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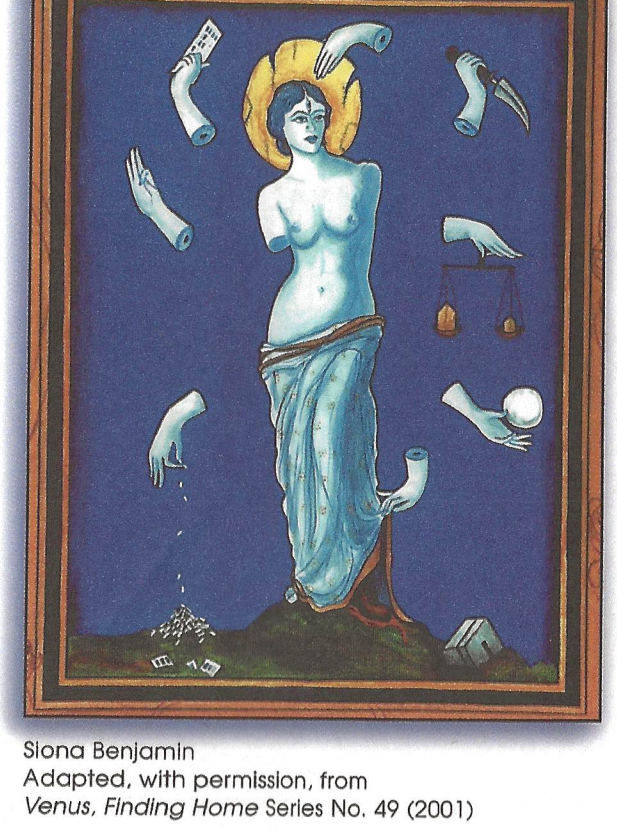

Siona Benjamin
Adapted, with permission, from
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VISION AND VISIBILITY: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH WOMEN ARTISTS VISUALIZE THE INVISIBLE

Gloria Orenstein

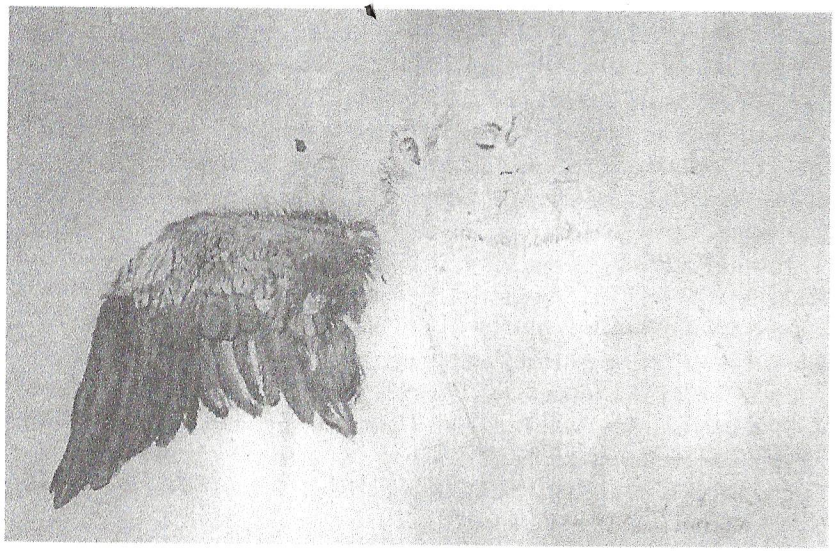

Figure 1. Hannah Wilke: *Self-Portrait with Dürer Wing* (1976)

In Memory of Hannah Wilke 1940–1993. Wilke's Self-Portrait with Dürer Wing *(1976) is a symbol of the way in which a pioneer Jewish feminist artist has fused the spiritual and the earthly aspects of woman in a startling image that captures a vision of our residence in a multidimensional world of creation.*

As a professor of women's studies (now gender studies), having written specifically about the omission of the women of surrealism from the art and literary historical records back in the early seventies, I have continued to write about women artists and feminist spirituality in the eighties. More recently, I began to look into the case of the erasure of Jewish women artists, in particular, from both the mainstream and the feminist revisions of art history. When I did so, I realized that this is actually the first time in history that there has been an identifiable group of Jewish women artists about which to write. Previously, certainly before the seventies, Jewish women artists flourished within different artistic movements. However, they did not necessarily reflect upon their Jewish identity or upon specific themes and issues relating to their religious heritage. The women whose works I have been studying emerge from the feminist movement of the seventies, and evolve through the multicultural analyses of the new millennium to constitute a cohesive group of women artists whose works have a common focus—the history, theology, spirituality, thematics, and issues of their Jewish heritage. They are not a "movement" in the sense that we have come to understand that word in modernism. Yet they are certainly, for the most part, aware of each other's work, and informed by the theoretical writings of contemporary Jewish feminist theo/alogians and writers.

Many feminist critical efforts to decenter the hegemony of a European-oriented narrative of art history have been written. We must also acknowledge the dominance of a Christian and androcentric narrative. Thus, we come to understand the reason why this is the first time in history that a well-defined group of Jewish women artists exists. Following the example of the analysis of multiple jeopardies offered by multicultural feminists, who insist upon the fact that class, race, and gender inequities cannot be separated out from each other, we must argue that the same holds true for an understanding of the absence of Jewish women artists from the previous art historical canon. Jewish women artists have confronted the combined discrimination against them and their works from androcentric art history, anti-Semitic prejudice, and the cultural bias

against art in favor of the sciences and the social sciences. I have personally noticed that, during the seventies and much of the eighties, many national and international feminist conferences covered a variety of disciplines, but omitted the visual arts. In doing so, they relegated feminist creation in the fine arts to conferences devoted exclusively to art history, from which women had already been excluded until the vitality of the women's art movement created the Women's Caucus within the College Art Association. This caucus has now given birth to the Jewish Women's Caucus of the same association.

The story of the omission of women artists from art history has been recounted many times in feminist art history books beginning with Linda Nochlin's important essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In the contemporary period, women artists began to rethink their omission. They took control of their participation in the art world as well as of the documentation of their work via the activist leadership of feminists in the 1970s, notably Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, two Jewish women who inaugurated workshops for the teaching and formation of women artists using feminist methodologies.

However, the problem for Jewish women artists has been complicated by the fact that the Second Commandment's injunction against making graven images had often been interpreted to be an injunction against making figurative art or even against making any artistic images. Indeed, when Jewish artists of the early twentieth century did create work within a movement, it was the abstract expressionist movement that they participated in since, by making abstract art, they were certain not to be making iconic, graven images.

All Jewish artists have experienced recorded art history in the West as primarily Christian, and Jewish women artists have experienced art history as both Christian and androcentric. Thus, we must situate the new body of work by contemporary Jewish women artists at the crossroads of women's studies, multicultural studies, Jewish studies, and feminist spirituality. Let us begin to re-enumerate the various handicaps that Jewish women artists have had to wrestle

with in order to constitute a new movement in the arts that makes its debut as we enter the new millennium.

1. The Second Commandment's injunction against making graven images.[1]
2. The Christian bias in Western art history.[2]
3. The patriarchal biases of the art world and of androcentrically constructed art history. Since Linda Nochlin's essay, we have amassed some thirty years of feminist scholarship to prove that women artists have systematically been excluded from the art historical canon. There have been great women artists, whose reputations have equaled those of male artists in their historical period, but they have been written out of the textbooks and excised from the patriarchally constructed narratives of art history.[3]
4. Jewish women artists, like Jews in all walks of life, have lost a generation of creativity to death in the *Shoah*/Holocaust. How many of the women who died in the *Shoah*, like the young artist, Charlotte Salomon, would have been important artists had they lived to complete their life's creative *oeuvre*?[4]
5. Assimilation. Internal and external anti-Semitism exist both inside and outside the art world. Many Jewish women artists I interviewed refused to be labeled as Jewish artists. Previously, in the seventies, I had met surrealist women artists who refused to be labeled as "women" artists. Both categories had been relegated to "outsider," "marginal," and "subordinate" status in the mainstream art world. Even the suggestion that their work fell into one category or the other could exclude them from major galleries, museums, exhibitions, or books. Thus, Jewish women artists for the most part also tended to assimilate and to negate any association with Jewish identity, concerns, or issues in their art, because they found it to be a disadvantage professionally to do so.
6. Diasporic hybrid identities. Finally, having had to flee from Spain because of the Inquisition and from Europe because of

the *Shoah* and anti-Semitic oppression, those Jews who settled in other parts of the world, the Jews in the Diaspora, have taken on a variety of hybrid identities. We know that many Jewish child survivors became Catholic when they were hidden with Christian families during the Second World War. Similarly, the Crypto-Jews in the U.S. Southwest have only recently revealed the Jewish component of their secret, hidden identities—for they outwardly practiced Catholicism. Additionally, one of the artists in my archive was raised in India, and was steeped in Judaism as well as in the Muslim and Hindu religious training that she received while she was going to school in India.

My research indicates that this generation of Jewish women artists—from the seventies to the present—could be conceived of as resembling a historical art movement although it is not identifiable as one in the conventional manner. The works by these women artists embody, rather than simply illustrate, the teachings of important contemporary Jewish feminist scholars, theologians, and philosophers such as Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Laura Levitt, Marcia Falk, Adrienne Rich, Cynthia Ozick, Irena Klepfisz, Gerda Lerner, Evelyn Tornton Beck, and many others.

The Jewish women artists whose work I have studied address the issues analyzed at length by feminist theologians. All note women's omission and invisibility in Jewish theology, which had been constructed to exclude women from important participation in Jewish rituals, leadership, and scholarship, historically. Feminist theologians have called for a time of *tikkun*, of healing the wounds of erasure through a theology of Remembrance and *Midrash*,[5] in which women would be written back into the texts, the rituals, and the history of the Jewish religion. Feminist *Midrash* has often presented biblical narratives from the point of view of the females in the story. Some Jewish theologians and writers have also called for a Jewish feminist encounter with the divine feminine, referring to the *Shekinah* and the *Matronit*, the spirit of Miriam, her well, the holy waters of the *Mikveh*,[6] the celebration of *Rosh Chodesh* (women's New Moon ritual), and the cycles of the moon—all interpreted within the context of feminist *Midrash*.

Through visual *Midrash*, contemporary Jewish women artists have posed questions such as: "What does tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge mean for women?" "What would a return to Eden mean for women?" "In what ways do our lives link us to our foremothers Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah?" "Was the flood a metaphor for women's amniotic fluid and childbirth?" "How do the current political events parallel events that occurred in the Bible?" "When Lot's wife looked back, did she see the *Shekinah*?" "Who were the women prophets?" and "How do feminists reinterpret Eve, Lilith, the *Shekinah*, *Asherah*,[7] and the *Matronit*?"

Jewish women artists are not just interested in reinterpreting the lives of biblical heroines. Like all people whose history has been erased, they are interested in documenting the social history of Jewish women, ordinary women, whose lives were also heroic in many ways, and they have done so by investigating the lives of immigrant women, working women, and by studying family history. Many of these artists are, themselves, child survivors of the *Shoah*, who have lived through the silenced history of the Holocaust. They have been hidden, and have had to keep their own Jewish identities hidden for a long, formative period of their lives. Consequently, they have taken a special interest in childhood, and depicted the lives of children as important subject matter in art and in history.

As these artists search through history and autobiography, they use techniques in which the historic and the contemporary are superposed or fused to create images in which the past and the present are literally welded together, creating a *tikkun* or healing of all the broken links in the matrilineal chain.

Another contribution made by these artists is the use of the materials that oppressed their forebears for art materials today. Many have turned to the fabrics of the garment industry, the shoe industry, and others to factory implements to transform the instruments of sweatshop oppression of their parents' immigrant generation into tools for artistic liberation in their own creative lives.

In this body of work I have observed a focus on documentation—on proof that the *Shoah* did take place, that the people erased from our memories and our records did exist. Theirs is an attempt to reconstruct the memory of the lives of their deceased families and ancestors in an

attempt to reverse these omissions. These women artists' interest in the Crypto-Jews or *Conversos* of the Southwest, who converted, and lived as Catholics for many generations, is also an attempt to show the world that Judaism will not die, no matter what harm may be done to the practice of the faith—either by the *Shoah*, the Inquisition, or assimilation.

Finally, the artists whose works I have investigated have made extensive pilgrimages to sacred sites in Europe and in Israel, to synagogues, to the homes of their ancestors—as well as to the crematoria and the death camps. Rituals, prayers, and ceremonies connected to their creations rendered all this activist research more complex and were often performed or created in connection with their artistic works, both at the sites and in their studios. As a feminist who has, at different periods of my life, critiqued Judaism because of the patriarchal nature of its origins, I was especially moved by the work of these artists whose feminist daring—their *chutzpah*—was always connected to love rather than to a rejection of their religion. These women artists loved Judaism, and had the *chutzpah* to declare that, in order to heal both Judaism and the world, and in order to heal themselves, as well, women had to break in—they had to enter the visual and literary heritage of their tradition, and they did so with or without permission from the patriarchal authorities—whether religious or artistic.

Obviously, the characteristics of the majority of works in this collection would not fit easily into the description of the general orientation of the journal *FEMSPEC*. The insistence on documentation in the project of a realistic depiction of moments recalled through memory in order to reconstruct a history from which women's presence has largely been obscured, has lent itself to the creation of an *oeuvre* that relies more on techniques of realism than fantasy, surrealism, or science fiction.

However, despite the fact that this body of work intends to rewrite and reconstruct a lost history, it is through the artist's visionary imagination that the invisible may be evoked and rendered visible. Thus, it is obvious that within this body of work there will be examples of artistic attempts to visualize people, events, entities, and concepts that are linked to the "other world," to the spirit world, to the world of deceased ancestors and their unwritten history, to the invisible presence of spiritual guides, beings angelic or demonic, known and imagined through scriptures and dreams, that have participated in spiritual ways in determining the unwritten history of survival or oppression of the Jewish people. For the scriptures have indicated that our world is governed by invisible forces from the beyond including the deity, the creator God, and the multiple entities who inhabit the divine realms. These, too, contemporary Jewish women artists visualize, and so I now turn my attention to a few examples of this kind of work. While this work represents what might seem to be a logical creative trend in a Jewish feminist creative project, it is not the dominant mode of the work I have uncovered. As was the case with the early feminist literature of the late sixties and early seventies, realism was the chosen creative mode. A specific story of oppression, resistance, and liberation had to be told, and could not be conveyed in abstractions. So, too, in the case of this body of work, it has been important to these artists to begin by using the documentation left to them by their ancestors to establish a historically accurate basis for their claims of oppression of women and of Jews as a people, as well as their claims of the important creative contribution of their female ancestors. These contributions were never included in the legacy they inherited.

RUTH WEISBERG

Ruth Weisberg was one of the first Jewish women artists of the second wave of the women's movement whose art focused on Judaism in relation to the lives of contemporary women. As the dean of the University of Southern California School of Fine Arts, and past president of the College Art Association as well as of the Women's Caucus for Art, Ruth Weisberg has played an important part in the creation of a new art about women's role in Judaism as well as in theorizing the representation of women both in Judaism and in art history.

One of her major works, *A Circle of Life* (1984–1985, not reproduced) is a series of eleven large paintings in which she visualizes various life passages from the past, the present, and into the future. In these three important paintings from *The Circle of Life, The*

Great Synagogue of Danzig, *Passage*, and *The World to Come*,* Ruth links the past and the present together through memory. At *The Great Synagogue of Danzig*, a group of Jewish children hold hands and stand in front of a wooden gate layered over a vision of the synagogue, the most important sanctuary of the Jews of Poland.

These are the souls of those who died, but who come back to life through the power of her art. The figurative, realistic imagery of this work and of *Passage* and *The World to Come* (also not reproduced) depict the souls of the departed as she envisages them hovering over us or as the spirit figures of the immigrants who arrived in New York harbor at the end of the nineteenth century. Ruth conceives of all the souls merging and continuing their cyclical journey together again.

What is feminist and innovative in this cyclical depiction of life's journey is that the protagonist is a woman artist and that the entire life cycle is about the engagement of her body, mind, and soul with the other dimensions, both temporal and spiritual. Metaphorically, Weisberg shows us the woman artist as the narrator and subject of her soul's passage on Earth and into the world to come. No longer the object of a male gaze or narrative, she is now the author of her own destiny—a destiny that, as we see, involves the choice to use her own creativity in order to place women as subjects in Jewish art and history.

In her monumental installation *The Scroll* (Figure 2),[8] which was conceived and completed over a period of three years in the mid-1980s, Weisberg has created a room-sized piece in which a scroll appears to float on the wall surrounding the viewer, who enters into the environment, and is enveloped by the scroll. Here, she overlays passages in her own life and the lives of family and friends with images from and references to Jewish and biblical history. In telling this story, Weisberg wrests back the narrative authority from male artists, and invests women with the power to portray their own visibility and presence in the major events of Jewish life and Jewish history. *The Scroll* is a peaceful epic—not one emphasizing war or violence. Weisberg uses folklore sources and women's autobiography in order to fill in episodes where only silence has reigned in our official histories. She is interested in capturing time through memory—in remembering both her friends, relatives, and ancestors as well as the memory of those who perished in the Holocaust.

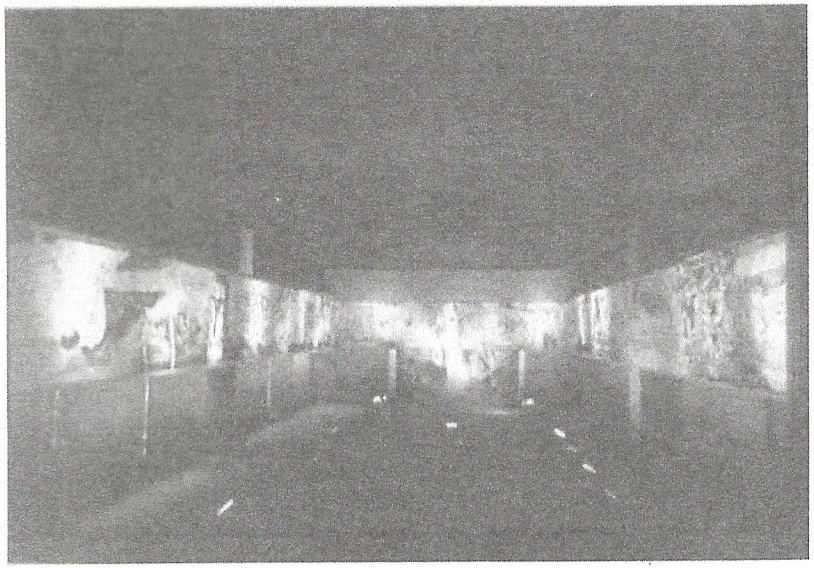

Figure 2. **Ruth Weisberg: *The Scroll* (1987–1988) 94' × 44'**

It is to the image of the sheltering wing (of the *Shekinah*) that I want to draw our attention in this piece. Weisberg entitles the last section of *The Scroll*, *Redemption* (Figure 3) and portrays a vision of Jerusalem floating above the Israelites' tents in the desert where they camped waiting for the Promised Land. This section is also a eulogy for the victims who died in the Holocaust. We see concentration camp uniforms hanging on clotheslines.

Yet, to the left is an image of a large, angelic wing, a "sheltering wing," of a spiritual being. Weisberg's work is unique in art history. It is the quintessential inscription of historical, contemporary, and personal Jewish women's lives into the new scrolls, the new narratives, the new family histories of women, representing women's journeys from the Exodus to Revelation, from oppression to liberation, from absence to presence in our tradition. Although her style is predominantly figurative and realistic, Weisberg has imagined the angelic beings, the souls in the other world, and the protective presence of the *Shekinah*, thus enabling us to envisage the spirits of those beings and spirits who are ordinarily invisible to us.

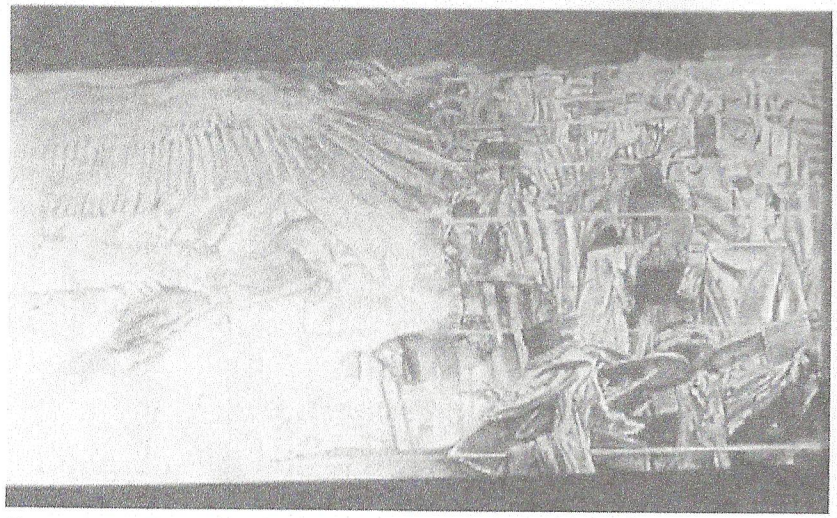

Figure 3. Ruth Weisberg: *The Scroll: Redemption* (1987–1988)

SUSAN SCHWALB

In 1987 Susan Schwalb appeared with Ruth Weisberg in one of the first programs on Jewish Women in the Arts, held at Hebrew Union College in New York City. Schwalb is also an important feminist activist. She was the arts delegate from New York to the International Women's Year's National Women's Conference in Houston in 1977. She also cocreated the First International Festival of Women in the Arts held in conjunction with the United Nations' Mid-Decade Conference on Women held at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen in 1980. As a silverpoint artist, Schwalb was inspired by her encounter in 1985 with the *Sarajevo Haggadah*,[9] which led to her *Creation Series* (1987, not pictured). The arc, which in the *Haggadah* represents the universe, and the circle, which represents the Earth (the smaller circles symbolizing the Sun and the Moon), combine here in a series of mixed-media drawings, paintings, and altarpieces that unite the circle as a female symbol with the gold-leaf background's arcs and halos, suggestive of the Godforce present in our energy field—much like the golden auras around the saints and holy figures in medieval art.

Inspired by medieval illumination of sacred texts, Schwalb's art renders the cosmic movements of divine creation through the changing patterns of silverpoint lines. The circles, that could represent strands of RNA and DNA forming within the womb, as well as a microscopic view of the light and dark elements of matter and energy in flux, are perceived by the artist, always within the sacred golden flame of divine light and of cosmic space and time.

Schwalb is primarily an abstract artist, and the works I want to bring to our attention here are *The Tree of Life #31* (1995, Figure 4),

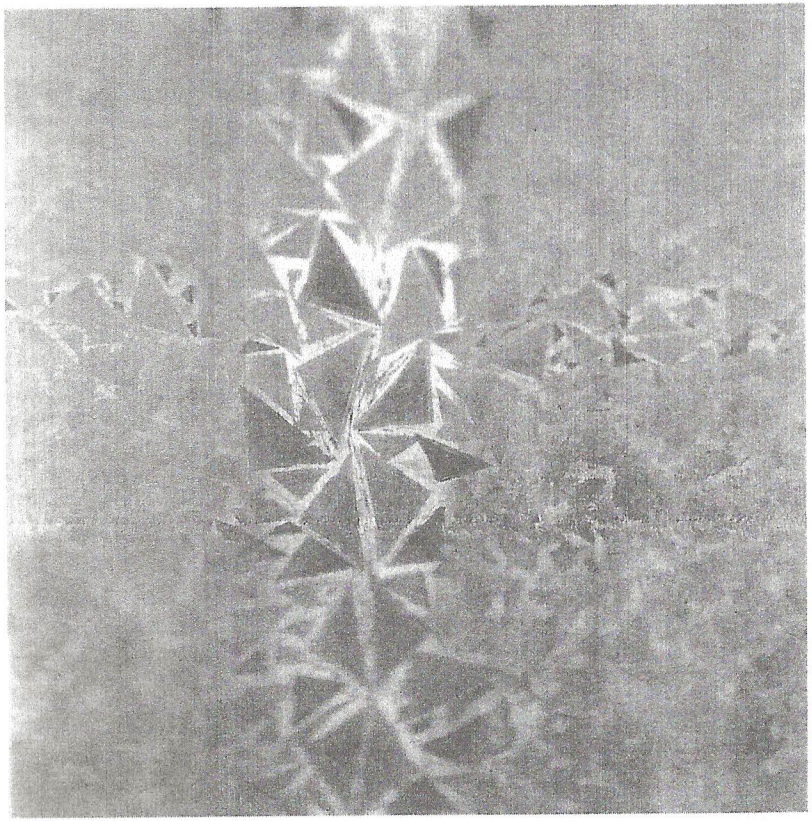

Figure 4. Susan Schwalb: *The Tree of Life* #31 (1995)

Figure 5. Susan Schwalb: *Let There Be Light in the Firmament* #15 (1994)

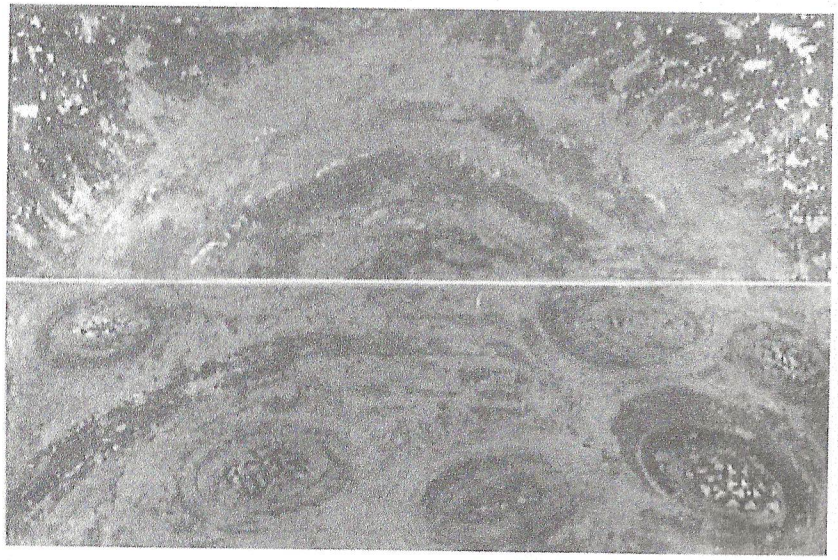

Figure 6. Susan Schwalb: *Let There Be Light in the Firmament* (1994)

and two images from *Let There Be Light in the Firmament* (1994, Figures 5 and 6). *The Tree of Life*, made of gold, silver, and copper leaf, references the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. As far as we know at present, there is only one planet on which life, symbolized by the Tree of Life, has evolved from the sacred (golden) cosmic creative matter of the primordial fireball or from the divine pronouncement: "Let There Be Light." Our Earth trees are, to our knowledge, the only trees in the universe. They are Trees of Knowledge, because they contain within them the material of the origin of the universe, the energy of divine creation in its most current form of evolution. The gold reminds us that in the remotest parts of the universe, parts that our radio signals will only reach some two or more billion years from now, there may be other life-forms, and that all of them are also sacred.

Perhaps the light from the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden is finally reaching us now. The cosmic images of *Let There Be Light in the Firmament* express the energies of the divine light of creation as they begin to coalesce into cosmic matter. Shimmering with gold leaf and mica powder, these images scintillate and reflect light, depicting the divine radiance of the spiritual energies of creation that emanated from the Word spoken by the Creator of the origin of the universe.

While the works of Ruth Weisberg and Susan Schwalb range from figurative to abstract representations of spiritual entities and energies, they show the wide range of possibilities for artistic visualization of the invisible with the Jewish tradition about which it has been said that iconic imagery was forbidden. Yet, as we now know, the Second Commandment's injunction referred primarily to the making of images of idols, not to the representation of the energies and symbols of creation.

CAROL HAMOY

Carol Hamoy, a New York artist, grew up in a family involved in the garment and fashion businesses. Feathers, spools, threads, and fabric remnants were her childhood toys, and they have become the tools of her trade as an artist. She uses personal experience and memory as the building blocks of her evocative artistic process. Her

identity as a woman and a Jew is expressed in her work with threads and fabrics, stitched and rewoven together from her family's history. The structure, cut, drape, and construction of clothing interested everyone in her childhood world. It is instructive to see how the very materials of one generation's oppression, in this case the oppression of those working underpaid in the garment industry, become the materials of another generation's artistic mode of expression. This is the important transformation that Hamoy's work has wrought.

Here, I would like to focus on one of her numerous works, her installation piece entitled *Welcome to America* (Figure 7), in which thirty white, gauzy, robelike garments—wedding gowns, dresses, skirts, and all sorts of undergarments, adorned with stories that were told to the artist by women émigrés and/or their descendants, float freely, blowing with the slightest breeze, in the upper loft of New York City's Eldridge Street Synagogue.

When one peruses the archives of *Welcome to America* installed in the Eldridge Street Synagogue, one is led through the long, arduous journey made by these courageous women. The garments, representing the spirits of our ancestral matrilineage, bear the name, date of arrival,

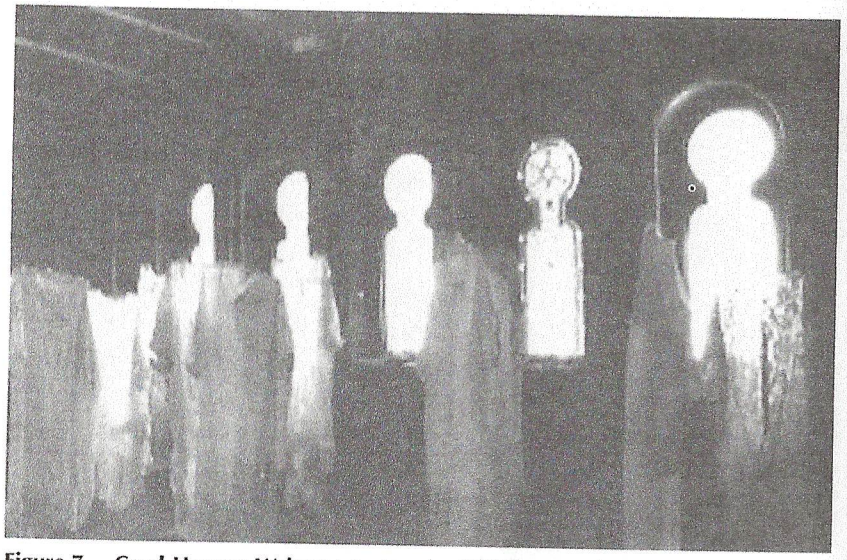

Figure 7. Carol Hamoy: ***Welcome to America*** **(1994)**

place of origin, and a short text capturing a moment in the life of the woman whose dress is displayed—whose spirit is depicted. The dresses tell the stories of women who were among the original congregants of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. These garments not only celebrate the brave lives of those women who came to America from foreign lands, but they also relate imagistically to the windows, some of which remain in stained glass, in the synagogue. The shape of these windows seems to be that of a human head and torso. As the dresses hang, in single file, lined up in front of these human-shaped windows, they are like rows of spirits, and we may imagine the illumined head of the window being the luminous head of the women represented by the gowns. As the light pours through the windows, the women's spirits are literally brought back to life in our memories via the rays of light from beyond.

All the garments have been stained to acquire an antique patina. They have been pieced together from a patchwork of table and bed linens, and other fabrics such as muslin, and from scarves as well. This work honors the memory of our female ancestors, who made the early journeys to America, and found the freedom to worship their religion here at the Eldridge Street Synagogue.

Based upon archival research into the lives of the real women who did belong to this congregation, Hamoy revived the spirits of their stories by printing them onto the dresses. You may read such stories as, "Rose arrived in 191— from Yassi Ritakanen, Roumani: on the boat her baby had measles. She kept him wrapped in a pink blanket to offset his face." "Esther Rachel arrived in 1900 from Techana, Poland: She was left a widow with six children. The oldest was eighteen: the youngest, six months." Or Chaye Soret, a "design prodigy from Pinsk," whose "heart broke when she stopped working to please her husband," or Sarah from Kiev, "who changed her name to Shirley to seem more American," and Bertha "who loved to dance" (Morton).

Through her imaginative handling of the appropriate elements from the historical period of this wave of immigration, Hamoy has memorialized actual women whose bodies and minds, hearts, and souls once inhabited such gowns and dresses. Through this work, Hamoy makes the invisible come alive for us and invites the spirits who once frequented the synagogue to revisit their ancient abode. It

speaks to us of how their spirits now inhabit another home, a divine home, of which this synagogue was once the earthly manifestation—and of how they are now illuminated by a divinely radiant spiritual light. Each dress bears the stories of two immigrants—one on the front and one on the back. Their suspension on ropes hanging from above calls our attention to the fact that their presence among us derives from a higher realm, and reminds us that our foremothers are ever present in our midst, especially when we pray.

Another work, *Morning Prayer* (not represented), is a "book" work that Hamoy made containing the 18 prayers that Orthodox Jewish men say every morning including, "Thank you God for not making me a woman." She has created an important addendum which reads, "Thank you God for making me a woman who is an artist."

Through the artistic use of the very materials that her ancestors used for utilitarian purposes—the fabrication of practical clothing for daily wear—Hamoy shows us how those very same materials can become sources of creativity for the woman artist, whose flights of imagination lead her to discover the strength, creativity, and beauty in the lives of the matriarchs of her tradition. Here, their stories, embossed in gold onto the garments, are literally "blowing in the wind." They are "the answer" that had been erased—the once-missing life stories that narrate the history of our matrilineage of talent, courage, and strength.

GABRIELLE ROSSMER

During the immediate postwar decades, the forties and the fifties, Jewish-American artists had difficulty responding to the anti-Semitism of the war in their creative work. They were more concerned with their identification as American artists than as Jewish artists. Moreover, the contemplation of the *Shoah* and of the eradication of so much memory of Jewish life became almost impossible to imagine. Artists found it to be so horrific that no images could be found to convey the intensity of their reactions.

Although Jewish artists of the postwar period participated in the abstract expressionist movement, they found that avoiding image-

making relating to the *Shoah* contributed still further to the eradication of Jewish content and memory from art. By the early sixties, it became obvious that the stories of survivors needed to be told in order to bear witness to the reality of these atrocious events.

By the seventies, with the advent of the women's liberation movement and the reclamation of women's art history within the context of women's studies research and scholarship, women artists began to represent the themes of their lives in their art.[10] The most powerful took the longest to surface. The works of child-survivors, whose parents had lived through the events in Europe, eventually expressed those relating to the *Shoah*. They began to imagine the lives and suffering of their lost relatives, as well as to explore their parents' childhood recollections and their family history.

Since 1990, Gabrielle Rossmer has been developing an installation about memory and family history entitled *In Search of the Lost Object* (not represented) using documents found in her father's files from the 1980s that concerned the attempt to save her grandparents from extermination by the Nazis. Using these documents, altered family photos, and other elements from her family's life in pre-Nazi Bamberg, Germany, along with domestic objects from daily life that conjure up memories of her family's past, she has created an installation about memory, loss, and mourning.

Entering the installation, the public can inspect a variety of photos, objects, documents, and memorabilia from the life of her Jewish family. However, what is of most interest to us here are the ghostly figures from the past that float through the installation in the form of 40 stiffened clothes-hangings, stained with soot and ashes. They appear to be shrouded figures from the past whose souls or spirits have lingered in the atmosphere and haunt the memory of the contemporary family members. Gabrielle Rossmer went to Bamberg to research her family history, and the shrouds of the spirits were suggested by the fact that her family was engaged in a small shirt manufacturing business. This work was installed at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City in 1994.

Revenants (Figure 8) was installed in a side chapel off the ambulatory as part of the complete installation. *Revenants* was influenced by the medieval sculptures from the Bamberg Cathedral, especially

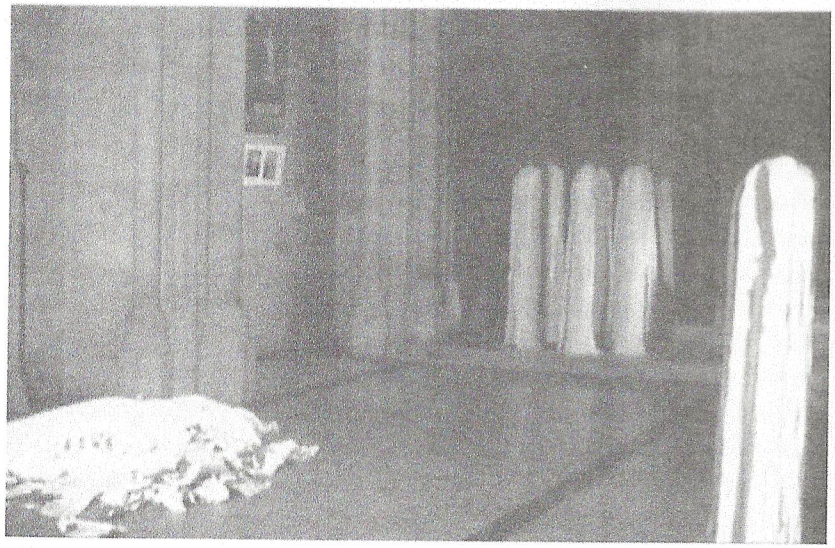

Figure 8. Gabrielle Rossmer: *Revenants* (1984)

Synagoga and Ecclesia. Rossmer's revenants reference the drapery in those figures. These revenants, like the spirits of the immigrant women in the synagogue by Hamoy, make a bridge to our ancestors, whose sacrifices and strength have not been forgotten. It is important that these two works, that of Hamoy and that of Rossmer, have been installed in houses of religious worship. The context of the sacred in which these spirits are evoked includes the dimensions of the beyond within the description of sacred reality. Not only do we recall the ancestors, but as they stand like sentinels in our midst, we feel that they observe us, as well. Rossmer's *Revenants* do not haunt us like ghosts. On the contrary, they seem to reside among us. Spiritually they seem to continue to relate to their former surroundings, imbuing the space of the former dwelling with a sense of spirituality, and imbuing the spaces of worship with a sense of their divine origin. They remind us of the dimensions from which we came and to which we go.

Yet, despite the fact that these revenants were brutally taken from us before their time, their innocence is conveyed in the fact that their return is peaceful and protective, not vindictive or frightening.

CHESLYN AMATO

Cheslyn Amato has defined herself as a Vietnam-era/civil rights movement American, a fruits-of-feminism woman, a post-Holocaust Jewess, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, artist, professor, and citizen. She writes in her artistic statement, distributed at shows:

> I am essentially interested in creating circumstances or occasions for the acknowledgment, celebration and fullest exercising of human being—an opportunity to stand in awe with dignity and grace. As much as I build these circumstances I also use them, both the process and the place. More recently, I recognize myself, fundamentally as a temple builder. Out of the need to reconstruct myself in this universe comes the desire to stand in a temple in which I feel truly comfortable while honoring all that I inherit.

Thus, Amato's *A Temple in Honor of Life Lived Every Day: An Unfinished Song of Love* (Figure 9) is a mixed-media installation of 18 large classical columns with an inner chamber surrounded by suspended fabric that functions as a monument to memory and everyday existence. The artist's personal accumulation of notes, memos, journals, junk mail, maps, and diagrams is embedded within these columns, enshrining the artist's intimate ephemera. The artist's personal space and individual history thereby become entwined with public space and references to ancient history.

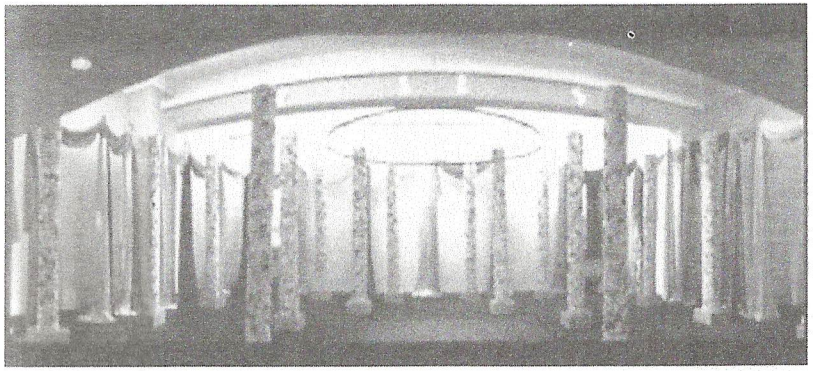

Figure 9. Cheslyn Amato: *A Temple in Honor of Life Lived Every Day* (1996)

Amato writes that *Apparitions in the Backyard* (1998, Figure 10) is a mixed-media, multimedia installation. It is comprised of twenty-foot-tall columns covered with paper balls and projected color slides that change over a period of time and then repeat. A sound element is sometimes present, as well. She has projected slides onto a circular arrangement of columns, and then photographed that in color slide format. The projections onto the columns are like apparitions, and, in one particular apparition, the artist is transformed into an angel in her own backyard.

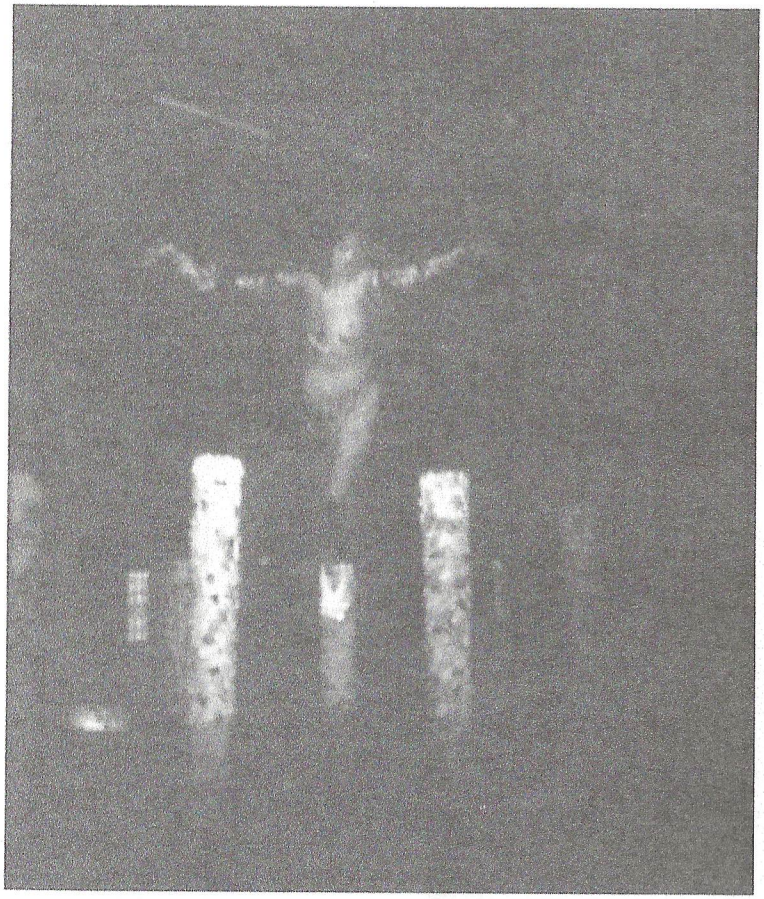

Figure 10. Cheslyn Amato: ***Apparitions in the Backyard*** **(1998)**

In her artistic statement, Amato writes that "taken as a single, whole event/experience, the piece is committed to the envisionment of transcendence, transfiguration, divine presence, womanhood, the pleasure of light, the pleasure of magic, and the pleasure of spectacle." For Amato, the work is about a woman becoming an angel right in her own backyard, in the midst of everyday life.

In this piece, ordinary items of daily life become the building blocks of the columns of a temple, symbolically expressing the sacredness of ordinary things. For Amato, all of reality is sacred. All things are capable of participating in the creation of a sanctuary, a holy space within daily reality, wherein the mystical, visionary, and spiritual dimensions of Judaism manifest. It is in this space that we can acquire the experience and knowledge of our fundamental spiritual nature, of the dimensions in which we exist at one with the angels, for the earth is a heavenly body, and our own bodies are also celestial beings in the cosmos. The power of the temple, created by the materials of daily life empowered by the creativity of the woman artist, is such that it causes the eternal to manifest within the temporal and the temporal to radiate in its divine dimensions. Perhaps this angel is the being that the artist's spirit is on a higher plane. Or, perhaps it is the manifestation of a shamanistic shape-shifting, or a being from the spirit world superposed upon the photographic image of the artist. Is it a vision, a mirage, a hallucination, a prophecy, a sign, or simply a hyperrealistic apparition of the way things really are? These are the possibilities suggested by the sudden appearance of the artist as angel in the artwork as temple.

ANITA RODRIGUEZ

Anita Rodriguez has written that "the Spanish Conquest gave birth to a phenomenon the planet will not witness again. A new people and culture were born, woven out of a genetic and cultural diversity that encompasses all the gene pools and traditions of the Spanish, European, Moslem and Jewish worlds."[11] In 1492, the diaspora of Sephardic Jewery coincided with the conquest of America, for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed the edict ending more than eight

centuries of Jewish, Moslem, and Christian coexistence in Spain, and the Jews were forced to leave Spanish territory. When they moved to the Southwest—to Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—they lived openly as Catholics, but secretly practiced their Jewish religious rites without informing anyone. Today, certain Catholics have noticed that their great-grandmothers said blessings over candles on Friday night, or that they made a special chicken soup when someone was ill. Some found *menorahs* hidden in their attics, and others realized that their relatives spoke a very strange Spanish, which turned out to be *Ladino*. Often one finds a Jewish star or a *menorah* engraved on a tombstone that bears a Catholic Spanish name. Sometimes Jewish iconography is hidden in the lower corner of the stone so that only someone who is searching for such imagery will come upon it.

Anita Rodriguez is one of several contemporary women artists who have been so inspired by this mixture of cultures and by the way in which Judaism was preserved over hundreds of years by secret practices that they have devoted their artistic *oeuvre* to an exploration and honoring of the Crypto-Jews of the Southwest.

Rodriguez's paintings are rooted in the world of the Crypto-Jews of the Southwest, and inspired by its art, dances, ceremonies, customs, and oral traditions. She paints stories in the visual vernacular of Hispanic New Mexico. The image of death comes from *penitente* religious art. The shapes of *rederos* (altar screens), *retablos* (paintings on wood), *nichos* (niches with doors)—all come from New Mexican religious art and Mexican folk art.

Let us look more closely at *Mana Sarah* (Figure 11). Here, we have the image of a female skeleton lighting the Sabbath candles. The *Muerto*, or dead woman, is an ancestral figure. In this case, she is the biblical Sarah. Her presence in our mythic and spiritual worlds is our manna, our sacred spiritual nourishment. For generations, mothers like Sarah have sent light into the world on the Sabbath, thus nurturing creation with light. In *Los Posadas y el Secreto* (1993, not represented), Rodriguez shows us that it is actually death that keeps the memory of the Jewish religion alive, for the *Posadas* are praying to a *menorah*. Thus, in the Hispanic Catholic world, death becomes an ally for the Jew, for the dead ancestors (represented as *Muertos*) who keep the memory of Judaism alive in the spirit world.

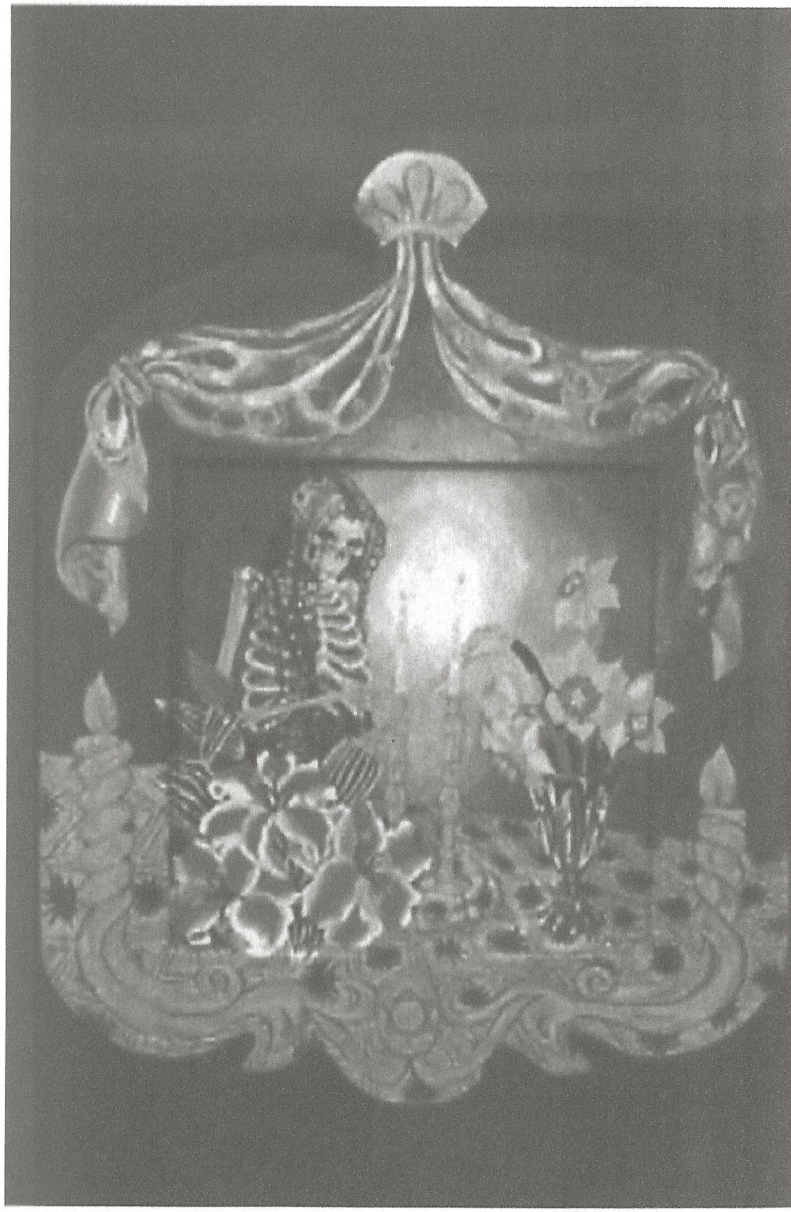

Figure 11. **Anita Rodriguez: *Mana Sarah* (1997)**

When we say prayers to the dead, we are feeding the memory of Jewish ritual practice that they embodied during their lifetime on Earth.

In *Secret Rites* (1993, Figure 12), she has painted the *Posadas* engaging in the ceremony of *Brit Millah*,[12] as the ancestress offers the spirit-baby to the *Mohel*[13] for circumcision. His table of operating tools is located to the right of the composition. *Rites of Passage* (1995, Figure 13) combines several moments of life-cycle rituals. On the left is the *Brit Millah*. In the center is a Jewish wedding under a *huppah*. The Rabbi and the groom are wearing *yarmulkes*. To the right is a visit to a cemetery. The tombstone has a Jewish star engraved on it. Otherwise, participants in these rituals appear outwardly to be native to the Mexican Catholic context. In *Boda Escondida* (1995, not represented), a hidden wedding depicts a secret ceremony that would seem to be Hispanic and Catholic except for the fact that the couple is being married under a *huppah*, and the Rabbi is holding up a wine cup and wearing a *tallit*. In *Secret Rites*, a baptism seems to be taking place. A baby is being presented to the Virgin and is held up near a fountain of holy water. Behind the fountain is a *Menorah*. Finally, *Peregrinación* (Figure 14) depicts a spiritual pilgrimage to a sacred site. The *Muertos* seem to be carrying a large chest that might hold the Ark of the Covenant. Two golden angels accompany the chest. On their pilgrimage to the sacred site, they will pass by a tree in which a prophet or a saint appears—perhaps a vision. Further in the background, people are performing a ceremony with fire. Perhaps God appears in the fire. With *Muertos* carrying the golden, angel-decked container, one has the distinct impression that the sacred cortege is a manifestation from the world of the spirit.[14]

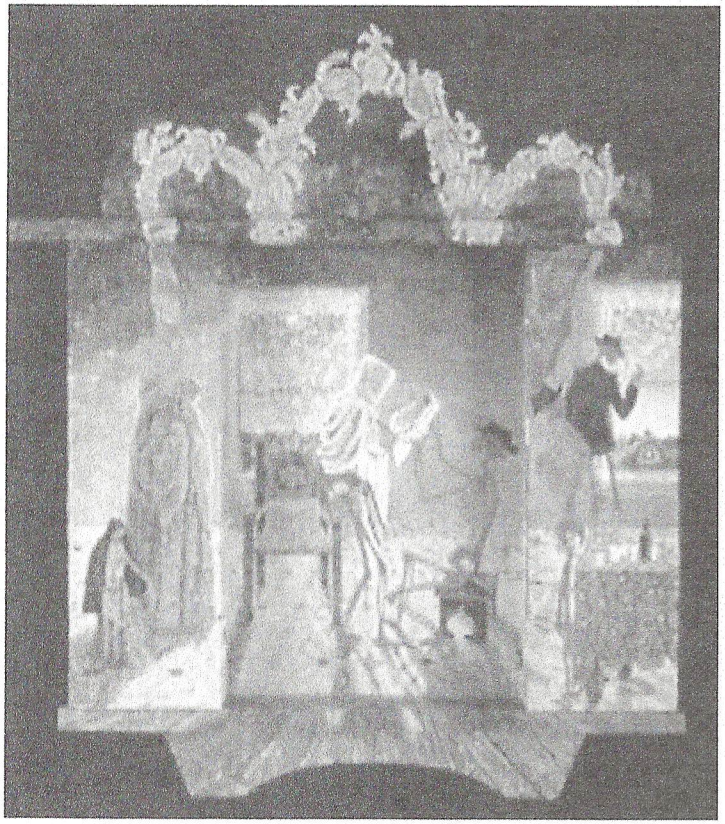

Figure 12. Anita Rodriguez: ***Secret Rites*** **(1993)**

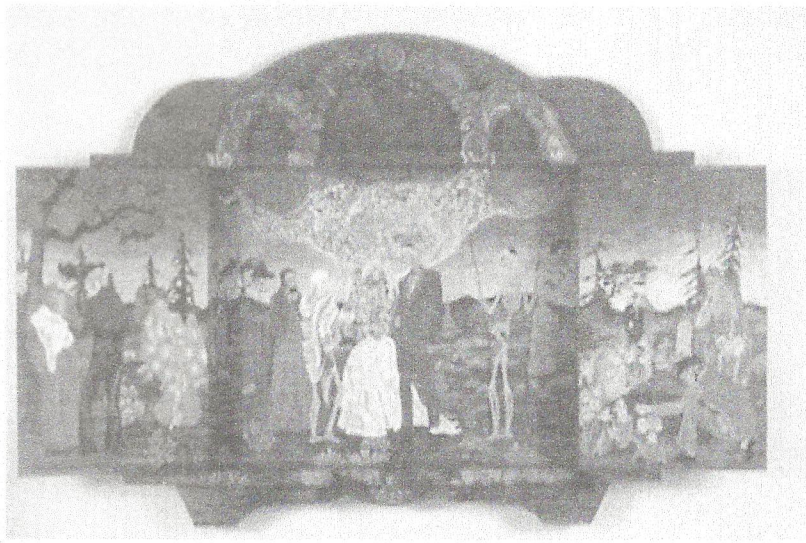

Figure 13. Anita Rodriguez: ***Rites of Passage*** **(1995)**

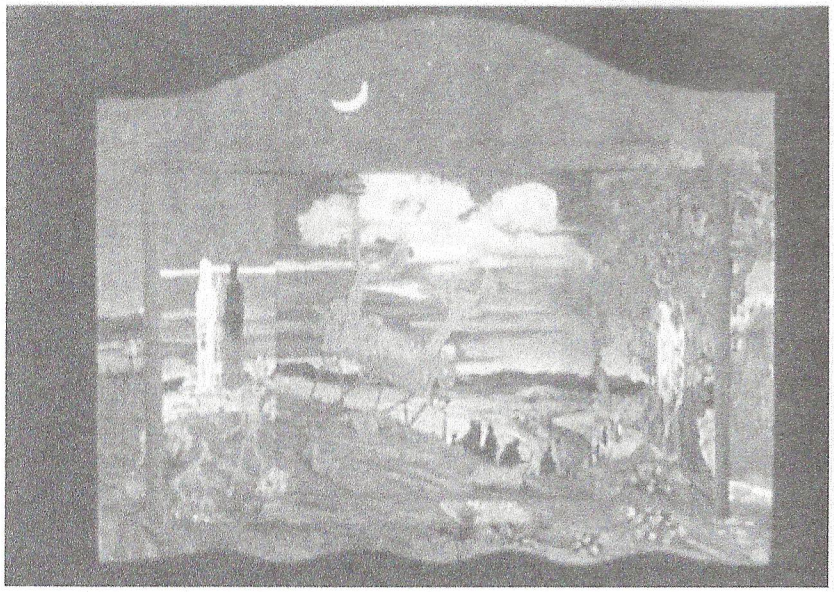

Figure 14. Anita Rodriguez: *Peregrinación* (1995)

The work of Anita Rodriguez enables us to see the multiple layers of symbolism and historical, spiritual, and cultural references in the art of Hidden Jews. If we train ourselves to seek the hidden Jewish references behind the various sacred symbol systems of the countries of the Diaspora to which Jews have immigrated, we are more likely to discover lost pieces of the Jewish historical and artistic record. Works like these are truly multicultural, hybrid images in which we come to understand the ways in which visual images function to support a people's faith when they live through periods in which their religious beliefs and practices are suppressed, or when they are persecuted for their spiritual practices.

FERN SHAFFER WITH OTHELLO ANDERSON

Jewish artist Fern Shaffer works with a non-Jewish black male photographer, Othello Anderson, creating and documenting shamanic rituals performed in order to heal the earth. Shaffer's

work is a form of prayer and is done in a sacred manner. Anderson records Shaffer performing the ritual, and the photographs that remain are the artistic documentation of the important blessings and energy transfers that take place in the moments of ritual enactment. Shaffer's costumes are often made of raffia, and strung with totems, pouches, twigs, and various offerings to God and the spirits. Over the years, the evolution of their rituals documents a life-cycle and cosmic-cycle journey through which they bring spirituality back to the community (*Effigy Mounds Ritual* 1987, Figure 15). They use symbols, dance, drumming, and other shamanic techniques, specifically prayer, to communicate with God and nature in order to restore balance to our eco-spiritual environment that science and technology have upset.

Since January 9, 1995, they have participated in a *Nine Year Ritual* (1995, not represented) inspired by the Mayans who did prayers in sequences of 9. They felt that the next 9 years would be important in making the transition from one century to the other, and they offered prayers specifically to insure that the transition be smooth and peaceful.

Figure 15. Fern Shaffer: *Effigy Mounds Ritual* (1987)

The first ritual took place on Jan. 9, 1995, at 9:00 A.M. in Lockport, the western region of Illinois, to transmit to the trees their concern for all of plant life.

The second ritual took place on Feb. 9, 1996, at 9:00 A.M. in Big Sur, California, on the Pacific Coast. The purpose was to reflect their concern for water.

The third ritual took place on March 9, 1997, in Mineral Point, Wisconsin. The focus was on their concern for food resources.

The fourth ritual took place on April 9, 1998, on the summit of Blue Ridge Mountain, in Virginia. The focus was to reflect their concern for the preservation of our natural resources.

The fifth ritual took place on May 9, 1999, in Death Valley, California. The focus was to reflect their concern for the premature death of our planet.

The sixth ritual took place on June 9, 2000, in Temagami, Ontario, Canada. The focus was their concern for the preservation of old growth forests.

Their multicultural collaborative work demonstrates the harmonious interconnectedness of two creators united by their spiritual belief in the sacredness of all creation. As they have written, "The earth is our home; it nourishes us physically, sustains us aesthetically and spiritually. We are part of the earth and the earth is part of us. Self-preservation is the first law of nature. As we love and protect ourselves so shall we love and protect the earth. Our rituals are created to focus attention on the importance of protecting the earth and its environment."[15]

I am struck by the totemic, shamanic images created by the figure Shaffer cuts as she swooshes through a given landscape in her raffia costume. One imagines the energies, the wind she stirs up as she whirls and swirls over the land. These are sculptures in motion as well as living acts of prayer. The figure appears to be one with nature. Often the forms of her raffia extensions seem to fall into the shape of a creature whose very habitat is that of the location of the ritual. A human clothed in our ordinary attire would be out of place, and would disrupt the communion with the environment that the artists must create in order to transfer their prayers effectively.

The artists consciously seek out specific locals which, on certain occasions, may be sacred sites, and, on other occasions, may be sites

in need of healing (where nuclear reactors have caused damage to the environment). Often their selection of sites corresponds to a vision of acupuncture points on the earth, places which they feel both receive and transmit the prayers and energies more readily. This is the shamanic nature of the work they do, as they use their psychic senses to intuit the specific needs of the environment and to select those places most propitious for the performance of their healing work.

SIONA BENJAMIN

Most of the artists whose works we have discussed may be associated with the second wave of the women's movement. Siona Benjamin, however, is a multicultural, feminist artist from the Third Wave[16] of the movement, from a younger generation. She is a Sephardic Jewish artist from Bombay, who now lives in New Jersey. She was educated in both Zoroastrian and Catholic schools while growing up in predominantly Hindu and Muslim India. Her present work is about her diasporic and multicultural identities. Her stunningly original images endeavor to reconcile the disparate spiritual aesthetic tendencies transmitted to her by the diverse teachings and trainings of the spiritual and aesthetic disciplines she has experienced.[17]

Benjamin's self-depiction as the many-armed Durga calls upon traditional Indian iconography to express the unity of her multiple identities within a single individual. She depicts the woman artist as a multitalented creator, a spiritual warrior and a radiant power-center, whose energies, which combine the spiritual forces of her diverse cultural traditions (Hebrew prayers and Hindu icons), unite to combat the dangers of war, pollution, and the disempowerment of women that threaten us everywhere today. The many arms and many heads of her female images work in tandem and in counsel with each other implying the geometrically increased potency that is the inheritance of those who possess hybrid identities, and who embody the rich cultural pluralities of their borderland spiritual homes.

On the cover of this issue we feature *Venus* from her *Finding Home* series (No. 49, 2001). The disempowered woman is depicted in Benjamin's version of the Venus de Milo, a purely Western symbol. She

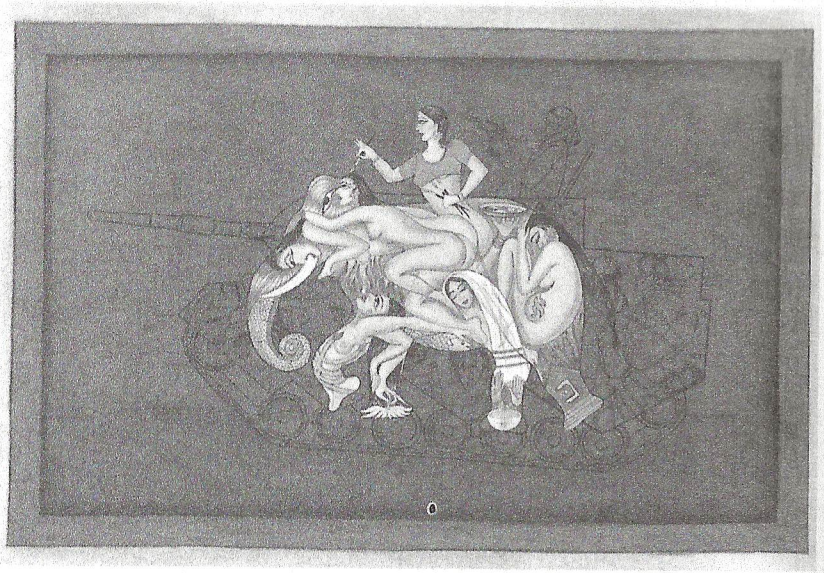

Figure 16. **Siona Benjamin:** ***Amistad, Finding Home*** **Series No. 53 (2000)**

is armless, but as shown here, she could have had the multiple arms and the diverse talents and powers of a non-Western symbol, the Durga. Yet, here in the West, her arms have been severed from her body. She has a Third Eye through whose clairvoyance she realizes the loss of her many potential powers. Benjamin painted this work at the time of the last presidential elections to represent the way that a reductive concept of women's powers has deprived us of our potential for making important political change. Had the Western woman benefited from the cultural heritage of a fusional image acknowledging the existence of her Third Eye, her aura, and her many arms, perhaps, Durga-like, she could have allied herself with her multiarmed sisters, and purified the world of negativity, making it safe from danger.

Amistad, No. 53 from the *Finding Home* series (Figure 16) refers in name to the slave ship but is actually a battle tank transformed by an army of women artists, clairvoyants, procreators, and creators—women performing prayers and rituals of love and peace. The elephant symbolizes strength. Here the sensual/sexual energies of women, combined with their multiple spiritual talents is potent

enough to reduce the violence of the army tank with its captive and bound bodies to the mere shadow of its previous form. These women, pregnant with the new creation of the *Aleph*, nurturing the earth with the milk of their breasts, praying, painting, and envisioning new colors and new creatures, have caused Life to triumph over Death and peace to flourish where once there was war. These women are blue, for they are Women of Color, multicultural with hybrid identities and talents. As I see it, they are the artist's answer to war. They are spiritual warriors, defenders of the freedom of the imagination, the power of the female body when aligned with the mind, heart, spirit, and Third Eye. These are the liberators of all the enslaved of the earth. They bear the *Aleph* and the prayer shawl, and perform the sacred rituals of a new generation of futuristic Jewish feminist leadership.

Finally, *Curry-Oke* from the *Finding Home* series, No. 40 (Figure 17), adds a note of humor to the expression of this multicultural

Figure 17. **Siona Benjamin:** ***Curry-Oke, Finding Home*** **Series No. 40 (2000)**

ethnic music. Here the woman artist is depicted in the image of a female Krishna and as a karaoke singer, whose words are rendered in four different languages: English, Hindi, Marathi, and Hebrew. They say, "Expression must come from the depths of my soul." Levitated on a lotus flower, guided by the many symbols and forces of her multiple Durga arms, and inspired by the spirits of a glass of good wine, she points to the Jewish star as her guiding light. With her "Curry-Oke" energies permeating the universal ethers, it is not surprising that another series of Benjamin's work is entitled *Spicy Girl*. Indeed, the Bene Israel Jews of Bombay were noted for their love of spicy food, and "spicy" is the adjective of choice for describing the special savor of Benjamin's vision.

Benjamin's Jewish-Hindu feminist iconography makes a radical breakthrough in harmonizing the contradictions and polarities presented by these various traditions. It pioneers an original multicultural imagery at the confluence of artistic and spiritual traditions that are often in conflict with each other. While Hindu art is based upon the ritual making of icons energized with the spirit of the deities to whom the artwork is consecrated, Jewish art prohibits both the making and the worship of such iconic images. However, the real tension depicted in Benjamin's work is less between her conflicting spiritual identities (which reach a harmony in the way she calls upon both of them to oppose the destruction and, hence, the desacralization of this world) than between the forces of Good and Evil. This fundamental conflict of opposing energies exists in both the Hindu and the Jewish religions as well as in their aesthetic approaches to image-making. Whether sin consists of making a "graven" image or of not invoking the energies of the deities through ritual and iconic representation—the important work of the new feminist multicultural artist is that of ridding the world of negativity and restoring light to a universe threatened by darkness and evil. Her two demons are war and violence. The woman artist in Benjamin's work becomes a spiritual warrior defining the integrity and the enlarged, empowered identity of her new hybrid, plural, poly-cultural borderland *home*. Benjamin's women warriors are always assisted by angels, guardian spirits,

and above all, by God, who is invoked through the *Shema* prayer, which she inscribes in Hebrew on many of her paintings.

This short perusal of art by contemporary Jewish-American artists who are selected for their focus on "nonrealistic" images expresses a cosmic conception of life that is multidimensional both temporally and spatially. Each of these artists envisages a communion with our historical antecedents. Both familial and historical, these spirits not only reside in a realm beyond this one, but also visit with us in synagogues, sacred sites, and houses of worship—a cathedral, an earth site, or Jerusalem itself. In the visions of these Jewish women artists, our ancestors receive our prayers, intervene on our behalf, and make spiritual contact with us—perhaps most readily via the creative arts when they are integrated with prayer and rituals expressive of their love of God's creation. Many of these artists continue to express their love of Judaism while recognizing its patriarchal origins and history and working to reconstruct its present practices by including women in important roles. They have expressed their love of the faith through what I call a "tough love" reexamination and re-creation of their sacred tradition. The works I have selected seem to suggest that at the heart of this "tough love" is the conviction that the prophetic, visionary dimension of Judaism must become manifest in our contemporary embodiment of Jewish spirituality. These women artists seek a Judaism that espouses gender equality as well as prophecy, and it is through the work of women artists that these two transformations of the tradition express the power and importance of clairvoyance linked to aesthetic vision for an expanded understanding of our past as well as for a healing of the present tensions that will transform our future.

As we move through the new millennium and beyond the terrible events in the Middle East and of 9-11 in New York, we find ourselves in need of the kind of visionary guidance that can activate our imaginations so that we will be better able to envision a future in which the energies of darkness and negativity will be transformed into those of light and peace. We must train our many arms and Third Eyes to embrace a vision that harmonizes the hybrid, multi-

and poly-cultural identities that we embody, so that we may stand together and create a force-field that fosters reconciliation, one that spreads blessings upon the world we pass on to our children and to the seventh generation thereafter.

NOTES

*These also are not reproduced here.

1. The Second Commandment from Exodus 20:4–6 states, "thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water that is underneath the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the father upon the children onto the third and fourth generations of them that hate Me; and showing mercy unto all of them that love Me and keep my commandments."

2. The Christian bias in art history is closely associated with anti-Semitism in the discipline. An excellent discussion and analysis of this is found in Soussloff.

3. An excellent anthology of early feminist analyses of art history can be found in Rave, Langer, and Frueh. See especially Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism."

4. Charlotte Salomon is a fascinating example of early modern Jewish art. See Felstiner.

5. *Midrash* is "[t]he method by which the ancient Rabbis investigated Scripture in order to make it yield laws and teachings not apparent in a surface reading" (Jacobs 345–47).

6. The *Shekinah* and the *Matronit* are discussed at length in Patai. Both are concepts referring to the feminine in the Godhead within Judaism. The *Mikveh* is the bath of ritual purification connected to the laws concerning menstruating women.

7. As Patai writes, "Asherah was the chief Goddess of the Canaanite pantheon" (36) and "her servants saw in her the loving motherly consort of Yahweh-Baal and for whom she was the great mother goddess, giver of fertility, that greatest of all blessings. The Hebrew people, by and large, clung to her for six centuries in spite of the increasing vigor of Yahwist monotheism" (52).

8. Interpretation inspired by "Tradition and Self: An Artist's Vision" by Nancy M. Berman in the catalogue for Weisberg's show of "The Scroll" at the Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles, November 1987–March 1988.

9. The Sarajevo *Haggadah* (telling, or narration, in Hebrew) was the first illuminated Jewish manuscript to be discovered in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Until it was found, there was a long-held belief that illustrations of any kind were forbidden in Jewish text. Although it is hard to date, scholars believe it to have originated in the late fourteenth century.

10. See, for example, Broude and Garrard.

11. Anita Rodriguez, taken from materials sent to me by the artist.

12. *Brit Millah* is the circumcision ceremony in which the male child enters a covenant with God.

13. The *Mohel* is the person who performs the ceremony of the *Brit Millah* (circumcision) for the male child.

14. Anita Rodriguez, taken from materials sent to me by the artist.

15. Fern Shaffer and Othello Anderson, taken from a joint artistic statement.

16. For an understanding of third wave feminism, see the Special Issue of *Journal of International Women's Studies, Harvesting Our Strengths: Third Wave Feminism and Women's Studies* 4.2 (April 2003).

17. This text on Siona Benjamin is taken from Orenstein (2002); see also Benjamin and Orenstein (2000).

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