

## Making art from the stuff of memories

Show features works based on life stories of Jewish women

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SUN STAFF

Neither one medium nor one dimension can contain the lives depicted in *Weaving Women's Words: Baltimore Stories*. The exhibition, which opens today at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, features a vibrant melange of installations, collages and canvases by 11 artists from around the country.

Their mixed-media works are inspired by the oral histories of 30 remarkable women whose experiences, memories and accomplishments in an eminent Jewish community span the 20th century.

In disparate pieces, the artists, all Jewish women themselves, are united by a profound sense of empathy with their subjects, most of whom they have never met.

Tamra Sigler's *Neighborhoods Gameboard: Harmonious Cacophony Remembered* portrays women in constant motion with energetic paint strokes, tinted images of local landmarks and fine pencil work that leads to sundry vanishing points.



Leaves tumble from an oak tree in one of Rhoda London's collages.

In *The Things We Carry*, candlesticks and wine goblets rise from well-worn suitcases lined with family documents and old newspaper clippings. The series, created by Viviana Lombrozo, pays tribute to Jewish ancestors who fled their homes and came to a new country, where their daughters — these very Baltimore women — flourished.

Leaves tumbling from a tree in one of Rhoda London's collages, collectively titled *Women of Consequence*, commemorate a beloved [See Words, 11N]

## Words become telling artworks

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oak grove firmly planted in one woman's memory of her childhood home.

There is "no way not to compare" these women to those who came before, says London, 69. Consider "the amazing amount of strength that Jewish women have had over the centuries, when the men went off to shul to learn and the women took care of business, [raised] a million children, cooked and cleaned and did the holidays," she says. "In a contemporary sense, these women are doing the same thing. They still hold it together."

*Baltimore Stories* is the culmination of a five-year oral history project initiated by the Boston-based Jewish Women's Archive. With the goal of recovering material typically overshadowed by history told through the lives of men, the archive has built an online research resource rich with oral histories, photographs, family documents and other memorabilia.

Over several years, three folklorists conducted extensive interviews with the women, both well-known and unknown, within and beyond their Baltimore communities.

All narrators were 75 years or older at the time they were interviewed. Community activist Shoshana Shoubin Cardin, state Sen. Rosalie Abrams and philanthropist Lols Blum Feinblatt told their stories, as did Micky Loveman, a locally renowned shoe salesperson, and Lillie Steinhorn, who recently retired at 89, after 65 years working for the federal government. Shirley Selis, a passionate ballet enthusiast and teacher, also shared her stories, as did the late artist Amalie Rothschild. A number of other contributors have since died.

The exhibition that grew out of the oral histories is loosely modeled on a previous Jewish Women's Archive show in Boston, says Jayne K. Guberman, a folklorist and project director for *Weaving Women's Words*. "We were committed to creating an exhibition that would showcase and highlight these women's lives and contributions. We didn't want to create oral histories that would simply sit in boxes in a library or archive where no one would know what these women had done."

With the involvement of community and advisory board members, as well as the Jewish Women's Archive staff, folklorists, narrators and artists, the ambitious project "was a



Tamra Sigler's *Neighborhoods Gameboard: Harmonious Cacophony Remembered*, (above); Viviana Lombrozo's *"The Things They Carry,"* (left).

we called the "gems" — sentences which really summed up a woman's life experiences, her feelings, her values."

Ruth Surosky Levy, a narrator whose memories have influenced several pieces in the *Baltimore Stories* project, has already seen Sigler's piece, created around the "neighborhood" theme. "There's a picture of myself in there as big as life, 52 years ago," says Levy, 83. She's curious to see how other artists have interpreted her remembrances. "I've just accepted everything I've done. Those were my decisions," she says. "How [they] affect other people, I don't know. To me, I've just lived a wonderful life."

The project's community coordinator, Shelley Hettelman, says *Baltimore Stories* speaks to other groups whose lives aren't always found in history's master narrative. "We don't want our audience to just be the Jewish community. ... Similar projects could be done with any identity community," for example, African-American and His-

panic women, she says. As the artists immersed themselves in the transcripts, keeping their assigned theme in mind, they came to focus on certain narrators. Getting to that point wasn't always easy. "I have to admit it was a struggle," says London, accustomed to creating large-scale, conceptual installations. "I made notes and notes and notes."

Ultimately, London, whose theme was "achievement," succeeded. "I'm accustomed to really listening to what people are saying and [trying to understand] what they want. ... In the end, it started to come more alive for me."

London echoes the sentiments of other *Baltimore Stories* artists: "I think I'm never going to learn anything new anymore, but I did — about my own [artistic] process. These women were mine. I really was in love with them by the time this was over."

For Lombrozo, the child of Jewish European immigrants who settled in Mexico City, the theme of "foremothers and forefathers" was a natural. "It just resonated so much," she says.

Lombrozo, 55, read the transcripts carefully, wrote a journal based on them, and used that as a platform for creating the suitcase series. "I started thinking in terms of what [a family's past] meant to our children — the value of heritage; the things we literally carry with us."

For Sigler, a Baltimore native who lives in Florida for part of the year, the neighborhood theme was particularly apt. Her contribution to *Baltimore Stories* is layered with meaning. A rosemary undercoat of paint is covered with softer grays "as a way to imply memory." On top of that, Sigler, 61, created pathways that lead viewers through a familiar landscape, where Levy and other narrators once made their way from home, to temple, school, the movies, to the circus and corner deli. "The whole thing was fascinating to me," says Sigler of the research and artistry that went into her piece. After countless meetings and difficult decisions, Brenda Brown Rever, who chaired the

### Related events

*Weaving Women's Words: Baltimore Stories* is an exhibit based on the memories of 30 Baltimore Jewish women, and includes artwork, narrator portraits by photographer Joan Roth, and narrative excerpts. The show, on view through July 16, opens today with a public reception from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, 15 Lloyd St. Admission is free. Call 410-752-6400 or visit [www.jhsm.org](http://www.jhsm.org).

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Jewish Women's Archive is presenting a symposium, "Jewish Women Building Community," featuring an address by author Gail Sheehy. A panel discussion moderated by Sanford Ungar, president of Goucher College, follows. The event takes place tomorrow from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Brown Center, Maryland Institute College of Art, 1361 Mt. Royal Ave. Admission is \$10. For more information, call 410-602-9084 or visit [www.jwa.org](http://www.jwa.org).

A series of talks and workshops related to the exhibition, including several featuring the narrators from *Weaving Women's Words*, continues through May. For more information, call 410-602-9084.

project's Baltimore advisory board, exults in *Baltimore Stories* and what it can tell visitors. "I always knew Jewish women were wonderful," she says. And what's more, once they enter their later years, as the exhibition attests, "These women are still going."

The same can be said for the artists who channeled those women's lives into passionate works of art.