

# Arts

## Where Warhol meets the Rebbe

Full-time Rabbi Yitzchok Mouly expresses his faith through bold, vibrant pop art.

Darren Levin reports.

IT'S 9.30pm at a Chabad House in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, and artist Yitzchok Mouly (pictured) is putting the finishing touches on a piece for an exhibition in Dumbo, a hip suburb in Brooklyn.



Unsurprisingly, he's the only rabbi exhibiting.

The 29-year-old father of three says he finds it hard juggling between his life as a full-time rabbi and youth director and his fledgling career as a working artist – but he doesn't mind straddling both worlds.

"As a Chabad rabbi there are certain truths that you want to adhere to, but at the same time we are living in the YouTube age. And we're part of that. It would be disingenuous to pretend that we're not.

"It's about living in two worlds and the harmony between those worlds, rather than disparity," he explains.

Born and raised in Melbourne, Mouly's work has been attracting the eye of local collectors since his first exhibition in New York's artistic hub, Chelsea. His pieces have since sold for upwards of \$6000.

Mouly describes his style as Chassidic pop art. He works in rich, vibrant colours and is "in love with repetitious images". While his earlier pieces reflected a deep appreciation for the late Andy Warhol, Mouly is eager to branch out. He's working on a new series of images which are both "kosher and funky".

"On the left hand side I'll have a piece of gefilte fish and on the right hand will be a piece of sushi," he explains. "On the left, I'll have a kiddush cup and on the right a martini glass. I'll have Shabbat candles and a Zippo lighter.

"That really is Chabad philosophy," he says. "There are different ways to approach an item ... Sushi is no less kosher and no less holy than gefilte fish."



Chassidic pop art ... Yitzchok Mouly's *Master and Pupil*.

Mouly, however, is not a trained artist. An avid photographer, he first dabbled in the medium three years ago after discovering silk-screening on the internet.

"I had this expression within me that was brewing. I can't draw, paint or sketch free-hand, so photography was my voice.

"But sometimes the photos were too crisp, too perfect, too photo-like. I bumped into silk-screen and thought, 'I could do this.'"

Growing up on a commune in northern Queensland, Mouly later moved to New York with his parents at age four. Those years as a child in New York's Lubavitcher community changed his life.

"Without those years I would've been a

damn good surfer," Mouly jokes. "The Rebbe really instilled within me a love for my Judaism, which I may or may not have gotten on my own."

The globetrotting family later moved back to Melbourne, where Mouly studied at Yeshivah College. He was ordained in Venice in 2001, working at Chabad Houses in Israel, Russia and South Africa, before moving back to the States with his Canadian wife.

"She's very supportive," Mouly says of his wife Batsheva. "She enjoys it. Together, we have a message. On deadline, she's out there helping me out moving the canvasses around."

Mouly still maintains close ties with Melbourne. His parents – Moshe and Nora Elkman – are well-known in the community through their Caulfield shop, The Coat Man, and he is currently creating a piece for Rabbi Laibl Wolf's Spiritgrow centre in Caulfield North.

"I love Melbourne, I just wish it was a little closer," he says.

*Yitzchok Mouly's work is available in Australia through Pollock Gallery, 270 Church Street, Richmond. Inquiries: (03) 9427 0003 or enquiry@pollockgallery.com.au.*

*To view Mouly's work visit www.hasidicpopart.com.*

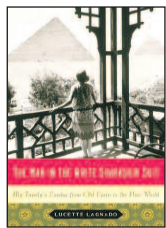
## A poignant testimony of Egyptian exodus

### Book review

#### THE MAN IN THE WHITE SHARKSKIN SUIT

Lucette Lagnado  
HarperCollins Ecco, US, \$25.95

Reviewed by Racheline Barda



IN this sensitively written and meticulously researched book, Lucette Lagnado reconstructed the vanished and largely forgotten world of the Jews of Egypt.

Like so many of their co-religionists in Arab countries, they were forced out of their country after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and particularly in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez crisis.

Through the palpable and vivid memories of Lagnado as the six-year-old "Loulou", the story, set in Cairo in its cosmopolitan heyday, unfolds around the charismatic figure of the father she adored, "The Captain", "the man in the white sharkskin suit".

This man was larger than life, full of extremes and contradictions: a devout Jew, attending synagogue every day while haunting nightclubs and gambling tables every

night and leaving his young wife alone at home.

The perfect "boulevardier", his reputation as a womaniser was such that even the adulated Egyptian diva Om Kalsoum supposedly succumbed to his charms.

Originally from Aleppo and thus deeply rooted in Oriental culture, he navigated smoothly between the religious and the secular, the conservative and the hedonistic. He was fluent in a variety of languages, typical of thousands of Levantine Jews that settled in Egypt towards the mid-19th century from other parts of the old Ottoman Empire. They formed a vibrant, diverse and multi-ethnic community.

Just as one Egyptian ruler, Mohammed Ali, invited the Jews in, around the 1830s, another ruler, Gamal Abdel Nasser threw them out in the 1950s and '60s. In 1963, the Lagnado family left their mythical home on Malaka Nazli Street, abandoning all their possessions and privileges, facing a precarious and impoverished future, separated from their extended family.

For the first time, Loulou's proud father, Leon, could not provide for his wife and four children, while waiting in a dingy Paris hotel

for a visa to the United States. For the first time, he had to depend on charity from Jewish relief agencies to survive. Their voyage to New York was paid by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which Leon reimbursed painstakingly over many years.

Unfortunately, the family's exodus to the "goldene medina" proved to be a source of deep pain and disappointment for Lagnado's parents, financially as well as socially. The only work her ageing and disoriented father could find was selling fake silk ties in the streets of New York.

Always longing for Cairo, he could never abandon the patriarchal mentality and conservatism of his Levantine world.

He could never relate to the pragmatic American way and missed the warmth and compassion of Egyptian society.

"He was by no means convinced the values of New York trumped those of Cairo", and preferred "being an old Egyptian to a new American", Lagnado writes.

Increasingly, he found refuge in religion. Because of his refusal to change, he witnessed the dislocation of his family, with his children gone, and his wife estranged, except for his unique relationship with Loulou, the

child of his latter years. He patiently nursed her back to health after she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease.

Desperately ill, "stripped of any identity", he was eventually admitted to a nursing home and died in hospital in 1992.

Lagnado went back to Cairo in 2005, revisiting her old home on Malaka Nazli, always sensing her father's presence at her side. She remembered her long-suffering mother telling her again and again when she was a little girl: "Loulou, il faut reconstruire le foyer" (we must rebuild the hearth).

"Eventually, I came to understand that I was the chosen one, entrusted with the impossible task of taking our shattered family and our lost home and restoring them," she writes.

It seems that in her book, Lagnado has fulfilled that "impossible task", lovingly and honestly. It is a poignant testimony to the anguish of her uprooted parents but it also pays tribute to a long lost world of tolerant and harmonious coexistence between Muslims, Jews and Christians.

*Egyptian-born Racheline Barda is a Sydney lecturer, scholar of the Holocaust and a volunteer guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum.*