

Except from essay by Jennie Klein  
Visualizing Maternity in Contemporary Art  
Race, Culture, Class

GAIL REBHAN, *MOTHER-SON TALK* (1996), *DIVERSITY* (2000),  
*FAMILY SHIELD* (2003)

Unlike Cué and Hong, Gail Rebhan is the grandchild of European Jewish immigrants rather than an immigrant herself. Having been born and raised in America, Rebhan is no stranger to the relentlessly homogenizing consumer culture of this country. Like Cué, Rebhan's work challenges the implicit assumptions of America's consumerist society. Rebhan's challenge is more direct however. Possessed of a biting wit and sly ironic humor, Rebhan uses found objects in her photographs and

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From *Mother-Son Talk*. 1996. Offset artist's book, 7 × 9 inches.

artist's books that narrate her uphill battle to teach her secular children what it means to be Jewish. Rebhan's artist's book *Mother-Son Talk* uses found images along with text to narrate Rebhan's frustrations with imparting Jewish feminist values to two boys enthralled with popular culture. Next to an image of a plastic Santa Claus and toy Torah scroll, Rebhan writes:

When my older son was about three or four years old I realized that everything he was learning about Judaism was negative. The things we don't do: We don't celebrate Christmas. We don't celebrate Easter. My husband and I decided we needed to start observing the Jewish holidays and rituals more frequently. After the silent prayer at our first Friday night Shabbat service, my son told me he prayed that he could celebrate Christmas.<sup>11</sup>

A few pages later, Rebhan's son tells his mother that he wants to marry someone blonde—or maybe a Jewish girl provided that she is pretty like his mother. By the age of 15, Rebhan's son Jackson has apparently embraced a life of teenage consumption, as evidenced by Rebhan's "portrait" *Jackson—Age 15* (2003), an assemblage of found objects that includes a dirty sock, CDs, candy wrappers, and Coke cans. Rebhan's



*Family Shield*, 2003. Giclee print, 19 × 19 inches.

portrait of her son, whose detritus marks him as a "typical" American male, stands in stark contrast to her photographic portrait of her family tree, *Family Shield*.

Rebhan assembled images of her family and archival family photographs of the Kachor family (spelled several different ways) surrounding a large menorah/family tree. The one sepia-toned image of Rebhan's immigrant family is layered behind the menorah. A small section in the right hand corner is cut away to reveal a photograph of Rebhan's son, dressed as a pirate. The Statue of Liberty in the top right corner is juxtaposed with images of Rebhan's family from the 1950s, post-immigration. *Family Shield* insists that Rebhan's sons acknowledge their Jewish identity. Images of her two sons playing baseball, rollerblading, visiting Disneyland, and participating in their bar mitzvahs are interspersed with two older photographs of Rebhan's immigrant grandparents and her relatives.



*Diversity*, 1997. Giclee print, 8.5 × 11 inches.

Growing up in the Washington DC area, both of Rebhan's sons experienced the quintessential American childhood, including team sports. In *Diversity*, Rebhan layered the following text over a picture taken of her son's soccer team.

I am watching my nine-year-old son's soccer game. I overhear two mothers talking about how much they enjoy living in this neighborhood. They especially like the diversity. Their sons have all sorts of friends. I wonder what they are talking about. The neighborhood is not very diverse. Suddenly, I realize they are talking about my son and me. I don't feel very different from them.

In fact, Rebhan's son is completely interchangeable with all of the other boys on the team. Rebhan has helpfully written the word Jewish and drawn a line to her son's face, which she circled. Rebhan's experience mothering two sons in the late twentieth century appears on the surface to be fairly typical of the institution of mothering in North America. She is a soccer mom, she works, she cleans up after her very messy children, and she is able to laugh about the whole thing. Nevertheless, as the text in *Diversity* suggests, to be Jewish is to be still considered not quite white and therefore different. In Rebhan's case, the "diversity" that the other mothers congratulate themselves on attaining is more humorous than anything else. Many years and miles removed from the pogroms and concentration camps of Hitler's Germany, the well-intentioned anti-Semitism of Rebhan's neighbors makes them unwitting buffoons, the butt of the laughter issuing from gallery goers encountering Rebhan's work for the first time.

Rebhan's ironic labeling of her son as "Jewish" causes the viewer to try and find "Jewish" traits in her son's face, traits that would not seem evident in the absence of the label. *Diversity* thus raises the ugly specter of eugenics, the pseudo-science developed by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 based on the idea that it was a moral imperative to improve humanity by encouraging the best and most able to breed. From there, it was a short step to encouraging the less fit not to breed. In Nazi Germany, eugenic science went hand-in-hand with anti-Semitism and the ultimate extermination of millions of people. American eugenics, which flourished during the first three decades of the twentieth century, did not result (fortunately) in the mass extermination of any group of people. It did fuel instances of enforced sterilization and discrimination against those perceived to be less "fit"—initially the poor immigrants that crowded the cities of America. Although the science of eugenics has been largely discredited, its specter still looms large over contemporary notions of motherhood and childrearing, which are as class-based in the early twenty-first century as they were in the early twentieth century. Mothers can now be blamed for both rearing their children incorrectly and passing on bad genetic material.<sup>12</sup>