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EXCLUSIVE Ancient Texts of Everyday Secrets

By Emily Wilson

Arts commentator Emily Wilson talked to singer and composer Jewlia Eisenberg about her latest installation in San Francisco that brings to life the ancient, secret writings of women in what is now Iraq.



Jewlia Eisenberg within her installation for "The Bowls Project." Photo by AnMarie Rodgers.

"The font was really bad, which is why I pulled it down," she said. "The title was *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowl* somebody's dissertation from 1973—what could be more dry, right?"

But Eisenberg found the amulets far from dry, as they exhorted demons and angels to block monsters, bring strength, and cure. These bowls come from the time of the Babylonian Talmud, which Eisenberg says is at the core of Jewish life, explicating that Talmud does not overflow with the female voice, and Eisenberg says what drew her about the text was hearing from women's time.

"You get a lot of voices from women very specifically and very personally," Eisenberg said. "They are secrets about their homes, their work, and taking care of their bodies, including menstruation and miscarriage."

When Eisenberg asked Boyarin to read the Aramaic for her so she'd know how to pronounce it, she saw he was having trouble with some words.

"This man does not stumble over Aramaic," she said. "It's his bread and butter. I asked, 'What was that word?' and he said 'form for women.' It doesn't appear once in the Talmud. It appears all the time in the bowls."

In the text of the bowls, everyday concerns run smack up against supernatural forces, Eisenberg says. She calls this the 'apocryphal intimate,' and she says it exists in American songs as well, what rock critic Greil Marcus calls "that old, weird music." On the album Eisenberg has included these types of songs as well, such as "Early in the Morning," which includes the lyrics, "Some people say I'm dead/I saw the Devil at the foot of my bed."

Eisenberg hopes people going to see the installation and hearing the songs will see the connection between their lives and the lives of the women who wrote the text on the bowls.

"When I first started thinking about this project, we were very deep in Iraq, but unless you have family fighting in Iraq, most people were not thinking about it," she said. "With the text here, you can't help but identify with these Iraqi women from 1,500 years ago. They're not even that different from you, so how about women who live there now?"

Eisenberg knew right away she wanted to make an installation with this project, rather than just recording a CD.

"I wanted people to see the text and engage with it," she says. "So people know when I say stuff like, 'I am standing at the shore of the sea and I adjure you great bird of rivers that you may hear my words and accept my incantation,' I am not making this up. That's directly from the bowls, and yes, Jews talked about god as the great bird of rivers. It's not some fuzzy wuzzy thing or my own feminist manifestation."

Eisenberg looked for a while for someone who could create an installation to go along with her music. She found that person, architect Michael Ramage, while she was a visiting artist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She wanted to have a space where people could go and engage with the text, she says, and she wanted that space to be shaped something like a welcoming.

That's how it was for Ella Washington, one of the people sitting inside the dome at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Washir visiting San Francisco from Atlanta, was on her way to another performance, when she saw the dome and was drawn in.

"The structure feels very sacred, the cloth feels very Mediterranean, and everything about it is so feminine," she said. "I don't feel good in here."

Making Women Visible And Powerful In The Media

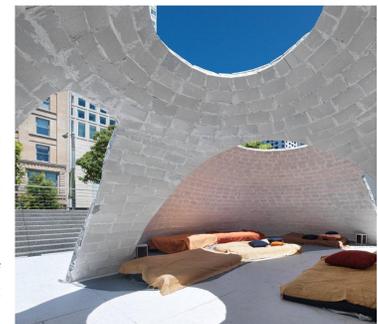
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At the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in downtown San Francisco, people are gathered in a double vaulted dome, sitting on colorful pillows waiting for a performance to begin. Visitors are invited to whisper anonymously. Then recordings of those secrets play inside the dome.

All of this—the dome, the performance, the secrets—are part of a project from Jewlia Eisenberg, founder of the music group *Hostess*. Eisenberg looks for text that interests her to set to music. She has included Bosnian resistance poetry (*Sarajevo Blues*) and the Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin (*Trilectic*). With her latest *Bowls Project: Secrets of the Apocalyptic Intimate*, Eisenberg has drawn from Jewish Babylonian amulets, in the shape of bowls. Residing in 8th century Babylon (the area that is now Iraq) buried the entrances to their homes.

Eisenberg found the text while in the office of a former teacher, Daniel Boyarin, a Talmudist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley.



The audience enters a double vaulted dome and relaxes on colorful pillows while hearing secrets from ancient Babylon today. Photo by Rien van Rijthoven.

