

# Plotzing Over | The 'Reinventing Ritual' Show

*Andy Port*



Courtesy of Hadas Kruk and Anat Stein, Studio Armadillo. "Hevruta-Mituta" (2007) by Studio Armadillo: Hadas Kruk and Anat Stein.

You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate "Reinventing Ritual," the contemporary art and design show that opened Sunday at the [Jewish Museum](#) and runs through Feb. 2. But it helps. Not that you won't admire Jonathan Adler's torso-like menorah that owes more to '60s modernism than traditional pieties. Or, Karim Rashid's funky hot pink version. Or, the little garden shed that could, doubling as a sukkah, where an observant family takes their meals during Sukkot, the harvest festival. And how amusing is the video by Francisca Benitez, showing Williamsburg sprouting with sukkahs? Sukkahs on balconies. Sukkahs on sidewalks. Here a sukkah. There a sukkah. And have you ever seen a stout Hasid wield a two-by-four?



Courtesy of Ronald Feldman

Fine Arts, New York “Gardening Sukkah” (2000) by Allan Wexler.

No, the show that Daniel Belasco, its curator, intended — how contemporary artists endow ritual performance with beauty and meaning — gets its psychic charge from understanding Judaism’s rules and commandments. God says in Jeremiah 1:9, “I am putting my words into your mouth.” And yet, there are strict prohibitions against destroying sacred books. This makes Johanna Bresnick and Michael Cloud’s “Mouth to Mouth,” in which they shred the Book of Leviticus and insert the scraps in gel capsules all the more profane. Or is it sacred? How do you ingest meaning, after all?



Courtesy of Grand Idea

Studio, San Francisco “Galvanized Steel Candelabra” (2003) by Joe Grand.

And the poignancy of being a smart, observant woman delegated by the patriarchs to second-class status is played out in some of the cheekiest pieces. Take the video “Writing Lesson #1” by Hadassa Goldvicht, in which the artist reacts to the Hasidic ceremony that celebrates a 3-year-old boy’s first exposure to language, by having him lick the honey off the Hebrew alphabet. Now a grown-up, with a video camera rolling, Goldvicht licks the letters with such lust and longing that she manages to convey just how left out she must have felt. Deprivation is also [Oreet Ashery](#)’s motivation to dress up as an Orthodox Jewish man (Hello, Yentl!) and celebrate Lag d’Omer on Mount Meron in Israel. As Ashery writes in the catalog: “The celebrations are similar to outdoor raves yet fueled by religious ecstasy alone. Only men may dance. Mostly, I was terrified I would be discovered. Yet, the fantasy of being accepted unconditionally into the tribe ... kept me going for a few intense hours.”

And so it goes: koshering, recycling, marrying, adjudicating. They all have their sacred ways and means. And in “Reinventing Ritual,” it’s enough to make you think.