



Amy Berk inherited several trunks with neatly ironed and folded table linens that belonged to her grandmother, a successful Jewish immigrant in Brooklyn. Berk's family lore holds sacred the decades of the 1950s and 60s, when the grandmother's table was a festive gathering place for the family and its many guests. In *Recoverings*, Berk rearranged, hand-sewed, and stretched a number of tablecloths and napkins to create subtle "canvases," whose shimmer, texture, and newly formed patterns transform the simple textiles, usually background for a table service, into subjects of aesthetic reflection. Starting as utilitarian, horizontally-oriented objects, they have now assumed an upright, vertical position on the museum wall.

The real effect of the "canvases" lies in the persistence of the stain. The stain links two worlds inhabited by Amy Berk. First is the world of her tribe, the domestic world seen through the lens of nostalgia and desire, realized as a chance food stain at a family table. Second is the world of art where the stain, representing the touch of an artist's hand, is imbued with immense significance. Straddling the two worlds, Berk attempts to reconcile them; she is recovering the memory of her grandmother by elevating her to the status of an artist, by making the food stain represent the absent woman's touch on her granddaughter's life.

This veneration of the stain is reminiscent of a ceremonial cloth, called the Torah binder, specific to Western Ashkenazim in the 17th-19th centuries. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interpreted the ceremonial use of the Torah binder in an essay, from which the following text is an excerpt.

"For at least four hundred years, Western Ashkenazim have forged a powerful nexus between two central covenants in Jewish sacred history—the covenant of Abraham, marked by circumcision, and the covenant of Moses, marked by the giving of the Torah. They have concretized this link by means of a long strip of cloth.

A rectangle of unbleached linen is still used by some Western Ashkenazim today to provide a clean surface on which the infant lies during the circumcision. After the circumcision, this cloth is torn into four strips, which are sewn end to end to form one long band about twelve feet long and six inches high. Someone with a good hand, possibly the local teacher, cantor, or circumciser, draws the inscription and images, which are either embroidered by the mother or another female relative, or painted. The inscription carries the child's name, birthdate, and zodiac sign, and a wish drawn from the circumcision liturgy that he grows up to a life of Torah, marriage, and good deeds.

After one to three years, when the child first visits the synagogue, he presents the binder as his first gift to the synagogue. At the end of the public reading, the scroll is ritually raised so the congregation can witness the text, and it is then tightly rolled shut. The child then offers his binder, which is used to wrap and bind the scroll so that it holds firm...When the child reaches the age of thirteen he reads publicly from the sacred text as part of his bar mitzvah, his initiation into the ritual responsibilities of adulthood; the scroll used on this occasion may be bound with his binder.

Circumcision is known as *berit milah* (covenant of circumcision), and the etymology of *berit* (covenant) is believed to be 'binding'. Thus the cloth used during the circumcision ceremony that symbolically binds the child into the covenant is later transformed into a physical binder for the 'terms' of that covenant, the Torah. Carrying the child's name and birthdate, and even the blood of circumcision, the binder symbolically binds the child around the law each time it is used to secure the Torah scroll." (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Cut That Binds: The Western Ashkenazic Torah Binder as Nexus between Circumcision and Torah." *Celebration, Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Ed. Victor Witter Turner. Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982.)

The Magnes collection contains nearly a hundred Torah binders. They are fascinating examples of Jewish folk art, some bearing elaborate painting and embroidery. But the stains they carry equally fascinate: the precise marks of folk artists' hands and involuntary marks created by the bodies of countless baby boys are forever entangled, preserved, absorbed by the fabric. Amy Berk's *Recoverings* come from the tradition where art-making is inseparable from living, where the line between the sacred and profane is threadbare.

Alla Efimova
Chief Curator

LEFT:
Torah binder
1814, Munich, Germany
Linen backed with silk;
silk embroidery
Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
Theodore Lilienthal
80.83

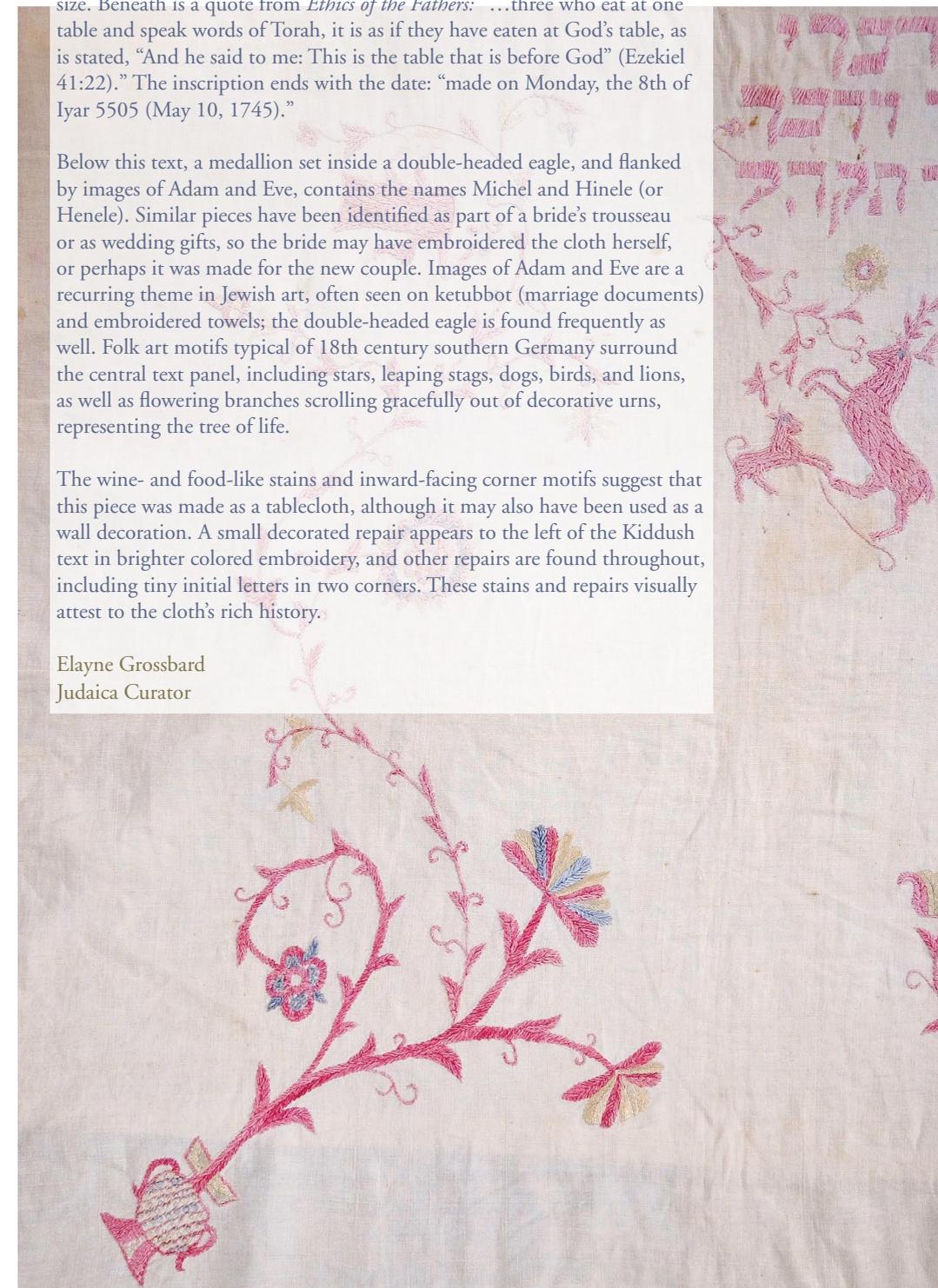
RIGHT:
Festival Kiddush cloth
1745 / 5505, Germany
Linen, embroidered with
multi-colored cotton thread
Museum Purchase
Strauss Collection
75.183.137

In this beautifully embroidered cloth, a central panel contains the Kiddush blessing for festivals, with Sabbath inserts in contrasting color and letter size. Beneath is a quote from *Ethics of the Fathers*: "...three who eat at one table and speak words of Torah, it is as if they have eaten at God's table, as is stated, "And he said to me: This is the table that is before God" (Ezekiel 41:22)." The inscription ends with the date: "made on Monday, the 8th of Iyar 5505 (May 10, 1745)."

Below this text, a medallion set inside a double-headed eagle, and flanked by images of Adam and Eve, contains the names Michel and Hinele (or Henele). Similar pieces have been identified as part of a bride's trousseau or as wedding gifts, so the bride may have embroidered the cloth herself, or perhaps it was made for the new couple. Images of Adam and Eve are a recurring theme in Jewish art, often seen on ketubbot (marriage documents) and embroidered towels; the double-headed eagle is found frequently as well. Folk art motifs typical of 18th century southern Germany surround the central text panel, including stars, leaping stags, dogs, birds, and lions, as well as flowering branches scrolling gracefully out of decorative urns, representing the tree of life.

The wine- and food-like stains and inward-facing corner motifs suggest that this piece was made as a tablecloth, although it may also have been used as a wall decoration. A small decorated repair appears to the left of the Kiddush text in brighter colored embroidery, and other repairs are found throughout, including tiny initial letters in two corners. These stains and repairs visually attest to the cloth's rich history.

Elayne Grossbard
Judaica Curator



REVISIONS **Amy Berk** *Recoverings*
Judah L. Magnes Museum
February 5, 2007—August 5, 2007

Looking through the Magnes' textile collection, I was particularly fascinated by the Jewish folk art: the "craftiness," the good and bad workmanship, and how these objects allow us to get a glimpse into the daily life of Jewish families as well as how they fit into surrounding cultures. I also responded to the tradition of donating household textiles to the synagogue. As a rabid recycler, and someone whose work has very often taken common household or utilitarian objects and brought them into the sanctified space of the white cube of the gallery, this reuse truly resonated.

The collection's festival Kiddush cloth is a goldmine of information and inspiration. The embroidery is delightful and serves as a folksy counterpoint to the more formal motifs and machine-made embroidery in the table linens that were left to me by my grandmother. Traveling almost halfway around the world from its point of origin and after 250 years of use and display, this Kiddush cloth carries with it a tremendous sense of history, place, and memory.

The materials in my work here, too, have traveled far from their first domestic home and even farther from their points of creation. The linens that I selected to use in my fabric "paintings" are mostly beige in color, with scattered yellows, ochres, and whites. Some of the napkins and tablecloths are embellished with monograms or leaf or floral patterns. Others have a sheen that I chose to highlight and use as an optical counterpoint to their flatness.

Most of these linens were used on my grandmother's table in the 1950s and 60s when she hosted holidays (Jewish and secular); she was known for her hospitality and good and ample spread. Many of these fabrics show stains, proving their heavy use, and some also include traces from their time in storage in my aunt's basement in New Jersey awaiting my reclamation. I often use materials given to me by other people as this practice taps into my inclination to recycle and infuses the materials with the spirit of the giver, motivating me to make something meaningful in their honor.

The flaws or stains on these otherwise perfect grounds captured my imagination and provoked me to present them as paintings. I became intrigued by the markings, attracted to them aesthetically, and interested not only in how they occurred but in how these imperfections are viewed. Along with being difficult to remove, stains can have negative connotations, referring to sullied reputations as well as gravy that missed the boat. A stain can also refer to a material used to create a shift in color. For me, the discolorations of time and the remnants of the act of hosting holiday gatherings enriched rather than diminished the fabrics, and provided a space for reflection as well as a surface/platform for aesthetic contemplation.

Amy Berk



Amy Berk in her studio, 2007.

Amy Berk (b. Brooklyn, 1967) received an M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1995 and a B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1989. She has exhibited her hybrid brand of feminist pop art both nationally and internationally at venues such as the Museu du Republica in Rio de Janeiro, Kraushaar Gallery in New York City, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Southern Exposure, Craft and Folk Art Museum, Meridian Gallery in San Francisco, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland Art Gallery, and Traywick Contemporary in the East Bay. She was the co-founder/co-director of the innovative Meridian Interns Program and currently teaches in the first year program at San Francisco Art Institute, and for University of California Berkeley Extension; co-publishes stretcher.org, a site for art and culture, and collaborates on public interventions with Together We Can Defeat Capitalism.

EXHIBITION-RELATED PROGRAMMING

All public programs take place at the Magnes. Public programs have limited space and reservations are encouraged. To make reservations, contact the information desk at 510.549.6950 ext. 0 or infodesk@magnes.org.

Sunday, February 4, 2007 at 2:00 PM

CONVERSATIONS ON ART

The Fabric(ation) of Memory

This panel discussion explores intergenerational dialogue through the medium of textiles. Moderator: Jane Przybysz, executive director of San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles. Panelists include: Magnes REVISIONS artist Amy Berk; Consuelo Underwood, Bay Area textile artist and associate professor of fine arts at San Jose State University; and Beth Dungan, independent curator. \$12 non-members; \$10 members.

Thursday, July 12, 2007 at 6:30 PM

CONVERSATIONS ON ART

In response to *Recoverings*, Faith Powell, Magnes curatorial assistant, investigates the representation of the dinner table and its trimmings in the context of Jewish art.

REVISIONS is a series of exhibitions at the Magnes in which artists, curators, and scholars are invited to create experimental installations inspired by the museum's permanent collections.

REVISIONS Amy Berk: Recoverings was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, as part of the Challenge America: Reaching Every Community program, with matching funds from an anonymous donor.



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Amy Berk, *Recoverings* (DHW), linen and threads, 2005; photographed by Shlita Savage, 2006

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