

The family that makes art together . . .

Three generations of Schöns have collaborated on an exhibition at Brandeis

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 24, 2022, 4:01 p.m.



Nancy Schön, in front, third from left, in her sculpture studio with, from left, Ellen Schön, Mia Schon, Charlie Dov Schön Guterman, Susan Schön, Jackie Schon, and Hannah Schon. The seven have pooled their works for the exhibition "Seven Species, Three Generations" at the Hadassah Brandeis Institute through Sept. 15. Clay sculpture in front at right is a recent Nancy Schön work "Desecration" inspired by the war in Ukraine. JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A year ago, most of the artists in “Seven Species, Three Generations” at Brandeis University had no idea they were about to embark on the fraught and fruitful endeavor of mounting a family exhibition together.

Last summer, cousins Mia Schon and Charlie Dov Schön Guterman applied for a grant

from [Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#). They planned a family project, but they didn't tell the family until after they'd been awarded the \$7,500 grant last September. The show is presented by Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Women's Studies Research Center at the Kniznick Gallery.



Susan Schön, "Barley Is Strength." ELLEN SCHÖN

"We got the grant and then we went around to everybody and we asked, 'Would you be comfortable . . . ?'" Mia said at a gathering of the artists in the West Newton home of her grandmother, public artist Nancy Schön.

"'Are you crazy?'" said I," remembered Nancy, best known for her "[Make Way for Ducklings](#)" installation in the Public Garden. Nancy is 93 and still active, with a

sculpture soon to be installed at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. She has four children, 11 grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren, with two more on the way.

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Sophie Krentzman, director of arts and culture for Combined Jewish Philanthropies, oversaw the grant’s jury process.

“The whole jury was excited about the caliber of the art and what [the artists] might produce,” she said.

As exhibitions go, it was a big undertaking to pull together in a short time frame. The theme was the symbolic [seven sacred species](#) of fruit and grains the Bible says grow in the land of Israel: grapes, dates, figs, pomegranates, olives, barley, and wheat. Each artist — Nancy and her daughters Ellen, 68, and Susie, 60; Susie’s daughter Charlie, 22; and Jackie, 37, Mia, 35, and Hannah, 29, who are daughters of Nancy’s son, Andrew Schön — was assigned a species.



Nancy Schön, "Generational Unity." NANCY SCHÖN

Mia and Charlie found literature ascribing [attributes](#) to the species, which they used to spin sustenance into metaphor.

The artists met on Zoom. Mia splits her time between Boston and Tel Aviv and Hannah is based in Austin, Texas. The others all live in the Boston area. Mia chaired.

“Welcome to the grant. Here’s what you’ve been assigned. I hope you’re up for it,” said Mia. “It was like a reality show.”

The exhibition embraces themes of Judaism, female identity, and, most vividly, family. Ellen’s 3-D-printed ceramic figs, full-bellied fertility symbols, are arrayed in a spiral

according to size. The piece, “Family,” was inspired by the fig’s attribute, perseverance.



Ellen Schön, "Family." ELLEN SCHŠN

She made them in the wake of her 2020 Boston Sculptors Gallery show “(Re)Generation,” celebrating the pregnancy of her daughter. Perseverance comes in the backstory: Ellen’s late husband, Steve Marcus, was the child of a Jewish couple who fled Vienna in 1939.

He always thought, if my parents didn't come, where would I have been? Ellen said.

“But now my family is growing.”

When Ellen's 6-year-old granddaughter, Josephine, saw the family of figs, “She said, ‘Where am I? Which one am I?’” said Ellen. “She figured it out. She's the fourth one from the littlest.”

Each artist works in a different medium — for barley, Susie wove a reedy tapestry; for olives, Nancy crafted a seven-candle bronze menorah, representing the seven artists; for dates, Hannah, a movement artist, made a video on a date farm in Desert Springs, Calif.

Art, said Nancy, is “constantly solving problems.”

“I used to draw here sometimes,” Charlie said. “I remember Nanny once setting me down and being like, ‘Well, the eye is a ball, the lid comes over it.’”



Jackie Schon, "Gilded Grapes" JACKIE SCHON

“I remember hearing something like that, too,” Ellen said.

The matriarch has been a model in many ways, but the artists have all taken their own paths. Susie remembers her mother before the ducklings were installed in 1987. Like most artists, Nancy had faced a lot of rejection. Susie became a textile designer, knowing commercial art would support her.

Nancy’s granddaughters witnessed a different era in her career.

“Growing up, the most successful woman, the most successful person I know happened to be an artist and a woman,” said Jackie, a painter, cofounder of the [Paint Bar](#), a Newton business offering local corporate events and virtual painting classes.

Mia, a mosaic muralist and public artist, learned how to write a contract from her grandmother. She’s the family funding wizard, now — and she has taught Charlie a few things about grant writing.

The Schöns leaned on each other through the birthing of “Seven Species, Three Generations,” gathering at monthly Zoom meetings to brainstorm and critique each other.

“The feedback was fabulous, one of the most exciting things of all,” said Nancy. “Each one was willing to say what they thought and people were willing to listen to it and accept it and use it.”

“Also, we were scared of each other,” joked Mia.



Nancy Schön, in front, third from left, in her sculpture studio with the six other female artists in the family, from left, Ellen Schön, Mia Schon, Charlie Dov Schön Guterman, Jackie Schon, Susan Schön, and Hannah Schon. JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In the end, the feedback and accountability brought the family closer.

“We all rose together to make this happen. It couldn’t have been a show led by Nancy Schön. It couldn’t have been a show led by Ellen Schön,” said Hannah. “It had to have been all of us. Everyone together.”

SEVEN SPECIES, THREE GENERATIONS

At Kniznick Gallery, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Women’s Studies Research Center, Brandeis University, 515 South St., Waltham, through Sept. 15.

www.brandeis.edu//hbi/artist-program/index.html

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