

ARTS

TEEN SCENE

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FOOD

A+HOME

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PARENTING

The wishing tree

From the living-room window, I can see the magic tree at the end of my street. The morning's wind and rain have lashed the house. They rattle the storm windows and set the magic tree swaying back and forth, back and forth.

The magic tree at the end of my street does not resemble any magic tree you have ever seen. It is relentlessly nondescript — dry, gray and leafless with a steep V forming a low trunk. The magic tree has been there at least 39 years, probably planted by the town or some long-forgotten developer.

When I was young, we reached the magic tree by skipping over a pair of flat rocks pressed into the soil like a mini-staircase arranged just for us. We stirred a stew of wet leaves and mud into a hole in the trunk, taking sticks as our ladles.



LAURIE GRANIERI



ON THE WEB
Read Laurie Granieri's blog at c-n.com

Sometimes we processed past the magic tree to greet the imaginary queen holding court around the corner. We were solemn, always so solemn. And the sidewalk, the curb, the tree — that nothing corner in a nothing town — became majestic. Gray was tinged with gold.

Sometimes we processed past the magic tree to greet the imaginary queen holding court around the corner. We were solemn, always so solemn. And the sidewalk, the curb, the tree — that nothing corner in a nothing town — became majestic. Gray was tinged with gold.

But some three decades later, it is difficult to keep from going as gray as that tree, leafless and dry. I am stuck on L. Frank Baum's assessment of Dorothy's Aunt Em in his 1900 book, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz": "When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now."

I don't want to be an Aunt Em. The crop of silver — OK, gray — strands sprouting from the crown of my head already humble me. But morphing into Aunt Em, feeling as flat, gray and desolate as a Kansas prairie, is frightening.

I want to stand against that, but some days I find it difficult, especially in February. This morning, even with one cup of coffee to fuel me, it is difficult. Some days, the broad, flat expanse of things is disconcerting. There is no magic tree in sight.

I pass that tree twice a day, each morning and each evening. It is no longer magic. I wonder if that stew-pot impression remains. I wonder if my former neighbors remember the procession, the queen and the leafy mash.

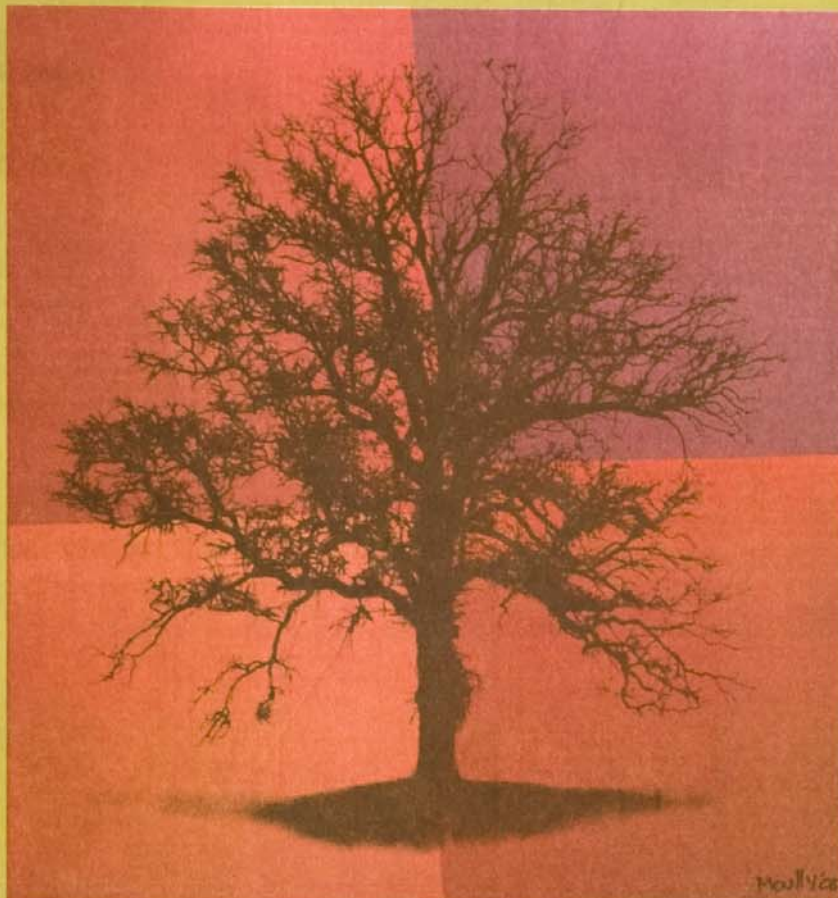
I've never thought to check on the tree. Because most days I whiz past the magic tree in my little gray car. I round the corner and turn my thoughts to non-magical matters, like dinner or work.

But this morning, the wind and the rain are lashing the house. I've had one cup of coffee, and I've decided it's not enough. And now, as I regard that tree on the other side of the glass, I wonder if I can steal to the end of the street and offer a little prayer at its base.

I'm tired this morning, and I want to rub the bark of the magic gray tree, demand a little help from the queen. I want a sip of that magic stew.

Laurie Granieri

IN LIVING COLOR



Yitzchok Mouly

"Tree of Life" is among the "Chassidic Pop Art" works by Yitzchok Mouly on display at ArtisZen Arts in Lambertville.

Through his art, Yitzchok Mouly captures the vibrancy of the Hasidic world

By BOB MAKIN
STAFF WRITER

Yitzchok Mouly poses for a picture in front of a mounting of his pop-art, as his 2-year-old son,

Sholom, wiggles in his arms. For the youth director of the Chabad Jewish Center of Basking Ridge, the photo freezes a moment in a dichotomous world, where the bright colors of Mouly's Andy Warhol-influenced art applied to the black-and-white of his Hasidic Jewish faith are balanced with and grounded by a growing family. Mouly will be surrounded by family and friends when a reception takes place at 7 p.m. Saturday honoring his ongoing exhibit "Chassidic Pop Art" at ArtisZen Arts, a Lambertville gallery that specializes in pop art.

CHASSIDIC POP ART

Yitzchok Mouly

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Between a rock and a hard place Where to go 'bouldering' in the Garden State

By JIM PECK
CORRESPONDENT

Some years ago I had a friend who was an expert rock climber who took me out a few times for some unforgettable experiences.

We started at the top, so to speak, by going to Palm Springs,



After some lessons we gathered our ropes, climbing shoes and gear, and he led me up a few rocks along some routes planned for beginners, which were rated 5.2 or so on a scale of 5.0 to 5.14. We climbed up Coffman's Craig on Mount San Jacinto and then rappelled down (definitely not a



COLORS: Capturing vibrancy of Hasidic world

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"My family really grounds me and makes me focus on the important things," Mouly, 29, said. "Without that, I would be a drifter.

"After the kids go to bed, I paint," he added. "It is within a healthy structure. Sometimes it is hard with a full-time job and a full-time family, but it is a healthy balance."

Raised in Australia and Brooklyn by hippies turned Hasidim, Mouly developed a love of Judaism, family and art at a young age. While living in the Australian Outback, he also fell in love with nature, which he often depicts in his art, including photography.

One of his 20 pop-art works at ArtisZen Arts, "Tree of Life," is based on his photograph of a massive tree in the Great Swamp Basin that divides Somerset and Morris counties.

"Every Sunday after Hebrew school, we just take off somewhere and enjoy nature together as a family," said Mouly, whose mini van, littered with remnants of snacks from last weekend's family ski trip, recently transported to the gallery about dozen works, as well as his two sons, also Mendle, 4.

His wife of five years, Batsheva, was home with infant daughter, Miriam.

"I wanted to give her a break, so I took the boys with me," he said.

The Mouly home in Basking Ridge is a 10-minute walk and two-minute drive to the temple, which also sports much of the rabbi's pop-art. In the basement of his home are art and photography studios.

Batsheva, co-director of the temple's youth, is supportive of his art, Mouly said.

"It is wonderful to have her constant input," he said.

"When you find the talent that you have been given, then it's important to use it and express it," Batsheva added. "His ability to portray the life of Ju-



BOB MAKIN/Staff photographer

■ Rabbi Yitzchok Mouly, youth director of the Chabad Jewish Center of Basking Ridge, poses in front of his "Chassidic Pop Art" exhibit with sons, Sholom, 2, left, and Mendle, 4.

daism in such a happy medium and to be able to share that with so many other people is a talent he has found within himself. That makes me want to support it."

In addition to the work hanging on the walls of the synagogue, Mouly's visual skills often come in handy there.

Serving not only as co-youth director but also promotions guy, his photography and videos can be seen throughout the temple's Web site, www.chabad-central.org.

"At Chabad, we have to wear many hats," he said.

For Mouly, those hats either are an edgy pink yarmulke or a black felt Stetson-style brimmed hat.

"I wear a pink kippah because a rabbi in pink kippah is far less intimidating for those not used to interacting with a rabbi," he said. "It breaks down the barriers. My work does the same. Everyone can find something they can relate to in it without feeling out of place.

"Hasidic culture is perceived

as very rigid and old world, with very little wiggle room for personal expression within that world, which is completely not the case," he added. "Pop art to me is vibrant colors with a positive lift, open and accessible to all. Bringing the two together was about finding the bold colors in the Hasidic world and bringing them to the front."

Black and white — in color

Whether Hanukkah dreidels (spinning tops), gelt (chocolate coins) or dancing rabbis, the Jewish images in Mouly's work are black and white on vibrant colors.

Brian Hanck, owner of ArtisZen, expects several sales of Chassidic Pop Art during and after Saturday's reception.

When patrons see the large dreidels Mouly depicts, Hanck said, they are stopped in their tracks and immediately smile.

"I believe it is the special way he pays homage to his religion and then presents his pursuit through iconic images that cap-

tures the spirit of his heart and touches many others," he said.

It's all about energy, Mouly said, not only in regard to his art but also in working with temple youth.

Both are fun, he said.

"Life is full of energy, and I want to express it and share it," he said. "I enjoy working with the energy of the youth and broaden their understanding of their heritage in a fun, exciting way, not just sitting down with the books."

Mouly also makes Judaism fun with a giant Dreidle House, where temple youth hold a Hanukkah party each year with their families.

His entertaining art soon will be display in New York City, having been seen previously in galleries and synagogues in Philadelphia and throughout New Jersey. He's also interested in using his art for fund-raising purposes, he said.

"Art is a great communicator," Mouly said. "I'm thankful that I get to communicate my faith through my art."