

Sheree Hovsepian

By Lauren Weinberg



Bright light suffuses the five aloof young women whose pictures hang in the Spertus Museum lobby, shining on their delicate white garments and lip gloss. Almost all of them gaze upward. Are they contemplating the divine—or snobbishly rolling their eyes?

Their photographs, from Sheree Hovsepian's 2008–09 series "Portraits of Young Jewish Women," continue the Spertus's free Ground-Level Project Series. All-white backgrounds and frames make the images blend into their support wall, accentuating their ethereality. Hovsepian hasn't set out to depict *The Five Mean Girls You Meet in Heaven*, though.

Hovsepian, *Portrait of a Young Jewish Woman (Judy)*, 2008

According to the show's introduction, the Iranian-born artist, who attended the SAIC and lives in New York, explores "Middle Eastern envy": the belief that Jews integrate more easily into American culture than their Middle Eastern peers. This goal explains why Hovsepian idealizes her subjects, making them—and the higher plane they appear to inhabit—unattainable. Except for Keren, the women position their bodies away from the camera. Amanda, the only woman who returns our gaze, seems irritated.

The problem is, Hovsepian's photos don't work without an explanation. The series hinges on her self-perception as an Iranian-American woman, but it reveals no trace of that identity. Her subjects' simple outfits and the photos' placeless backdrops convey neither Jewishness nor a rapport with American culture. (Nor is it clear who's a "Jew": What about the thousands who are also Iranian?) Hovsepian's images are remarkably striking, however, and the questions her project raises belie its modest size.

September 1, 2009