

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting in a boat on a lake. The man is on the left, wearing a brown t-shirt and khaki pants, looking back over his shoulder towards the camera. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, looking towards the camera. They are both holding hands. The background shows a calm lake and green trees.

# Anna Shteynshleyger

January 3 – February 14, 2010

# The Renaissance Society

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

**Museum Hours**  
Tuesday - Friday: 10am - 5pm  
Saturday, Sunday: 12- 5pm  
Closed Mondays  
http://www.renaissancesociety.org

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

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# Pronounced /ˈʃteɪnʃleɪɡɜːr/

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 possessive-ness, her wedding band clearly visible as she tenderly grasps his forearm. The setting is idyllic, casting them as a latter-day Adam and Eve on one of Eden's riverbanks. In this context, marriage is biblical ritual, an observation under-scored 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 place.

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,

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, Bellinesque 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 6:00pm

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, 2:00pm**  
**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 Rosenberg 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, 2:00pm**  
**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

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

Essay by Hanna Waller. Layout by the J&amp;L Graphic Design, Chicago.