

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Homeland security

By Chris Bergeron/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM - Frozen in time, two sad-eyed sisters named Mania and Blima gazed into a photographer's lens 80 years ago in Poland and into Leslie Starobin's memory.

A photographer and art professor at Framingham State College, she has preserved fragments of their lost world in a series of photomontages at the Danforth Museum of Art.

The long-dead Polish sisters and others who joined the Jewish diaspora of the 19th and 20th centuries come alive again in 15 deeply personal mid-sized pieces. They are displayed as part of the Danforth's New England Currents series which showcases regional artists. It's on display until Feb. 4. Starobin creates her montages by juxtaposing actual family artifacts she describes as "heirlooms from Exodus" into compositions that offer glimpses into vanished Jewish communities around the world.

Old black-and-white photographs are partially covered by prayer shawls or wedding veils. Passports, a scrap of a map or a volume of Schopenhauer are canted across the image.

Starobin uses Photoshop to assemble her separate pieces into a visual narrative. Featuring families from Europe and the Middle East, India and South Africa, her images convey the breadth and diversity of Jewish communities around the world.

Some visitors may find powerfully affecting images that provide revealing homages into the struggles of displaced Jews around the world.

One visitor last week said the montages "didn't grab" him and seemed to emphasize technology over genuine artistry.

Danforth Executive Director Katherine French described Starobin's work as "beautiful photographs done in a style lost to history."

"Leslie Starobin is exploring a world that has disappeared and a kind of photograph that has disappeared through the things people carry when they

leave one place and go to another," she said. "This was a beautiful visualization of the Jewish diaspora."

By incorporating actual relics of the photos' subjects, French said Starobin has created for viewers "a kind of jumping off place to access memory and feeling."

French said she was initially intrigued by Starobin's work after seeing other pieces last year and meeting her at the Photographic Resource Center of Boston University. Following that encounter, Starobin began working on the current series now on display and related pieces not yet show. "She has really realized a body of work," French said.

French said Starobin's work complements an ongoing exhibition of expressionist paintings of rabbis and cantors holding the Torah by Hyman Bloom. "It's a perfect companion piece to Hyman Bloom," she said. "But it can stand on its own perfectly. It's a different kind of art."

French stressed that Starobin's photomontages will touch visitors of all backgrounds and faiths.

"You don't need to have relatives (in the Jewish diaspora) to have that feeling sparked as a kind of memory," she said.