



SPINOZA: MARRANO OF REASON

VISUAL RESPONSES

BY ORI Z. SOLTES



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The legacy of groundbreaking, 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza(1632-1677) remains the subject of fascination and intense debate. Spinoza, whose ancestors had fled the Inquisition for the Netherlands, had a traditional Jewish upbringing but as a young adult came to believe that human beings should live their lives guided by reason.

A brilliant introvert who did not seek to impose his ideas on others, Spinoza's ideas nevertheless shook the world and were considered so heretical, so deviant, that he was excommunicated for life from Amsterdam's Jewish community. Today, Spinoza is remembered for rejecting divine transcendence in favor of rationality, a concept that paved the way for the Enlightenment.

Spinoza suffered for his beliefs in a way that was different and yet intricately bound to the suffering his Sephardic ancestors had endured just a few generations earlier. The artists in this exhibition explore some of the complex issues raised by his short life and profound influence.

Janet Heit and Billha Zussman



A Brief, Brilliant Life of Dissent

What was it exactly about Spinoza's beliefs that so exercised everybody? Surely his short treatise on *God, Man and His Well-Being*, which discusses the issue of how we can have knowledge of God and thereby knowledge of truth, might have contained ideas that were deemed heretical. But he wrote this treatise between 1656 and 1660, *after* his excommunication, so his views were only available orally at the time of both trials, the one when he remained silent before Rabbi Morteira's interrogation and the other when he was not even present.

That short treatise contains in seed form what would be the centerpiece of perhaps his greatest work, the *Ethics*, on which Spinoza spent the last fifteen years of his life—beginning his writing a good six years after the *heirem* was pronounced against him. In both these works, God is associated with Nature. Put otherwise, Spinoza articulated a form of *panbenotheism*—a concept often confused with *pantheism*. Where the latter finds gods everywhere, the former finds the one (*beno*) God (*theos*) in all (*pan*) things. Specifically, Spinoza began to articulate the notion that God is Nature in the process of “naturing” (*natura naturans*) and what that process yields is nature “natured” (*natura naturata*): so God is both separate from and yet identical with the universe.

This idea offers two problems for the conventionally-thinking Jew or Christian. One is that the process of “divine besoulment” encompasses more than merely humans, and to ascribe souls even only by implication to non-humans was considered disturbing to some—like arguing that the earth moves around the sun rather than that the sun and other heavenly entities revolve around the earth.

The other problem for most of Spinoza's contemporaries was that he essentially eliminates the “personality” ascribed by Judaism and Christianity to God and with that elimination he eliminates the notion of a personal relationship between God and ourselves: *natura naturans* cannot be imagined “talking” to Moses and delivering to him commandments at Sinai, much less hearkening to our daily prayers. The “personalization” of God by treating “God” as a—personal—“name” enables “my God” versus “your God” thinking—and with it, concepts of heresy, schism, and infidelism, together with religious violence and wars. We are far less likely to be driven into war “in the name of” nature: “*natura naturans*.”

Spinoza noted that our embrace of the Bible and its teachings is based on belief, not reason; there is no *rational* proof that God delivered the Torah to Moses. He also argued that in our tight embrace of the God of *Scripture*—a God of laws and commandments—we have lost hold of the God of *Life* that he terms continuous, in transgressing the barely discernible and nonetheless extant boundary between *naturans* and *naturata*.

“Experience day by day protested and showed by infinite examples, that good and evil fortunes fall to the lot of pious and impious alike....”



In one of his letters to Henry Oldenburg, he comments on “God, whom I define as a Being consisting in infinite attributes, whereof each is infinite or supremely perfect, after its time. ...by God we mean a Being supremely perfect and absolutely infinite.” In the same letter to Oldenburg, Spinoza also goes on to respond to an inquiry regarding “errors that I detect in the Cartesian and Baconian philosophies.” In this we recognize him as a key figure in the shaping of modern, secularized, rational Western thought.

Spinoza: Marrano of Reason

Not surprisingly, the fascinating array of artists whose work has been gathered into this exhibition reflect on diverse aspects of Spinoza, his life, his livelihood, and his thought; the development of modernity; the place of Jewish art and artists within the history of art and of Western art in the modern era. They offer reflections in abstract and figurative styles, in a range of media, with varied plays on symbolic language pertinent to the range of issues that the discussion of Spinoza as “The Marrano of Reason” evokes.

The title of the exhibition as conceived by its curators, **Bilha Zussman** and **Janet Heit**—one of whom, Sussman, is also a contributing artist—plays with both the importance of Spinoza’s rationalism and his unwillingness to hide his convictions from others. **Zussman’s** soft, semi-abstract sculpture—a table-top landscape—offers two amputated hands (cut off, like Spinoza from his community) reaching in different directions. Black—the color that dominated his second trial before the rabbinical court—and yellow, (the color associated with betrayal and with Jews from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 to the Holocaust), dominate the work. Imbedded within it is the image of a rose—alluding to a pun in Spinoza’s signature, for his name in Portuguese derives from “thorn”: *espinho*.

Jan Ayers Friedman shapes Spinoza’s “Cherem” (Sealing the Light) as a darkly lush abstraction: the darkness of the *Bet Din* (Rabbinical Court), both mental-spiritual and physical, overruns the image, nearly obscuring the yellow that is at once the color of betrayal and the unquenchable brightness that such darkness cannot obscure.

Trix Rosen plays on Spinoza’s punning name and its implications for his thought and for the Jewish experience in and beyond Spain and Portugal. Her “Thorny Question” takes dried roses and their very thorn-suffused stems and shapes them as an anthropomorph: one flower is the head and two others are shod feet; the arms terminate with no flowers—cut off, like the philosopher himself. Spinoza’s questions were both as layered and fragrant as the petals of a rose and as pointed as a rose stem—and pricked at conventional thought.

Other artists use the biographical datum that Spinoza was a lens grinder as a stepping-off point to play with the idea of the unique lens through which he explored and explained traditional texts. In **Rena Barnett’s**

“I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of established religion.”



“He alone is free who lives with free consent under the entire guidance of reason.”

photo collage, “Tikkun Kor'im” this is literalized and (con)textually focused: we see part of a right hand, wrapped in *t'fillin* straps, holding a magnifying glass that slightly enlarges a key passage from Deut. 6—the *sh'ma* and the *vi'abavta*—on the vocalized side of a *Tikkun*: the book that juxtaposes vocalized and unvoiced texts of the Torah so that one may study in order to perfectly read (*kor'im* means “readers”) the latter with the help of the former. But *tikkun* means “correction”—which is what Spinoza sought to do regarding our understanding of the text.

In **Judith Joseph's** woodcut “Vision of Spinoza” the philosopher soars as a butterfly above the windmill-dominated Dutch landscape, his right eye huge within the perfect circle of a magnifying lens: he sees well beyond where those sleeping under this star-studded night sky might ever dream (pun intended) of seeing.

Some works explicitly combine the issue of Spinoza the lens-grinder with that of Spinoza the student of Torah and rabbinics. Both versions of **Leah Raab's** “Through Spinoza's Lenses” feature an open book with glasses resting upon it—and a second, closed book next to it—as if the reader had left the desk just a moment ago, planning to return. And the “text” is deliberately “illegible”: because of the complexity of texts that Spinoza studied, or of his own texts—or because his own were not yet written when he was condemned?

Jaron Beekes' work is both image and text: his black-and-white graphic novel, *De Lens van Spinoza* (“The Lens of Spinoza”), offers a biography of the thinker and an account of his thinking in an accessible and visually-stimulating way. The setting for Rabbi Morteira's lecture is the interior of the current Spanish-Portuguese synagogue (with some artistic license and some irony: it was actually dedicated in 1675, two decades after Spinoza's excommunication). Text and image also resonate in **Saskia Pfaltzer's** *Spinoza's Roller Coaster*, done together with **Erik Bindervoet**. Explanations of Spinoza's world of ideas are accompanied by full-page illustrations in pale colors, at least one of which puns on the treble idea of a roller coaster that is a moebius strip (and thus mathematically unorientable) and also a symbol of infinity: Spinoza's life and thought in a particular visual nutshell!

Filip Schrooyen, in his “Tractatus Singularis,” has taken the familiar anonymous 1665 German portrait and subjected it to intense overpainting and visual “editing,” and embedded it within a kind of reliquary designed as a book; the face and the mind within it are reborn—re-visioned, observed, and read—from afar.



In and Beyond Spinoza's World

Some artists embed Spinoza in the far-flung details of his world. **Shoshanah Brombacher's** Chagalesque painting, overrun with bright pigments and myriad details, places the philosopher at his desk, surrounded by diverse quotes in Latin from his *Ethics* and scenes ranging from students in the Talmud Torah and rabbinic figures strolling along the street to beings tumbling through space—all, as it were, emanating from his calm *natura naturans* presence. **David Wander's** "Spinoza" is similarly filled with dynamic activity: the young, clean-shaven, wide-eyed philosopher on the left side of the image is surrounded by a series of earthlike spheres depicted in a moon-like cycle of phases, suggesting a world that is changing. On the right, a rabbinic figure scissors his *payot*, and others hide their eyes from the light of two candles (rather than blessing them). A seven-branched menorah links the two sides of the image—secularity and tradition are both part of Judaism; the entire painting is nonetheless grounded in infinitizing repetitions of the word *heirem* (excommunication), in Hebrew.

Hair and its configurations as a symbol occupy **Yehudis Barmatz-Harris** in her "Lamentations." An unwoven, shredding window screen shares space with tightly braided locks of hair, creating patterns of silvery light and black. The braiding of a young girl's hair reflects her gendered and age-specific place within many religious communities and is often considered a symbol of modesty. The image entangles the traditional with modernity.

Alan Falk's inkjet print plays straightforwardly on the issue of Torah reading and interpretation evolving in non-traditional directions, with Spinoza as a beginning point of the modern era in a painting filled entirely by women wearing *kippot* and *t'fillin*, items traditionally worn by men, suggesting that gender no longer distinguishes or defines the Jewish relationship to God's word.

Dorit Jordan Dotan engages old and new by way of the flotsam and jetsam that one traditionally (pun intended) finds across America in secondhand stores run by charities like Goodwill. So her "Good Will" series puns on that phrase (that reflects so strongly on Spinoza, and was so lacking among his accusers) as it applies to the most banal of commercial contexts and as it relates to the aesthetics of digital art—its pixelated intangible visual elements—and the thought, the reason, the oral-become-written ideas of Spinoza. It is his image, his forehead bulging with the twists and turns of the brain within, that dominates the time-pieces, angel statuettes, rabbits, keyboard-protectors, and other *chotchkes* that populate her images.

Others engage the philosopher by looking backwards at the diversely-conceived Judaism from which he came. **Miriam Stern's** "Portugal" refers specifically back to the Spinoza family's experience: against the backdrop of the texts of Portuguese Inquisition edicts, she places the image of an etrog box, or that of crosses (like the ones carved on Converso doorways), which she then subverts by adding bases that cause the images to appear as menorot.





“Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself.”

Gabriella Boros offers an “Homage to Spinoza” in a series of woodblock prints that interpret seven biblical Psalms, including the opening phrase in Hebrew, for each—that, like the seven branches of a menorah growing from the fertile roots of his mind, offer perspectives on Creation, Hope, Fear, Gratitude, Human Evil, the Peace of Shabbat, and Humility—all of these notions resonant with the philosopher’s ideas. Conversely, **Richard McBee’s** complex “Elisha Triptych” intentionally borrows that most typical of Christian forms in order to contextualize Spinoza (on horseback, visually evoking El Greco’s ca 1597-99 “Saint Martin and the Beggar”!). McBee connects Spinoza to the renowned early rabbinic scholar, Elisha Ben Abuyah, who, in engaging in mystical speculation, apostacized. And therein lies the challenge and dangers to the artist seeking to engage with Jewish texts and their layers of commentary in the quest to create art that is fresh, authentic, and non-heretical.

Others look specifically “forward.” **Munnus Zweerts** might be said to do this: her atmospheric photograph “Shadow” alludes to confining ropes and the bars of a prison window, through which one discerns the silhouettes of two figures, as mist-shaped shadows, conversing. Beyond the prison window they dialogue in freedom. Beyond the confining community of Spinoza, they stretch toward democratic societies shaped by modernity. **Robert Brandwyn**, who hails from Colombia, translates the notion of dispersion—and ever-starting anew in new locations—from the Portugal-Amsterdam matrix of Spinoza’s family in the 16th-17th century to Brandwyn’s own family’s Polish-South American matrix of experience in the between-wars 20th century, embedding photographic memory into the layered surfaces of “Starting Again.”

Cynthia Beth Rubin, Yona Verwer, and Kris Tonski combine forces to look simultaneously backward—and forward in “Zodiacs and the Lower East Side”. Within the body of five painted “screens”—like the five books of the Torah—embedded chips visible on smartphones yield videos offering a range of pre- and post-Spinozan elements. The multi-layered work includes images as far-flung as zodiac/Jewish calendar motifs (the circular cycles of human time); illuminated medieval texts; the immigrant neighborhood of 19th-century New York’s Lower East Side; details of former synagogues; and modern-day murals. The Spinoza family’s refugee world of Old Amsterdam translated, for Jews, into the new refugee world of New Amsterdam starting in 1654 - the same year as Spinoza’s first trial by the *bet din*.

Yona Verwer’s solo piece, “Caute” (Latin: “be cautious”), breaks through the painting’s normative flat surface and offers a metaphor for Spinoza’s intellectual break from normative thinking. A diagonal slit created by two canvas flaps bear the word “*caute*,” referring to Spinoza’s signet ring with that inscription on it. Pushing open the slits, the viewer encounters hidden images linking past to present.

Lenore Mizrachi-Cohen’s photographic and calligraphic montage, “Heart/Change” plays differently on past-present in the context of the immigrant experience: conditions may change but the heart is constant.





The double image of a bride and groom—one in Egypt and the other, from the following generation, in New York—offers the ghost of each behind the other, visually blurring and thus linking them: old and new, traditional and modern. Rising up from the bottom of the image—and in part assuming a pattern along the brides’ white gowns—is the Arabic word, “heart (change),” repeating, spinning in every direction: changing and unchanged.

Looking from Spinoza forward in a personally spiritual way, **Goldie Gross’s** “And S/He Woke Up” is a small diptych. One side is dominated by a left hand, (intended to be that of Spinoza), against the backdrop of what would suggest Spinoza’s own room; the other is dominated by a right hand (the artist’s) against a contemporary setting. The idea derives from the oft-used cinematic trope of presenting a character who wakes up not quite knowing where he is or what is happening staring at his/her own hand as s/he achieves orientation—as a metaphor for religious re-orientation. Spinoza’s “awakening” from his traditional religious perspective to spiritually revolutionary thinking is echoed by the artist’s sense of herself and others who have experienced a kind of awakening out of religious tradition to something new.

A particular textual reference—to Spinoza’s posthumously published *Ethics* (specifically Part V, Proposition XXXVI, in which “the intellectual love of the mind toward God is that very love of God whereby God loves himself,” and the corollary that “God, insofar as he loves himself, loves humanity and consequently, that the love of God toward humans and the intellectual love of the mind toward God are identical”)—effects a transhistorical visual resonance in **Ieke Spiekman’s** four-part homage. In the first, a man is attacked in front of the former Ashkenazi synagogue in Amsterdam, in the Nazi era of 1941; this yields to the image of a servant girl relaxing—she sits and stares into nature (*natura naturata*); in the third, Spinoza sits staring out, on that same fence; and in the fourth, Spinoza is attacked on the street. So human violence, born of irrational passion, brackets the rational, intellectual love of an intellectual God (*natura naturans* that begets *natura naturata*) that is not personal, human, imbued with passion—of which awareness both Spinoza and a servant girl (*contrary* to Spinoza’s view) is capable.

Toby Turkel’s “On the Space Continuum” blurs earlier and later eras by juxtaposing Spinoza with the visual brilliance of his Dutch contemporary, Johannes Vermeer (born, like Spinoza, in 1632) and that of the 20th-century German Jewish physicist, Einstein. Turkel’s re-visioned conversation transforms the figures and background of Vermeer’s 1655-60 “Officer and Laughing Girl.” The girl has become Einstein, and the map of the world on the back wall has become a map of outer space—but the light pouring in through the window is that of enlightenment.

“The mind of God is all the mentality that is scattered over space and time, the diffused consciousness that animates the world.”



Joel Silverstein's "Spinoza: the Modernist" creates a different sort of synthesis: stylized versions of the standard portrait of Spinoza and the image of Chagall's 1912 "A Pinch of Snuff"—in which the snuff-user, moreover, is a rabbi, and recalls a number of rabbis in other Chagall paintings—meld as one disturbing face. So both Turkel and Silverstein play both on who Spinoza was and the question of what "Jewish" art is within "Western art."

Archie Rand approaches Spinoza from an oblique and large perspective, and with a style that resonates a differently angled almost cartooned shape such as that utilized by Silverstein. Rand's figures in his four "Purim" paintings seem spun out of illustrated fairytales, drawn with careful detail and largely colored with a copper-pink grisaille tone. The reference to Western (Christian) imagery and style—while labelling each of his four scenes (the number of letters in God's ineffable name, incidentally, and perhaps not by coincidence) in Hebrew cursive, identifying the Purim Scroll (*megillah*), for instance, or the sending/exchanging of gifts of food—suggests an engagement with the question of defining "Jewish painting." This question, as Rand knows and intends to remind us, began to emerge with the modernity made feasible in large part by Spinoza—and his rejection from the community resonates obliquely to the work by contemporary Jewish artists rejected either because of work perceived as *too Jewish* (by Christian and, responsively, by some Jewish critics) or as simply too obscure (by Jewish critics).

Ruth Schreiber's "Progress at Last—My Personal Bookcase" resonates obliquely with the question of where women fit into both art history and Judaism—since both of these realms have traditionally excluded or drastically limited female participation, turning every woman into a kind of Spinoza—and thus within "Jewish" art. She charts the rise in the acceptance of and the accomplishment by women scholars within Jewish studies, by building a miniature bookcase with five shelves. Two books yield to an empty shelf that yields to ten volumes as we move from years 0-500 CE to 500-1000 to 1000-1500: on the fourth shelf, which includes Spinoza's era, the number of books more than doubles, and on the last, every inch of space is packed with volumes. All of these volumes are labeled with authors' names, asserting their roles—apposite to Spinoza's—in *human* progress.

Various artists have used abstraction to consider the timeless/spaceless ideas articulated by Spinoza or relatable to his narrative. **Tal Demsky's** "Substance Monism" is an oil-painted sky-blue light bulb, surrounded by fragments of an exploded (actual) sky-blue light bulb, against an earth-tawny ground. She addresses the philosopher's absoluteness and his sense of the Absolute—whether God or *Natura*, whether as a creative consciousness or the explosion of a hydrogen atom—that suffuses everything, so that the essence of God, (which is to exist), like that of a lightbulb, is found in the existence of everything else, (as the lightbulb fragments possess part of the essence of being a light bulb).

Tracy Ellyn's "In the Beginning, the World Was Created" engages this idea—also including in her mixed media piece light bulbs, together with glass and dyes—with an explosive, richly textured piece that bursts





its frame (as Spinoza burst his own frame) that might be seen to emanate from a concentration toward the upper left of the image and yet does not, since the primary form is a perfect circle bursting to fill out the picture plane.

Appositely, one might say, **Irina Sheynfeld's** oil on canvas "Axiom V" addresses Spinoza's comment—regarding the inherent uncertainty for any being to understand another being of whatever sort—by juxtaposing two images that are, at first glance, shaped identically. Except that not only are key aspects of their color schemes different or even opposite—they read almost as a color-blindness test—but their structural elements (12 versus 13 "protrusions" from the central element, for example) are different. What do we see, and what do we know?

On the other hand, **Susan Turner's** brilliantly-hued solvent print, "Chaos," uses deeply-carved earth and sky pigments in a dynamically textured dialogue between smooth and rough-hewn line, suggesting at once a beginning time point of the macrocosm and the sort of one-celled microcosms the spaces of which might be examined with lenses like those ground by Spinoza; Exploring the physical reality hidden beneath the surface of things operates in dialogue with his exploration of the metaphysical and moral universe.

Paul Dikker uses both modernist abstraction and traditional figuration in suggesting both the microcosm of Spinoza's own mind and the macrocosm of the vast skies captured by so many Dutch painters of the 17th century—and the separated inseparability of reason and emotion, spirit and matter, *natura naturans* and *naturans naturata*—in his diptych, "Everything is One." The small figure of the philosopher floats in a grey-hued spaceless space, below a gargantuan, abstract, multi-colored, stormy "sky" that may also be construed as the hyperactive, roiled interstices of his mind, threatening and yet not at all threatening to that isolated yet absolutely calm individual.

By contrast, **Beth Haber's** "Politicus" references the distinctive style of 17th-century Dutch frames, an accompaniment to the lushness of Dutch images during that time—Spinoza's era—when the Netherlands was at its peak as a mercantile power. In a repeating configuration centered on a delicate and textured abstraction, Haber makes a statement about Spinoza's carefully-structured and complex arguments in the *Ethics*, and their own delicate, layered, rectilinear complexity.

Susan Schwalb offers rectilinearity from a different *angle*. Her "Harmonizations #14" offers 36 carefully silver-, copper-, and gold-point squares marked by vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines, perfectly articulated: they represent the *Lamed Van*, the 36 anonymous righteous ones through whom the world continues to exist. One of her squares is empty, a black hole so dense that it is devoid of light. Is this Spinoza, his density leading the rabbis to darkness, yet in fact filled with the bright, modernist illuminations of texts and ideas?

"Minds, however, are conquered not by arms, but by love and nobility."





The *Lamed Vav* are central as a concept to the Jewish mystical tradition, particularly in its last phase: Hassidism. And one of Hassidism's key early 19th-century figures was Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, a group of whose followers two centuries later is captured by **Joyce Ellen Weinstein** in a photograph of them dancing and chanting a litany—"Na NaH NaHMaN"—in which the four consonants that make up his name in Hebrew resonate with those that make up God's ineffable name (YHVH). The father of Hassidism was considered a radical reformer by mid-18th-century, eastern European rabbis. Rabbi Nahman, a few generations later, was thought to be a dangerous heretic. Today, his followers are a small, ultra-Orthodox sect. New thinking can lead to modernity or it can ossify in the face of newer thinking.

One might end where this all begins: with texts—appropriate to the issue of Jews as a people of texts and images—for whom the most concentrated era of positive interface with Christians and Muslims at the same time took place in the Iberian world from which Spinoza's family would ultimately flee.

Frits Woudstra offers work as a painter and writer, reflecting on Spinoza's writing more from a conceptual than visual perspective.

On the other hand, **Lauri Wohl**, in her distinctive textile mode, presents "Memory Demands so Much," poetry in Hebrew and Arabic—as if on the scroll of some imperial decree. This "decree," however, focuses on memory, interweaving (pun intended) poetry from the *Convivencia* era of Spinoza's ancestors with that of contemporary Israeli and Palestinian (and Syrian) poets. Wohl offers art as a statement of the shared yearning for peace—exactly the sort of yearning expressed by Spinoza in his discussions of God.

Indeed, **Susan Dickman**'s "Letter to the Future Nation-State," embedding textual fragments of the propositions in Spinoza's *Ethics* within an encaustic carapace, imagines what Spinoza would have thought of the current Jewish State and the fanatical rabbis who, like those who pronounced the *beirem* against him, assert who is and who is not a Jew—and have an effect on the relationship between the state and non-Jews within and beyond it. How irrational their sectarian snobbery would appear to the Marrano of Reason!

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