

Biography for JADA Talk

Start with the beginning of *Wild and Tame Soliloquy* from 2005.

I was an UG from 1976-1980 – linguistic theory was all abuzz at that time – semiotic theory was coming up then. When I graduated from college with my studio art degree with a minor in comparative religion and philosophy, I went to NYC and worked as an assistant to the director of a gallery on 57th Street. This was in 1980 when HIV/AIDS was showing up, like COVID now, with people getting sick and dying and figuring out that this new virus was the culprit. I lost friends during that time. I was living in Hoboken, NJ across the river from NYC, and that was the time when artists in SoHo were starting to paint on buildings. So there was Renee – she made paintings on building that were mostly about her signature, Renee. That stuck with me. That act.

After working on other artists' behalf I realized that I wanted to strengthen my own practice and efficacy, so I decided to go to art school, I got into Hunter, but decided to go Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia - from 1982-1984 - where I did in fact deepen my practice, developing the interdisciplinary modality that I continue to enact still. After graduate school, I moved to Chicago with my boyfriend who became my husband because he got into grad school at the School of the Art Institute, and I ended up teaching there at the same time, for nearly twenty years in fact, during the rise and establishment of post-modernism – this was 1985-2004. The thing was that SAIC had been an intensely regional school up until about 1985, just happened to be that it began its journey into the international domain at the exact time we got there.

I made one of my seminal works to date in 1996. Renee from the walls of SoHo showed up in a seminal work of my own: *A Temple In Honor of Life Lived Every Day – An Unfinished Song of Love. (1)* Who knew, but I realized after coming up with the title that I had named this place after myself: Cheselyn Chaya Chesed Amato – my name means life love. Go figure – and how fantastic is that.

I have worked from and for impassioned being – I swoon of sublimity awe, enchantment, and I tremble before all the vicissitude, the catastrophe, the devastation.

My work as artist has always been motivated by an impassioned eye, mind and heart for the meaning of being, the experience of being human and how human beings engage with each other, about the sublimity, awe, wonder, enchantment and love AND the melancholy, the harrowing, the injustice and suffering. I have understood myself as a Post Post-Holocaust Jewish person and woman and artist/poet/thinker impassioned by this great enterprise of all that is, examining it all via so many investigative trajectories, categories or disciplines for examining the world, ourselves, exploding limiting concepts and beliefs and allowing for awareness and possibilities for becoming whole myself and for the whole-ing of others, of whatever is calling for healing and balance, for balance and positive transformation. I think of myself as a swooning soul. I mean really swooning and sincerity – for me these are quite synonymous in many ways.

Something happened in 2004 that changed my life – I entered into a long journey – and now is not the time for that story. Let me say that it was after teaching in art school for those twenty years that my own practice seemed to mature and I discovered that there was a place where I belonged, in a conversation where my work was really useful, and that was in the contemporary Jewish museum context. And, here is where I am going to address the word, irony. I was invited to participate in the exhibition entitled, *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* and this is the piece of

mine that was included, *Textile Collage: Napkins, Placemats and Death Camps (2)*. I think I can say that the piece that caught the curator's eye was the most loaded piece I had ever made, one in which there was a possibility of misunderstanding, in the sense that someone could think that I was not at all reverential or deferential or commitment to remembrance, and specifically, of the Holocaust, but this piece could not have been more about meaning, for meaning; it was absolutely a contemporary kaddish or eulogy for the dead, the beloved dead.

It started as a physical collage including placemats and textiles from my favorite shops on Canal Street in NYC along with paper napkins with classic aristocratic motif and an image of Auschwitz from above. It is true that some people would not recognize the image of Auschwitz, some would and understand the heart-break for its presence and some would see it as an affront as if equating banal un-loaded motifs with a pattern that is actually the representation of as loaded an image as possible. I knew that I made it as this post post-Holocaust Jewess born in 1958 with one foot in the old world and one in the new, a person who hold the sacred and the profane at once, and who is both wild and tame, reverent always while having to engage head on with contradiction, the evil that can lurk in banality and the enchantment of decoration, if not beauty.

After this show which inaugurated the new Spertus Museum building in Chicago in 2008, there was a total crisis at the institution because some staff, donors and members were deeply offended by the show, the work in it, but probably more, the title of the exhibition, deeply offended some staff, donors, partners and members. I do think that some people interpreted, Post-Jewish to mean no longer Jewish. The reference was certainly to Post-Modernism and perhaps actually an inaccurate correspondence in a way, because the show was really, I think, an gesture toward affirming the rebirth of a deeply wounded people. The exhibition was misunderstood; the title was not the best. The museum closed its doors and was absorbed back into the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership. This is an example I think of the wounding that built up over the course of the warring 20th century; maybe the irony of Post-Modernism is-was a reflection of numbness and indirectly about fear of feeling anything, a kind of bravado and show of courage in the face of cataclysmic human brutality. I can understand that trust has been breached and something hard to re-establish.

Between 2016 and 2019, I began an unexpected deep dive into learning how to provide spiritual care for people encountering health crises including sickness, dying and death. It started by engaging in chaplaincy training in the hospital context. It was a kind of total immersion boot camp in every kind of illness, dying and death under the sun. I accompanied people through their last breaths, I learned so much about how we leave. At the same time, I engaged in the earning of another Masters Degree, this one in Theological Studies with a focus in art, spirituality, chaplaincy, and justice and social transformation, to support the hospital training so that I would have the credentials necessary to be hired for a job in the field. I am now serving as bereavement accompanist in hospice assisting family and friends to navigate loss and grief upon and after the death of loved ones. I have added these new tools to what I call my lightworker toolkit for tikkun or healing for self, others and our world.

At the same time In 2016, while a member of the collaborative gallery, AXIS in Sacramento, CA where I have been living since 2006, I created the interdisciplinary installation, *Uncontrollable Beauty: An Odyssey | Everything We Need Is Always With Us.(3)* Here is an excerpt from the spoken text I delivered in situ: *Ballad of Uncontrollable Beauty.*

End with: *What is Important?*