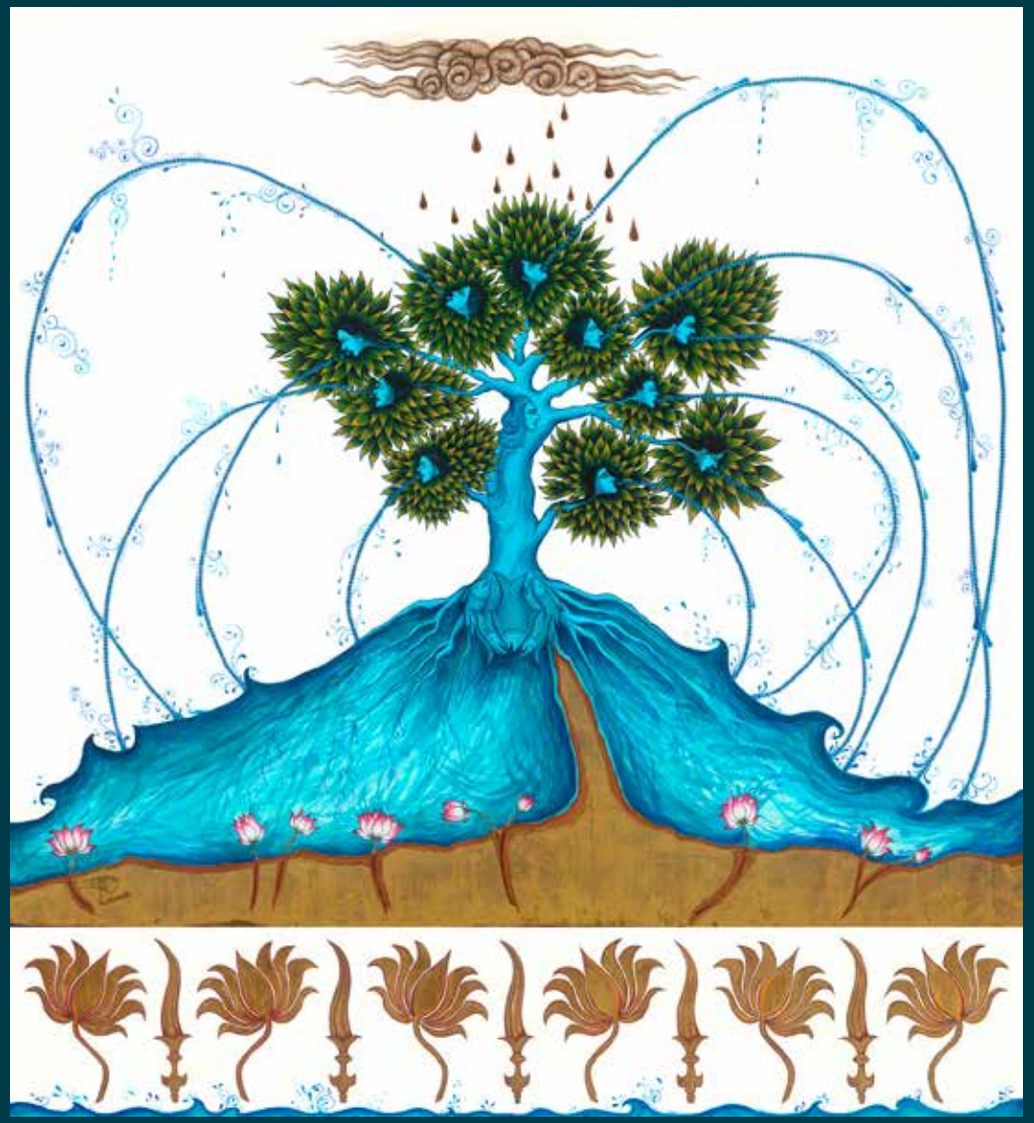
Siona Benjamin

BEYOND BORDERS

Edited by ***Elizabeth Greenberg***

With contributions by ***Ori Z. Soltes***, ***Matthew Baigell***, and ***Aaron Rosen***

Opalka Gallery, The Sage Colleges, Albany, New York



***Sephiroth: The Tree of Life* (detail)**
2011, gouache, 22K gold leaf, and mixed media on museum board, 67 x72 inches

Table of Contents

Foreword

Siona Benjamin comes to us by way of Mumbai, India where she grew up as part of a rare Jewish community in a sea of Eastern religions. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Jainists infused the intellectual, cultural and visual atmosphere, imbuing everything in sight, like nighttime jasmine. Gods and goddesses share the visual stage with all manner of religious expression.

Siona introduces us to a cast of characters steeped in myth and mystery; her fallen angels and beguiling women are plucked from a vast compendium of visual references. Amidst a marbleized sea, a hidden lion waits to pounce upon unsuspecting prey. In her beautiful gardens deeper meanings lurk beneath the surface.

The stark contrast derived from the current Syrian refugee crisis set against the hubris of the Gods amplifies humanity's dire predicament. The constant yearning for both identity and a place to belong is the underlying theme throughout her work. Her seductive use of brilliant color draws the viewer into the plight of her subjects.

With the skill of a Persian miniaturist, Siona uses her own wily brand of humor, élan, and political awareness to captivate us and make us reflect on just how many lessons from humanity's past seem even more relevant today.

Jeffrey Bergen
ACA Galleries
June 21, 2016

Liz's Intro

Home is Where I Pitch My Tent: The Art of Siona Benjamin

Ori Z. Soltes

Siona Benjamin's world is transcultural and transnational. She grew up as a Jew in India, in Mumbai (Bombay), a region dominated by Hinduism and Islam—each with its own artistic sensibilities and conflicts—and attended Catholic and Zoroastrian schools. She was also a girl in a culture still finding its way toward healthy treatment of women. She came to the American Midwest and then ultimately to New Jersey, two very different locales, but both part of an America with its own unanswered questions regarding religion, ethnicity, gender, and race.

Her art has multiple sources and shapes. It falls into—and tumbles out of—the tradition of Indian and Pakistani miniature painting, particularly that sponsored by the Mughals (1526 –1857), but also reflecting the Persian miniature tradition that fed into Mughal art as well as the larger contours of Islamic art. She engages the question of how Jewish art should be defined—through subject, style, symbol? through the art itself or through the identity of the artist? She explores feminist issues of recognition and blindness within the male-dominated societies in which she has lived, as well as within the Western-hegemonic feminist movements within those societies.

Especially in the extended series, begun in the late 1990s and entitled *Finding Home*, her figures have blue flesh. She applies a skin color most frequently associated with a male—the Hindu god, Krishna—to female figures, forcing the viewer to stop and rethink whatever (s)he thought (s)he *knew* about that association. Moreover, "often I look down at my skin and it has turned blue. It tends to do that when I face certain situations of people stereotyping and categorizing other people who are unlike themselves." So the color in part responds to (even feminist) Western preconceptions regarding women from elsewhere across the globe; and each figure is also a kind of self-portrait, translating the personal into the universal.

Her lavish use of gold leaf in some works resonates from the world of medieval Christian painting and from the illuminated manuscript traditions within Christian and Jewish Europe. She is inspired by Bollywood posters—and the Amar Chitra Katha comic books familiar to her from her Bombay years—and also by the poster-sized comic book moments re-visioned by American Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein.

Finding and yet simultaneously always searching for home is expressed in her *Finding Home #57 "Passport Photo*," in which the artist's passport identity page, including her gender, hair color, and father's name and photo, is framed within an archway—as a backdrop for her profile figure stepping forward in a rich blue-patterned garment, a bright red scarf soaring upward as if blown by a gust of wind, its pigment echoed by her skullcap and pantaloons. The tawny monochrome framing, filled with floral elements and a crouching female figure (perhaps the artist herself) poised like a cat, hiding in the branches of a tree, is in turn framed by a darker monochrome frame overrun with Hebrew letters (including those that spell out the words of Judaism's most basic credo: "Hear O Israel, The Lord Our God, the Lord is One…").

Each of the primary figures in the sub-grouping *Finding Home (Fereshteh)* ("angels" in Urdu) is overtly or covertly female. They are often drawn from the Bible, either by way of rabbinic interpretive *midrash*, by way of her own *midrash*, or by both. A particular branch of the group focuses on Lilith, the *midrash*-based first wife of Adam. Lilith was able to fly and was unwilling to be ground beneath her husband's dominating heel; for this rebellion she was not only exiled from the Garden, but subject to millennia of cruelty. She also came to be viewed, in popular Jewish legend, as a seductress and as a destroyer (particularly of babies).

Finding Home #57 "Passport Photo"
2002, gouache on paper, 13 × 10 inches

Finding Home #74 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"
2006, gouache on wood panel, 30 x 24 inches
Private Collection

The artist's 2005 *Finding Home #74 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"* offers Lilith's name in Hebrew and her winged figure with a Jewish prayer shawl as a kerchief and a *hamseh* with an eye in its palm dangling furiously from her neck. Such a classic Muslim amulet, frequently used also among Jews within the Muslim world, is the sort of instrument that one might wear around one's neck for protection *from* Lilith and to ward off the Evil Eye. But *this* Lilith, paradoxically, *wears* a protective amulet. Waves of flame rise up from her, suggesting the heat of her furious anger and also (again paradoxically) recalling the sort of flames that, in Islamic art, often rise from the head of the Prophet Muhammad to signify his connection to divinity—serving the same function as the round plates of gold behind the heads of Christian saints. And she bellows, in a cartoon-style bubble that emulates Roy Lichtenstein's signature Pop style: "a thousand years have I waited, keeping the embers of revenge glowing in my heart!"—alluding perhaps to a divinely administered punishment that would see one of her children destroyed every day for a thousand years.

A second 2006 Lilith—*Finding Home* #79 *(Fereshteh)*—is subtitled *"Ishq."* She leaps, like a pinwheel, her head thrown back and her eyes nearly closed, as if dancing and dying simultaneously—the wound in her side both dripping blood and sprouting foliage—her pretend-Urdu-formed name inscribed along the bottom of the image. But the title *"Ishq"* is placed within the frame itself, in Devanagari, and refers to "divine/particularly powerful love." It's a word that Benjamin uses to connect traditional to modern issues. "Yesterday's wars are still fought today, recycling the same problems . . . the weapons of war have become more advanced in their ferocity," she notes. "Therefore these heroines of yesteryear are resurrected in my work and have become warriors of today, questioning our measure for love, for passion, for *Ishq*."

Finding Home #9
1998, gouache on paper, 16 x 11 inches

This particular Lilith is splayed across a sand-colored backdrop on which a map of the Middle East is drawn: a military map with strategic plans and objectives, specifically regarding Iraq. We can discern the contemporary context: the second intrusion into Iraq, in 2003, begat by lies to the American people from its highest leaders in a profound transformation of the American dream into an imperialist nightmare. The splayed form may also be recognized as that of a broken cross, what has been known since 1871, in English, as a *swastika*. The word is Sanskrit: *sva* (*su*) means "good," *asti* means "to be," and *ka* is an intensifier; it means "extreme well-being." The symbol may be traced back, in India, more than 4,500 years. It remains widely used in some Indian religions, mainly as a tantric symbol that evokes "*shakti*": auspiciousness. The notorious appropriation and transformation of this symbol by the Nazis turned positive to negative.

We may understand this last work as connected to the widespread criticism of America's war-torn arrival into Mesopotamia in 2003, but America is emphatically the place where she has found home. Her 1998 *Finding Home #9* could hardly be clearer. Standing on a lotus blossom-*cum*-welcome mat, the figure, wearing jeans and sneakers but swathed in a sari, is painted entirely in blue—a blue version of grisaille—and bears on her head the light-studded crown recognizable as that of the Statue of Liberty. Her six arms—typical of many Hindu gods, but particularly the god Shiva and the goddess Kali-Durga—bear the attributes of the immigrant and the specifically Jewish immigrant to America. Thus she holds not only a suitcase, a little house, a tornado-like swirl of air, and a guitar, but a Hanukkah menorah and a decalogue tablet, inscribed with the Hebrew word "life" (*chai*). Home is where one finds a safe place for one's tent—and the United States has most often offered that place where diverse tents may be pitched; its safety symbolized by the Statue rising in New York harbor.

Finding Home #79 (Fereshteh) "Ishq"
2006, gouache and 22K gold leaf on paper, 17 x 15 inches
Private Collection

In 2011, Siona Benjamin began a series that she entitled *Improvisations*. Her background palette was deliberately lighter and more monochromatic than before—grey and tan, light green and deep light blue, sometimes overrun with a delicate web of floral and vegetal motifs, sometimes with abstract yet organic patterns of grey, white, and gold leaf. Figures—ghostly white cranes and oxen or more solidly depicted horses or dragons with human heads, or a dancing girl whose skirt is the waves of the sea itself—occupy the space. *Improvisation #15* offers five renditions

(the number of books of the Torah, of wounds in Christ's body, of the Pillars of Islam) of a blue-skinned Indian woman in a tiger-striped sari, a reflecting mirror in her left hand. She alternates with wild flora and fauna, her face repeated as peering into the composition's central circle—in turn dominated by a stalking, crouching lion, a twisting gazelle, and multiple swords.

The last half dozen *Improvisations* further expand their peripheral imagery, presenting kaleidoscope-like multiplications of the primary figure—a stylistic element that leads directly into the visual vocabulary of the artist's most recent series. The terrorist attack on the Chabad House in Mumbai in late November 2008, in which the young rabbi and his wife and four others perished, inspired Benjamin to create *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives*. The artist observed that the news reports caused many Americans to wonder about a community that they had not known existed. They asked: "Did Jews first inhabit India with the establishment of Chabad House? If not, then what did the local Jewish population look and sound like?"

Improvisation #15
2011, gouache and mixed media on Mylar and museum board, 17 x 17 inches

Maayan Abraham (Shapurkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage, gouache, and acrylic
on Hahnemuhle paper, 35 x 35 inches

Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage, gouache, and acrylic
on Hahnemuhle paper, 35 x 35 inches

This led the artist to seek the Fulbright Fellowship that brought her back to Mumbai to create a body of work that utilized photo-collages based on photographs taken while interviewing 65 members of the Jewish community. She embellished these with gouache and 22-karat gold leaf to paint her subjects' stories, once again emulating the painting styles of Indian and Persian miniatures on the one hand and Bollywood posters and American Pop art on the other. "Visualizing the Bene Israel Jewish faces and the painted ornamentation around them, they could be the ghost images from my past, my childhood in Jewish India, weaving new and old stories," Benjamin noted in her Fulbright proposal. "Are these faces from dreams and memories or are they just other faces on passports or immigration cards or perhaps from my family's photo albums? It is with these faces and their stories that the rest of the world, I hope, will come to know the Bene Israel Jews in a very transnational India."

Eddna Samuel (Akshikar)
2012-2013, photo-collage, gouache, and acrylic on Hahnemuhle paper, 35 x 35 inches

They are so varied! There is Maayan Abraham (Shapurkar) who stares straight out, her young, gentle face filling the space surrounded by a thick, mottled gold-leaf "frame" across parts of which a wine-red pattern weaves itself. To the lower left and right of the central image, the pattern takes the form of a pair of flowers, the blossoms formed by hands which assume the *mudras* of Indian dance, but may also be recognized as repetitions of the hands of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, with whom Maayan shares an enigmatic smile.

The profile portrait of Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkar) (who died shortly after he was interviewed) hovers, skullcap on his head, in a circle of gold leaf, like a Byzantine halo, that in turn floats just above the pulpit within the Succath Shelomo synagogue. Beyond it, in the background, the Holy Ark draws the eye, with its wine red-with-gold curtain sporting a six-pointed star and the Eternal Lamp hanging before it. Hebrew words swirl in gold—upside down and right-side up across the space—offering Judaism's central credo: "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God; the Lord is One. Blessed be the Holy Name..." Delicate vegetal circles in wine red, part of Benjamin's repertoire of abstract embellishments, dance to the right of the portrait, together with four dove-like birds—universal symbols of the soul (for whom, according to the artist's grandmother, we must leave breadcrumbs on our windowsills).

The image of Eddna Samuel (Akshikar) includes nine repetitions of its subject—a number with layers of symbolic significance, from the nine months of human pregnancy to the nine dragons in Chinese symbolism; from the nine Greek muses to the nine bows in Egyptian symbolism; to the nine players on an American baseball team. That number is particularly revered in Hinduism and considered a complete, perfected, and divine number because it represents the end of a cycle in the decimal system, which originated on the Indian subcontinent perhaps 4,500 years ago. Each Eddna pulls on the string of a graceful bow (as Arjuna might, with Krishna as his charioteer) around the centering form of a six-pointed star. Each is dressed in contemporary versions of traditional Indian clothes, her arrow released into a thicket of stylized vegetation that echoes yet differs from the circle of vegetal and floral forms upon which she stands. In a manner recalling Islamic, particularly Ottoman Turkish, style, stylized vegetal forms repeat in yet another pattern within the interior of the six-pointed star at the center, itself a geometric configuration with a long history. The six-pointed star, which offers heaven and earth, male and female, as an upward triangle interwoven with a downward triangle, has come to be seen as a particularly Jewish symbol, the Star of David.

Siona Benjamin's art is derived from the complex world into which she was born and the varied worlds through which she has moved as she has continued to find home—"which I realized is wherever I pitch my tent." She explored that theme through a tent installation for a 2011 exhibition, *My Magic Carpet* and, most recently, through a large, complex work, called *Exodus*. All of these works shape an art that has as its ultimate goal to "dip into my own personal specifics and universalize, thus playing the role of an artist/activist." As such, Benjamin uses images from diverse religious and cultural traditions as instruments of mutual inclusion, not separation, in an effort to help *improve* the world, and not merely *observe* it.

Ori Z. Soltes teaches theology, art history, philosophy and politics at Georgetown University, and is the former Director and Chief Curator of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum. He is the curator of more than 80 exhibitions and the author of 15 books, among them *Our Sacred Signs: How Jewish, Christian and Muslim Art Draw from the Same Source and Tradition* and *Transformation: Three Thousand Years of Jewish Art and Architecture*, in which the work of Siona Benjamin is featured.

My Magic Carpet
2011, mixed media installation, 11 feet in diameter

A Feminist Midrash

Matthew Baigell

The idea that the history of modern art has followed some kind of evolutionary sequence—Impressionism followed by Post-Impressionism, followed by Symbolism, followed by Fauvism, and so on—never made much sense to me. It imitates a pattern more appropriate to the evolution of biological species and, besides, it omits many wonderful artists whose works did not conform to that scheme. Today, finally, many realize that there were and are several currents instead of a single stream and that the different currents do not have to move in the same "forward" direction to be considered valid and interesting. One of the currents involves artists who combine in their works elements of more than one cultural heritage, a globalizing point of view based on varying combinations of national, religious, and/or ethnic backgrounds.

Siona Benjamin swims in that current. She is American but was born into the Bene Israel community in Mumbai in 1960 and moved to the United States twenty-five years later. She includes in her work stylistic elements and subject matter derived from her Jewish and Indian heritages, her strong feminist concerns, and her American experiences as an artist and woman of color. She questions whether she will ever be able to set deep roots in one locale and finds this unnerving, but also seductive because she will always inhabit that spiritual borderland that lies somewhere between open, free space and the confines of categorization and compartmentalization. "I am," she says, "a world citizen first." Always aware of the "cultural boundary zones," as she puts it, in which she has lived, she does not want to be limited by them. When she says that she feels she is Indian, American, Jewish, a woman of color, and a feminist, she recognizes that her task is both to acknowledge and to integrate her multiple cultural identities into one unified personality. Art, she says, serves that purpose. It is her vehicle for viewing the world, "outside the bubble of one's own country, religion, and race."

Among the many identities that Benjamin inhabits, it is her identity as a woman that I want to discuss here, for as she has stated on several occasions in recent years: "My work is celebratory of my womanhood, my abilities, my strengths and my ambitions." Since the turn of this century, she has celebrated her womanhood artistically through the abilities and strengths of women in the Bible, including the Four Mothers, so central to biblical history—Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel—as well as outsiders such as Lilith, Asnet or Asenath, and Miriam. (The name, Lilith, is mentioned only once in the Bible but with a lower-case "l" as a synonym for demon [Isaiah 34:14]; Asnet was the Egyptian wife of Joseph [Genesis 41:50]; and Miriam, afflicted with a skin condition for disrespecting God [Numbers 12:10].) The significance of these works is that Benjamin has not illustrated her source material in traditional ways but rather has challenged what is stated in the Bible and in Jewish legends and has given her subjects personalities of their own. They are independent women whose lives and experiences are relevant to our own today. As she has indicated numerous times, she searches for contemporary parallels to stories in the Bible but alters the original stories in the hope that her work will contribute to understanding different points of view and opinions. In effect, she has created her own interpretations and elaborations of biblical stories, akin to the long-standing Jewish tradition of *midrashim*.

A painting that well represents this point of view is *Finding Home #61 "Beloved"* in which Sarah and Hagar embrace each other despite the relevant passages to the contrary in Genesis 16 and 21. Benjamin hopes that the enmity between the women—perhaps surrogates for Israelis and Palestinians—will end soon, but the figures in the right and left margins suggest that she knows otherwise. Those on the right extend a friendly hand but intend mayhem: bombs are attached to their bodies. Those on the left, well-intentioned amputee soldiers, will probably be unable to stop the carnage.

Finding Home #61 "Beloved"
2004, gouache on paper, 20 x 16 inches

The Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes (Rachel)
2014, gouache on paper, 24 x 11 inches

The Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes (Sara)
2014, gouache on paper, 24 x 11 inches

The Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes (Leah)
2014, gouache on paper, 24 x 11 inches

The Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes (Rebecca)
2014, gouache on paper, 24 x 11 inches

Bringing together Sarah and Hagar suggests that Benjamin seeks tolerance in diversity. But this painting also alludes to the notion that there might not be a resolution to diversity, especially when the cuts—the drops of blood—across the bodies of Sarah and Hagar suggest that a healing might never take place. Even though both women are exiles, both isolated from their kin, and both considered to be mothers of a people, their differences are great. Sarah is the mother of the Israelite nation; Hagar is among the most Other individuals in the Bible. Sarah is the mistress; Hagar is the slave.[1]

In this regard, the two women represent conflicting aspects of Benjamin's own unresolved issues stemming from her various heritages of which she is very aware. The question Benjamin proposes in *Beloved* is whether she can find a home in any particular culture, especially when, as she has noted, she was raised Jewish in a Hindu and Muslim country and had close friendships with Muslims of her own age. "In deep embrace," writes Benjamin, "they [Sarah and Hagar] are mere reflections of each other."

Whatever else this painting connotes about the situation in the Middle East, *Beloved* also has profound autobiographical implications: first, that these images exist within a biblical context indicating that Benjamin's Jewish identity undergirds and is central to her search for a cultural home; second, that she channels her feminist interests through two strong women, mothers of future nations; and, third, that Benjamin's character, like those of her biblical subjects, is sturdy and will guide her destiny regardless of what the future portends.

For the next several years, Benjamin added several paintings to this and other biblically thematic series. Her feminist point of view grew even stronger in her art, where it emerges clearly in another set of paintings completed in 2014. In these, Benjamin audaciously substitutes women for men as the principle figures in a famous Jewish legend. Four Mothers take the place of four sages who lived in the first century C.E. and who in legend entered Paradise (Pardes),[2] to varying results. They were Ben Azzai, who died from looking at the Divine Presence; Ben Zoma, who went insane; Acher (Elisha ben Avuya), who became a heretic; and Rabbi Akiva, who alone managed to leave Paradise in peace. Benjamin's interpretations follow.

Rachel, in a headlong dive, dies as an angel lies upon her chest. Around her, other angels, some bad and some good, weep as Rachel mourns her children (Jeremiah 31:15). Although in the next verse their return is promised, Benjamin associates her loss with the future catastrophes of the Jewish people, including the Holocaust.

Sarah, mad with worry, eats money associated with financial scammers as an atomic explosion rises behind her, while under her we see angels being suppressed as demons are let loose above. The reversal of the positions of heaven and hell with heaven below and hell above, suggesting the reversal of our notions of good and evil, call to mind the art of the Early Netherlandish figure, Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450- c. 1516) in whose works evil could be seen as triumphant, clearly a comment by Benjamin on our contemporary world.

Leah, in a field of cut grain that symbolizes the heresy of Acher, has weak eyes and, according to Benjamin, has learned to look within to find faith. A fanciful faith, to be sure, but one which allows her to leave the male world of the Patriarchs and embrace a world where her daughters and sons will inherit and inspire equally. In this regard, Leah sees with her heart, not just with her weak eyes, and finds strength there. At the same time, Benjamin juxtaposes good with bad, including blind figures around the sides to suggest loss of faith.

In Benjamin's interpretation, Rebecca, like Rabbi Akiva, looked and ascended and descended in peace, but unlike Rabbi Akiva, Rebecca knew that even in Paradise there might be problems. The two lotus flowers, one emerging from Rebecca's stomach, indicate rebirth. At the top, a photograph of a celebratory dancer is collaged onto the work and painted over by Benjamin. Above her head, the Lion of Judah, a figure of protection appears; in its center is a house that includes a flame, a symbol of hope.

Through this series, Benjamin makes the point that challenges and imperfections exist even in Paradise and these are to be met directly and with a spirit of holiness. Overall, Benjamin's intention is to indicate that until all children are safe, none are safe, her way of commenting on the unpredictability of the future. But at the same time, she hopes that mothers will find the power to help bring peace to the world, a notion she had suggested ten years before in *Beloved*, her painting of Sarah and Hagar hugging each other. Her point of view, then, has been consistent. Through biblical surrogates who connote a sense of spirituality, Benjamin illustrates that women have played, can play, and should play a strong role in making the world a better place for all humankind.

Notes

[1] Savina J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990): xxi–xxxiv, 195, cited in Einat Ramon, "The Matriarchs and the Torah of Hesed (Loving Kindness)," *Nashim* 10 (Fall 2005): 154–177.

[2] Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, "Four Who Entered Paradise," trans. Rabbi Moshe Miller, www.chabad.org

Matthew Baigell is a professor emeritus of art history at Rutgers University. He has written many books and articles on American and Jewish-American art and finds contemporary figures such as Siona Benjamin, who comment on contemporary attitudes and events, among the most compelling artists of our time

Next Year in Nineveh?

Dr. Aaron Rosen

"We were fashioned to live in Paradise, and Paradise was destined to serve us.
Our destiny has been altered; that this has also happened with the destiny of Paradise is not stated."

—Franz Kafka

"Next year in Jerusalem." Every Passover, Jews around the world intone this deceptively simple formula, freighted with centuries of both diasporic disappointment and messianic hopefulness. While the Passover seder commemorates the ancient Israelites' emancipation from bondage, in the same breath it insists that freedom—true freedom—belongs to the future. It is this tension, balanced on the knife's edge of possibility, that Siona Benjamin probes so powerfully in *Exodus: I See Myself in You*. Benjamin's images recall the travails of Egypt, the shackles of slavery left dangling behind. But above all, this work reminds us of fetters that remain, escapes deferred to the next year and the next. Benjamin paints Jerusalems of the mind: paradises gained, lost, mourned, and imagined. Though she takes inspiration from the stories and rituals of Judaism, she conjures images capable of bearing the hopes and disappointments of Jews and non-Jews alike.

The new works in this exhibition are haunted by the tragedies of recent events, especially the struggles of Syrian refugees who have fled the brutality of ISIS and Assad. Benjamin sees a contemporary Exodus unfolding in the journeys of these refugees, and she utilizes biblical imagery and symbolism to lend them dignity. This strategy sets her apart from many of the artists who have attempted to grapple with the catastrophe. A number of artists have re-purposed the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body washed ashore on the beaches of Bodrum, Turkey, in September, 2015, after the flimsy, overcrowded boat in which he and his family were traveling capsized. In Frankfurt, street artists spray-painted a giant image of the toddler onto a wall on the banks of the Main River, while an artist in India formed a giant effigy of Alan out of sand. More solipsistically, Ai Weiwei photographed himself lying 'lifeless' on the seashore. Like the young boy photographed raising his hands in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, Alan's image has—in just nine months—been appropriated to the point of paralyzing ubiquity. Acutely aware of the dangers of over-saturation, Benjamin honors the experiences of refugees not by merely recapitulating images of their suffering, but by inventing stories that speak to their dreams.

Exodus portrait #10
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Closely following the conflict in Syria through the news, Benjamin has assiduously gathered clippings and digital images of forced migration over the past year in preparation for her new work. She began her process by isolating and focusing upon single figures in photographs, attempting to understand their pain one by one rather than en masse. Using drawing to identify with people who would otherwise remain anonymous, Benjamin found herself repeating the words which later found their way into the title of this new body of work: "I see myself in you." The lines in her drawings are never merely mimetic, never simply copies of the faces captured in photographs. Through the act of drawing, she accomplishes a much more profound and complicated act of transformation, shifting gazes, postures, and gestures in ways which return to these weary figures some of the peace and tranquillity which has been stolen from them. There is pain in these drawings, to be sure, but there is also a determined quietness. Even as she renders a woman crying out in anguish, for instance, she gives her the space and stillness to grieve. With palpable softness, Benjamin's pencil cradles the people she draws.

Exodus portrait #14
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Benjamin not only brings to these figures a personal empathy but a wealth of art historical allusions and affinities. Persian and Mughal miniature paintings from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries have been a consistent source of inspiration for Benjamin over the past two decades. While she channelled the jewel-like precision of masters such as Bihzad (1470–1506) in her earlier work, in recent creations she has extended her engagement with this tradition in new directions. Her studies of refugees recall sketches and paintings by Riza-yi `Abbasi (c. 1565–1635) and his disciple Mu'in Musavvir (active c. 1630–97), who pioneered a new direction in Islamic painting, developing single-page illustrations of characters observed from life, documenting people on the margins of society.

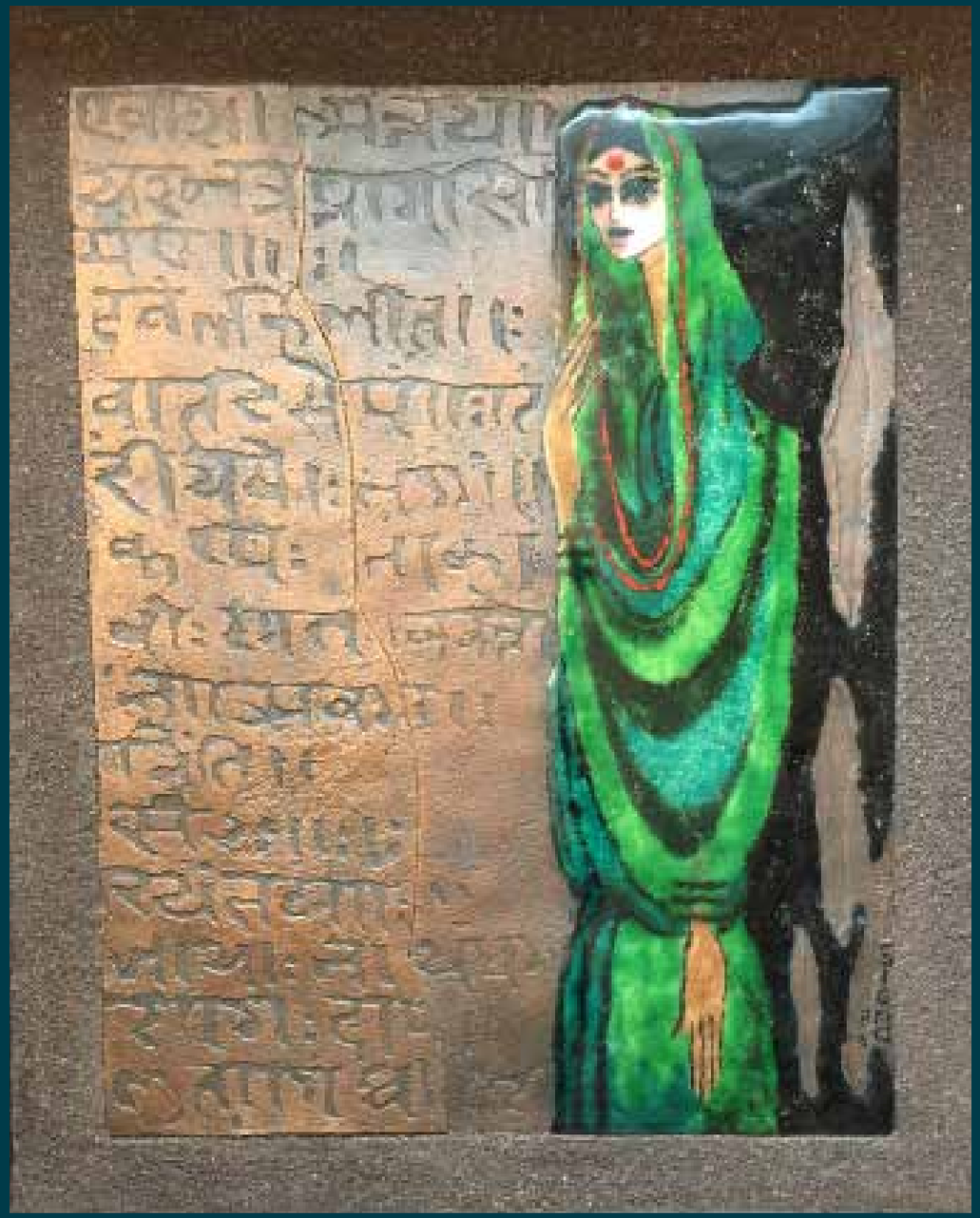
At the same time that Benjamin brings to bear on her subject a refined grasp of Islamic art, she also channels precursors from across the history of Western culture. The woman and child in her Exodus panels recall Käthe Kollwitz's haunting images of mothers mourning their children, as well as Marc Chagall's depiction of the biblical Hagar, who fears her young son Ishmael may die in the desert. The figure of the whale evokes parallels with medieval Christian illuminated manuscripts, in which Jonah's three days and nights inside the "great fish" prefigure Christ's entombment and resurrection. In Benjamin's image, the sad-eyed whale harbors mother and child like a womb. This protection is painfully undercut, however, when we remember the fate of Alan Kurdi and his mother, for whom no miraculous assistance appeared from the deep. The reference to Jonah adds yet another interpretive layer. The wayward prophet was called upon to prophesy to the city of Nineveh, which today lies in northern Iraq, near Mosul, an ISIS stronghold. Do we dare hope, Benjamin asks, that the citizens of modern Mosul will be spared like those of ancient Nineveh?

Rising up from behind the whale, emerging from the sea, Benjamin paints what is—if not an answer—a prayer. A man browned by sun and grime from a long journey carries a ram over his shoulders. The artist's source is a photograph of a refugee bearing a sack slumped against his neck. Benjamin, schooled in Jewish tradition, cannot help but render this lumpy mass as a ram. And not just any ram, I suspect, but the ram of the Akedah, the "real

Exodus: I See Myself in You
2016, gouache, acrylic, and 22K gold leaf on wood panel, 41 × 120 inches

hero" of Genesis 22 as Yehuda Amichai once called him. When God stays Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son, the patriarch looks up and spies a ram caught in a thicket, which he slaughters instead. This is no random, dumb, unlucky beast, Midrash tells us. This ram was created in Paradise, at the beginning of time, for this one special purpose. Ever since Creation it had been running as fast as it could in order to arrive atop Mount Moriah at that very moment, that it might offer itself instead of Isaac, ensuring the future of the chosen people. Maybe we have left Paradise, maybe we have lost it forever. But perhaps, this story teaches us, it can still save us. This is Siona Benjamin's offering.

Dr. Aaron Rosen is the author of *Imagining Jewish Art* and *Art and Religion in the 21st Century*, named one of the best books of 2015 by *The Times*. He is the editor of *Religion and Art in the Heart of Modern Manhattan* and co-editor of *Visualising a Sacred City: London, Art and Religion.*



Body and Soul
1985-86, enamel on copper, 23 x 19 inches

A Conversation with Siona Benjamin

Elizabeth Greenberg: Let's start by talking a little bit about your background and the history of the Bene Israel community in India. Growing up, were you aware of differences between your community and the Hindu and Muslim communities that surrounded you? I know you've talked about what a rich cultural landscape it was and how you went to different types of schools and were surrounded by different types of people. But were you aware that there were differences? And then, were those perceived as being positive or negative or neither?

Siona Benjamin: Just coincidently last week I was in Toronto for the Toronto Jewish Film Festival. I met one of my friends, Tina, who was my friend since first grade. And then I have another friend in India and her name is Sunita. Tina comes from a Muslim family, I was Jewish, Sunita is a Portuguese Christian and the three of us were best friends.

Our parents were good friends. We went to each other's houses and parties. We shared sweets and food during our respective festivals. And last week when I was talking to Tina over dinner, I said, "You know I think my work is formed partly because of people like you and Sunita. Do you remember having any kind of thoughts coming to your mind about me being Jewish or you being Muslim? Did it ever come up?"

She said, "Absolutely not. I don't remember it ever coming up. I never thought of you as being Jewish or anything. You were my friend and I liked your family and I spent time with your family." And I said, "Yeah, same here. Was that an age of innocence that has completely gone from this world today and doesn't exist anymore?" If you do bring it up with people and say one of my best friends growing up was Muslim – and I spent so much time with her family and her parents in her home and she in my home – we slept over and we went to school together and we ate together. What has happened to this world where the minute you say that you had friends who were a Muslim and a Jew people tell you it's not possible? What is really surprising is that even though we have "globalized" so much we have become so tribe-conscious. Supposedly the world has become smaller; we can travel and communicate better with other people, but at the same time we've become even more paranoid and more tribal.

EG: Do you think that your experience growing up in India was fairly normal?

SB: I think it was. We Indians have always prided ourselves on being a very cosmopolitan society and very – I hate the word tolerant because tolerant is like when you tolerate somebody – but I think a better way of putting it would be where you just lived with somebody and you never thought of these differences and you made bridges instead of making differences with each other. So India has sort of always been proud of opening themselves up to other communities – like some Holocaust survivors from World War II and the Parsis (Zoroastrians) who came from the Assyrian-Iranian culture. Worldwide there are very few Parsis left. They're a very small community and India gave them a place to worship, to have temples. And I actually went to a Catholic middle school and a Zoroastrian high school.

And Tina, my Muslim friend, is married now to a Parsi. So she didn't stay tribal because we learned in our childhood that we see the person and not the religion. But on the other hand, a lot of my family left India to go to Israel. I don't know why exactly, but there was this kind of mindset that there were better opportunities in Israel. Israel was a place that all the Jews return to; there was this ideal dream, although some of them went there and missed India.

EG: I was wondering why so many Indian Jews left for Israel. From what I've read it seems like they had a pretty good life in India. You weren't affected by antisemitism or hostility.

SB: I think there were two reasons for that. One is because we were such a micro-minority and most of the tension was between Hindus and Muslims. So Parsis and Jews and other minorities were just non-threatening commu-

nities. And secondly, I asked several Indian Jews about this during my Fulbright project in India and a lot of them repeatedly said this, they prided themselves on being able to blend in and assimilate.

EG: I was also wondering about the other Jewish communities in India, the Baghdadi Jews and the Cochini Jews. Do the three groups see themselves as one or very separate? And does the Indian caste system play into this at all?

SB: So there are Baghdadi Jews, Cochini Jews, and Bene Israel Jews. For a time because of the influence of the caste system there was some discrimination between the three communities. The Colonial influence on all these countries, whether in Asia or Africa–it's so ingrained to be made to think the lighter skin is prettier. So because of that I think there was a difference between even the three Jewish communities. For example, my mother was a light-skinned Bene Israel woman and people would think she was Baghdadi and not Bene Israel. So yes, there was a little bit of hierarchy and I think that was because of the influence of the caste system in India plus the Colonial influence that has affected all countries that had been colonized.

EG: Was there intermarriage between the Baghdadis and Bene Israel and Cochini or not so much?

SB: Yes there was some, but now it is more so. The Baghdadis were the newly-arrived Jews directly from Baghdad whereas the Cochini and the Bene Israel had been there for centuries and were more native so to speak. So there was a slight hierarchy.

But that was there even with the Mizrahi, the Sephardic, and the Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. When the State of Israel was formed there was a hierarchy. Now if you go to Israel it's amazing. There's a spectrum of skin color because of the Ethiopian Jews, the Indian Jews, Baghdadi Jews, Moroccan Jews, Yemenite Jews, and all the Russian and Eastern European Jews. There is so much intermarriage that there is no one type of Israeli face.

It's strange that even though all this has changed and improved, world politics pushes you to demonize the other which is not your tribe.

It's a dichotomy and that's what I like to talk about in my work. This is a very important point. It's a very puzzling fact and I'm trying to grapple with it, to understand it. And that's what I try to do through my work. I try to understand it. Will I ever understand it? I don't know. So I'm not offering any solutions. I'm just offering maybe more questions. And I'm just trying to reorganize the pieces of the puzzle.

On the one hand, we're more global and more aware of other communities. And at the same time there is all this hate of the other in the world now. There are these two opposite ends and it's a schizophrenic kind of feeling.

EG: Can we discuss the progression of your work through the years? You tend to work in groups or series. We have *Finding Home*. We have *Improvisation*. We have the Fulbright *Faces* project. And now we have the new work on paradise and refugees. Am I missing anything?

SB: Well the *Finding Home* series is sort of like a main tree trunk. Out of that came *Fereshteh*, the Women of the Torah, because I started studying Midrash with different Rabbis and I found that I was a mythmaker. I like being a storyteller. In graduate school, I was told that to be successful, to be like a white male artist, I had to make large, abstract paintings to be accepted in the larger art world. But things have changed in the art world and there's a greater understanding of the "other"–of the other voice, of the other kind of expression, and the other kind of artist that comes from outside the Western world. I like to make small, delicate, feminine paintings that tell stories–just the opposite of what I was told when I was in graduate school.

Finding Home #1
1995, gouache and silver leaf on paper, 17 x 11 inches

Finding Home #2
1995, gouache on paper, 17 x 11 inches

Finding Home #3
1995, gouache on paper, 17 x 11 inches

Then I started the *Improvisation* series where I was just having fun with my bag of tricks, the bag of images that I had created and which had become my own. So I started playing with them a little bit. *Improvisation* is literally an improvisation without really having a specific story to talk about. And then I did many other pieces–specific pieces–like the different installations, *Lilith in the New World*, *Foreign Body, My Magic Carpet tent installation, Mandala red and blue and others...*

I did a whole *Lilith* series based on the concept of the feminist story of Lilith from the "Alphabet of Ben Sira," which I've studied. I found out there's a lesser-known myth about the first wife of Adam, which makes it interesting from a feminist point of view.

And then I did several other pieces, like *Foreign Body* for example, where I explored the story of Elijah's chariot–something very different. I took that story and connected it to a female body, showing this foreign body clothed and unclothed. You can actually open and close the boxes. You can examine these different parts of the body–almost like decapitated parts of this foreign body.....examine this "exotic" body so to speak, part by part, blue skin included.

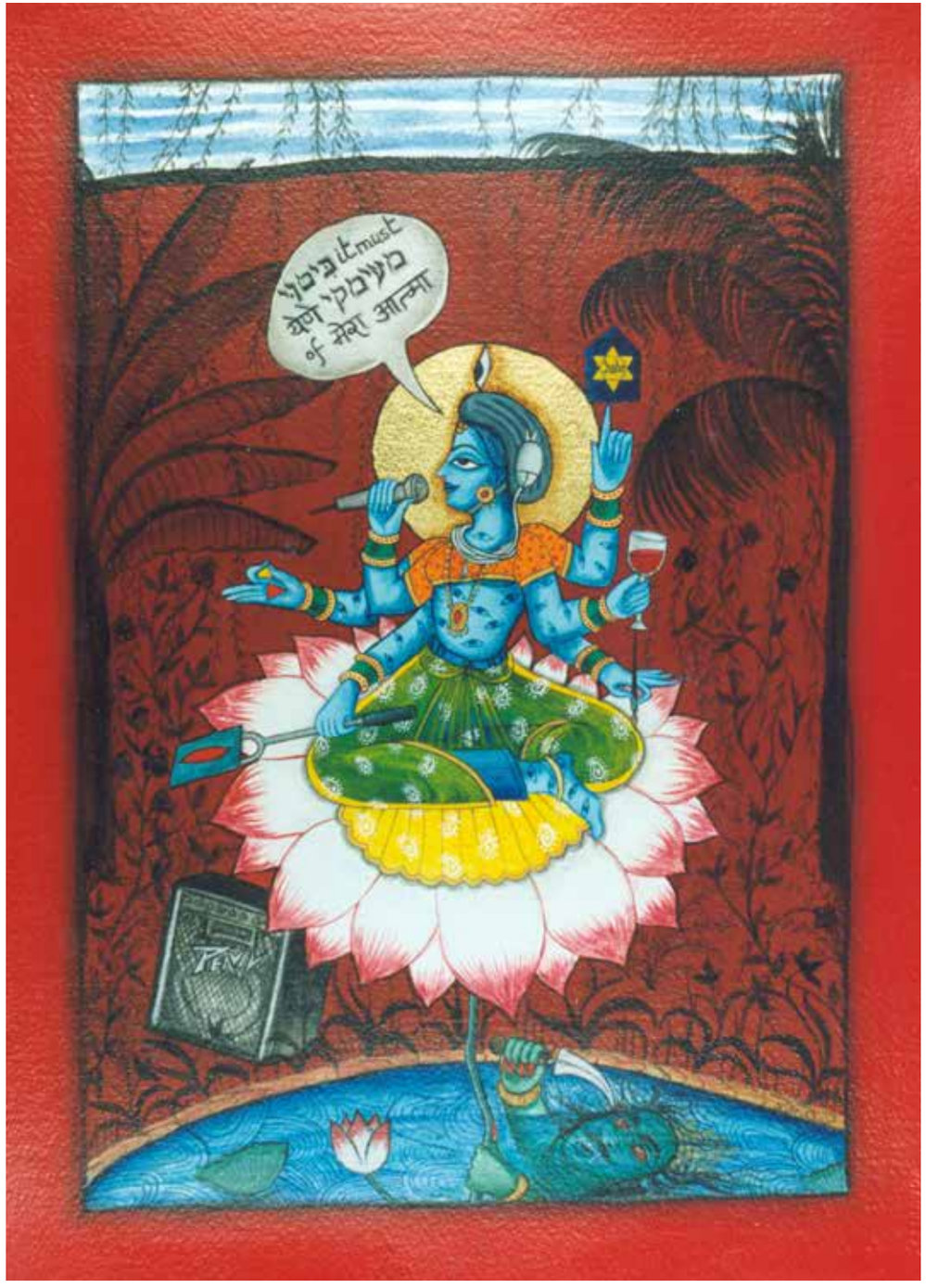
So all of these works were like little branches that came from *Finding Home*. Even my new series, *Exodus*, is an offshoot of *Finding Home*. I'm looking at all the refugees who have lost their homes and how I see myself in them even though my experience is different. I didn't experience those horrible circumstances like they did, being displaced and kicked out from their home.

I came here by choice and I came here with privilege to study. America has offered me so many opportunities. So why do I see myself in them? You know that is the question. Maybe because they are still grappling with what is home and that is something I've struggled with too.

EG: Why did you start to study Torah and Midrash? Is that something that you brought with you from childhood? Had you been interested in the stories in India or did that interest develop as an adult?

SB: You know India is a very myth-based country, whether it was Jewish mythology or my grandmother telling me some little mythology from the Indian Jewish perspective or the wider perspective of the Hindu Muslim community. So it was very myth-oriented, filled with icons and stories. I always knew that I was affected by that. Then I was told, "Oh you're Jewish so you have to worship this flame," which is this imageless God. And so there was also the dichotomy between image-filled India and imageless Judaism, which was just the opposite.

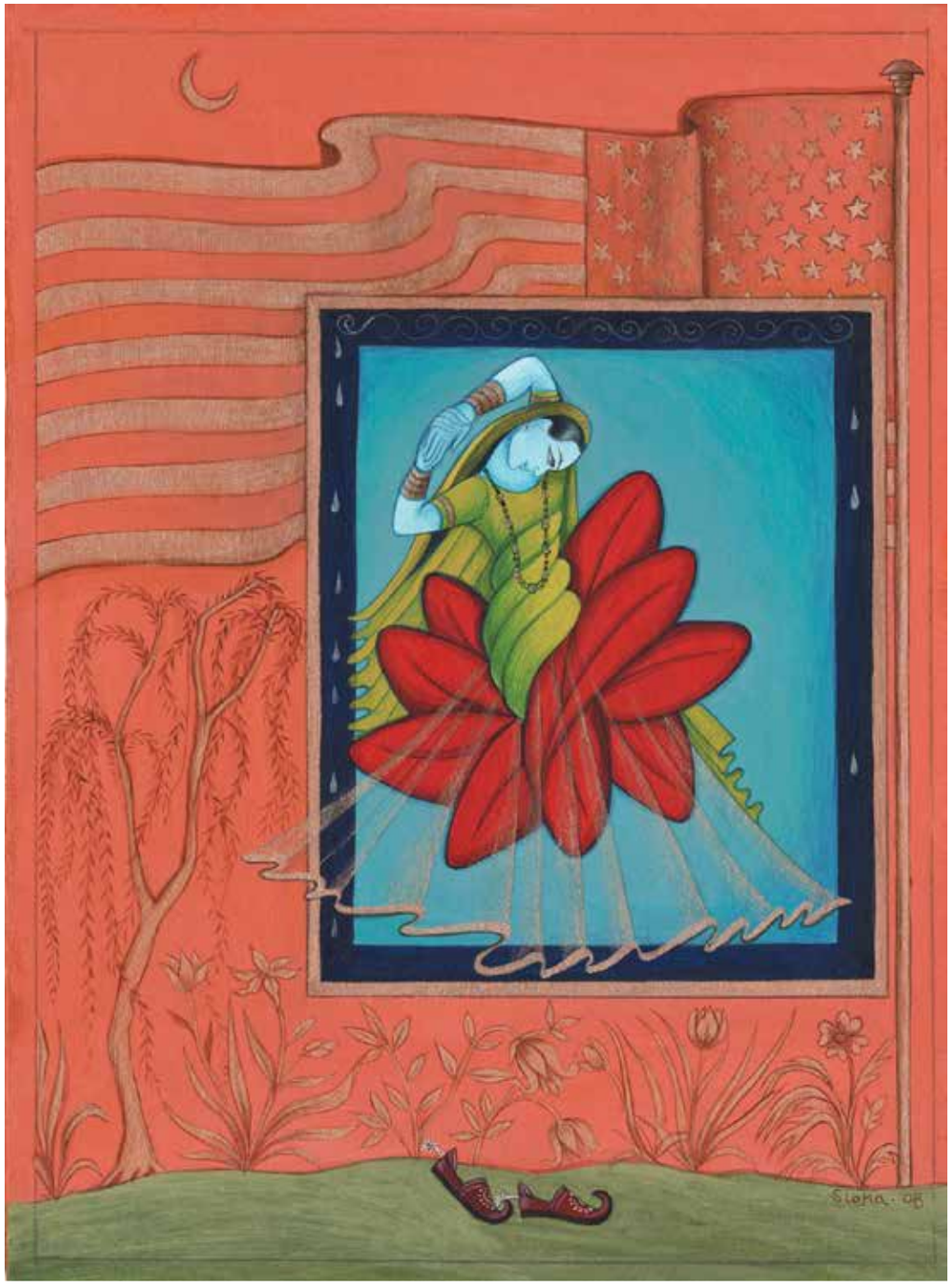
Finding Home #22
1998, gouache on paper, 17 x 14 inches



Finding Home #40 ("Curry-oke")
2000, gouache on paper, 20.5 x 15 inches

Finding Home #97 "Trap"
2008, gouache on paper, 17 x 12 inches

Finding Home #98 "Release"
2008, gouache on paper, 17 x 12 inches



Finding Home #99 "Lilith in Pardes"
2008, gouache on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

Finding Home #77 (Fereshteh) "Miriam"
2006, gouache and 22K gold leaf on paper, 15 x 12 inches

When I came to graduate school I was told that I needed to make large abstract paintings which were not feminine or feminist—at that time in the late 1980s—to be successful. But I found that I really remembered all the mythology and all the stories, whether they were *Arabian Nights* stories or were little Jewish superstitious stories told by my grandmother.

I can remember when I was six, my grandma would come and do this whole salt ritual. She would bring a handful of salt in her hand and she would say some Hebrew prayer around me if I was sick and had a fever. And then she would spit in it and she would flush it in a toilet or throw it in the backyard so that the fever was taken out. It was such a mix—she would say the Hebrew prayer but the ritual was obviously influenced by India. So I learned from both a greater India and from my Jewish stories.

When I came to the United States, I was really searching for my identity as an artist. I had moved to New Jersey and I met this Rabbi and he said, "You should study Midrash." And I said, "Oh I'm not religious. I'm really not religious." I didn't want to be called a Jewish artist or an Indian artist. I wanted to be a good artist. But then he said, "No it's got nothing to do with religion. It's about recycling mythology."

I read the book by Joseph Campbell called *The Power of Myth*. And he talks about how we are all controlled by mythology. Like the color that I wear today or the color I paint the walls is based on what I come with—with my baggage, with my history. And how we are so affected by mythology even when we don't realize it.

All of this started coming together when I started studying Midrash with Rabbi Burton Visotsky at JTS. It's incredible; you read this piece of Midrash and then it's interpreted. And you read the interpretations of the different Rabbis through the centuries. And then I have my own interpretation of it.

So the story of Vashti and how she was cast out—just in one sentence—was enough to be able to make ten paintings about just that. The fact that she was cast out: who was cast out? A refugee is cast out. You know I was cast out—not literally—but because of the fact that I chose to be removed from my culture. Now what have I got to say if I come back and look through the house like the one in the painting?

She's looking through today's newspaper. I can make 50 paintings just on that one sentence of Midrash. I've only scratched the surface of recycling the mythology. It's a bottomless well of information that is so amazing that I feel overwhelmed sometimes. And in a way, it brought me back to where I came from.

For instance, I took for granted that my mother lit the Shabbat lamp every Friday. And why did she do the special Indian ritual of sometimes, on special occasions, taking coconut water and sprinkling it in the different corners of her home to bless it? I don't see any other community doing that. But it was a special mythology that was built by my family or by my community.

EG: So when you started to study Midrash—I don't want to call it a happy coincidence, but it came at the right time of your art developing. They merged together.

SB: Yes, it was like an answer sent to me from higher above. I don't know. Every artist struggles to find their identity, find their expression and their style. You wonder if you're ever going to find it. And there are so many artists who still struggle all their life to find that. In a way I kind of stumbled upon that. It's so hard to be an artist –to survive as an artist—but that is what keeps me going every day, the fact that I have stumbled upon my magic formula and I can share that with the world.

EG: Can we talk a little more about *Finding Home*? Not the branches that came out of the series, but your initial explorations. There's so much in these works about being Indian and Jewish, but they are also about becoming American, and the merging of your identities. They are so rich in context. One of the main things that seems to have developed through *Finding Home* is the use of blue. Why did you start using blue to depict the characters in your work?

Finding Home #80 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"
2006, gouache and 22K gold leaf on panel, 38"x 26"

Finding Home #87 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"
2008, gouache and mixed media on museum board, 23 x 18 inches

SB: Let me backtrack a little bit to give you some context. I studied theater set design and that also influenced me in the finding of my mythology. Reading plays and doing sets based on the environment of the play, how do you convey that through your set design or through the costume design? I had a wonderful set design teacher during my second MFA, Professor Scott Bradley who in turn had trained with the famous American set designer Ming Cho Lee at Yale. I loved the whole concept of reading a play and being able to integrate that through my set design, through the environment. So that set became my painting. And the actors on the stage became these characters that I wanted to be able to use to talk about these issues.

So when I was first working on *Finding Home*, I started thinking about what would be the right shade of brown to paint myself . What is a representative shade to paint myself when I do these kinds of self-portraits?

They're not always self-portraits, but I put myself as the actor in this stage of identity. Some of my really early paintings, like *Finding Home #28* and *#29*, you can see that I used a generic skin color.

So those characters have not turned blue yet. I was still playing around. I started thinking about other characters, like Krishna (who has dark blue skin) because he's a very dark-skinned god. And Kali, Shiva, and also Green Tara and Red Tara in Buddhism–different skin colored gods and versions of Buddha and Indian gods and goddesses.

Finding Home #88 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"
2008, gouache and 22K gold leaf on wood panel, 37 x 20.5 inches

I began thinking about the Shekinah, which is the female aspect of God in Judaism, and I wanted to try to explore that feminist identity. So all of these thoughts were on my mind and I was thinking, what is my identity? What is my token color? And I thought of the Blue Krishna or the Blue Shiva or the Green Tara or the Red Tara. But I also thought about the color of the sky and the ocean and how if you lie on the ground and look up at the sky in India, or if you lie on the ground and look up at the sky in America, you can't tell where it is.

Fereshtini #6
2007, gouache and 22K gold leaf on museum board,
10 x 8 inches

Fereshtini #7
2007, gouache and 22K gold leaf on museum board,
10 x 8 inches

Fereshtini #8
2007, gouache on museum board, 11 x 9 inches

Fereshtini #9
2007, gouache and 22K gold leaf on museum board,
11 x 9 inches

You can't say, "oh this is an American piece of sky or an Indian piece of sky." It's still the same blue. It's the same thing with the water—the ocean. I thought it would be a great color to be a neutral color that would represent myself or my skin color as being a Jewish woman of color, of being the other, of being transcultural, of belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Belonging here and being very American or belonging in India and being very Indian at the same time.

I had this mixed identity and I wanted to celebrate that instead of lamenting it and wishing I belonged in one tribe. Many times before I did feel envious of people who have families rooted in one place; they can just belong in one place and be proud of this. My mother's mother died in Cleveland, Ohio and my father's mother died in Beersheba, Israel. My family is in Israel and now I'm an American and raising an American child. It was just too much diversity to be able to feel comfortable. But the blue skin has grounded me. It gave me my own identity of being transcultural. And also, in this way, I have invited other people who feel like "the other." Not necessarily people who are from different cultures, but many people can understand what it is to be different for their own reasons. And so many people have come up to me and said, "Oh I identify with your blueness," for such and such reason, and it could be a completely different reason from mine.

EG: I'd also like to talk more about the role of women in your work. It's very much there in *Finding Home*, but it continues through all your work and the reevaluation of women's roles in Biblical stories and myths. You place women in a much more central role than happens in a lot of Judaism, frankly. How do you balance your feminism within a religion that some would argue has misogyny built into it? And how has your feminism developed over time?

SB: Well, I had a strong mother. And women like Indira Gandhi were a good influence; I had these varied role models. I was also an only child and my parents told me, "You're my son and my daughter." So I believed that. I am often called a feminist artist, but I don't think I'm disowning the male in my work. And even though religions can be misogynistic, I feel like, for example, in Judaism there is a big role played by the Shekinah. And in Hinduism there are all these incredibly strong goddesses that are celebrated. The feminine is in every religion, but we feel like it's being suppressed.

In Indian mythology there is the whole concept of Ardhanarishvara, in which Shiva and Parvati are combined. The character is half-woman and half-man. Because every woman has man and every man has woman in them. That icon has stayed in my mind. Even though I'm using a woman as my vehicle to be able to talk about issues, I've also tackled stories which are male. I've done a few triptychs on Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael for example.

But I feminized them and I made them into women in these triptychs, not because I'm putting down the male but because I'm talking about the Shekinah or the feminine aspect in the male. I can identify with that. I have also done several paintings about Joseph and his "Technicolor Dreamcoat" and how he was deemed in the Midrash as being feminine because he was very beautiful.

This androgyny between male and female is very interesting to me. So it's not just that I want to draw the woman, but I also want to celebrate the male in me as being a strong element of existence. I want to celebrate being human instead of just being feminist.

But yes, I do use the woman as a central roleplaying character in my work—it's part of the mythology that I've developed.

EG: Can you talk more about Lilith and the role she plays in your work? She's a character who is traditionally associated with negative or evil qualities, but you celebrate her strength. Throughout history we see women being demonized for their strength, but you've resurrected Lilith through your interpretation, which I just love.

Siona Benjamin

SB: So Lilith is interesting because she was the first wife of Adam and there's all this mythology about her—that she is evil, she preys on men, she harms babies...very negative myths around her. Actually her story is just very straightforward and simple. She's essentially the first feminist story. She was created equal to Adam. She wanted equality. She protested about it. Adam didn't like it and God didn't want to interfere with the squabble. So she leaves in a huff. She doesn't come back. She's like the first ex-wife. And after this, a mythology is built around her; about her going to the Red Sea and giving birth to 100 children a day and they are killed by God's angels because of her refusal to return to the Garden of Eden. And she in turn hurts other children, so there's a tradition that you tie amulets around the baby's cradle and around the mother for protection.

Then she becomes an icon of feminism in the 1960s. So there's *Lilith* magazine and there's the Lilith Fair—American women resurrected her and said, "Wait a minute. She's like our first feminist." She always interested me and reminded me of being like the goddess Kali.

Kali becomes terrible and fearful. But she's not—she doesn't go after the good. She persecutes the bad. She will slay bulls and inside the bulls there will be hidden demons. Her good side is Durga and her bad is Kali, with her tongue hanging out and a garland of skulls around her neck. And it struck me that women have this capacity for having all these different roles in life. That is why they seem to be stronger in that way. They can multitask. Men have a harder time doing that. I've felt that Lilith is like Kali and she's this character that can belong in so many different cultures. There are so many similarities between Lilith and characters in other religions that I thought she would be a good character to use in my recycling of mythology. In one of my paintings she is begging for mercy, "Please save us from your wrath," she asks. Who is us and who is them? We don't know.

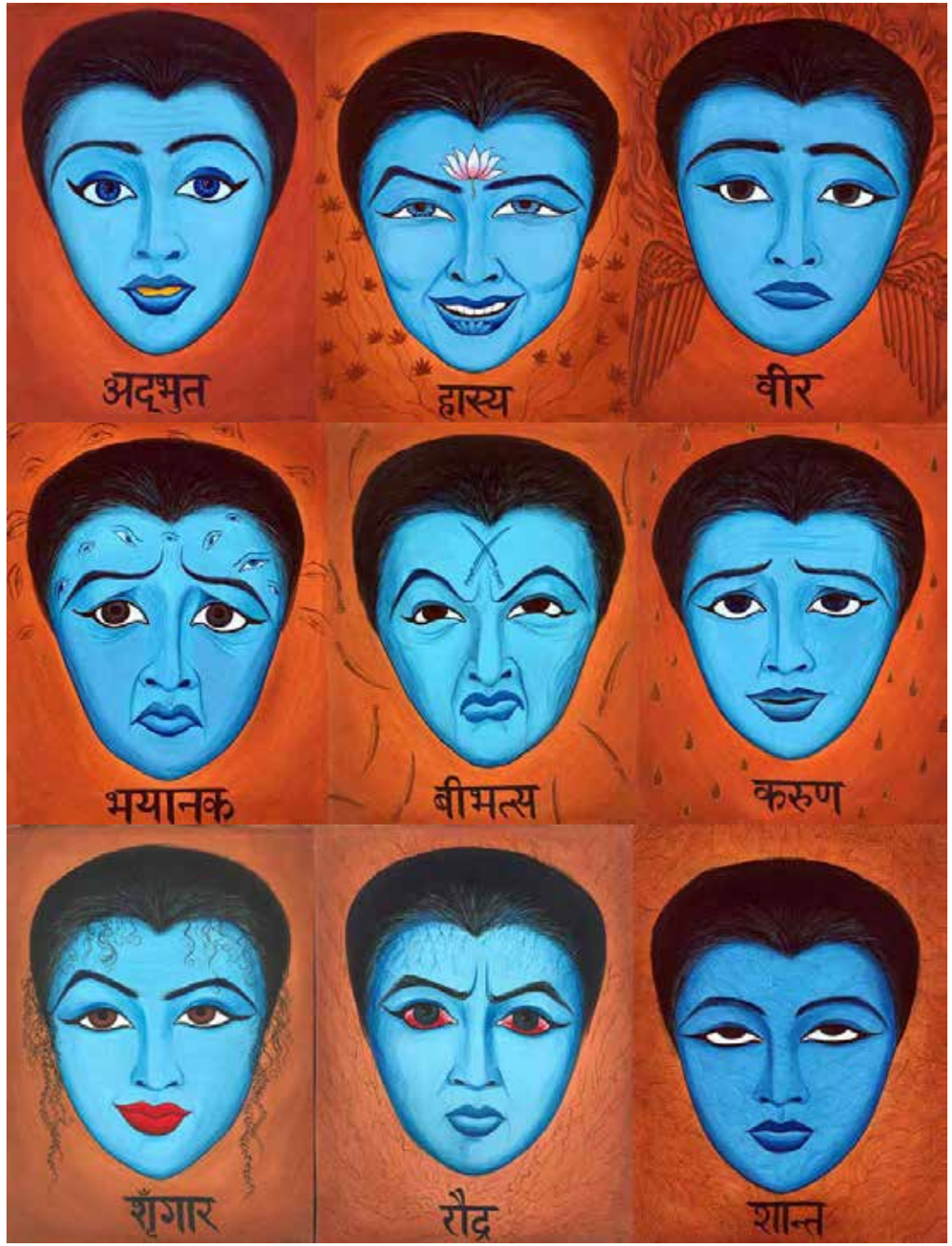
And in another one she's swearing revenge like she could be an Iraqi mother whose children have been destroyed in the war and who is responsible for that? Or she could be an American mother whose son has died in vain in a war in Iraq. Or she could be from any one of the tribes in Africa. She could be a Palestinian or Israeli mother whose child got blown up in some senseless bombing. And she could be angry because of that.

So she's come back. She's resurrected and she can play so many roles. She can enact her injustice that was done to her in her original mythology. And she could reenact all these different injustices that are still happening today.

She's fascinating to me because she also is a connection to all these other mythologies and different religions. I can proudly say that I see all these similarities in different religions. You know some people don't and I'm sorry for them. I'm really sorry for them that they don't see similarities in people. And they feel that their tribe is better than the other. So in my own small way I feel like my work can contribute to making people think about this.

EG: And *The Four Mothers Who Entered Pardes*? That seems like another important work from a feminist standpoint.

SB: *Four Mothers* was by chance. Again, the original story is a male story. Rabbi Akiva and his three rabbi friends decide to go into Paradise and confront and look at beauty. Three of the four were not ready to see the beauty and the perfection, and maybe also imperfection in this so-called paradise. But I feminized them. I was doing a residency at the 14th Street Y and I wanted to tap into the feminine.



Rasa
2006, gouache on paper, 11 x 9 inches each

Improvisation #13
2011, gouache and mixed media on Mylar, 10 x 10 inches

I could have done them as the four male rabbis, but it was more fun to find fitting roles of who the four rabbis would be as four matriarchs from the Torah, from the mythology that I was more familiar with. And I could've done four mothers from Hinduism. I could've done four mothers from Islam. I mean it's endless. I can do a second part and a third part you know? But since I was doing this Jewish-based study for one year in this residency it was fun to see which four mothers–which four matriarchs–would fit into the four roles of the rabbis.

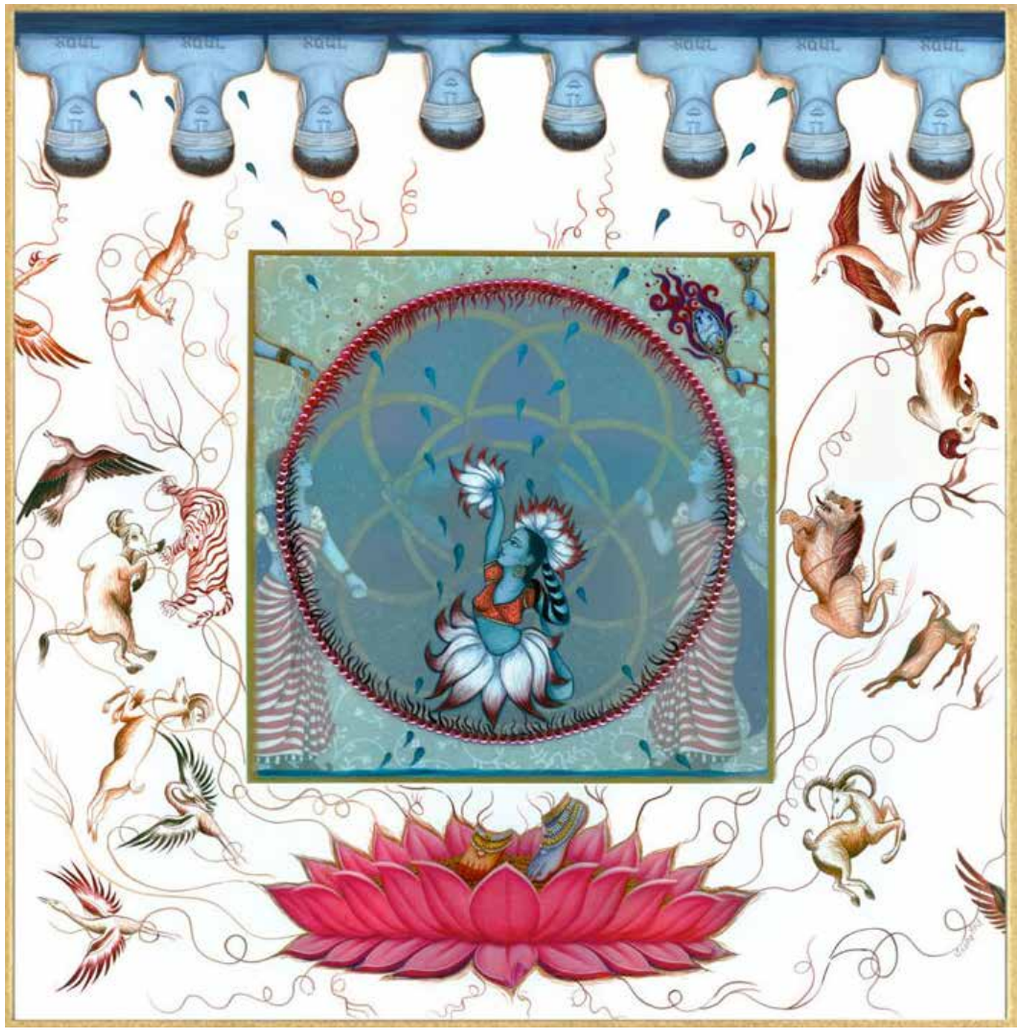
So I studied the different roles of various women in the Torah and I thought Rachel would be best as the rabbi who died because of her story–she was the one who didn't have children to begin with and then she does have two children. But then she dies in childbirth, and so half is this woman who is a female soldier. And the other half was my mother, who had died recently. I saw her shrouded in white before they buried her so the character is reminiscent of all of my personal mythology too.

Improvisation #20 (Rachel's Dream)
2011-2012, mixed media on vellum and museum board, 16 x 16 inches

EG: You reference Indian dance in your work quite a bit. Can you tell me more about Rasa?

SB: "Rasa" in Sanskrit means Divine Nectar–the taste of enlightenment. It also means the simple verb "to taste" which is thought of as having an appetite or passion for life. I wanted to try to re-explore that, because I studied that in art history in India and it left an impression in my mind.

I also studied some Indian dance when I was younger, very informally and just as a hobby. I studied Bharat Natyam and a little bit of Kathak. Bharat Natyam is a South Indian dance and Kathak is a North India Mughal dance. I had some good teachers, especially in Bharat Natyam, my teacher was this South Indian man who was a dancer himself. In his studio, I remember he had these wonderful photos of himself expressing the nine emotions of dance. These nine emotions are based on the same Rasa theory. So I remembered that and I made a series of nine masks portrayed in my blue face depicting the nine emotions of dance.



Improvisation #19 (Lila's Soul)
2011-2012, mixed media on vellum and museum board, 19 x 19 inches

EG: You have dancers you work with and you paint them blue for the performances. How did that come about?

SB: I studied Theater set design and the actors who act on the sets I designed have influenced my ideas in my painting process. I always wanted to paint actual dancers blue with body paint, and have them act and dance parts of the stories in my paintings. This came about with me working with Indian dancers and also modern dancers, who through this process of collaborating interpret my paintings through dance. It has become fun and energizing and very much a part of my art-making process. I have worked with wonderful dancers who look at my paintings, discuss with me about them, and show me through dance movement how they can visualize the story in that particular painting.

Improvisation #16
2011, gouache and mixed media on Mylar, 17 x 17 inches

EG: We talked a little bit already about the *Improvisations* and how you had found an artistic vocabulary that was your own and you were taking that and playing with it and just being free with it. There are similarities to your other work, but there is also a departure in terms of materials. There's a transparent quality to them that is really interesting and open. I'm interested in why you started using Mylar and vellum because you hadn't done that before.

SB: I came across this material called Mylar and I thought, "Ooh, colored pencils and paint, it takes it differently." So it was a fun medium to paint on. And then there was the transparency of it. You could put things underneath it and create a veiling effect, a kind of layering. My work is a lot about layering–layering of color to build up the richness, layering of imagery to build up the content.

So layering is very important in my work I think. When I build up color it's often many layers of pure color. I mix colors quite a lot, but I also use a lot of pure color, straight from the tube. But then it looks like it's mixed when you look at the final product. And that's because when I put a pure orange or a pure yellow down, to make it that really climactic, intense orange, I might have to put two layers of different yellows and one layer of another orange and then mix the yellow and the red to make a third orange and then layer it on top of that to be able to create the jewel-like tone.

EG: You also use layering in the Fulbright project, in a sense, because it's collage. Is that the first time you use collage? *Improvisation* seems sort of collage-like, but I don't know if it was actually collage.

SB: In *Improvisation* there's a little bit of collage in the sense that I had archival stickers made of my own work and then I put them underneath or in the work sometimes. But it is parts of my own paintings. I read somewhere that artist Nancy Spero also did some of this and called it "cannibalizing her art"! So I've taken a hand from one painting or a face from another and have made a totally different new painting. And then I've painted on top of that a totally new image.

In the Fulbright series there were all these photographs that I had taken during my research time in India and I didn't want to present the portraits just in their surroundings. I wanted to take the character out of the photograph and do the symbolism and mythology through collaging. So for the Indian Jewish bride, I had photographs of her hands and her face separately. I did the collaging on the computer, got it printed, and then I painted on top of that. I could again create that layering through collage and through paint.

EG: Why did you move towards photography in that project? Did you know you were going to do that or did it just become apparent when you were in India doing the project?

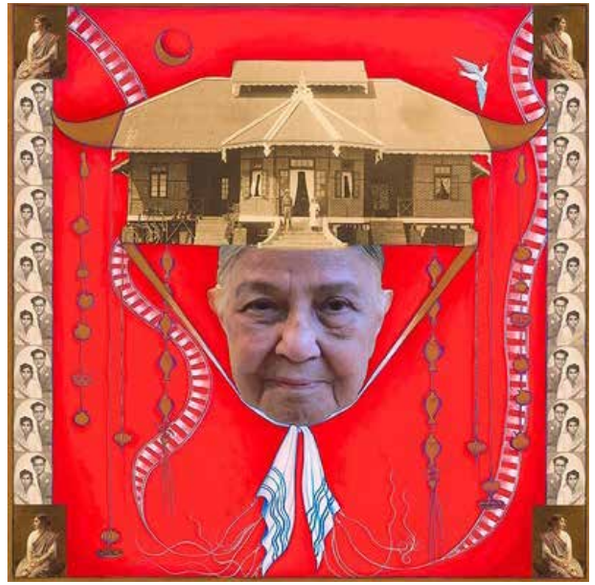
SB: I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. I knew that I wanted to photograph, but I could have taken photographs and done hand-painted portraits of each one of them from scratch.

EG: With *Finding Home* and your earlier work, you're exploring your heritage but a lot of it is also about your integration into the United States, about this back and forth between cultures. It seems like with the Fulbright project you purposely want to be pulled back to the community in India. So what drove you to explore that? Was it just a life moment, that you hit a certain age and you look back to your childhood and to your heritage? Or was there something else driving you?

SB: I think it's partly, yes, you hit a certain age and you want to go back and explore where you came from. And with the Fulbright, I got the opportunity and the grant to be able to do that. And now I have a second Fulbright coming up in Israel and I was happy to get that because it's like part two. Now I'm interested to see what happened to that culture, that person, that left motherland India and went to fatherland Israel. How did they integrate? How did they intermarry with other Jews maybe—or maybe not. And their children—are they re-intermarrying with other Jewish communities. And so how are their children going to be? It will be interesting to see.

Similarly when I went back to India for my first Fulbright I wanted to see what the remnant community of the 4,000 or 5,000 Jews left there was like. Are they the same as they were when I left India? What do they have to say now? What do their faces look like? I remembered how they were, but then I actually wanted to capture them and wanted to store them. I wanted to immortalize them so I could see if they were the same as I remember them.

It's so much about memory and loss, and about the different kinds of loss. It can be traumatic loss like the Refugees series I'm working on. But it also can be a traumatic loss because of other circumstances or because of people leaving voluntarily. People are always looking for answers of who they are or where they came from. What do they want to do? What is the purpose of life? That's of course the big question.



Molly (Milkha) Samuel David (Shahapurkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Lt. General Jack Jacob (and Pal Singh Gill, his assistant)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint
on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Diana Elijah (Pingle)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint
on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Moses Abraham (Phansapurkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic
paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

EG: And what did you find with the remaining community? Do you see a community that's dying out? You have a number of subjects in the project that are younger people—are they committed to staying in India or not? Did you come away with hope, with sadness, with regret?

SB: Definitely not regret. With hope and a little bit of sadness. Sadness on many levels—that I am not in that community anymore or that I had a good time with them and that was a part of my childhood that is gone. But with hope that there are still 4,000 or 5,000 Jews left there and they're still strong. They still believe. There's a flame of hope in their belief and I feel like their culture and religion should be celebrated because it's unique. Their food, and their way of behavior, and their wedding ceremonies. It's only when culture and religion is used as a weapon to highlight differences between people that there's a problem.

Salome Hyams Parikh (Mumbai)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint
on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Mozel and Monica Moses (Pugaonkar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint
on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

Karen Simon (Borgawkar), Indian Jewish Bride
2011, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint
on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

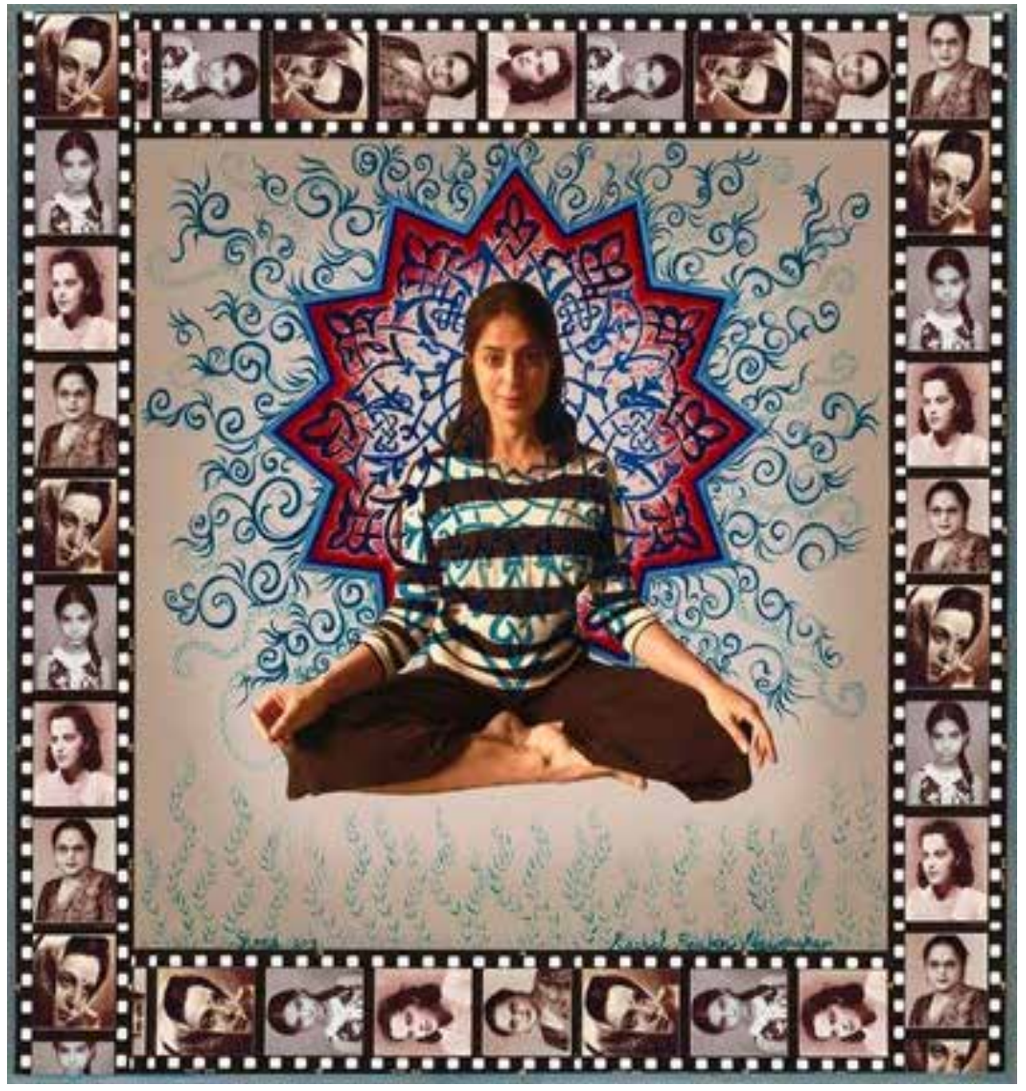
I have this beautiful black and white wedding photograph of my mother from the 1950s. She's wearing a white sari with gloves and a bridal veil; and under the gloves she has hennaed hands. It's such a mix of culture, it is so unique and different. And how wonderful is that?!!

EG: It's interesting how you did oral interviews with everyone and then you created the artwork. You're doing a sort of social history, as well as the art.

Abner Satkiel (Bhastekar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

SB: Yes, in that series you can say I'm an anthropologist, a historian, and an artist. It was a different form of expression. For my next Fulbright in Israel, I'll also interview my subjects because I want to know their stories. But I don't want to do photo collage paintings because I've already done that; so maybe I'll try lenticular prints or holograms. We'll see. Right now, I'm seeing overlapping faces, of father and son, mother and daughter for instance, to show what happened from motherland to fatherland. What were the changes? The overlapping of the two faces – what will that look like?

EG: Over the years, you've experimented with a lot of different techniques, like gold leaf and marbling. Were these things you learned in India or you've taught yourself over time?



Rachel Reuben (Nawgaokar)
2012-2013, photo-collage with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

SB: Technique is interesting for me. I don't claim to be an expert in some of the traditional techniques. I am not specifically trained in Indian miniature painting or Russian icon painting or gold leafing, for instance. I've had a hybrid training in Indian miniature painting. I studied it in my undergraduate years in Mumbai and I also have a teacher in Jaipur with whom I sometimes study. In graduate school, I studied the illuminated manuscript style with one of my American professors.

Exodus #5
2016, gouache and mixed media on museum board mounted on wood panel, 15 x 9 inches

I've learned the traditional techniques, but then I adapt them. I don't use natural pigments like my teacher in Jaipur does and I don't paint in little shells with gum Arabic as a binder. It's too tedious for my lifestyle over here. So I improvise. I use Holbein gouache, which is very beautiful and vibrant and has the most amount of pigment in it; and I use a certain kind of gel medium which is close to the gum Arabic. That allows me to build layers and not let the colors bleed into each other.

If you ask, "Are you a traditional Indian miniaturist or an illuminated manuscript painter?" No, I'm not. But yes, I am all of the above because I have had the good fortune of studying them all, along with Western painting, where I learned to work with large canvases and oil paint and to build up texture and explore color.

So my technique is a hybrid just like my identity.

EG: I'd like to end by talking about your newest work, *Exodus: I See Myself in You*. You've used the current refugee crisis as a jumping off point. Can you talk about how the project initially developed?

SB: The project actually started because I wanted to explore the concept of paradise. In Hebrew it's called "pardes" and I had touched on the idea of this in the *Four Mothers* project. But I wanted to look more at this idea of the perfection of paradise. We see paradise as perfect, but don't forget there's a lot of betrayal. There's the snake in the Garden of Eden. There is the eating of the apple. There is the expulsion of Adam and Eve and the forgotten myth about Lilith.

If you look at that mythology and also paradise stories from other cultures, you will see that it's not as perfect as it sounds. I wanted to explore the concept of paradise and not just talk about the perfection, but talk about the imperfections—to point that out so we are more grounded in our expectations when we look for paradise.

Then I started thinking about the Syrian refugee crisis and how they are also looking for their own paradise, their home. I wanted to use some connection to what's happening today. The refugees of today would serve as the characters in my work wanting to find their paradise. So that's how the idea began.

I thought it would be a wonderful story, with all the images flooding the news about the Syrian refugees—taking the inspiration from these news media photographs and then using them as the characters who are being expelled from their homes and at the same time wanting to find their paradise.

And what has expelled them? It's not the snake anymore. It's not their bad behavior. It is the circumstances of change. Who are we to act as gatekeepers? They are expelled from their home, their paradise, and they are searching for a new home. So in a way it's still tied into my *Finding Home* series.

EG: As an immigrant yourself, it seems obvious that would influence how you view this group of people being expelled from their paradise. Your story is not the same, of course, but you could say that you left paradise and found paradise.

SB: Yes, exactly. My home now is Montclair, New Jersey and when people visit they comment on how beautiful it is here. Maybe this project has made me realize even more clearly that my backyard and my surroundings are just so pretty. It has made me question if I could go back to that so-called paradise that I left behind and miss. Probably not. Maybe this right here is my paradise. But then we yearn for the paradise we have left behind or the one we want to find in the future. And why is that?

Exodus #1
2016, gouache and mixed media on museum board mounted on wood panel, 14 x 10 inches

Exodus #4
2016, gouache, 22K gold leaf and mixed media on museum board mounted on wood panel, 16 x 10 inches

Exodus #2
2016, gouache, 22K gold leaf and mixed media on museum board mounted on wood panel,
16 x 21 inches

Exodus portrait #8
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #35
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #2
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #20
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #15
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #21
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #25
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Exodus portrait #9
2016, pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Published on the occasion of the exhibit
Siona Benjamin: Beyond Borders

August 23–October 9, 2016
at the Opalka Gallery, The Sage Colleges, Albany, New York
and
March 4–April 15, 2017
ACA Galleries, New York, New York

Director and Curator: Elizabeth Greenberg
Exhibitions and Public Programs Coordinator: Amy Griffin

ISBN: 978-0-9858900-7-0

Publication design: Maureen Mooney, spaghetti + egg

Printed by Benchemark Printing, Schenectady, NY

Typset in Text: Corporate, Gills Sans **Title:** Vortex
Printed on Sterling Matte Text 100# and Sterling Dull Cover 130#

Cover: *Finding Home #88 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"* (detail)
2008, gouache and 22K gold leaf on wood panel, 37 x 20.5 inches