Finding Home: The Transcultural Worlds of Siona Benjamin

Ori Z. Soltes

THERE IS AN INTERESTING MIXED METAPHOR at the heart of artistic practice: art is the mirror through which the artist explores outside reality, but it is also a unique series of windows through which the astute viewer may peer. In Siona Benjamin's case, the worlds she has inhabited are so complex and layered that the richness of her experience along with her skills as a draftsperson and a colorist combine to offer a most unusual series of mirror-windows.

Benjamin's world is transcultural and transnational. Her art interweaves traditional with modern elements and offers a panoply of conceptual colors between the blacks and whites that too often define our visual limits. She comes to this multiplicity naturally, one might say. She grew up as a Jew in Mumbai, India, a city shaped by a composite of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian cultures—each with its own artistic sensibilities and each at times in conflict with the other—and attended schools that were variously Catholic and Zoroastrian. She belonged to the Indian Jewish community of Bene Israel from the coastal region of western India, whose history dates back over two thousand years and whose numbers, before recent emigration, made them the largest Jewish community in India, but who are lesser known in the West than, say, the Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, or Romaniote Jews.[1] She grew up in a culture where women were often denied respect. So, posing questions about gender boundaries and

Feminist Studies 38, no. 3 (Fall 2012).

definitions of culture was a key feature of her childhood. Within her family, she and her generation gradually dispersed, mostly to Israel and the United States, while her parents remained in India. She came to the United States, first to the Midwest and then to New Jersey, each region radically different from the other but both part of a country with its own historical problems of clarity and obscurity on questions of religion, gender, ethnicity, and race.

The referential locales in her art are thus multiple. Her painting falls into—and tumbles out of, bursts out of—the tradition of miniature painting, particularly that sponsored by the Mughals during their more than three centuries of rule (1526–1857) in the Indian subcontinent. It also draws from the Persian miniature tradition that fed into Mughal and non-Mughal Islamic art, as well as from the eighteenth-century Rajput (Hindu-based) art of northern India. Benjamin utilizes distinct aspects of Jewish art, drawing on and playing with its traditional symbolic language—such as the seven-branched candelabrum—as well as its varied interpretive approaches to biblical subjects and figures. Her work engages with feminist issues of acceptance and rejection, recognition and blindness within the series of male-dominated societies in which she has lived, as well as with the Western-hegemonic feminist movements within those societies.

The Hindu-based figurative aspects of her work are wedded to an emphasis on background color and Persian Muslim geometric, vegetal, and floral patterns. Her lavish use of gold leaf to create a sense of spaceless backgrounds for some of her works resonates with the world of Byzantine icons and medieval Christian paintings—as well as with the illuminated manuscript traditions within the Christian and European Jewish worlds. She is as inspired by the bold Bollywood posters that plastered the city walls and the Amar Chitra Katha comic books that were popular in the country in which she grew up as she is by the poster-sized comic book moments re-visioned in the Pop Art of Roy Lichtenstein in the country that has become her home.

Her subjects and her conceptual approach are often rooted in specific aspects of Jewish literature and the questions to which they give rise. As with so many—particularly Abrahamic—traditions, Judaism's texts have mostly been shaped by men, which means that the playing field of gender is uneven, although not always unsympathetic (Lilith's punishments, for instance, are both approved of and

decried as cruel.) Most often Benjamin combines issues, allowing each part to contribute to the totality in an unprecedented manner. One series, begun in the late 1990s, is called *Finding Home* and is a reflection of her ever-evolving rumination on the word "home" and its implications, particularly for an itinerant: What are the particulars through which we shape a dwelling into a home? The *Finding Home* series may be characterized as a tree with many branches. One of these branches contains several works collectively titled *Fereshteh* (meaning "angels" in Urdu) in which each of the primary figures is overtly or covertly female. The figures are most often drawn from the Bible—either by way of the rabbinic exposition of the underlying meaning of Biblical texts known as Midrash, with its often phantasmagorical flights of fancy, or by way of her own midrash, or both.[2]

A second branch (really a more particularized branch of the *Fereshteh* branch) focuses on Lilith, the midrashic first wife of Adam, who was able to fly and was unwilling to be ground beneath her husband's dominating heel. Her refusal to submit to her husband led to her being exiled from the Garden of Eden and subject to millennia of cruelty. She also came to be viewed, in popular Jewish legend, as a seductress (particularly of pubescent boys) and as a destroyer (particularly of babies).[3] Benjamin brings particular innovations to this narrative in her diversely visualized syntheses of Lilith as rightfully furious at the God who torments her and also as compassionate for humankind.

Many of her *Fereshteh* figures have wings—but not all (which proves that wings do not an angel make). They all have blue flesh. One recognizes this as an allusion to Krishna as he is often depicted in the Indian tradition: the eighth avatar of the God Vishnu, in human form.[4] In the complexities that define the diverse aspects of Hinduism, Krishna also functions as a divine guide in the text of the *Bagha-vad Gita*, in which he instructs the warrior Arjuna on both rough and fine points of divine and human reality and their interplay.[5] The use of blue skin for Benjamin's *Fereshteh*, as well as for figures in other works, associates the figures with Krishna and also with the more general Indian spiritual tradition of *bhakti* (devotional worship), which is characterized by broad-mindedness in religious perspective and an embrace of paradox. Importantly, the figures that the artist depicts are typically female, so she expands the idea of spiritual embrace to

encompass gender diversity. Ultimately, Benjamin has undercut, through the association of a skin color traditionally reserved most often for a male godhead, a male hegemony that associates God with maleness, whether visually or verbally.[6] Her figures become embodiments of what in Hinduism is referred to as *ardhanareeshwara*—a being that is half woman and half man; the composite image of Shiva and his female consort, Parvati. Benjamin's application of a skin color most popularly and familiarly associated with a male figure to a series of female figures forces the viewer who recognizes this allusion to stop and rethink whatever (s)he thought (s)he knew about these images. Benjamin has also connected the Hindu idea of *ardhanareeshwara* to gender-balancing tantric art images and to the Jewish kabbalistic idea of the *shekhinah*: the female aspect of the genderless God that resides in all of us—both women and men—when we are "gender-balanced" in our thoughts, words, and actions.

In addition, color can also imply race—and for Benjamin, skin color as a marker of Otherness exists even within certain feminist contexts. As she puts it, not only do "even well-intentioned Western feminists often direct a Eurocentric gaze at sexual practices and politics elsewhere in the world," but more broadly, "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?'"[7] So even within a certain elite feminist world, race can function to produce an ugly sense of hierarchy. She adds, "Very 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."[8] So each of these figures is also a kind of self-portrait—but with a universal resonance. They are ultimately not about *her*, but about all of *us*. One of the things we all share is our human love of telling stories: myth is universal, only its details differentiate one tradition from another. Benjamin's figures are bearers of myth, of story—they entertain as they educate.

Benjamin's images and their diversity

Benjamin's works underscore the fact that she has spent a lifetime finding diverse modes of home in different places under radically

different conditions (a Jewish girl in a Zoroastrian or Catholic school in a Hindu and Muslim community, and a Jewish immigrant woman of color in a country built by immigrants but still often hostile to them). But the matter of "finding home" is for her less a matter of moving from one physical place to another than about becoming comfortable with being part of diverse cultures and traditions and drawing from them to create one's art, not only as an aesthetic exercise but as a teaching instrument to future generations in a world where distant and diverse parts are increasingly proximate through technologies such as the Internet. For Benjamin, it is about being "a transcultural artist … able to change his/her colors according to the environment."[9] It is about being comfortable in one's own skin—a psychological metaphor that Benjamin has visually literalized.

Consider one of Benjamin's powerful and visually disturbing depictions of Miriam, Moses's sister, in a small, ten-by-seven-inch gouache and gold leaf work on wood panel, *Finding Home No. 73 (Fereshteh) "Miriam"* (2006). Miriam is best known for leading the joyful dances after the miraculous passage by the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds and also for finding the water in the wilderness. It was through Miriam's merit, according to a well-known Midrash, that God enabled a well of water to accompany the Israelites through the wilderness—in a rather striking contrast to her brother Moses.[10] The Midrash reminds us that Moses's overly zealous action of hitting the rock with his rod in order to bring forth water prevented him from coming into the Promised Land. But Miriam was virtually ignored in the traditional narrative of the Passover Seder. That omission began to change two decades ago with the advent of Miriam's Cup, a goblet that honors her, and that, filled with water, offers a female symbol of salvation to counterbalance the Elijah goblet that is filled with wine. Benjamin depicts Miriam with blue skin, like Krishna, and shows her wearing a sari. She reclines in a goblet, connected intravenously to both water and blood as life sources, and is surrounded by a grisaille mushroom cloud of human and animal faces that are both beautiful and hideous. One might ask: are these the faces of the people of Israel, present and future? Closer inspection suggests the faces of the destroyers—the Egyptians—swallowed by the sea, turned gray and rising as a distant, threatening mushroom cloud. Are they not *all* humans, though, Israelites, Egyptians, and others, potentially creative

and destructive, beautiful and ugly? Set in a field marked by dark-blue shadows, the goblet is surrounded and framed by vegetal and floral imagery, including lotus blossoms, which close at night and reopen in the morning, symbolizing the ongoing cycle of life, death, and rebirth that is a common theme in Indian culture and art.

Miriam is a character to whom Benjamin is drawn as an artist, and she has portrayed her several times in her *Finding Home (Fereshteh)* series. The artist, who wandered for many years before recognizing that her home is where she chooses "to pitch [her] tent" (as she put it in a conversation in New York City in May 2012) and shape her family, could hardly not be drawn to a leader who wandered for forty years in the wilderness, seeking the Promised Land. In *Finding Home No. 77 (Fereshteh) "Miriam"* (2006), the heroine carries a suitcase—the sort of suitcase that anyone might recognize as belonging to a ship-borne immigrant of a century ago (or an immigrant arriving into JFK airport today, for the story is as contemporary as it is ancient) with all of her/his Old World belongings and memories packed tightly, almost desperately, into it.

In a third "Miriam," *Finding Home No. 72 (Fereshteh)*, also from 2006, the sister of Moses dances at the center of a complex 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. By using the triptych form, Benjamin has done what a growing number of Jewish artists, particularly in Israel and the United States, have done over the last century: ask the question of where their art fits into the history of Western art, which has been for so many centuries largely Christian art. Within that Christian tradition, the triptych is a key visual element, its three components intended to symbolize a God that is threefold (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), with the redemptive Son inevitably at its center—either on his mother's lap or on the cross.

For Benjamin, as we have seen, the question is larger: Where do I as a non-Westerner fit in? Where do I as a person of color fit in? Where do I as a woman fit in? These questions are all woven into a singular tapestry by the artist, who places her blue-skinned, redemptive figure of Miriam—singer of God's praises,[11] bearer of life (finder of water in the wilderness), both the spider (female, inherently suspect, inherently dangerous, a seductress of men who interpret God's word again

and again across history, and an ancestor of Jews, suspected of poisoning wells and devouring Christian children) and the fly (caught repeatedly in the web of these hostile interpretations)—in the heart of this gold-drenched, icon-like image that so distinctly emulates centuries of specifically Christian-styled focus of devotion toward the God of love and mercy.

Other works from this same period in the artist's crowded oeuvre reflect on other women whose biblical stories, in their ambiguity, have necessitated intense rabbinic discussion in order to explain how acts—described in a text in which the words are ascribed, ultimately, to an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God—may have transpired. *Finding Home No. 62 (Fereshteh) "Asnat"* (2004) is one such work. Asnat was Joseph's wife in Egypt and bore him two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.[12] One Midrash discusses her as the daughter of Potiphar (whose wife tried to seduce Joseph, which got him thrown into prison, which led to him meeting the cupbearer of the Pharaoh, which led to him interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams, which led to him becoming prime minister, which led the Israelites to Egypt, which led to…). Benjamin depicts Asnat in profile, in the style of a Mughal imperial portrait, combining the image of Asnat-as-imperial-princess with a large sword and showing her wearing a skullcap reminiscent of the *kippah* worn by orthodox Jewish men. This Egyptian "foreigner" in Joseph's branch of the Israelite tree is identified by her name in Hebrew on the upper part of a painted frame. But subtly interwoven with the decorative motifs along the lower part of the painted frame is the phrase "Why I don't get the Yiddish Jokes"—jokes that would have been written in that Ashkenazi language and that were as obscure to Benjamin's Bene Israel upbringing in Devanagari (the Sanskrit alphabet used primarily for writing Hindi) as Hindi is to Ashkenazi Jews. In the same image, Benjamin uses Devanagari script to spell out the Hindi word for "What?" in a comic-book-like bubble that merges Pop Art with the art of the Mughals.

The other woman, besides Miriam, in the life of the adult Moses, who is also portrayed by Benjamin, is Tzipporah. A small 2005 gouache and gold leaf on paper work titled *Finding Home No. 76 ("Tzipporah")* depicts her as another non-Israelite "foreigner," like Asnat. Moses encountered Tzipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest, while in exile from Egypt in the aftermath of his killing an

Egyptian taskmaster who had been beating an Israelite slave. Benjamin has wafted her Tzipporah into the middle of the image; her left arm, wrapped in phylactery straps, is pierced at the shoulder by a phantasmagorical bird.[13] Is it a Persian *tawus* (a peacock-like bird) or is it a hoopoe who leads the flock of thirty birds that arrive to their Maker, the *Simurg*, at the end of Attar's *Conference of the Birds*? Or is it the brilliantly-colored, benevolent *Simurg* itself, of which there is only one, like the Egyptian and Greek Phoenix, like the Russian Golden Cockerel, like the Slavic Firebird (every tradition has its own mythological bird of some sort)? Does the bird inflict the wound? Or is it gently and protectively removing Tzipporah from the battlefield below? For one may discern there the shadowy figure of a soldier, his rifle raised to his shoulder, aimed at hers. If she is lifted above the bloodshed as she bleeds, she lifts *herself* up, for her name, Tzipporah, means bird (*tzippor*) in Hebrew.

Ambiguities drive the symbolic language of Benjamin's work, and they reflect both the range of her personal experiences as well as her sense of the world as fraught with ambiguity. Nowhere is this clearer than in her tiny (eight-by-six inch) 2006 *Finding Home No. 84 (Fereshteh) "Abraham."* The hooded figure depicted leading a horned animal would traditionally evoke the patriarch of three very patriarchal religious traditions, who fulfilled the divine commandment to offer his son to God. In the typical story, Abraham's wife Sarah is notoriously left out: Abraham takes their son off to sacrifice him, and the next we hear of Sarah is her death. In Benjamin's rendition, Abraham is invisible—completely obscured by the shadow of a cloak. So one might ask: Is this really Abraham? For it may be that Benjamin is depicting not Abraham himself, but a midrashically imagined adjunct to the biblical story and its rabbinic interpretations. This is, after all, one of the Fereshteh series. Might it not be a veiled Sarah-as-angel within the story of Abraham who is leading a ram—or as the case may be, a cognate sort of animal, like a mountain goat—to be sacrificed? Could she not be the very angel whose voice cries out to Abraham not to slay their beloved son whom he was willing to offer so unhesitatingly to his God, without a word of question or protest? Could it be she who looks mysteriously over her shoulder at us, her blue hand and lower arm visible, reaching out from her robe, as blood-red drops fall from the sky? Is this a feminized presentation

Finding Home No. 84 (Fereshteh): "Abraham" (2006)
Gouache and gold leaf on paper, 8 × 6 inches.

Finding Home No. 77 (Fereshteh): "Miriam" (2006)
Gouache and gold leaf on paper, 15 × 12 inches.

Finding Home No. 76 (Fereshteh): "Tzipporah" (2005)
Gouache and gold leaf on paper, 15 × 12 inches.

Finding Home No. 62 (Fereshteh): "Asnat" (2004)
Gouache and gold leaf on paper, 14 × 10 inches.


אמנת
क्या ?
Why I don't get the Yiddish Jokes

Finding Home No. 46: "Tikkun ha-Olam" (2000)
Gouache and gold leaf on paper, 11 × 9 inches.

Finding Home No. 73 (Fereshteh): "Miriam" (2006)
Gouache and gold leaf on wood panel, 10 × 7 inches.


רבה

מר

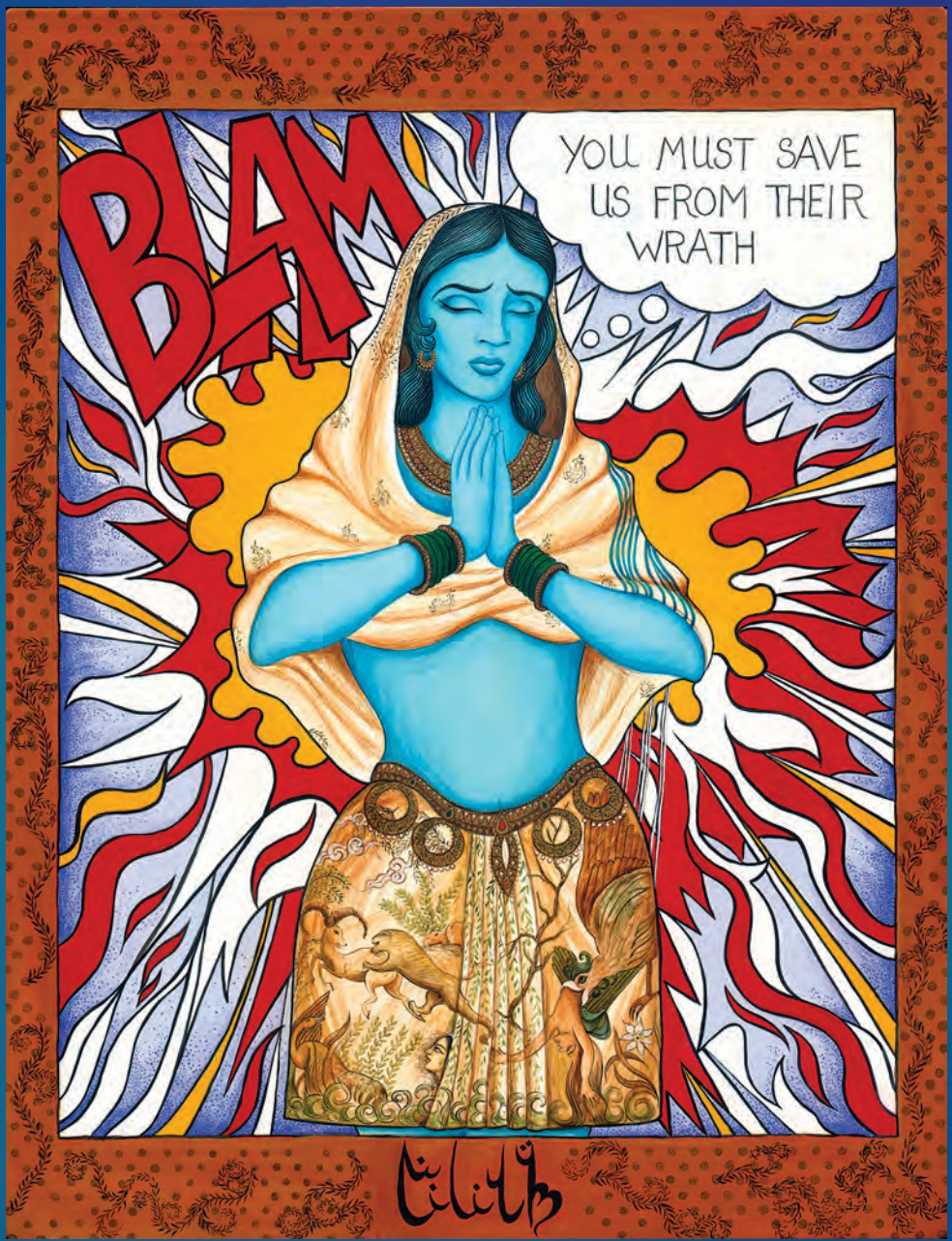
רוסף

PREVIOUS PAGE *Finding Home No. 72 (Fereshteh): "Miriam" (2006)*
Gouache and gold leaf on wood panel, 18 × 15.3 inches.

OPPOSITE *Finding Home No. 79 (Fereshteh): "Ishq" (2006)*
Gouache, gold leaf, and digital image on paper, 22 × 22 inches.


NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2003
A17
for Targets and Arms
exit
enter
what's the timetable
what's the plan?
Military Forces
IRAQI
U.S.
BRITISH
Army
Repub. Guard
Marine Corps
interval
100 miles
abandon ship
go back
get out now
SAUDI ARABIA
exit
lilith

Finding Home No. 74 (Fereshteh): "Lilith" (2005)
Gouache and gold leaf on wood panel, 30 × 24 inches
(painting size). Mixed media installation size: 75 × 58 inches.



Finding Home No. 75 (Fereshteh): "Lilith" (2006)
Gouache and gold leaf on wood panel, 30 × 26 inches (painting size). Mixed media installation size: 12 × 10 feet.

Lilith's Lair and Other Stories of Deception (2011)
Gouache and mixed media on museum board.

Finding Home No. 82 (Fereshteh): "Joseph" (2006)
Gouache and gold leaf on museum board, 22 x 17 inches.

All images courtesy of the Siona Benjamin and Flomenhaft Gallery New York.

of Abraham-as-perfectly-balanced-and-expressed-by-Sarah, through which Benjamin explores the notion of an ideal male-female balance?

The notion of reaching across obvious gender lines is not limited to Benjamin's depiction of Abraham. Another 2006 image *Finding Home No. 82 (Fereshteh) "Joseph"* focuses on a male who is singled out in the text of the Torah for his physical beauty.[14] Joseph exhibits stereotypical male and female character traits. He begins as a spoiled, narcissistic child whose dreams are about his own glory—and he plays with the fears of his siblings years later, when he has them in his power, before revealing himself to them—all qualities that one might stereotype as male. But by the end of his story, after the death of his father, Jacob-Israel, he has recognized not only that God has been behind his enormous success, but more importantly, that his entire story had not been about *him*, but had been divinely guided "to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."[15] The practice of assigning credit elsewhere—the unassuming partner who beams at her husband's successes, without pointing out that he would have had no success without her—might be called stereotypically feminine behavior. One might say that Joseph eventually found his feminine side. Benjamin's Joseph is quite beautiful in an almost girlish way, with long, dark hair, thick with curls, some of which spill out of his coif and down his blue-skin cheeks as he looks back over his shoulder winsomely, hurrying away from us. Joseph wears a rich coat-like garment—not one of many colors, but one the heavy silkiness of which one can palpably feel, overrun in an almost grisaille manner with images of faces and figures: a kind of cross between a hunting carpet pattern out of Persia or India and the large cloud array that arises behind the goblet of Miriam in *Finding Home No. 73*. The coat is spread out like a dress whose feminine wearer has just turned suddenly, with a flourish. Within the painting are the Hebrew letters aleph, shin, and kuf. The letters spell out the Urdu word *Ishq*, meaning "Divine love"—not everyday love or passion, but God-derived love of the sort that Joseph came to understand had enveloped him even when his brothers hated him or Potiphar's wife sought to destroy him. Five elaborate golden monochrome knives with long blades decorate the frame, their points directed in toward Joseph. Their number alludes to the number of books in the Torah (the text in which Joseph's story is told and that connects Israel to God). This is also the number of wounds

in Christ's body (blood drips from a horizontal beam across the upper right of the painting) and also of the pillars of Islam. In other words, this very number is a connector among all three Abrahamic traditions for whom Joseph is an important ancestral figure.

A different sort of "ancestor" is Lilith, upon whom Benjamin repeatedly focuses. Her *Finding Home No. 74* and *No. 75 (Fereshteh) "Lilith"* might be viewed as dark and light siblings, because they offer two different responses to the suffering to which Lilith is said to have been subjected through the millennia. *Finding Home No. 74* depicts Lilith's name in Hebrew and a winged figure wearing a *tallit* (a Jewish prayer shawl traditionally worn only by men) 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. This classic Middle Eastern amulet (*hamsa*, in Arabic, meaning "five") is an ancient symbol of protection and is believed to ward off the evil eye. It was adopted by North African and Middle Eastern Jewish communities who renamed it "Miriam's hand" and is just the sort of instrument that one might wear around one's neck for protection from "demons" such as Lilith.

So this exquisite Lilith, paradoxically, wears a protective amulet. She weeps hot tears. She has been pierced—at a point between her heart and her belly—by a bullet and bleeds from that gaping wound. Waves of flame rise up from her—both 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 relationship with God, just as round plates of gold behind the heads of Christian saints signify that connection for them. Benjamin's Lilith bellows, in a cartoon-style bubble, "A thousand years have I waited, keeping the embers of revenge glowing in my heart!" Is she alluding perhaps to that part of her divinely administered punishment that would see one of her children destroyed every day for a thousand years?

If this Lilith is vengeful (who wouldn't be, given her multiple wounds?) her sister image (*Finding Home No. 75*) is protective—of us, the descendants of her husband, Adam, and his second wife, Eve. Her name is written in English—but stylized to create the feel of Urdu.[16] She raises her hands in a *Namaste* gesture of greeting, her eyes are closed and her brows drawn up in loving concern; the thought-bubble

that rises from her head begs "You must save us from their wrath." Whose wrath? The wrath, surely, of the demons within us, demons of division, hostility, and violence. Behind her, in pure Lichtensteinian fashion, bright colors create an intense comic-book-style explosion, together with the bold red letters that spell out the comic-book word for an explosion: "BLAM."

Yet another Lilith in the *Finding Home* series is not actually called "Lilith," but rather, "Ishq": *Finding Home No. 79 (Fereshteh) "Ishq"* (2006). We recognize the figure that leaps before us, pinwheel-like—her head thrown back and her eyes nearly closed, as if both dancing and dying simultaneously—as Lilith (the wound in her side still dripping blood and now sprouting foliage) from the English-styled-as-Urdu name along the bottom of the image. But the title of the work, "Ishq," is inscribed in the image itself in *Devanagari* script. *Ishq*—divine or powerful love—is a word that Benjamin uses as part of the instrumentation through which she connects tradition to modernity not in terms of art but in terms of human issues. "Yesterday's wars are still fought today, recycling the same problems, the same anxieties and dilemmas," she writes. "Nothing seems to have progressed.... 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*."[17] This particular Lilith asks the question of whether we are worthy of divine love or even whether we have a real desire for human love by placing her Lilith figure, splayed as she is in mid-flight, across a sand-colored backdrop on which a map of the Middle East is drawn: not any map, but a military map with strategic commandments, plans, and objectives specifically regarding Iraq. We can readily enough discern the context: the second invasion of Iraq, begat by lies to the American people from their highest leaders in a profound perversion of the American dream; the distortion of a republic into an imperialist nightmare.

There is another interesting aspect of this work. The splayed form that Lilith takes may be readily recognized as that of an equilateral cross known as a *swastika*. The word is pure Sanskrit: *sva* (*su*) means "good," *asti* means "to be," and *ka* is an intensifier. So the word means "extreme well-being." The symbol may be traced back, in India where it originated as a good luck ornament, to at least 2500 BCE. It remains widely associated with Indian religions, primarily Hindu, mainly as a

tantric symbol invoking *shakti* (auspiciousness). The appropriation and transformation of the swastika by the Nazis—whose rise wreaked such worldwide havoc—adds another layer of interest to this Lilith.

From past to present and Future

With the passage of time, and her own life's transitions—marriage to a man from Connecticut of Eastern European descent and family life in Montclair, New Jersey, with a daughter considering the myriad college choices in the US educational garden of paradise—Benjamin's art has continued to evolve. Her extended 2010–2011 *Improvisations* series is often less stridently colored than her previous work and often includes the use of pencil, Mylar, and other mixed media along with gouache. Familiar subjects are transformed by additional media, as in her 2011 *Lilith's Lair and Other Stories of Deception*. This brightly colored, large piece incorporates mixed media elements with gouache. And it turns her attention once again to the "Lilith" theme and to the triptych form with all of its implications for a Jewish artist working in the cultural West. It is a self-reflective work in a new, deliberate way.

Among the components in the central panel of the triptych is the repeated image—seven times, in small photo-collage format—of the Miriam-with-suitcase from her 2006 *Finding Home No. 77 (Fereshteh) "Miriam."* This figure also appears, in a slightly larger version, floating away along the right-hand panel of the triptych. The centerpiece of the central panel is a large self-portrait against a golden halo-like circle that recalls, in format, a 2006 work, *Rasa*, that depicts nine moods or "masks" of traditional Indian dance.[18] *Lilith's Lair* is, in fact, intensely focused on dance—appropriate considering the culture of Benjamin's origins, rich in dance and where not only does every gesture, every *mudra*, have symbolic significance but where the very gods (particularly Shiva and Krishna) are repeatedly portrayed as dancing, both to bring the world into being and to maintain it. It is also appropriate to the revisioned direction into which Benjamin has moved her art in some of its most recent manifestations. In a dance program first performed in 2008 called *Rang de Nila* ("Color Me Blue") she collaborated with five dancers—Nicole Sclafani, Pranita Jain, Bhavani Lee, Dina Denis, and Ishrat Jahan—who assumed personae and choreographed roles extracted from characters in her paintings.

Ultimately, Benjamin's artistic purpose, aside from making lush, beautiful works, is to use art 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 2000—*Finding Home No. 46* "*Tikkun ha-Olam*"—offers a concise statement of that purpose. *Tikkun ha-olam* is a Hebrew phrase meaning "repairing/fixing the world" that refers to the obligation that each of us has to leave the world a better place than the one into which we were born. Benjamin's art seeks to "dip into [her] own personal specifics and universalize, thus playing the role of an artist/activist," and uses imagery drawn from diverse traditions as instruments of mutual inclusion toward that end.[19]

In the image "*Tikkun ha-Olam*" a traditional Krishna/Kali-style figure dances on a stylized lotus that is also a burst of light, her multiple arms raised upward. She has seven arms, each ending in a stylized *hamseh* hand yielding to stylized flames, that take the shape of a seven-branched menorah, the most persistent symbol in Jewish art history. In the colorfully spaceless space within which this figure hovers, to one side the words "tikkun ha-olam" are written in Hebrew; on the other side they appear again, transliterated into *Devanagari* script. The two primary parts among the many sides of the artist and her multiple worlds are held in perfect equilibrium by a figure that is at once self-portrait and the portrait of everywoman—and everyman.

Given that it is an amalgam of so many different categories and components, one clearly cannot define Benjamin's work in simple terms. It transforms *portions* of those categories and components and challenges *all* of them in creating a separate whole. Her work refashions an array of traditional forms of art in their styles, subjects, and symbols in order to undercut a range of commonly held concepts regarding gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. She thus undercuts the very concept of definition—which means to "draw a boundary around"—and adds a lush chapter to the history of art as she shapes her own distinct new world.

Notes

1. Even within India itself, the Judeo-Marathi-speaking Bene Israel Jews of Mumbai are historically distinguished from the Judaeo-Malayam-speaking Jews of Cochin—and from the later-arrived Jews of Goa and Cochin.

2. "Midrash" comes from a Hebrew-language root, *d-r-sh*, meaning "to dig beneath the surface"; midrash digs beneath the surface of certain biblical texts, seeking deeper meanings.
3. The word "*lilitu,*" translated into "Lilith" in Isaiah 34:14, is a hapax legomenon in the Hebrew Bible (meaning that it appears only once), and its meaning is less than obvious. It appears several times in the Dead Sea Scrolls and three times in the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud. But it is in the anonymous, medieval text *Alphabet of ben Sira* that begins a serious elaboration of Lilith as Adam's first wife, her refusal to submit to him, and her exile and punishments. She is also discussed in the Kabbalah and in later *Aggadic* (Jewish oral history) traditions.
4. The word *krishna*, in Sanskrit, literally means "dark" or "black." 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 blue.
5. If for Vaishnavite Hindus, Krishna is merely an avatar of Vishnu, for Krishnaite Hindus—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. But Vaishnavite and Krishnaite devotees neither disavow the legitimacy of each others' spiritual emphases nor (for the most part) make war with each other—or with other Hindu groups—based on religion.
6. The color is also associated with some female figures, notably Kali (and also with other male deities), but the image of Krishna is by far the most popular and familiar and in any case Benjamin's most particular referent. Benjamin has also commented in several conversations—the most recent, in New York City in May 2012—on the symbolic importance for her of blue as the sky color: a universal sky shared by everyone.
7. Siona Benjamin speaking to an audience at the Morris Museum, New Jersey, May 21, 2007.
8. Siona Benjamin from a lecture given on April 7, 2007, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.
9. Ibid.
10. For more on the well that followed Miriam in the desert, see the Midrash Numbers *Rabbah* 1:2.
11. Exod. 15:20–21.
12. Gen. 41:50–52.
13. Phylacteries are small black leather boxes containing parchment inscribed with Torah verses, and phylactery straps (like those depicted) are used to strap the boxes to the upper arm and forehead of observant Jewish males during morning prayers.
14. Gen. 39:6–7.

15. Gen. 50:20.
16. Urdu is typically written in a modified version of the Persian alphabet, itself adapted from Arabic letters.
17. From Benjamin's remarks made at an artist's reception on November 3, 2011, in conjunction with the exhibition *ISHQ: Paintings by Benjamin* in the Bernstein Gallery of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University (October–December 2011).
18. Indian classical dance, and indeed aesthetic theory, is structured around nine emotional essences called *rasas*, which represent the moods that art can evoke in its audience. They are codified in the ancient text *Natyashastra* by Bharata.
19. This statement was made in the context of the September 15, 2011, opening of Benjamin's exhibit *My Magic Carpet* at Flomenhaft Gallery, New York City.