

For Solo exhibition catalog: “Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives” at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (Prince of Wales Museum) in Mumbai India. (Sept 30 - Oct 20 2013)

Pitching One’s Tent: Faces within the Indian Jewish Narrative

Siona Benjamin’s most recent work, which has grown out of a Fullbright project, offers imagery consistent with her paintings throughout her distinguished career. Her world is transcultural and transnational. She grew up as a Jew in India, in a Mumbai predominantly divided between Hindu and Muslim cultures, and she attended schools that were variously Catholic and Zoroastrian. Even as a Jew she comes from a tradition within an array of diverse traditions—a Bene Israel, not a Sephardi or Ashkenazi or Mizrahi or Romaniot.¹ She also grew up as a girl in a culture still finding its way toward healthy treatment of women.

So her childhood made the interweave of diverse threads of tradition into a colorful tapestry—and the asking of questions regarding definitions and boundaries—an inevitable part of her reality. She and her generation gradually dispersed, mostly to Israel and to America, while her parents remained in India. She came to the American Midwest and then to New Jersey, both locations part of an America with its own still-unanswered questions of regarding diversity of religion, ethnicity, gender and race.

Her painting reflects her own diversity: the tradition of Indian and Pakistani miniature painting, particularly that sponsored by the Mughals, but also the Persian miniature tradition that fed into Mughal art as well as non-Mughal Islamic art and also 18th-century Rajput—Hindu-based—Northern Indian art. She engages distinct aspects of Jewish art and encompasses feminist issues of acceptance and rejection, recognition and blindness within the male-dominated series of societies through which she has lived her life—as well as 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 geometric, vegetal and floral patterns that are part of Muslim—and in particular Persian and Ottoman Turkish Muslim—art. Her lavish use of gold leaf to create non-perspectival 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

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, to say nothing of those from Iraq.

European worlds. She is as conscious of and inspired by the bold Bollywood posters that plaster the city walls in India—and the Amar Chitra Katha comic books recalled from her Mumbai years—as she is of the poster-sized comic book moments re-visioned in the Pop Art of Roy Lichtenstein and the often enormous photo-realist portraiture of Chuck Close, in the America that has become her home.

This recent series is filled with *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives*. It records a world fast disappearing. Benjamin photographed more than sixty individuals from the Bene Israel community who derive from varied walks of life. She explores their reality and celebrates their diverse interior worlds by embedding those photographs within larger visual contexts in which she has digitally reproduced the photos and painted over or around them. The mixture of media may be seen as a metaphor for mixtures of identity. Media mixture also reinforces the merging of ancient and modern elements that articulate her theme.

As much as that theme pertains to elements of interwoven identity, the underpinning for it is the question of *home*. If, for the American poet, Robert Frost “home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in,” Benjamin some time ago realized that, for her, home is “wherever I pitch my tent.” A series begun in the late 1990s, and included in this exhibition, is indeed called *Finding Home*—reflections on the word “home” and its implications, particularly for an itinerant: what are the particulars through which we shape a dwelling into a home? For the matter of “Finding Home” is not only a matter of moving from one physical place to another. It is about being 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. It is about being (in the artist’s words) “a transcultural artist... able to change his/her colors according to the environment.” It is about being comfortable in one’s own skin—a psychological metaphor that Ms. Benjamin has literalized visually.

One subset series of *Finding Home* is *Fereshteh*—the word means “angels” in Urdu—and each of the primary figures in the series is overtly or covertly female. They are most often drawn from the Bible—typically either by way of the rabbinic interpretive tradition with its often phantasmagorical flights of fancy or by way of her own interpretations—or both. Krishna is evoked by the use of blue skin for Siona’s *Fereshteh* as well as for figures in other works: they become associated with *bhakti* (love and devotion) and with broad-mindedness with respect to religious perspectives and the embrace of paradox.

On the other hand, the figures that the artist depicts are typically female, so she has carried the idea of spiritual embrace to that of gender-diversity embrace. Ultimately, Benjamin has undercut, (through the association of a skin color traditionally reserved most often for a male godhead), the

implications of legitimizing male hegemony through associating God with maleness, whether visually or verbally. Her figures become embodiments of what in Hinduism is referred to as “*Ardhanareshwara*”—a being half woman and half man: the composite image of Shiva and *his* female consort, Parvati.

Her application of a skin color most popularly and familiarly² associated with a male figure to a series of females forces the viewer who recognizes this coloristic allusion to stop and rethink whatever (s)he thought (s)he *knew* about these images. She has also synthesized the Hindu idea of *Ardhanareshwara* 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 men and women—when we are “gender-balanced” in our thoughts, words and actions.

One of the things we all share in common is our human love of telling stories: myth is universal, only its details differentiate one tradition from another. Siona’s figures are bearers of myth, of story—in the case of *Faces*, they offer a narrative of the community into which she was born, each of whose members has a story to tell.

Eddna Samuel (Akshikar) is a businesswoman and a single mother. She is portrayed as young and dynamic, dressed in contemporary versions of traditional Indian clothes and pulling back on a golden bow, her arrow released into a thicket of stylized vegetation that echoes but is different from both the circle of vegetal and floral forms upon which she stands and, in a manner distinctly recalling Islamic style (particularly Ottoman Turkish style), stylized vegetal forms repeat in yet another pattern within the interior of the six-pointed star that forms the center of the image.

Eddna’s figure repeats in a perfect circle, nine times—a number with layers of symbolic significance, from human pregnancy to the nine dragons in Chinese symbolism to the nine bows in Egyptian symbolism; from the nine muses of ancient Greek thought to the nine chivalric heroes of Medieval European thought to the number of players on an American baseball team. Of course, the number 9 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, together with its written form, originated on the Indian subcontinent perhaps 5,000 years ago.

Mozel and Monica Moses (Pugaonkar) are a mother and daughter who, in Benjamin’s image, are embraced by a deep sky blue in which the pale grisaille image of the Taj Mahal hotel is embedded at an angle, with fire emerging here and there from its windows. The entire image is framed in a

² 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 Siona’s most particular referent. She has also commented on the symbolic importance for her of blue as the sky color: a universal sky shared by everyone.

stylized series of waves of flame in light and dark orange—recalling the fact that Monica’s father was a fire fighter honored by his country as part of the team that helped save the hotel—a jewel of Mumbai sophistication, with its combination of Islamic and European stylistic elements—at the time of the 2008 terrorist attack on it.

Abner Satkiel Bhastekar was a Bollywood photographer and so the portrait that Benjamin has contrived of him is overrun with faces and figures, moments and events that any devotee of the Indian movie scene would recognize. But Bhastekar is also surrounded by the repeating image of a large portrait lens, seen from different angles with the hand—or in two cases, the pair of hands—holding it, also seen from different angles. Thus she has created a contemporary, mustached and spectacle-wearing figure with eight “arms” extending in an array from him, recalling familiar classical images of Indian gods with multiple arms and legs in diverse *mudras*. There is poignancy to this image: Bhastekar was particularly helpful in helping Ms Benjamin assemble these far-flung faces throughout the shrinking Mumbai Bene Israel world—somewhat like a “fixer” who finds locations for a Bollywood movie—and died suddenly, of heart failure, at age 58, shortly after the photographic part of the project was completed.

Differently, the profile portrait face of Daniel Elijah Benjamin (Gadkari) floats, skullcap (*kippah*) on his head, in a circle of gold leaf—like a Byzantine halo—that in turn floats within the Succath 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 Hebrew words 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, with four dove-like birds—peace symbols, their number the number of letters in God’s ineffable Hebrew name—while the white-washed floor of the impeccable interior comes alive in one corner with a watery surface, through her brush.

Benjamin Gadkari is retired; one might infer that much of his non-working life revolves around the world of the synagogue of which he is an integral part. His voice, resoundingly chanting the Hebrew blessings in the sanctuary, resonates in the artist’s head, she has commented, every time she looks at this image. If one might understand his image as representing a part of the community and its life style that is fading, (he, too, passed away shortly after the photos were taken), Karen Simon (Borgawkar), a Bene Israel bride, offers a vibrant image of continuity with the future. Her tiara-decorated portrait face, surrounded by gold-leaf, as if she is a Byzantine

angel, floats in a sea of symbols, shapes and colors. A triple series of hands is placed as if she is wearing them as a necklace: these are *hamsehs*—outstretched Islam-inspired protective hands—but their fingers are positioned like those of the Israelite High Priest in the ancient Temple, offering a three-fold blessing.

Twelve times—the number of the Tribes of Israel—a hand extends from the periphery of the image toward the center, each embellished in henna with the extraordinarily complex abstract décor traditionally painted on Indian bridal hands and sometimes feet. Again the interstices between the various photographic elements are overrun with abstract, stylized vegetal forms, in red and blue.

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"—which realization she literalized by creating a tent installation for a 2011 exhibition, *My Magic Carpet*.³ That art has as its ultimate goal to "dip into my own personal specifics and universalize, thus playing the role of an artist/activist"⁴ who uses images from diverse religious traditions as instruments of mutual inclusion, not separation in a lifelong effort to help repair the world.

For ultimately, her purpose, beyond making beautiful art, is to create an instrument that is part of the process of *improving* the world, and not merely *observing* it. In a small gouache and gold leaf work on paper from the year 2000—#46 in the *Finding Home* series and entitled "*Tikkun ha-Olam*"—we find a concise statement of her purpose. "*Tikkun ha-Olam*" is a Hebrew phrase meaning "repair/fixing the world." It is a rabbinic phrase most fully articulated by Isaac Luria in the 16th-century kabbalistic community of Tsfat, and refers to the obligation of each of us to leave the world a better place than the one into which we were born. In this image, a traditional Krishna/Kali-style figure dances on a stylized lotus that is also a burst of light—one bare foot raised toward the knee with toes pointed back so that the foot is a series of curves—his/her multiple arms raised upwards.

³ The exhibition at the Flomenhaft Gallery, New York City. The tent installation included a carpet, pillows with images on them, and an extraordinary painting on the tent "oculus" of a blue camel and his master, interwoven with each other so that the two are hardly distinguishable from each other. This image is based on a story recalled from the artist's childhood, of a clever camel who managed to push his master out of the tent—but also resonates with implied references: to the region most stereotypically associated with camels (the Middle East) and the continual struggles within that region for space within its vast "tent," and for that sort of struggle that takes place between natives and immigrants and among diverse immigrant groups in whatever space they hope will become home.

⁴ Quotes throughout are from the artist's words at the *My Magic Carpet* exhibit and in subsequent email comments in February, 2012.

But there are seven arms—six extending from her two sides and a seventh directly from his head, all raised to the same precise height so that their termini—stylized *hamseh* hands yielding to stylized flames—create of this figure a seven-branched *menorah*, the most persistent symbol across two millennia of Jewish art. In the colorfully spaceless space against which and 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, dynamic balance by a figure that is at once self-portrait and the portrait of everywoman—and everyman.

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