

'Jewish Mobster' exhibit debuts at UF Hillel gallery

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Famed California artist Rachel Schmeidler premiered her collection of Jewish mobster silk-screened mug shots at the UF Hillel Living Room Gallery Monday night.

Guests dressed in fedoras, vests, pencil skirts and double-breasted suits, and they were transported back to the early 20th century with live jazz music and the 18 colorful vintage-style portraits at the "Jewish Mobsters" exhibition.

Schmeidler sought out Hillel's gallery to debut her series after conducting her own research on the history of Jewish-American crime.

"Bugsy Siegel was part of my original exhibit," she said. "I knew he was Jewish, and I looked into his history. I figured the best way to present the work was through an educational institution."

Schmeidler said she utilized both traditional and digital techniques. She painted over the police portraiture to make fine art prints on a silk-screened canvas, creating a pop-art aesthetic meant to trick the eye.

Schmeidler is best known for her series of celebrity mug shots entitled "Hollywood Most Wanted," which includes portraits of Lindsay Lohan, David Bowie, Jane Fonda and Jimi Hendrix.

Schmeidler said she searched online and in books for the portraits, choosing her subjects based on expression and interesting clothing. She said she discovered during her research that Bugsy Siegel was credited with inventing the Las Vegas gambling lifestyle and that the National Council of Jewish Women was created in response to the amount of Jewish prostitution that was occurring in the country.

Mitchell Hart, a UF associate professor of modern Jewish history, spoke during the opening about the influence of the powerful Jewish figures featured in the collection.

"In the context of American history, they had an enormous impact on the image of Jewish-American culture," Hart said.

To embrace the dark side of Jewish life in the past says a lot about the Jewish present, Hart added. The fact that Hillel has allowed portraits of Jewish criminals to be exhibited suggests a profound sense of security.

"Jews in America have won the battle they were fighting since the 1880s to prove to the larger population that Jews can be normative, unchallenging, not-dangerous members of society despite the fact that they are not Christian," he said.

Citing the Madoff scandal, a \$50 billion Ponzi scheme, Hart said Jews are again trying to distance themselves from the link between the culture and embezzlement and illicit crime.

Schmeidler said she received conflicting reactions to her exhibit in light of recent events concerning Gaza and Bernard Madoff.

"I think it's a piece of history to be examined rather than put under the carpet," Schmeidler said of her collection. "I wasn't trying to glorify it, or make a statement. I was trying to explore history."