

East Meets West in Montclair

Fine artist Siona Benjamin brings a world of influences to her work

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If you've been inside the MC Hotel in downtown Montclair, you've probably noticed the striking artworks hanging in the interior and exterior of the building and wondered about their provenance. Who was inspired to blend such brilliantly-colored dreamscapes that often incorporate vaguely recognizable local scenes?

The answer won't surprise you when you learn about the artist's background. Montclair resident Siona Benjamin, 59, grew up in a Jewish community in the heart of Mumbai, India, and was educated in Catholic and Zoroastrian schools. As the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships, she frequently visited family in Israel and explored the theme of multicultural art there and in India. She lived in France for six months and continues to teach workshops and promote her artwork, which has been displayed in museums and exhibits throughout the world.

But for this artist who has been around the globe, Montclair is home — as much as any one place can be.

"I belong everywhere and nowhere at the same time," says Benjamin, who came to America to study more than 30 years ago and moved to Upper Montclair in 2002. "It's unnerving to feel that I belong nowhere, and it's also unnerving to feel that I belong everywhere ... And I do belong, sometimes. I love Montclair. I belong to Montclair."



FAMILIAR FEEL TO IT The painting in the foreground, "Shangri-La," was inspired by artist Siona Benjamin's walks in Edgemont and Anderson Parks in Montclair.

WORKS ON PROMINENT DISPLAY

Benjamin's love for her hometown shines through her work at The MC Hotel, which in August observed the anniversary of its first year in business. The decor of the hotel is thematically tied to Montclair's flourishing artistic community, and displays Benjamin's work on each floor of the building, including the lobby.

In late September, she contributed two works to the exterior — a 22-foot by 6-foot mural and a circular installation for the rotunda that is 18 feet in diameter. Collaborator Yvonne Verwer created

sky imagery for the latter artwork, and Benjamin provided the encircling border. The artists used a material called Dibond, which is used in the making of green highway signs. The selection of the art, design and installation location was the result of a collaboration between the artists, developers Pinnacle Properties and The Hampshire Companies, the Montclair township council, and the Montclair planning board.

Benjamin was selected as one of the artists to do the hotel commission by David Ashen of Dash Design, the company hired to create the aesthetic sensibility of the hotel. >



Because the goal was to incorporate images reflecting local settings, Benjamin researched Edgemont and Anderson Parks with the help of Lisanne Renner, historian for Friends of Anderson Park. She then created, using her trademark fusion of Eastern and Western techniques, seven paintings that include such recognizable features as the winding pathways and giant oak tree in Anderson Park, and water birds in Edgemont Park. When guests at the hotel exit the elevator on any floor, they see one of these paintings.

Heather Carter, Benjamin's current art agent, praises her client's ability to produce artworks that are different, yet carry her signature style. "Her work reflects a mix of cultures and traditions and time periods," she says. "She uses a lot of humor and irony. And what I love is she injects mythology and sociopolitical commentary ... and also just her versatility."

"The hotel is seen as an art hotel," says Brian Stolar, the president and CEO of Pinnacle Properties. "Therefore, we wanted something that was really catchy, related directly to Montclair, and had some abstract color to it."

ART THAT REFLECTS A DIVERSITY OF EXPERIENCES

Benjamin's commissions are just a small portion of the work she does, however. Having completed hundreds of pieces, mainly circling around the ideas of diversity, identity and the feeling of belonging, she has expressed many of her life experiences on her canvases. A good example of this is her series called "Finding Home," which reflects her experiences living and traveling all over the world.

Benjamin always knew she wanted to be an artist. She went to undergraduate school in India, learning about and gaining experience in the craft of Eastern art. She then traveled across the world to Illinois, where she earned two MFA's, one



ARTISTIC PREVIEW (left) Artists Siona Benjamin and Yvonne Verwer stand beneath their rotunda mural, which was recently installed at the MC Hotel. (Right) Benjamin is dwarfed by the mural she created for the hotel's exterior.



in painting from Southern Illinois University - Carbondale and another in theater set design from University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign. She credits her background in theater and set design for finding the common ground between sustaining her signature style and making her work fit the atmosphere of the space; at the MC Hotel, the hotel is the theater, and her artwork is the set.

One of her signature styles is the blue pigmentation of her characters. In a short documentary about her work that can be seen on Amazon Prime, *Blue Like Me: The Art of Siona Benjamin*, this emphasis on identity is discussed. The film ends with the simple statement, "We all come from everywhere, but the planet is blue."

"We are so many different skin colors and from different places, but we are connected as human beings, and the planet is blue," Benjamin says. "And that's why my characters in my work are blue, because we are the color of the sky."

ART AS A FORCE FOR GOOD

She also finds her artwork to be an opportunity for advocacy. Her series titled "Exodus" portrays the struggles and experiences of refugees around the world. While she has never felt what it means to lose one's home, Benjamin uses her

opportunity as an artist to speak out. She thinks of this as akin to the work of visual journalists, recording the stories of the time. She has also been commissioned to illustrate a children's book by Seattle publisher Intergalactic Afikomen about a character who "belongs everywhere and nowhere" — a feeling, as she has noted, with which she is familiar.

She launched another project in response to the global pandemic. With "Cause for Comfort," Benjamin offers hand-signed archival prints and blankets priced below \$100, and donates 15% of all proceeds to local nonprofits such as the Montclair Art Museum and Repair the World in New York.

Given the unorthodox and bold themes of her work, she receives a wide array of responses to her art. "I think those who are open-minded to understand this amalgam of the world, this mixture of the world, really love my work," Benjamin says. She credits her local community with having a like-minded attitude toward other cultures and traditions.

And for her, that's what Montclair is all about. "It's about introducing that different-ness and diversity," she says. "So, the fact that I could do an Indian miniature-inspired painting in the lobby of a hotel — it fits in, but it doesn't. (And) that is what makes it unique." ■