



# Out of The Blue

**A**zure-blue skinned women adorned in rich tapestries of bold hues predominant the paintings of Siona Benjamin. Vibrant reds, yellows, oranges and greens are used to create intricate detailing and bold images. The contrast between the vibrant blues and fiery blood-reds is intense. While at first glance, these paintings are seemingly born of the age old Indian/Persian miniaturist tradition, they are something more, something other.

The women, unlike the subjects of traditional miniaturist paintings, are feminist reinterpretations of the Jewish matriarchs and other women taken from Jewish texts and are juxtaposed with modernity. They are ancient figures set loose in a modern world, often speaking on contemporary issues such as: violence in the modern world, the immigrant experience, globalization and the role of women. Her Lilith, a modern reinterpretation of a controversial figure, cries out, "A Thousand Years I have waited...." Collectively, the women are mothers, warriors, victims and seductresses. They are silent. They are loud. They are literal. They are figurative.

In one respect, their skin of vibrant lapis lazuli, like the painting tradition they are born from, suggests their universality, a product of both the sky and the sea. While in the miniaturist tradition this was often reserved for the depiction Indian deities, Benjamin's Jewish identity sees all people as created in the divine image.

On the other hand, her bold blue figures



Photograph of Siona Benjamin by Jay Seldin

also express her identity as a "Jew of color", someone set apart from the Ashkenazi Jews that predominate the culture of Jewry in the United States. She often has been told she does not look Jewish because of her failure to fit into the physical stereotypes, set apart by her dark skin and hair and Indian roots. "Very often," Benjamin explains, "I look down at my skin and it feels as if it has turned blue. It tends to do that when I face certain situations, such as when people are stereotyping and categorizing others who are unlike themselves."

To Benjamin, born in Bombay in 1960 to a Bene Israel family deeply rooted in tradition, the skin color of her subjects is both a sheath of the universality of experience, taking the issue of race and color out of the discussion, as well as an expression of other, never being quite one thing or another. As Benjamin explains, "It's like sitting on top of a

fence. Sometimes it feels safe to fit into a compartment and fall either way from the fence, but then I am reminded that although precarious, this position gives me a wider perspective of being able to see both sides."

Growing up in India as a Jew, she lived comfortably in a trans-cultural environment and her art is a product of those influences with details and elements drawn from all the diverse cultures that color India. The India of her childhood was a predominantly Hindu and Muslim society and Benjamin herself was educated in Catholic and Zoroastrian Indian schools. As Benjamin elegantly expresses through her art, "With such a background, the desire to find home, spiritually and literally, has always preoccupied me.... The feeling I have of never being able to set deep roots no matter where I am is unnerving, but on the other hand, there is something seductive about the spiritual borderland in which I seem to find myself."

Her deeply spiritual subjects, while bearing the names of matriarchs like Leah, Rachel and Miriam and figures from other Jewish texts, such as Lilith, Tziporah, Esther, Tamar and Vashti, contain elements drawn from the texts of many other world religions. These texts of the ancient world are painted and viewed with modern lenses. Words in Hebrew, Arabic and English swirl around them and commentate on and confront contemporary issues. As Benjamin explains, she is creating her own language through her art, a language not bound to a single time, place or people.

# ArtistProfile

by Erica Lyons



Finding Home #46, Tikkun ha Olam

As a young woman, Benjamin immigrated to the United States in 1986 for graduate work, though ultimately settled in New Jersey. It was a time of mass migration for the Bene Israel community, and while her parents remained in India, most of her family made aliyah.

At its core, she expresses, America is a nation of immigrants and founded on the principle that coexistence of diverse cultures is an ideal. She sees the diversity of America as its strength and believes that acceptance and tolerance are on the rise as America and the world become increasingly more globalized. She seeks to bring about tolerance and understanding through her art and break down existing cultural barriers.

Benjamin explains that she can't rank her identities and it would be impossible for her to enter into debates about whether she is an Indian Jewish American or an American Indian Jew as she is a rich tapestry of many ideas and cultures. She is clear, however, that she is "solidly an American artist" and speaks out against the need for people to compartmentalize and categorize.

Pop culture, cartoon and Kabbalah collide in her work and her influences are diverse. She acknowledges that many consider her work to be unconventional. She is inspired by artists as varied as Hieronymus Bosch and surrealist artists like Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington. She also is strongly influenced by what she refers to as "contemporary Asian diasporic art" from Anish Kapoor to Masami Teraoka, as well as the work of the Jewish painter Arthur Szyk.

While the influences of the East are strong, her art is also very much a product of the Western world in which she has spent her adult life. Benjamin received her early art education in India,

with an undergraduate degree from the JJ School of Art in Bombay, where she was trained in both Eastern and Western techniques. She later received an MFA in painting from Southern Illinois University and a second MFA in Theater set design from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

There are many elements in her work that are also very clearly contemporary American, but it is impossible to take her work and label it as Jewish, Indian, Eastern, American, Western, secular or religious because like the artist herself they are a complex intersection of many seemingly diverse ideas and cultures. It is her transcultural background that she believes gives her work such depth and fluidity.

Ornate and adorned, some of her figures are draped in blue and white tallit and wear prominently displayed Hamsas. They are sometimes clothed in meticulously detailed traditional Indian garments and born from the pages of ancient myths, yet other times, as in her artistic interpretation of the duality of Leah and Rachel, they are adorned with neckties and other clear representations of the modern Western world.

Her art speaks to inequality, war and violence against women. In beautiful brushstrokes and words both spoken and unspoken she calls for the world to change and see conflict differently. In a few bold pieces, Benjamin incorporates actual bullets in her work. They boldly jut out from the canvas and connecting cords encase her subjects. She accomplishes this confrontation between chaos and violence with beauty and artistic vision in a voice true to her own.

To Ashekenazi Jewry her iconic Sephardi images are foreign. To some Jews the strong influence of Hindu, Muslim,

Buddhist and Christian art and culture is alienating. In India, she is somehow not quite Indian enough since she is set apart by her unique Bene Israel roots.

She paints with a keen awareness of the tensions between seemingly disparate worldviews, cultures and nations and the space between them she often occupies. She explains that in a world that is becoming increasingly more global, the recognition of the basic similarities between all people is increasingly more important. Bold brushstrokes break down barriers and force an intersection between

worlds. In her work, *Tikkun ha Olam*, she juxtaposes diverse cultures and blends their core elements to create a strong portrait of a woman who is not caught in the middle but rather the product of multiculturalism and a transcultural experience. She paints dialogues about similarities rather than differences in a language that is all her own. ✧

Siona Benjamin is represented by New York's The Flomenhaft Gallery.



Finding Home #78, Tamar