

# Justine Frank

Extra City Centre for Contemporary Art,  
Antwerp, Belgium

A Jewish artist and writer born in 1900 in Antwerp, a fellow traveller of the Surrealists who forged a unique *oeuvre* mixing eroticism and Jewish iconography, an early immigrant to Palestine who was nonetheless anti-Zionist, a social outcast ostracized for her bizarre public behaviour who died in obscurity in Tel Aviv in 1943; if Justine Frank hadn't existed, she would have to have been invented. Or perhaps I should say: if she hadn't been invented, she would have had to exist. This is the greatest compliment I can pay to Roe Rosen's masterful exhibition, which retroactively creates a gap in the texture of official history. Indeed, after seeing Frank's retrospective, it is now clear that, amid all the standard accounts of Surrealism and the numerous exhibitions devoted to the movement, the work of one artist was missing: that of the ill-fated Jewess whose paintings singularly pervert her religion's symbols and founding myths, and whose fatal intensity is cut from the same cloth as Asja Lacis (Walter Benjamin's tormented and tormenting lover) and Colette Peignot aka Laure (intimate, like Frank, with Georges Bataille).

The life and work of Frank – all creations of the Israeli artist Rosen – reflect a bygone era while throwing our own into sharp relief. For Frank's return to her home town of Antwerp, the exhibition presented a large selection of paintings – I would especially highlight the series of Hebrew letters twisted into bizarre sexual figures, as if language were contaminated with obscene pleasure (*Alchemical Boards for the Study of*



Justine Frank  
*The Birth of Rabbi Frank*  
1937  
Oil on canvas  
75x75 cm

Hebrew, 1932) – as well as a film analyzing, in a play of mirror reflections, the connections between Frank's work and Rosen's own. One of the most remarkable pieces is Frank's 1931 avant-garde erotic novel *Sweet Sweat*, 'translated' into English and published in a special critical edition by Sternberg Press (2009). The text belongs to that genre of speculative pornography peculiar to French accursed Catholics like Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski, and even constitutes a kind of Jewish variation on Catholic perversity, drawing on the mystical-sexual traditions of Kabbalah and a good dose of Yiddish earthiness.

Rosen intends Frank not simply as a historical artefact but as a provocative intervention into contemporary debates regarding Jewish identity and Zionism, Feminism and our understanding of art history and the political role of art. The fake retrospective also raises more general questions about 'fictionalism' as a prevalent strategy for contemporary artists, a subject that has yet to receive adequate treatment. With this kind of practice, the art work should not only be a fictional creation but should fictionalize itself – the very coordinates in which it is presented as a work. This game of hoaxes and manufactured identities can be understood as a way of playing with artistic conventions, probing the boundaries of the real and imagined and so forth, but there is also, perhaps, something more profound at stake. While the creation of parallel worlds and alternate histories seems to affirm the overwhelming sense of contingency that pervades contemporary life, I would venture that its aim, far from escapist, is to reconnect with and restore faith in the world.

Rosen's fictitious exhibition encompasses not only Frank, her artworks and her writings, but also Roe Rosen himself posing as biographer, critic and even documentary filmmaker. Indeed, the artist's voluminous commentary is an integral part of the work. This impressive self-reflexive circuit recalls a passage from Klossowski's *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (1959), in which he speaks of 'the supreme pleasure of the work shining its radiance into space and recovering its own radiance therefrom ... There is nothing more living, I tell you, than the Louvre abandoned to itself at night.' Such is the marvellous power of art works that, in their jubilatory 'real presence', no longer need a spectator to animate them. What we witness in Rosen's complex construction is the strange spectacle of a show beholding itself, a show which, in spite of its will to historical engagement and critical thought, is also unashamedly abandoned to its own sovereign *jouissance*.  
Aaron Schuster

Pablo Helguera  
*Tourist Territory*  
from 'Suite Panamericana'  
2007  
Collage on paper  
23x30 cm