



Garland 3, 2014

# MEMORY

## MOSHE GERSHUNI

*Curated by*  
Matthew Garson & Kayta Oicherman

*Presented by*  
Cleveland Israel Arts Connection &  
Mishkan Or Museum

Roe Green Gallery  
Jewish Federation of Cleveland

Hartzmark Gallery  
Congregation of Mishkan Or



# Moshe Gershuni



Photo Credit: Dan Porges - Getty Images

**Moshe Gershuni** (1936-2017) belongs among the most important Israeli contemporary artists. His uncompromising and innovative practice charts Israeli art's development from the 1970s to 2000s, embracing international conceptual trends while elaborating them for its own purposes. His unique oeuvre, often deemed controversial on his own turf, remains a poignant testimony to the complexity of contemporary Jewish experience and its universal relevance.

Born in Tel Aviv, Gershuni was the first of three children. His father, Zvi Kutner, studied agriculture in France before immigrating from Poland in 1929 to become a pioneer, growing orchards near Hertzlyah. Upon arrival, he assumed the name Gershuni. Zvi's wife, Yona, had been an actress in Poland and became a milliner in the British Mandate of Palestine. The mildly observant family ensured young Moshe studied in religious schools through his grandfather's insistence, resulting in firm knowledge of Jewish prayer and Biblical texts that later found expression in his art and love of liturgical poetry and singing.

As Europe darkened with the rise of Nazism, Gershuni's parents procured entrance certificates to the British Mandate of Palestine for some Polish relations. The remaining family perished in the Holocaust, becoming a tragic presence in Gershuni's life, recurrent in his art.

After his father's sudden death in 1955, nineteen-year-old Moshe replaced him at the orchard while developing artistic interests. In 1960 he enrolled in evening sculpture courses at Tel Aviv's Avni Institute, continuing agricultural work. The Avni teaching team included leading figures of the New Horizons local modernist movement, while also placing Gershuni among students who would soon form the core of Israeli-born art avant-garde.

During the 1970s Gershuni significantly contributed to the Israeli strand of conceptual, minimalist and performance art. His activities were rooted in local experiences and turbulent politics, often turning to the artist's body and its ambiguous vulnerability. Yet he also created work drawing temporal parallels between his "safe" native Israeli life and the doom that befell European Jews, while acknowledging undeniable connection to the diasporic, Jewish world of his religious grandfather.

In 1980 Gershuni represented Israel at the Venice Biennale with an installation focusing on suppressed Holocaust memory. After

this significant European visit, his art turned into a highly expressive, personal idiom involving painting with hands and feet, crouching over large sheets of paper fusing glass paint, industrial varnishes and charcoal, as well as experimental printing media. This shift, following to some extent the German neo-expressionist trend with artists like Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz, was linked specifically to Gershuni's personal crises, depression and coming out as homosexual in the early 1980s.

From then onwards his works featured scribbles of Biblical verses, prayers, lines from *Eretz Israel* songs and poetry, references to Van Gogh, and Hebrew phrases addressing soldiers. The lamenting textual fragments partake in a distressed visual realm, simultaneously abject and beautiful, populated by swirling motifs: cyclamens, cypresses, wreaths, circles, flags, Stars of David, swastikas, rudimentary faces. Here desire and death, body and spirit, ecstasy and grief, belief and apostasy erupt through smears and smudges of paint and varnish, as if through bodily liquids.

Often against the grain of native celebratory narratives, the artist formulated a contradictory and almost blasphemous sense of torturous, but "stiff-necked" Israeli Jewishness arising from his deeply felt difference and unease living through the political turmoil and violence of the local reality. Gershuni's devotion to maintaining tension between divergent elements constituting his art allowed him to channel the particularity of this Jewishness into a universal ecstatic vision of embracing otherness.

## THE KADDISH IN GERSHUNI'S ART

The Kaddish, the Jewish mourning prayer, appeared in Gershuni's art in 1984. Returning to it in the 1990s through prints and paintings, he introduced new motifs—withering wreaths and gold leaf. Wreaths announce victors, adorn brides, but also decorate graves and signify suffering. Gershuni's black wreaths appear on golden surfaces that echo the yellow of industrial varnishes from his earlier work while referencing the gold of illuminated manuscripts and Christian icons.

This series emerged during Israel's traumatic decade spanning the Oslo Accords' rise and fall, terrorist attacks, and the assassination in 1995 of the Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The waning hope for political change can be read into these decaying wreaths, yet the Kaddish prayer and black circle on gold ground also invoke the sacredness and elevation of mourning and the grace of commemoration.

## KADDISH - ARTIST BOOK

In this extraordinary artist book, Gershuni's prints accompany Allen Ginsberg's lamentation over his mother's life and death, written between 1958-1959. Created in 1997, the year of Ginsberg's passing, it becomes a Kaddish for the departed poet.

The encounter between the legendary Jewish-American beatnik poet (1928-1997) and the preeminent Jewish-Israeli avant-garde artist proves strangely harmonious. Both shared a common historical starting point in early 20th century Yiddish-speaking Polish/Russian Jewish communities—Ginsberg's mother immigrated to America, Gershuni's parents to the British Mandate of Palestine, both escaping World War II. Despite different life trajectories, they shared post-war radical avant-garde culture, gay identity, impassioned devotion to their artistic quest, and torturous adherence to Jewish heritage—"worshiping the God included in it all," in Ginsberg's words.

Gershuni's masterfully vague prints correspond perfectly to Ginsberg's detailed, horrifying grief. Some images offer visual references to the text—empty circles radiating through dark ink clouds, or the cut-down mad flower ending the book. Others are gestures or textures that musically tune to the poem's distressed state.

The prints tell a strangely unified tale of transformation through painterly gestures, interchanging gold backgrounds with black ink, and recognizable motifs: wreaths, circles, arrows, flowers, question marks. Suggestive of but never becoming eyes, faces, landscapes, figures, or symbols, these dynamic images interact with Ginsberg's dense verse. Rather than illustrating, they embody in their evasiveness the work of memory and grief.

The book was produced as a limited edition of 48 copies at Har-El printing workshop in Tel Aviv. It features the Kaddish in English with Hebrew translation by the Israeli poet laureate Natan Zach, accomplished in close cooperation with Ginsberg. Twenty-four screen prints face bilingual text on Johannot paper, with black and white images executed on hand-laid golden metal foil leaf.



Kayta Oicherman, Ph.D.

Kaddish - Artist Book

# MEMORY MOSHE GERSHUNI

On display at ROE GREEN GALLERY, JEWISH FEDERATION OF CLEVELAND

*Kaddish*, 54 x 76 cm, 1997, black and white serigraph images on hand-laid golden metal foil leaf



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*Garland 1*, 170 x 170 cm, 2014  
\$7,000



*Multiple 1*, 80 x 60 cm, 2014  
\$6,000



*Multiple 2*, 80 x 60 cm, 2014  
\$6,000



*Multiple 3*, 80 x 60 cm, 2014  
\$6,000



*Garland 2*, 110 x 110 cm, 2011  
\$5,500



*Garland 3*, 110 x 110 cm, 2014  
NFS

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216-593-2890. Roe Green Gallery, Jewish Federation of Cleveland, Jack, Joseph  
and Morton Mandel Building, 27501 Science Park Drive, Beachwood, OH 44122



# MOSHE GERSHUNI - 'KADDISH'

## Allen Ginsberg/Natan Zach

Art is not life. Nor does it cushion the suffering that life so often delivers. It holds within it the cry of the individual—one who no longer believes that their voice or creative gesture can alter the course of existence or bend the arc of society. Art emerges from hopelessness: a despair that cannot be vanquished, only voiced. That solitary cry becomes the only thread of meaning in a society fractured by injustice and war. In this light, works of art serve as the last remaining justification for being.

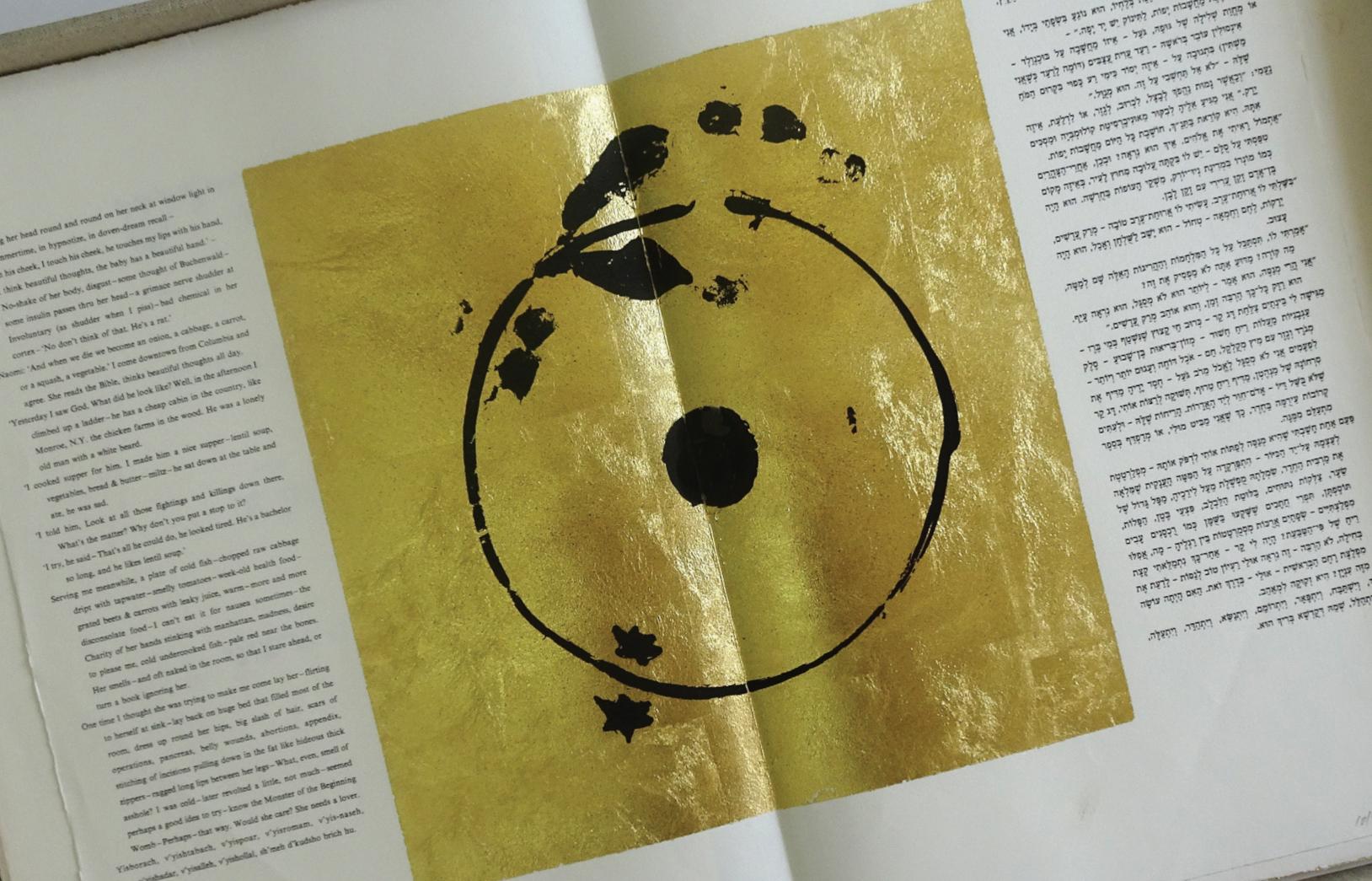
This definition of art by Gershuni would no doubt be endorsed by Allen Ginsberg.

As a young student in religious school, Gershuni was struck by a Talmudic tale of the High Priest in the Temple, adorned with a golden tiara inscribed "Holy to Jehovah." The Midrash recounts that those who gazed upon him would see their own reflection in the gold, as the sacred inscription was mirrored onto their faces. This haunting image stayed with Gershuni and became, in his words, a metaphor for the metaphysical charge he infused into his artworks—an echo of sanctity that confronts the viewer with their own presence.

The Israeli Poet Laureate, **Natan Zach** sat with Allen Ginsberg in New Jersey to translate the text in 1986 and together in the '90s we planned the artist book with Gershuni as a 70th birthday gift to Ginsberg - but he sadly never saw it.

When the printing project was completed, we hosted a celebratory gathering, together with the printing team. The poet Nathan Zach read aloud, and among the many stories he related, one stood out: Allen Ginsberg, no stranger to spiritual revolution, had remarked that the work 'Kaddish' had added "another chapter to the Book of Psalms." It was, perhaps, the highest compliment—an acknowledgment that Gershuni's vision had touched upon something eternal.

**Jacob Har-El, Jaffa - 3 July 2025**  
Gallery Har-El, Printers & Publishers  
[www.harelart.com](http://www.harelart.com)



## CURATORS



Cleveland native **Matthew Garson** is a fine art advisor, curator, and interior design consultant with over 30 years of experience. In the 90's, he was a curator for Progressive Insurance Corporate Art Collection and in 2000, he established M%, a consulting firm specializing in collecting emerging contemporary artists. Matthew is currently Chair of the Visual Arts Sub-committee and the Volunteer Director of the Roe Green Gallery.



**Katya Oicherman, Ph.D.** is a curator, researcher and artist focusing on Jewish material culture, as well as historical and contemporary textiles. She holds a practice-based Ph.D. from Goldsmiths, University of London (UK) with a thesis on 19th century German Jewish ritual textiles. Oicherman is the Director of Congregation Mishkan Or Museum in Beachwood, OH. Previously she was a resident artist-curator at the Minnesota Museum of American Art and the chair of the Textile Design Department at Shenkar College of Engineering, Design and Art in Israel.



**Moshe Gershuni** (1936-2017) was born in Tel Aviv to parents who migrated from Poland. His work, heavily influenced by religious teachings as well as the effects of the Holocaust, touches on political, social and personal issues. He influenced Israeli art to free itself from restraint.

## **EDUCATION**

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1960-1964 Avni Art Institute, Tel Aviv, Israel

## **TEACHING**

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1978 Teachers Training College, Ramat Hasharon, Israel

1972-1977 Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, Israel

## **SELECTED AWARDS**

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2013 Honorary doctorate, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

2006 Honorary Fellow of Bezalel, Centennial Award, Israel

2003 The Israel Prize for Art

1989 Kolb Prize, Tel-Aviv Museum of Art, Israel

1988 Minister of Culture Prize for Painting and Sculpture, Israel

1982 Sandberg Prize, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

1969 Aika Brown Prize, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

## **FILM**

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1997 "M. G. Rehearsals for Departure". 78 mins. Directed by Ziva Poste

## **SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

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Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York

Jewish Museum, New York, New York

Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California

Skirball Museum, Los Angeles, California

Ackland Art Museum, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf, Germany

British Museum, London, England

Groningen Museum, Groningen, Netherlands



**CLEVELAND-ISRAEL  
ARTS CONNECTION**

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To schedule group tours or individual visits at the Federation's Roe Green Gallery, email [israelarts@jewishcleveland.org](mailto:israelarts@jewishcleveland.org) or call **216-593-2900**.

To schedule group tours or individual visits at Congregation Mishkan Or, email [kolcherman@mishkanor.org](mailto:kolcherman@mishkanor.org) or call **216-455-1697**.



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