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Siona's Stories

Hybrid Artist, Whose Exhibit Opens Sunday In New Britain, Leads A Movement
Delivering Personal Narrative

By L.P. STREITFELD

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The hybrid art of Siona Benjamin has long been confined by categorization. A Bene Israel Jew born in India and living in America, she has been labeled a woman artist, a South Asian artist or a Jewish artist.

Yet starting Sunday, when "NEW/NOW: Siona Benjamin: Fereshteh" is celebrated at the New Britain Museum of American Art, she will be known as an American artist at the forefront of a new movement delivering personal narrative into the 21st century.

It is fitting that her painting "Finding Home No. 74 (Lilith)" will be unveiled at the institution that prides itself on being the first museum of strictly American art in the nation. The universal feminist icon (the mythical first woman, created by God at the same time as Adam, who refused to submit to Adam's will and left the Garden of Eden) marks Benjamin's dramatic change in style from her eclectic adaptation of Indian/Persian miniature painting to her idiosyncratic appropriation of the American Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip style. "Lilith" comes with an unequivocal message: Female power can no longer be denied. In fact, the details in this fiercely symbolic image call for female power to steer humanity away from its current path to destruction.

This declaration is an outward reflection of Benjamin's internal struggle. She has long engaged in the challenge of breaking through the limitations of borders to achieve public recognition as a trans-cultural artist. After a decade of fiercely painting her way through a theatrical narrative in which a multidimensional female character dramatically takes control of her power, Benjamin's first solo New York City gallery exhibition last fall attracted the attention of dumbfounded critics who didn't know where to place her. She slipped back into categorization this past winter with her appearance in "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now" at the Queens Museum of Art. Yet, this summer she will be in a Rutgers University-sponsored group exhibition celebrating the trans-cultural as crosscurrents in the mainstream.

The Asian background of this spectacularly talented immigrant uniquely positions her to set a standard for the transformation of personal stories into universal narrative. While many young artists are attempting to jump onto a movement that

has come from Asia through the Murakami-led Japanese breakdown of boundaries between high and low art, Benjamin is unique in having arrived at her universal art the hard way: externalizing introspection with intricately detailed personal self-portraiture.

Her complex characters are enriched by a highly developed use of symbols derived from a background in the Cabala and tantric art. Early work examined self-portrait, with skin painted blue to represent herself as a woman of color, along with American pop-culture figures such as Mickey Mouse and Madonna. "I'm glad they call it the New Britain Museum of American Art," she says, "because I am an American artist."

This American identification is woven into the threads of Benjamin's body of work. Her women are frequently branding their universal identity through the Stars and Stripes in the form of saris, aprons and sunglasses. Benjamin used her American passport as a backdrop for her figure representing herself in one painting. Benjamin's art establishes her American identity as a universal branding that transcends cultural boundaries. She has achieved this feat by forging a unique path integrating the force of her intellect (she has two masters degrees) with her extraordinary talent in figurative painting. Her art is, in fact, the result of plunging into this murky gray area to erase boundaries that confine ethnic women artists to a polarization that reinforces the prejudices that separate them from the mainstream. "It has been a double edge sword," she says of her heritage in relation to the art world, which has long categorized artists outside of the mainstream by their ethnic identity. She has found her universalism by exploring icons that were taboo in the Jewish tradition in which she was raised.

Her present triumph seems to come from breaking as many rules as possible. Not only did Benjamin persist in painting the figure when it was not popular to do so, she plunged into personal narrative when prominent feminist academics were equating female introspection with narcissism. She tossed off the prejudice against decorative art by creating ornate borders around her portraits, which now serve as camouflage to convey subtle messages in her narratives. She kept her intimate scale in defiance of the belief that a woman needs to demonstrate her ambition through the size of her canvases.

Benjamin has tackled her personal obstacles. Her recent series, "Fereshteh" ("angels"), examines female biblical characters in a Midrash (interpretation) of intricate paintings that collectively serve to integrate their ethnic identities into universal characteristics of the long repressed sacred feminine. These women reflect their maker in managing to do the impossible: reflect internal empowerment while placing their external gaze on such global threats as the destruction of the environment, terrorism and the persistence of the patriarchal hegemony. While united in their Lilith power of transformation, these Benjamin characters serve as aspects of an evolving self-portrait of a woman negotiating a space between the cultures that have forged her unique identity.

"My work is celebratory of my womanhood, my abilities, my strengths and my ambitions. After having struggled long with my own hybrid background and experience, I am beginning to see more clearly now that this blend can be humorous, enlightening and revealing," Benjamin says in a statement. "The ornate culture from which I came once seemed difficult and unnecessary to apply in my work. Now I have found a way to use it, to be able to weave current issues and parts of my life in its intricacies, thus making this ornateness strong and meaningful. In this way, I attempt to create a dialogue between the ancient and the modern, forcing a confrontation of unresolved issues."

Siona Benjamin's timely arrival as the latest member of the prestigious NEW/NOW tradition at the New Britain Museum of American Art marks a critical transition in which a major talent for the 21st century crosses the trans-cultural realm to claim her self-created universal identity.

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