

FORT GANSEVOORT

MALCAH ZELDIS

Shared Dreams

December 07 – January 16, 2021

An online exhibition

curated by Ariella Wolens



Malcah Zeldis, *Martin Luther King*, 1995,
Gouache on paper, 14.5 x 11 inches.

Beginning Monday, December 7th, Fort Gansevoort will present *Shared Dreams*. Organized by writer and curator Ariella Wolens, the exhibition is Fort Gansevoort's first with the 89-year-old Bronx-born self-taught painter.

Malcah Zeldis began her artistic practice in the late 1960s, producing folk-art inspired works centered on themes related to urban life and Jewish practices, biblical narratives, and historical figures. She has devoted most of her attention to the latter, dedicating many series to such prominent 20th century leaders as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi. Throughout her career, the artist has developed a distinctive visual style characterized by vibrant color, deceptively simplified figures, and flattened perspective that in some cases challenges the viewer's perception of space. The human body is often dramatically scaled – outsized or made minuscule -- and paired with conventional settings and objects, creating an intriguing formal dissonance. By deploying these visual codes, Zeldis reformulates her subject matter with eccentric flair, and establishes a symbolic milieu all her own.

Focused upon Zeldis' images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this exhibition seeks to examine what it means to have the life story of the preeminent Black American leader portrayed through the eyes of a Jewish woman, and acts as a springboard for considering the complex relationship between these two communities, particularly during the Golden Age of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century. In seeking to explore the cultural association of African Americans and Jews, the title of this show invokes the ethical notion of mutual moral responsibility which is at the crux of both Jewish teachings and the creed of Dr. King. In a perpetually referenced quote from the Talmud attributed to Jewish scholar Hillel, the question is posed: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being only for myself, who am I?" This maxim draws clear parallels to King's imperative to stand up for oneself and act with benevolence towards others. In his own words, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness." It is with such expressions of duty and compassion that King galvanized African Americans to non-violently protest their right to social equality – a conviction that resonated in the hearts of Jews such as Zeldis, and continues to move legions of Americans and global citizens to speak out against the oppression of any and all people.

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All of the gouache paintings presented in Fort Gansevoort's exhibition were originally included in Rosemary L. Bray's children's book, *Martin Luther King*, published in 1995. Zeldis committed herself to this body of work as an act of reverence for Dr. King, whose efforts she followed very closely while he was alive. The series begins with Dr. King's early life in the American South, detailing his familial background and schooling, before delving into his role as a central figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Curator Ariella Wolens writes, "Malcah Zeldis' narrative telling of the prophetic life of Martin Luther King Jr. pulsates with joyous vibrancy. Her unfettered visions convey King's inimitable grace with a directness that is in perfect harmony with the universality of Dr. King's clarion call for social equality." In this way, Zeldis constructs a realm where history is suspended inside a colorful reverie and observed through a euphoric yet acute lens. The viewer is introduced to an alternative method for processing and understanding the events of that time. Dr. King's assassination, imprisonment, and the bombing of his home are captured with a delicate candor that is both skillful and moving. Although images of violence are subdued, the depicted adversities remain potent.

The nation Zeldis depicts is not far from where we find ourselves now. During this politically turbulent moment more than a half century later, this exhibition reminds us that it is important to commemorate leaders who have shaped a progressive framework for the future. As America today reaches another climax of civil unrest and intensified calls for social justice, Zeldis' work poses the crucial question, "Will we continue to repeat history?"

Malcah Zeldis was born in 1931 in the Bronx, New York. She earned her BA degree at Brooklyn College, New York in 1970. She has exhibited her works at American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, Michigan; The Bass Museum of Fine Art, Miami Beach, FL; Frederick Weisman Art Museum, MI; Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL; Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York; Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, FL; Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY; Terra Museum of Art, Chicago, IL; Stedman Art Gallery, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ; Creative Heart Gallery, Winston-Salem, NC; Modern Primitive Gallery, Atlanta, GA; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; Jay Johnson Gallery, New York, NY; and the Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL. Her work is in the permanent collections of museums such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Museum, Williamsburg, VA; Akron Museum, Akron, OH; International Folk Art Museum, Santa Fe, NM; Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers Collection of Children's Literature, New Brunswick, NJ; Jewish Museum, New York, NY; John Judson Memorial American Museum, Washington, DC; Milwaukee Museum of Art, Milwaukee, WI; May Museum of Art, Lawrence NY; The Museum, Kresge Art Gallery, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI; Musée D'Art Naif De Lille de France, Paris, France; Museum of American Folk Art, New York, NY; Noyes Museum, Oceanville, NJ; St. Louis Mid-American Arts Alliance (Mulvane Art Center), St. Louis, MO; Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA; Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC; and the Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY.