

# Featured Artist

Rachel Rafael Neis



In my work I investigate and respond to the sensory and the material, and to the convergences between the human and the nonhuman. I do so via abstract and figurative paintings and drawings, zine-making, and small-scale sculpture and installation. My interest in the bodily extends to the materiality inherent in making work. In larger and smaller scale paintings I experiment with gesture, exuberant color, and the viscerally limpid and textural qualities of paint. These interests, along with the constraints and potential of monochromatic work, also find their way into my drawings and zine-making.

In painting and drawing, as in prose, I seek to open other (im)possible worlds to the present through a combination of conjuring and conjecture. My explorations of abstraction and figuration, and their boundaries and overlaps, decenter the focus on particular sorts of bodies that haunt the tradition of European painting. Further displacing narrow ideas of the body as object, are the human, nonhuman, and hybrid bodies that populate my work, which find companionship with vibrant archaic objects such as rotary telephones, spectacles, and books. Some of this imagery invokes medieval Jewish manuscript marginalia whose reconfigured centrality puts to bed notions of an iconophobic, iconoclastic, or disembodied Jewish visuality. Related to such imagery, are my investigations in the past decade of non/human reproductive materials, bodily variation, and zoology, that reference rabbinic tractates, religious manuals, natural history pocket guides, and museology. Some of these motifs figure in the works selected for *AJS Perspectives* "The Body Issue." For more on my work, as it relates to "the body" and Jewish

Studies, including my Niddah-zine (an installment from the 63 volume *Talmud-Zine Project*), see the expanded online issue of the magazine on the AJS website ([www.associationforjewishstudies.org](http://www.associationforjewishstudies.org)). Find more work on Instagram @postrafelite.

**RACHEL RAFAEL NEIS**, artist and scholar, is associate professor of History and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. Neis studied art at the Working Men's College London and Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem, as well as at Harvard University and Princeton University art programs. Neis's book, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) won the AAJR Salo Baron Prize and an honorable mention for the Jordan Schnitzer Book Awards. Neis is completing a second book, *When a Woman Gives Birth to a Raven: Rabbis and the Reproduction of Species in Antiquity*.



Rachel Rafael Neis. *Marginalia in the Middle II*, 2019. Watercolor on paper. 13 in. x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Rachel Rafael Neis. Detail from *Birds Born of Humans*, 2019. Clay, Talmudic Tractate Niddah. Courtesy of the artist.