



AK Azad Kashmir  
B Lt General (Retired) Jack Jacob (and Pal Singh Gill his lifelong assistant), 2012-2013,  
EP East Bengal Civil Armed Force (EPCAF)  
W Wing  
Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

# The Art of Identity Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives

In Conversation with Siona Benjamin

The **F**ACES jump from their frames, dance across the walls of the Flomenhaft Gallery. Life flows from the canvases, their stories swirl around them. It is clear that these are not mere pictures of people but the stories of generations, of families and of the Jewish people.

I had last spoken with Siona Benjamin following her return from India before her Fulbright project research for *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* had taken form. She had explained her vision for the project to me and shared her photographs of the people that would soon become the subjects of her art. While her passion was clear and her research extensive, it was hard at that preliminary stage to draw a mental picture of how this vision would take shape. But the result could not be more remarkable.

Now as I walked through the exhibition with Siona, she filled in the details that are absent from each canvas but are imprinted on her soul. She spoke about each one of the paintings and the people in them as if they were part of her own story, with a level of sensitive familiarity and deep intimacy. She explains it is because in a way they are parts of her own story, pieces of the puzzle that make up her own identity. “There is something in all of their faces that reminds me of home,” she says.

Her earlier series, *Finding Home*, speaks to this same yearning to connect and express all the different parts of her own identity. Though born in India into the Bene Israel community, she defines herself as a contemporary American artist. She seeks to challenge people’s perceptions of who is a Jew and who is an American. In the same brushstroke she also challenges gender roles and sees the strength in herself, in her female subjects.



Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar), 2012-2013, Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

In speaking with Siona, she explains that she hopes that the images she presents of the Bene Israel community will help dispel the notion that Judaism is somehow tied to race or ethnicity. We speak about the story of Purim. “This was a story from Persia,” Siona explains, “Esther wasn’t light skinned. She couldn’t have been. That wasn’t the definition of Jewish nor was it the definition of beauty.” She stresses that even when we look at the Jewish forefathers, we have to look closely at who they were and where they were from before we try and project Ashkenazi characteristics on them. She says Abraham, for example, was from Ur. He too also wouldn’t have been light skinned and therefore wouldn’t have met conventional notions about who is a Jew, who looks Jewish. He comes from one of the most conflicted places in the

world and a place that is seen to be very ‘non-Jewish’.

“This is my Tikkun Olam. I hope that in some small way, I am helping to contribute to a larger discussion. I create my art and I give it out to the universe. I have to then allow the universe to accept, reject or question these ideas. My hope is that a conversation has been started.”

And while her message resonates deeply with me, the people and the mental process are equally fascinating. There is a greater message she explains, “My art isn’t Jewish and it isn’t Indian. They are portraits of humanity. They are stories about a special group but really they are stories about all of us.”

She shows me her “Mona Lisa”, a beautiful close-up of Maayan Abraham



Three Generation Triptych, 2012-2013,  
Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches each panel

(Shapurkar). Maayan's photograph is featured in Issue 6 of *Asian Jewish Life* (page 19). Siona explains her face could belong anywhere. She adorned the portrait with a beautiful but simple design on gold leaf. It is a timeless and transcultural beauty that she says quietly can challenge notions about race and ethnicity. We then look at Maayan's grandfather, Samson Solomon (Korlekar) whose photo is also displayed. Siona tells his story with a sense of pride one typically reserves in telling their only family's story.

Ultimately, Siona sees herself as a storyteller, linking past and present on canvas. It is storytelling that gives her a certain freedom of expression that she says she wouldn't have had if she had been a historian or an archeologist trying to make these same connections.

While she is captivated by all the stories that make us human, almost immediately one facet of the subjects' individuality immediately emerges as vivid imagery. She explains that there is a medium that suits that each piece of the puzzle. For a multicultural/ transcultural artist that moves within and between multiple identities, boundaries and zones, as one would expect, she has mastered the art of multimedia. Ultimately, she says

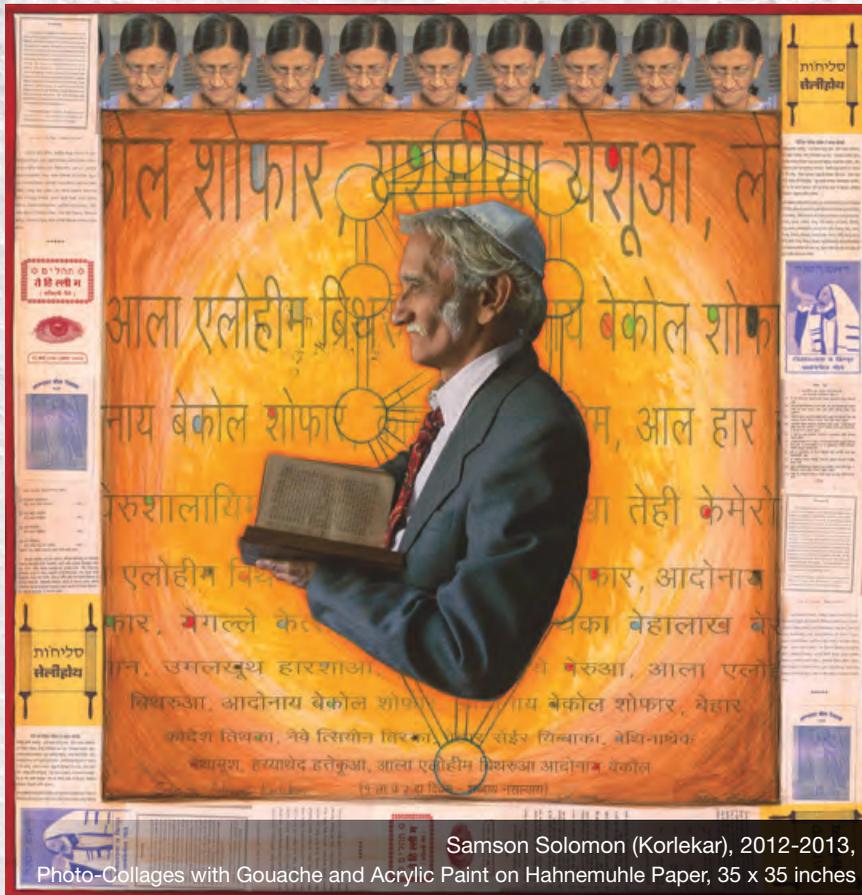


Salome Hyams Parikh (Mumbai), 2012-2013,  
Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

that all of our stories, like her exhibition, are multilayered. People are never one thing or one story but the sum of parts, identities and experiences.

Clearly differentiating *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* from her earlier

series, she creates her art around actual photographs. While she agrees that she is first and foremost a painter, she explains that she did have some training in photography, in black and white, years ago at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. While she said she first



Samson Solomon (Korlekar), 2012-2013,

Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

telling their stories. I can't stop asking for more details.

She then says regretfully, that *Faces* must come to an end at some point. Her gallery requested thirty pieces for the show and Siona has an additional ten pieces in progress. She says she will need to end this collection with these, at forty. But then, she says she will likely add just one more after that. She is animated as she tells the beautiful story of one brother who donated a kidney to save the life of the other brother. She describes the imagery of a kidney and blood vessels connecting them, like roots to a tree. She then adds, that perhaps, there is just one more after that.

These stories have woven their way so intricately into her story that I am doubtful that we have seen the last of them. I don't think she can really ever let them go. They are part of her now.

Though returning to India in some ways made it even more apparent how American she has become, the trip helped her to reconnect with her past and understand that their iconography has actually always been part of hers too. She was in search of "myself and my family that left [India] to go to Israel... pieces and threads of what is remaining to what once was. Finding people from my home doesn't necessarily mean I found all my answers though."

With pieces still missing to her puzzle, this lingering uncertainty guarantees that her artistic exploration of home, identity, multiculturalism, race and gender will continue. Secretly, I think I am happy that home for her is so many places. While I eagerly await those final 10, 11, 12... pieces in *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* to be completed, I can't wait to see what will come next. ✧

contemplated painting their portraits, she felt the photography captured the essence of the people whose stories she was sharing. The photographs give them a stronger voice in the art as beautifully detailed iconography dances around them.

Ultimately, while their faces help tell their story, Benjamin has worked to "take from the specific and make it universal". She invites the viewer, to take for example, the community cook and be able to identify with her. Together we look at the brightly colored saffron background and the pictorial story of Hannah Emanuel Samuel (Pearkar), the Bene Israel community chef. Siona tells her story but says that the work is really about the viewer taking her experience and relating it to their own world. It is not just their

stories that she seeks to tell but her own and the story of family, community and humanity generally. Some of the faces she says without the iconography could have been taken almost anywhere.

As to how the actual community reacted to seeing their images as art, she says they were flattered and deeply moved. She speaks of how warmly she was welcomed and explains that there is something incredibly special when a Bene Israel comes home. As a mere visitor to the community, I can attest to this warmth and an overwhelming sense of welcome.

Over lunch, we continue to talk about *Faces*. Even without a canvas, multimedia presentations, digital art, paint or photography, she can't stop