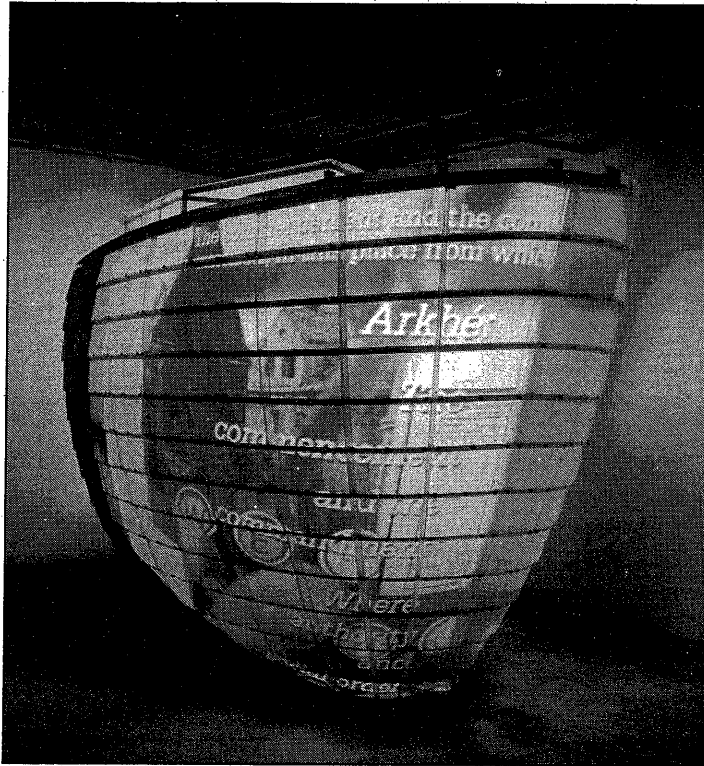


Ship of memories

Melissa Shiff's video ark is a Jewish Museum centennial highlight



COURTESY IMAGE

An ark for the Ark of the Covenant. Melissa Shiff's striking boat of images.

BY MIMI FRONCZAK ROGERS
FOR THE PRAGUE POST

Melissa Shiff: Ark at the Jewish Museum in Prague

Ends: Jan. 14, 2007.
Where: Pinkasova ulička (at the intersection of Široká and Valentinská), Prague 1—Josefov
When: Viewing times are noon to midnight daily

2002 floods conveys a more literal and localized concept of weather, and references the pulling together of people from all communities and walks of life during that time. The idea, says Hájková, is that "It concerns you. It concerns your life. We're all in the same ark."

The work pays homage to the Jewish Museum in Prague as a vital guardian of Jewish culture in Europe, both before and after World War II. The Jewish Museum was where Hitler amassed the Jewish ritual objects confiscated from European Jews, intending them for display in a future museum of an extinct people. Thus it also references the notion of preservation that is present in the biblical story of Noah's Ark.

The ark symbolizes displacement, escape and salvage — all concepts vital to the Jewish experience in the past century. "It is not just the particular but the universal metaphor of museum as ark and archive,"

A rich tapestry of themes comes together in a monumental video sculpture installed in the narrow lane next to the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague's old Jewish Quarter. Starting Wednesday, Sept. 13, a video montage will be shown throughout the day and night across the prow of Canadian artist Melissa Shiff's *Ark*. She created the site-specific sculpture especially for the Jewish Museum of Prague as the keynote of its Year of Jewish Culture festival, which celebrates the centennial of the institution's founding.

In all its 100-year history, the current project marks the first time that the Jewish Museum has really presented its activities to the wider local public, says Michaela Hájková, curator of visual arts at the museum. It is also the first time the Jewish Museum has installed a contemporary artwork in public space. "Ninety-five percent of our visitors are tourists," notes Hájková, but this work is expected to be viewed by a large number of Prague residents, in addition to out-of-town visitors.

Reflecting upon the museum's role as a repository of memory and its century-long work in archiving Jewish cultural artifacts was a primary theme for Shiff. Another important motif was weather. "The ebbs and flows of history are symbolized by weather," she says. It represents "the turbulence and changes over the past 100 years." Imagery from the devastating August

Shiff says.

The concept for the piece originated about a year ago. "I knew it was going to be a grand project," says Shiff, "and that I would need an architect and an engineer." Constructing a level base for the ship on the uneven cobblestone lane was itself a major undertaking. "It's almost like building a cathedral," she jokes.

The ark — constructed from sheets of translucent matte acrylic connected by a metal framework — was transported by container ship in its component parts and was assembled *in situ*. The curved front of the ship acts as a screen for the video montage, which plays from two separate projectors housed inside the boat. It is impossible to see the entire screen from a single vantage point.

In April, Shiff started making video footage inside the Jewish Museum, opening up drawers and shooting the numerous artifacts inside. She also filmed inside the museum's depository in the Smichov Synagogue as well as in the Libeň Synagogue.

Archive material is interspersed with symbols representing the vagaries of the museum's history. One such symbol is the star. We first see it on a grille from a synagogue that was destroyed during the sweeping urban renewal at the turn of the 20th century. It becomes the yellow Star of David that Jews were forced to wear during the Nazi occupation, then mutates into the communist red star, and finally changes form once again as the Jewish Museum becomes a private institution.

Numbers also are interjected into the video, sometimes with cabalistic meaning and other times representing accession numbers for items in the museum's collections but also invoking the human beings who were tattooed with ID numbers at concentration camps.

The site Hájková and Shiff chose for *Ark* has a strong *genius loci*. The lane lies at the entry to the former Jewish ghetto and leads to the Old Jewish Cemetery.

Steps away from the sculpture is the Pinkas Synagogue, housing a powerful Holocaust memorial consisting of the hand-inscribed names of the nearly 80,000 Jews deported from the Czech lands.

The synagogue was among the many buildings damaged in the 2002 floods.

Ark is not only about the preservation of Jewish heritage, but about bringing it more alive. The intention is to not only illuminate the past but also light the path for the museum's second century of existence.

In that regard, Shiff's project has unintentionally promoted the museum's archiving activities in a literal way. The artist would call up Hájková from her home in Toronto and say, "I need more menorahs!" which prompted the museum staff to speed up digital photography of artifacts. "It is also about museology in general," says Shiff. "The desire to archive. Without it there is oblivion."

Mimi Fronczak Rogers can be reached at features@praguepost.com

art relating to the *Feast of the Rose Garlands. Ends Oct. 1. Valdštejnská 3, Prague 1—Malá Strana. Open Tues.—Sun. 10 a.m.—6 p.m.*

Veletržní palác (National Gallery Collections of 19th-Century and Modern and Contemporary Art)—Pavel Brázda A long-overdue retrospective of this maverick artist, who celebrates his 80th birthday this year. *Ends Nov. 19. Zdeněk Šimek Sculptures by Šimek (1927–1970) Ends Jan. 7, 2007. Artists Supported by the Jana and Milan Jelínek Foundation Ends Nov. 19. Dukelských hrdinů 47, Prague 7—Holešovice. Open Tues.—Sun. 10 a.m.—6 p.m.*

Wenceslas Square—Sculpture Grande 2006 Now a summer tradition in Prague, this outdoor display of large-scale sculptures by local and international artists including Dennis Oppenheim is installed up and down Wenceslas Square and spills onto adjacent streets. Organized by Gallery Art Factory, this year's open-air sculpture festival remains on view into the autumn. *Ends Oct. 30.*

OUT OF TOWN

Jindřichův Hradec: Gallery of the Castle and Château in Jindřichův Hradec—Barbara Benish: Mari Objects and an artist's book by this American-born artist who has been based for many years in the Czech Republic. She also has an exhibition at Galerie VŠUP (see listing under Ongoing). *Ends Sept. 30. State Castle and Château (the gallery is located in the second courtyard), Dobrovského 1, Jindřichův Hradec. Open Tues.—Sun. 9 a.m.—4:15 p.m.*

LAST CHANCE

Galerie hlavního města Prahy (Prague City Gallery) at Dům U Kamenného zvonu (House at the Stone Bell)—Art Brut More than 300 works from one of the most important private European collections of such art presents a fascinating display of Art Brut, so-called "raw art," by untrained artists who usually followed no art movement or style but whose works are abundant with spontaneity and show a very individualistic world view. *Ends Sunday, Sept. 17. Staroměstské nám. 13, Prague 1—Old Town. Open Tues.—Sun. 10 a.m.—6 p.m.*

Galerie hlavního města Prahy (Prague City Gallery) at Staroměstská radnice (Old Town Hall)—Alena Kotzmannová: It's Starting Again. Home Cinema An exhibition of photographs, videos and slide projections that Kotzmannová prepared specially for Old Town Hall. *Ends Sunday, Sept. 17. Second floor of Old Town Hall, Staroměstské nám. 1, Prague 1. Open Tues.—Sun. 9 a.m.—6 p.m.*

Galerie Josefa Sudka—Space for a Permanent Exhibition Photographs by Sudek from the art collection of PPF, which operates this gallery. *Ends Sunday, Sept. 17. Úvoz 24, Prague 1—Hradčany. Open Wed.—Sun. 11 a.m.—5 p.m.*

Museum Kampa—Josef Beuys A display of multiples and graphics by one of the leading figures of conceptual art of the second half of the 20th century. *Ends Sunday, Sept. 17. U*

Drawings by Czech artist best known for Cubist sculptures in the Municipal House dining

Uměleckoprůmyslové Muzeum (Museum of Decorative Arts)—Glass and Light: 150

school of glassmaking in north Bohemia, the oldest school of its kind in the world. On view

Kopčebky, Jiří Šuhájek and others. *Ends Sunday, Sept. 17. Illiie 17. listopadu 2, Prague*