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## Jewish Artist Zoë Buckman's Creations Demand to Be Seen

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Artist Zoë Buckman Photo by Abbey Drucker

In art, Zoë Buckman has found her calling. In her new show, “Tended,” currently at the Lyles & King Gallery in New York, one of the strongest pieces came out of a potent memory. “clean tea” is in honor of her mother, Jennie, a playwright and acting teacher who died in 2019.

“It’s a photo that I took when my mom was first diagnosed with cancer nine years before she passed away,” Buckman said. “I took a photo of her washing her hair in the bathroom. Then I did embroidery and embellished it with flowers. I also embroidered it with text messages I received from my mom from when she was in the hospital nine years later. She’s exasperated, frustrated, and having a terrible time. But then she sends me another message, saying the women in the ward are so amazing and it is such an honor to know them. That really struck me. Even terminally ill, she was blown away by the women in the hospital and she wanted to communicate that to me. I found that very moving.”

Buckman, whose multi-faceted work includes embroidery, textiles, appliqué, sculpture, and drawing, has been showcased in galleries around the world, considers herself a feminist. While her art mostly deals with issues relating to women, said her art is aimed at all people.

“I loved the idea of it being universal and speaking to anyone who is or has been persecuted or oppressed or really anyone who’s going through trauma or a hard time,” Buckman said. “We all during this time need to tend to ourselves. There’s a lot going on. Wherever you point the lens, there is suffering, division and discord. But the title is open to interpretation.”

She said the show includes tender moments she has had with women, including family members, and highlights the capacity to overcome obstacles and heal. She said her mother played a large role in her life.

“One hundred percent, I get my strength and resilience from my mother,” Buckman said. “She was a survivor of trauma and a voice of advocacy, generosity, and creativity in my life. But I also get my humor from her. A lot of my fondest memories with my mom involve laughter. A lot of my identity revolves around Jewish jokes and food.”

Born in London, in 1985, Buckman has been in America for 14 years. She became enamored with and studied photography. On Instagram, where she identifies herself as a Jew, she has nearly 54,000 followers.

“It’s a really important part of my identity,” Buckman said. “Though I’m Jewish on my mother and my father’s side, I really got my Jewish identity from my mother. She experienced a lot of antisemitism in London growing up as a Jewish girl. I feel like I have a responsibility to my ancestors to highlight the beautiful elements of our culture. Also, it’s important to speak about what our community is going through. We are at a time here when we’re receiving a lot of hate and gaslighting from both sides of the political spectrum. In this time of heightened sensitivity toward marginalized groups, which I feel is a really positive thing, people are resisting including Jews in that. We’re seeing this uptick in hate crimes against Jewish people. So, I feel I have the responsibility to speak up. I’m frustrated that there are other Jewish voices in the public eye who have followings, and more of them aren’t speaking up about this right now.”

Buckman said she also sometimes loses followers when she makes Jewish related posts or when posting pics of herself “showing skin.” She said the latter might be due to some believing such photos are not in line with feminist ideology.

Buckman’s 2022 exhibition, “Bloodwork,” was chiefly motivated by a past boyfriend who left her after she had a miscarriage, and he did not even pay for her bloodwork. She said she was furious at the time and dealt with a range of emotions. Why didn’t she hire someone to throw him down the stairs? She said her brothers did offer to possibly rough him up, but she instead chose to keep her behavior regal and legal.

“I decided I would take that anger and use that to speak for unkind experiences that women go through and in that, it could be a beautiful revenge,” Buckman said.

She told The Guardian that while England is screwed (using a harsher word) America is worse off. She explained she specifically was talking about abortion rights. She said her critique is not one of an outsider throwing stones, but rather of an insider wanting to make things smoother and more just for women.

Her work has drawn acclaim, especially her boxing glove series. In those pieces, boxing gloves are hung by a chain, stuffed with pieces of wedding dresses, linen and textiles. A number of those pieces are currently part of Michigan State University’s Broad Art Museum’s “Resistance Training: Arts, Sports and Civil Rights” exhibition. Buckman said she took up the sport and hit the punching bag about eight years ago.

“I first started it in the run-up to the 2016 election,” she said. “Like a lot of us, I was just feeling then that you couldn’t turn your head without hearing about abortion and I felt this mounting war on women. That was when I began to speak publicly about my work in the art world. The art world is a hugely male-dominated space. I gravitated toward the boxing ring, and I realized that it was a space where I could process and work through past experiences of violence.”

In this show, “lies dressed honestly” depicts a woman in boxing gloves wearing a blue Nike shirt under a green one with the nearby phrase from them the left: “It was a blueprint or a red flag or some other metaphor involving a colour.”

Buckman said that while it is naïve to think that people on their own can change a decision by the Supreme Court, it is also wrong to think that efforts to better society are futile.

“A lot of the time, I feel demoralized,” Buckman said. “But I have to remind myself of the small battles that are won every day in this country, because there are many, in a neighborhood, community, office, house of worship, or anywhere else.”

She also said that having a daughter radically changed her life.

“What I learned about myself is that there is great power in being a mother,” she said. “I realized that I was capable of many things and that I had the ability to create.”

She said she hopes that all people have moments, however they may occur, where they discover how to harness their power and express themselves.

In 2016, for her installation at Papillion Art’s main salon in Los Angeles, “Every Curve” showed vintage lingerie embroidered with rap lyrics, an expression of the realization that while she enjoyed songs by the late Biggie Smalls, and Tupac Shakur, some of their songs, were unflattering to women, to say the least. Smalls was shot and murdered in his car in Los Angeles in 1997, while Shakur had the same tragic fate in Las Vegas a year earlier.

She said all of her life experiences go into her art, chiefly her experiences and that of numerous women from her life. She also learned something important from ex-husband, Jewish actor David Schwimmer, who played Ross Geller on the iconic NBC hit “Friends.”

“I learned what it meant to be obsessed with a real work ethic being on his journey and supporting him as he made his first film,” Buckman said, referring to Schwimmer’s 2007 directorial debut, “Run Fatboy Run” in which he also starred. “I have something to say, and I learned from the effort he put into his work.”

She said many in the world are in pain from being wronged, physically or verbally, while others are distressed from being judged harshly or may feel small while comparing themselves to others. At the same time, some who have had good fortune may be inspired to help others or simply listen to their concerns.

“I hope what people take away from my art is that people should look after themselves and realize that their voice matters, and has meaning,” she said.

Zoë Buckman’s “Tended” can be seen at Lyles & King gallery in New York through October 14.