, member of the Committee on Jewish Studies and the Center for Gender Studies University of Chicago

Sexy Challahs, Pregnant Shabbat Candlesticks, and Women with Sidelocks: Anna Shteynshleyger's Embodied Judaism

Currently professor of Modern European Social History, Auslander is the author of *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (1998), and *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in England, North America, and France* (2009). She is a member of the Committee on Jewish Studies and the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Chicago. Her current research is for an upcoming book titled *Strangers at Home: Jewish Parisians and Berliners in the Twentieth Century*. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 106. 1025 East 58th Street (on the Main Quadrangle of the University, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE

READING Sunday, February 14, 2010, 2:00 pm Charles Bernstein

Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature University of Pennsylvania

Highly esteemed poet, professor, and literary scholar Charles Bernstein will do a reading dedicated to his daughter Emma. The reading coincides with the release of All the Whiskey in Heaven, a thirty-year anthology. In addition, the reading will celebrate the recent release of Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture, a collection of essays in which poets and critics, Bernstein among them, address the question of what constitutes radical poetry written by Jews defined as 'secular', and whether or not there is a Jewish component or dimension to radical and modernist poetic practice in general. The reading will be followed by a discussion and reception. This event will take place in Swift Hall room 106. 1025 East 58th Street (on the Main Quadrangle of the University, directly east of Cobb Hall). FREE

This exhibition has been made possible through generous support from the Harper Court Arts Council.

Additional funding has been received from Alphawood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; The John R. Halligan Charitable Fund, the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; Nuveen Investments, the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and our membership.

[that side] Anna Shteyenshleyger, *Couple in Boat*, 2004-2009 pigment print, 50 x 39 inches