

# Finding Home: The Worlds of Siona Benjamin

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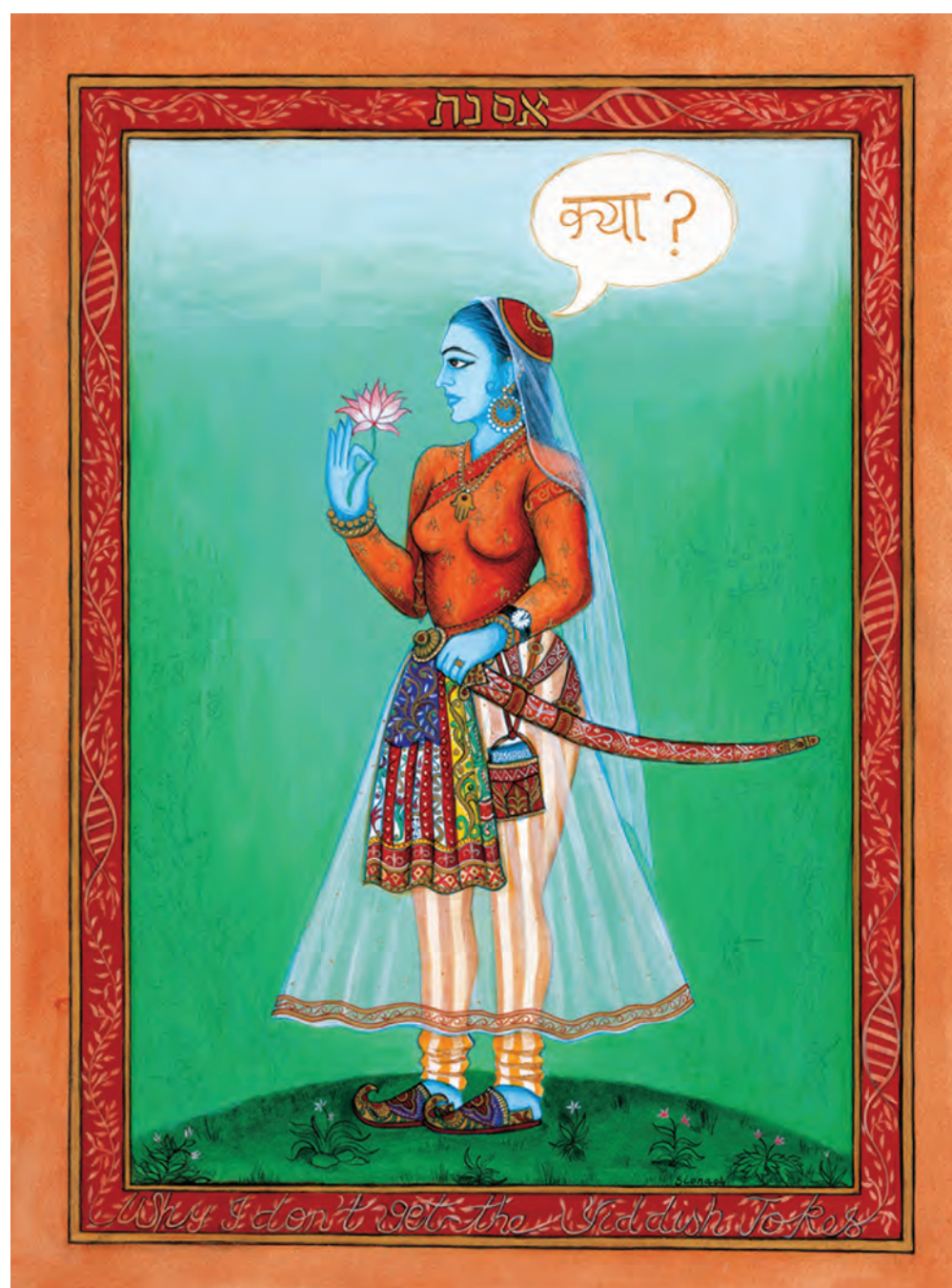


**S**IONA BENJAMIN'S ART IS A UNIQUE SYNTHESIS OF AESTHETIC AND CONCEPTUAL influences, both old and contemporary, from India, West Asia and America. One can begin to understand this by considering her biography, for her work is simultaneously personal and universal in its outlook. She was born in 1960 into the Marathi-speaking Bene Israel Jewish community of Bombay (Mumbai)—a complex Indian Jewish world. She grew up in a country dominated by often separate Hindu and Muslim cultures—a girl in a society still finding its way toward equal status for women—and attended Catholic and Zoroastrian schools. She came to America, lived first in the Midwest and then moved to New Jersey, very different locales within a country with its own still-unanswered questions regarding religion, gender, ethnicity and race.

Thus her art both draws from and defies the traditions of South Asian art, including Mughal, Rajput, and contemporary schools of painting in India and Pakistan. It engages the question of whether to define Jewish art as an expression of religion, ethnicity, nationality or culture. It encompasses feminist issues of acceptance and rejection, recognition and blindness within the male-dominated series of societies in which she has lived her life—as well as the Western-hegemonic feminist movements within those societies. It encompasses influences from Bollywood posters and American Pop Art.

### ***Fereshteh: Gender, Religion, Race and Otherness***

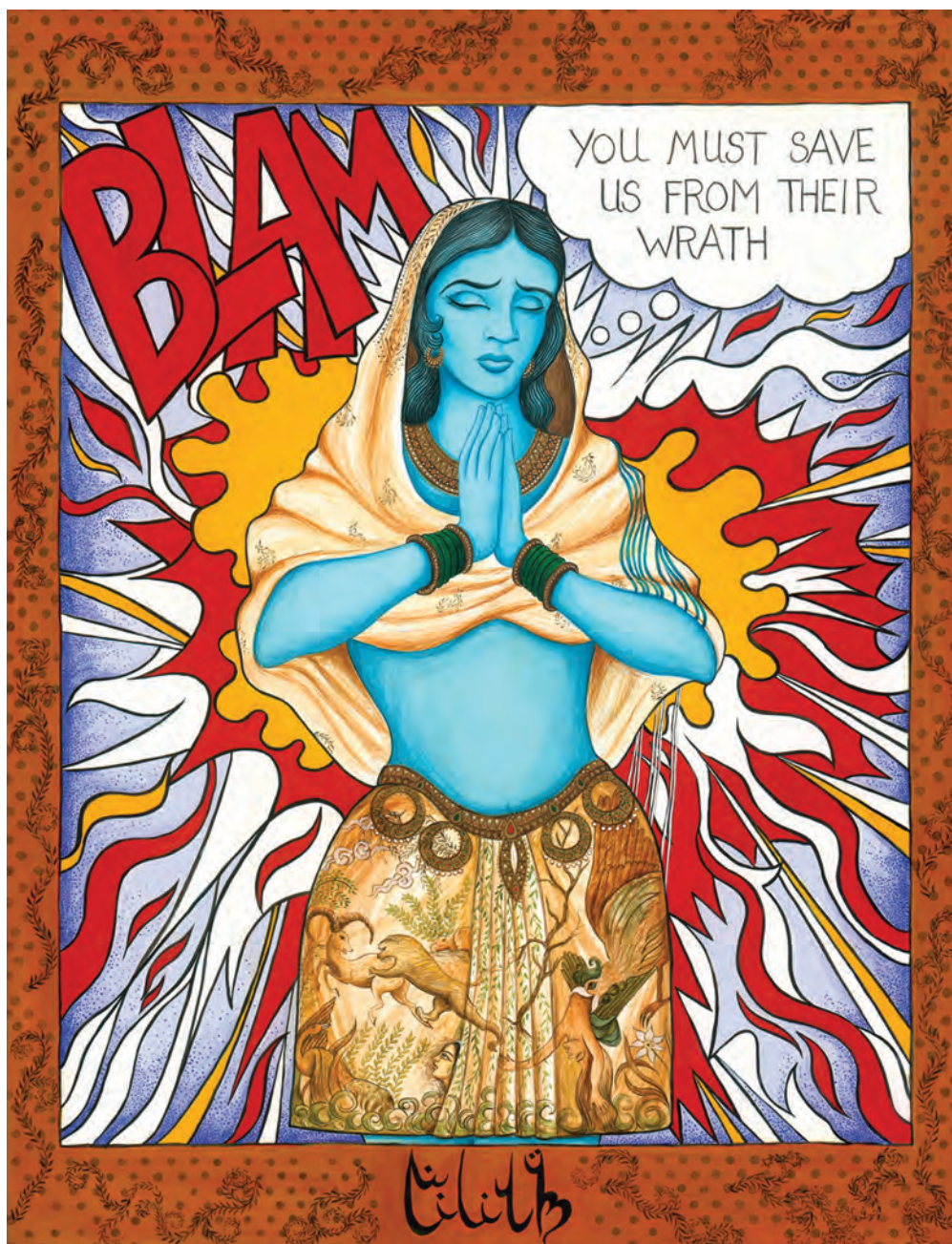
One group of works, begun in the late 1990s, is called *Finding Home*—a reflection of her ever-evolving ruminations on what the word “home” means. An extended group within these works depicts *Fereshteh*—“angels” in Urdu—and each of the primary figures in the series is overtly or covertly female. They are most often drawn from



**1**  
*Finding Home* #72  
(*Fereshteh*: “Miriam”), 2006.  
See figure 10.

**2**  
*Finding Home* #62  
(*Fereshteh*: “Asnat”), 2004.





the Hebrew Bible—either by way of the rabbinic interpretive tradition with its often phantasmagorical flights of fancy, or by way of her own interpretations, or both. That rabbinic literature has been mostly shaped by men, so its address of gender is an uneven one, although not always unsympathetic—but Siona adds a dynamic element of balance to that tradition.

Her *Fereshteh* figures have blue skin, like many Hindu deities, particularly Krishna. For Siona the colour does allude to Krishna,<sup>1</sup> but more to the sky and oceans that hover over and support all of us. Because of their blue skin, Siona's figures are associated with Krishna bhakti (devotion) and show broadmindedness with respect to religious perspectives and the embrace of paradox.<sup>2</sup> Since her blue-skinned figures are typically female, she has carried the idea of spiritual-diversity embrace to that of gender-diversity embrace.<sup>3</sup> Her heroines embody Ardhanarishvara, the composite image of the God Shiva and his female consort, Parvati. She has also synthesized the Hindu idea of Ardhanarishvara with the Jewish kabbalistic idea of the Shekhinah: the paradoxically female aspect of the genderless God that resides in both men and



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Finding Home #46  
("Tikkun ha-Olam"), 2000.



women when we are “gender-balanced” in our thoughts, words and actions. Moreover, she notes that skin colour, even within the context of feminist solidarity, often marks “otherness”. She explains: “Even well-intentioned Western feminists often direct a Eurocentric gaze at sexual practices and politics elsewhere in the world. I have noticed and experienced myself that [regarding] non-Western women...very often assumptions are made before we can open our mouths: ‘Do you speak English?’ ‘Are you educated?’ ‘Do you have our level of sophistication?’ ‘Were you timid, oppressed, uneducated before you came to live in the West?’” So even within the feminist world, race can offer an unwitting marker to those whose perspective is insufficiently global.

“Blue skin has become a symbol for me of being a *Jewish woman of color*” [italics added], Siona says, underscoring a triple perspective connecting the personal to the universal: religion, gender and race. For, “very often I look down at my skin and it has



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*Improvisations #14, 2011.*

turned blue. It tends to do that when I face certain situations of people stereotyping and categorizing other people who are unlike themselves.” Each of her figures is thus a kind of self-portrait even as her art is not about *her*, but about all of *us*. One of the things all humans share is a love of stories, and Siona’s images are bearers of stories—they entertain as they educate.

She weds her figures to emphatic background colour and geometric, vegetal and floral patterns that are part of Islamic—especially Persian—art. Her lavish use of gold-leaf to create spaceless space backgrounds for some of her works resonates from the world of Byzantine icons and medieval Christian paintings—as well as from the illuminated manuscript traditions within the Christian and Jewish European worlds. She is also conscious of and inspired by the bold Bollywood posters that plaster city walls in the country in which she grew up, the Amar Chitra Katha comic books familiar to her from her Bombay years, and the poster-sized comic-book moments re-visioned in the Pop Art associated with Roy Lichtenstein, in the country that she now calls home.

Works from her *Finding Home* series often reflect on biblical women. In one of her “Miriam” images—#72 (*Fereshteh*; 2006)—the sister of Moses dances at the centre of a web of multiple pasts and futures, her angel wings not only part of her figure, but repeated on the side panels—the wings—of the triptych of which she is a part (figures 1 and 10). By using the triptych form, Siona does what many Jewish artists have done over the last century: ask the question of where their art fits into the history of West-





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*Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives*—Maayan Abraham (Shapurkar), 2012–13.

ern art, which has been, for most of the past 17 centuries, Christian art. Within that tradition, the triptych is repeatedly used to symbolize God as threefold—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For Siona, the question is broader: where do I as a non-Westerner fit in? Where do I as a person of colour fit in? Where do I as a woman fit in? She weaves these together, placing her blue-skinned heroine in the heart of this gold-drenched, icon-like image that emulates centuries of Christian-styled devotion toward the God of love and mercy. Miriam, singer of God's praises (Ex. 15:20–21) and bearer of life (finder of water in the wilderness), is ambiguously both the spider—as a female, inherently suspect, inherently dangerous, inherently a seductress to the males interpreting God's word across history; and as a procreator of Jews, suspect as poisoners of wells and devourers of Christian children—and the fly, caught in the web of those hostile interpretations.

She is trapped, moreover, in a black blob of oil—signifying the troubled politics of West Asia. But we are all trapped: the image of Jonah in a fish on the left represents an American who was hanged several years back; and opposite him is a prisoner from Abu Ghraib, standing on a box, with a conical hat on his head and Christ's stigmata on his hands and feet.

Another subject in the series, “Asnat”—#62 (*Fereshteh*; 2004) (figure 2)—was the wife of the patriarch, Joseph, in Egypt (Gen. 41:50–52). The best-known rabbinic story



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*Faces: Weaving*  
*Indian Jewish Narratives—*  
 Daniel Elijah Benjamin  
 (Gadkar), 2012–13.

presents her as the daughter of the Egyptian overseer, Potiphar (whose wife tried to seduce Joseph). She is depicted by Siona in profile in the style of a Mughal imperial portrait in gouache and gold-leaf on paper. This “foreigner” in Joseph’s branch of the Israelite tree is identified by her name in Hebrew on the upper part of the painted “frame”. Interwoven with the decorative motifs along the lower part of that frame is the comment “Why I don’t get the Yiddish Jokes”—jokes in a European Jewish language as obscure to Jewish India as the Devanagari writing on the image is to European Jews. Siona spells out—in Devanagari—the Hindi word for “what?” in a comic-book-like bubble that begins to bring the world of Pop Art into that of the Mughals.

### ***Fereshteh: Destruction, Redemption and Repairing the World***

Destruction and redemption are central to Siona’s works devoted to Lilith.<sup>4</sup> These images also offer an emphatic meeting point between Benjamin and Bollywood on the one hand and Roy Lichtenstein’s signature Pop style on the other. Her 2005 *Finding Home #74 (Fereshteh)* offers Lilith’s name in Hebrew and a winged figure with a tallit<sup>5</sup> as a kerchief—one of its fringes dangling down toward the first *lamed* (Hebrew “L”) in her name—and a *hamseh* with an eye in its palm dangling furiously away from her neck. Such a classic Muslim amulet, frequently used also among Jews within the Muslim world, is just the sort of instrument that one might wear to be protected from de-





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*Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives—Esther Sukkur (Belkar), Sukkur Enock and Queenie Sukkur, 2012–13.*

mons like Lilith, and, particularly when adorned with an eye, to ward off the Evil Eye.

So Lilith, paradoxically, wears a protective amulet. She weeps hot tears. She has been pierced—at a point between her heart and her womb—by a bullet and bleeds. And she bellows, in a cartoon-style bubble: “A thousand years have I waited, keeping the embers of revenge glowing in my heart!”—alluding perhaps to that part of her divine punishment that would see one of her children destroyed every day for a thousand years and underscoring the angry aspect of those flames rising from her. If this Lilith is vengeful (who wouldn’t be, given her multiple wounds?) her 2006 sister (#75) is protective—of us, the descendants of her husband Adam and his second wife, Eve. In Siona’s image, Lilith’s name is written in English—but stylized as if it is Urdu (figure 3).<sup>6</sup> She raises her hands in a namaste gesture of prayer, her eyes closed and her brows drawn up in loving concern. The thought-bubble rising from her head begs: “You must save us from their wrath”—the wrath of the demons of division, hostility and violence within humans. Behind her, in pure Lichtensteinian fashion, the colours create a comic-book-style explosion, and red letters spell out the onomatopoeic word: “BLAM!”

In these and other images Lilith has become her Hindu divine counterpart, Kali or Durga: a consort of Shiva who personifies both creative and destructive forces. She is both awesome and awful. She embodies negative and positive forces, male and fe-



male divine forces, divine and human forces. Her very Hebrew name, “Lilith” (“night creature”), is by coincidence a pun on Sanskrit “lila”, the process through which reality is engendered.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, Siona Benjamin’s goal, aside from making beautiful art, is to use it as an instrument for being part of the process of *improving* the world, and not merely *observing* it. A small gouache and gold-leaf work on paper from the year 2000 in the *Finding Home* series (#46) is entitled “*Tikkun ha-Olam*” (figure 4). The title is a Hebrew phrase meaning “repair/fix the world”. It refers to the obligation of each of us to leave the world a better place than the one into which we were born. In Siona’s image, a traditional Krishna/Kali-like figure dances on a stylized lotus that is also a burst of light, her multiple arms raised upwards. There are seven arms—six extending from her two sides and a seventh directly from her head, all raised to the same precise height so that their termini—as stylized *hamseh* hands yielding to stylized flames—create of this figure a seven-branched menorah, the most persistent symbol in the course of two millennia of Jewish art. In the colourfully spaceless space within which this figure hovers, the words *tikkun ha-olam* are written—on one side in Hebrew, on the other side transliterated into Devanagari script. The two primary elements among the many aspects of the artist are held in perfect balance by a figure that is at once self-portrait and the portrait of everywoman—and everyman.

### Improvisations

In 2011 Siona 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—occupy the space. *Improvisation #14* offers a blue-skinned Indian woman in a sari, her left arm a blossoming tree branch; from the sari pallu held in her right hand, a tallit unfurls. She is echoed outside the “frame” by an armless figure: she is the pale, white marble-carved Venus de Milo, a Western art icon—wrapped in a sari that emulates the American flag (figure 5). It is a work, like its maker, with multiple, simultaneous identities.

Interestingly, the last half-dozen *Improvisations* begin to present kaleidoscope-like multiplications of the primary image—a stylistic element that leads directly into the visual vocabulary of the artist’s most recent series. The terrorist attack on the Chabad House—a Jewish outreach centre established by an Orthodox Jewish group whose roots are found in mid-18th-century Eastern European mysticism—in Mumbai in late November 2008, in which the young rabbi and his wife were among six people who perished, inspired Siona 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?”

This led Siona to seek (and receive) a Fulbright fellowship through which she came back to Mumbai and created a body of work, in 2012–13—photo-collages made from scores of photographs that she took while interviewing 65 members of the Jew-



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*Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives*—Daniel Rafael Joseph (Bhonkar), 2012–13.

ish community in Mumbai. She embellished these images with gouache and 22-karat gold-leaf to tell 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.

### Faces

“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. 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.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Faces* 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 into the outline map of India. To the lower left and right of the central image, the pattern takes the form of lotusbud-like hands that assume the mudras or gestures of Indian dance, but may also be recognized as repetitions of the hands of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, with whom Maayan also shares an enigmatic smile (figure 6).

Differently, the profile portrait face of Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkar)—who died shortly after he was interviewed—floats, skullcap (kippah) on his head, in a circle of gold-leaf that, in turn, like a Byzantine halo floats within Pune’s Succoth



Shelomo Synagogue interior, just above the pulpit (tevah). Beyond it, in the background, the Holy Ark (heychal) draws the eye, with its wine-red-with-gold curtain (parokhet) sporting a six-pointed star and the Eternal Lamp (Ner Tamid) hanging before it. Benjamin has inscribed the Hebrew letters in gold—swirling upside down and rightside up across the space, toward and from the central halo-medallion—of 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, their style a familiar part of her repertoire of abstract embellishments, dance to the right of the portrait along with four dove-like birds—peace symbols, their number the number of letters in God’s ineffable Hebrew name, but also universal symbols of the soul (for whom, according to the artist’s grandmother, we must leave breadcrumbs on our windowsills)—while the whitewashed floor of the impeccable interior comes alive through her brush in a watery blue patch in one corner (figure 7).

Some images offer more than one face. Esther Sukkur (Belkar) and Sukkur Enock are collaged in opposing profiles while Queenie Sukkur faces the viewer. They are all framed in an arched “window” over which the words “Elijah the Prophet” are written in Hebrew. (Elijah is particularly dear to the Bene Israel, who believe he ascended to heaven in his chariot from the site of Khandala in the Konkan.) The window is placed against a pale image of a dynamic Elijah whipping up the horses of his fiery chariot, an angel in attendance—but Siona has put the angel to work by adding, in bold, deep red, a blast of energy from its hand to the prophet’s upraised hand. Swirls of red continue downwards, to the abstract floral and geometric forms in the lower part of the image. The Image of Elijah, harbinger of the messiah, seen in many Bene Israel homes, is in turn “framed” by a tumbling progression of gods and goddesses—including Krishna, Shiva and the elephant-headed god of good fortune, Ganesh—and rishis or sages (figure 8).

The “frame” of the image of Daniel Rafael Joseph (Bhonkar) is, conversely, made up of 14 repetitions—twice seven—of his own face. The interior of the image offers a repeating collage of the photographic image of fish—grouped in seven “platterfuls”, with one fish vertically disposed as if standing on its tail, and thereby offering a kind of seven-branched candelabrum (each platter a branch, the single fish the stem) against a lush blue background (figure 9). Thus the image of plenty interweaves the universal history of seven as a symbol of completion and perfection, with the idea of the menorah that is the most frequent symbol in Jewish art across the millennia.

This image also recalls the seven-branched candelabrum of arms in Siona’s “*Tikkun ha-Olam*” image of 14 years earlier. Her work has not changed its original purposes or qualities, even as it has undergone continuous transformation over the decades: she entertains us with beauty as she educates us about the diverse and, for her, interwoven visual traditions that, like the sky in its blueness, encompass all human beings.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1 The word *krishna*, in Sanskrit, literally means “dark” or “black” or “dark blue”. Krishna is depicted early on as dark or black but eventually blue prevails as the pigment of choice in Hindu-tradition miniature paintings. The bhakti tradition refers to his pigment as “tinged with the hue of the blue clouds”.

2 If for Vaishnava Hindus, Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, for Krishna devotees—at least by the medieval period and the advent of the bhakti tradition—all gods, from Vishnu to Shiva to Brahma to Devi, are manifestations of the single, supreme godhead, Krishna.

3 The colour is also associated with some



female figures, notably Kali (and also with other male deities), but the image of Krishna is the most familiar and in any case Siona's intended referent.

- 4 Lilith is the Midrash-based first wife of Adam, who was able to fly and unwilling to be ground beneath her husband's dominating heel—for which she was not only exiled from the Garden (as Adam and Eve would be, one day) but subjected to millennia of cruelty. She also came to be viewed, in more popular Jewish legend, as a seductress (particularly of pubescent boys) and as a destroyer (particularly of babies).
- 5 A tallit is a Jewish prayer shawl traditionally worn only by men.
- 6 Urdu is very close to Hindi as a language, but is typically written in Persianized Arabic letters, whereas Hindi uses the Devanagari script it inherited from Sanskrit.
- 7 Shiva is also called Kala, meaning "eternal time" but also "black" and "death". Kali—often, like Krishna, blue-skinned in

traditional Indian art—is named from the grammatically feminine form of that word (and name). This Goddess is associated with many other aspects of divinity, including Durga. Durga means "invincible" and as an 18-armed aspect of Kali represents the warrior aspect of divinity. She embodies the combined energy of all the gods from whom she emerged, as part of divine lila. "Lila" means "play" or "pastime" or "sport", and refers to the notion that our world was created through the play of divine energy—and moreover, that the process of lila is a process defined by a perfect meeting of male and female opposites.

- 8 I am quoting from Siona Benjamin's Fulbright proposal.
- 9 A 30-minute documentary *Blue Like Me: The Art of Siona Benjamin*, directed and produced by Hal Rifken, premiered at the Indo American Art Council (IAAC) Film Festival in New York on May 8, 2015.

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*Finding Home #72*  
(Fereshteh: "Miriam"), 2006.