

Dangerous Symbols

Charlotta Kotik

To integrate iconic symbols from diverse civilizations into one's oeuvre requires a high degree of imagination, astute cultural literacy and immense courage – all of which can be rightfully attributed to American artist, Michael David. In the late 1970's he began working with such iconic symbols and the resulting works often generated great controversy.

Just as the cross adorns countless celebrated works of Western art, so too, the gammadion cross, or swastika, appears as a symbol and decorative motif in works from many civilizations, spanning centuries and continents. Both were selected by the artist as components in his *Symbols* series. The Swastika, which signifies goodness and auspiciousness in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, became forever stigmatized once it was co-opted by the National Socialists in Germany. Its original meaning as a symbol of good luck was hijacked by the forces of darkness, which transformed it into a symbol of destruction. Thus David's decision to associate the swastika with the legend of Golem in a series of works dating from 1977 to the present, could be

seen as a glaring offense.

However, should it really be viewed in such a simplified manner? The Golem is said to have been created to help his master bring security to Prague's well-established Jewish community. Legend has it that at one point an improper command enraged the powerful creature, instigating a spree of destruction that ultimately led to the Golem's own demise. Similarly the swastika was created as a sign of fortitude and seen as such until its original meaning for Western eyes was forever corrupted by its shocking misuse by the Nazis. David's investigation of the symbol's perverse power and multiple meanings can also be traced to the artist's intense involvement in New York City's Punk Rock scene, where the swastika was fetishized; it appeared in promotional graphics and was worn by some of the musicians, even though many of them were Jewish. For David, a Jew taking ownership of the swastika was akin to some African Americans reclaiming the N-word by using it in their music and poetry. In the same vein, he shortened his name from Michael David Singer to Michael David (though never legally changing it), emphasizing his Jewishness. Punk as an art form – violent, visceral, self-destructive, and monstrous – mirrored the narrative of the Golem.

David's paintings in the *Symbols* series share a pronounced sculptural quality: the surfaces are tactile and dramatic, expressive of the artist's hand and process. *Golem* possesses an "objectness" that corresponds with the materiality of the clay fictional being. In the narrative about the Golem of Prague, it's stated the materials used in the process of creation of the Golem, were wax, dirt, clay and fire. David's encaustic painting practice for decades has been defined by the use wax and fire. The Golem's ultimate disintegration into a mound of its original matter – "dust to dust, everything is dust"- bespeaks the perils of creativity and its potential for extremism and self-destruction.
Charlotta Kotik