

Printed from the Pittsburgh City Paper website:
<http://www.pittsburghcitypaper.ws>

POSTED ON MAY 26, 2011:

At the Warhol, an artist delves into the patriarchal limits of the Torah.

By Savannah Schroll Guz

Language and its experience-shaping power are the focus of Helène Aylon's exhibition *The Liberation of G-d and The Unmentionable*. The show continues The Andy Warhol Museum's *The Word of God* series, which features art intended to promote interfaith understanding. The American-born artist's implicit ambition -- to modify religious and social attitudes -- makes her work inherently controversial. Yet her approach is careful, scholarly and thought-provoking.

Aylon grew up in an Orthodox household. At 18, she wed an Orthodox rabbi. Widowed at 30, she broke from Orthodox tradition to become an artist with feminist leanings. By the 1970s, her views aligned more closely with progressive Judaism. Later, she initiated an unconventional Torah study, highlighting (in the distinctly feminine color pink) the patriarchal language she believes illustrates humanity's limiting views of God.

When Aylon works with actual Torah texts, as she does in the 64 books associated with "The Liberation of G-D" (1990-96), she does not highlight the text directly, but instead glues parchment to the borders of each page. This protects the holy text, but also prevents the volumes from being closed. Her lesson cannot be avoided by shutting the book or turning the page.

In her photographs "Self Portrait: The Unmentionable" (2010), she projects, across her forehead, the Hebrew script for God -- a word so holy, it is replaced in religious texts with "The Unmentionable." The image is repeated five times, corresponding with the Torah's five books, or Pentateuch.

Since Orthodox Judaism identifies God using masculine imagery, the appearance of this holy phrase on a female is inherently incendiary. Aylon's concept wholly depends on the Progressive belief that the Pentateuch is an assemblage of narrative fragments composed by a variety of *human* authors. And with this narrative assemblage -- possibly composed between the 10th and sixth centuries BCE -- comes an antiquated, oppressive and patriarchal world view, made into religious law.

Ultimately, Aylon's examination does not challenge the sacred, but seeks to rescue it from imperfect human understanding and profane encumbrances. Such re-evaluation suggests the possibility of overcoming ingrained, text-perpetuated intolerances. And this unstated but praiseworthy objective fulfills the Warhol series' mission beautifully.

The Liberation of G-d and The Unmentionable continues through June 26. The Andy Warhol Museum, 117 Sandusky St., North Side. 412-237-8300 or www.warhol.org



God, head: From Helène Aylon's series "Self Portrait: The Unmentionable."

URL for this story: <http://www.pittsburghcitypaper.wshttp://www.pittsburghcitypaper.ws/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A95612>