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Goddesses of Color: Interfaith Altars with Folk-Art Roots

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intertwined history of certain goddesses of the Middle East and the Americas. This history informs the original invented contemporary deities that my project centers around. Using recycled materials and collected objects, my project displays two religious altars, one from my heritage and one from my experience living in Brazil. One altar is based on afro-Brazilian sea goddesses, and one is a contemporary imagined interpretation of a Judeo-Christian female figure. The two altars together will compose an installation that seeks to unify a pagan practice and two distinct monotheistic traditions while still honoring their separate parts. These parts will be built in the studio and displayed there also, but will be photographed in different contexts. These photographs will be incorporated into the installation.

Making dioramas, secular crèches, and miniature installation projects always came naturally to me as art forms. At a young age, I made “projects” out of anything available at the time, craft supplies, nature, or household objects. This senior series was influenced by Andrew Goldsworthy nature installations and the recycled materials used by Rauschenberg, as well as the realm of the spiritual. The materials selected include recycled packaging carton, which is more Rauschenberg than Goldsworthy, but the process of fitting pieces together in sculpture and thereby transforming them makes both sculptors highly influential. Goldsworthy pieces have a holy mood about them, perhaps due to the precise meditative process of fitting stones or branches together.

Altars are a nearly universal idea, practiced in many religions and cultures. I am particularly interested in altars of Candomblé and Umbanda, Brazilian polytheistic religions with Yoruba origins. In these traditions, Yemaya, the mother goddess of the river in Africa evolved into Iemanjá, the goddess of the ocean in Brazil who has popular and widespread rituals in her honor such as floating white flowers in the ocean. She is a mother goddess, a deity needed by people, especially women. In my own upbringing, I participated in festivals for Iemanjá when my family lived in a coastal city in northeastern Brazil. After leaving, I retrospectively suspect that the honoring of a female deity was missing in my life. I always held great respect and spiritual connection with oceans, but never had a formal practice. In my practice of Reform Judaism and Protestant Christianity, I looked to certain heroines like Esther who saved her people in the Purim story, but these short and underrepresented narratives honoring women were never

enough. Without a strong leading female force in my inherited religions, I look to other ways of thinking about “mother goddesses” particularly in relationship to nature. I even envied some Catholic practitioners and their female saints, and mother Mary’s more prominent place, and her incarnations like La Virgen de Guadalupe. Iemanjá fills the void of a female deity in the pantheon of my religious experience.

In my representation of Iemanjá, I combined many sources (Image 1). The goddess is sometimes depicted fair, with jet-black wavy hair, wearing long white and blue robes. She is also depicted as a mermaid, with varying skin tones, from espresso to skim milk. She is the patron of the ocean and fishermen for Brazilians who practice, regardless of their mix of Amerindian, Portuguese, African, and/or other heritage. I looked at contemporary photographic and illustrative self-portraits of black Brazilian and black North American women. I tried to amplify the power of their self-representation, and reflect the confidence in the face of their oppressive societies.

The connection between the power of my contemporary peers of color who post portraits on Tumblr and other virtual blogging platforms, and the goddess Iemanjá is the importance of representation in the African diaspora. Abdias Nascimento, a black Brazilian activist, organizer, and painter, stated the importance of the Candomblé pantheon in the mid 90’s: “My Orishas are not archaic gods, petrified in folklore’s fixed time and space or lost in the stratosphere of academic theoretical speculation. They are alive and living beings that inhabit Africa, Brazil and all the Americas right now. They appear in daily life and in secular contexts as history’s legacy and that of our ancestors.”

(Cleveland, *Black Art in Brazil* pp.48-49). In painting my black mermaid image, I referenced Nascimento's *Oxunmaré*, a minimally composed yet richly symbolic representation of another Candomblé goddess of the same name. This goddess does not rule the seas as Iemanjá does, but carries the seawater to the clouds, where another deity is located. This half land- half sea goddess is regularly portrayed as a black mermaid. (Cleveland, 49) What is fascinating about this piece is that all the figures are flat like color paper cutouts in a collage, and quite opaque and smooth with one exception. The exception is the goddess' hair, which is considerably more textured and detailed. The detailed hair is a symbol of embracing African roots instead of adhering to Western, in this case Portuguese, standards of beauty. My goddess representation seeks to embrace the mixed heritage of a large portion of the population in Northeast Brazil, with curly-kinky hair.

I also studied the altars of Amalia Mesa-Bains, Chicana installation artist who investigated issues of bi- cultural identity in the mid to late 20th Century. Her works are full scale, grand statements that take inspiration from Catholic Chicana altars and domestic landscapes like closets and other furniture. In her 1990's series *Venus Envy*, Chapter One, she included Coatlicue, an Aztec deity, and a Mary icon. This interfaith expression is mirrored in my installations.

Another important factor in the stylization of my icon is the work Brazilian artist José Francisco Borges. Borges' prints have always hung in my house and probably influenced my appreciation for folk art. Colorful, expressive, and unabashedly playful,

his woodblock prints tackle retellings of local myths, histories, and cultural symbols. A poet as well as an artist, Borges' works began in *folhetos*, small booklets hung on string in the marketplace, often advertised by vendors singing about their contents. By the time I first interacted with his works, they were sold as gallery size prints. He has made ten variations of Iemanjá that are visible online. (Images 2-4) From Borges my icon echoes textural emphasis, and simple facial features.

In Jewish tradition, personal altars are not used, but instead tables and altars are used in community settings. Worship is communal though at times familial; it is more about being a part of a group, a chosen and distinct people. My transfer of Jewish sentiments and symbols to an altar representation seeks not to merge or meld the three Abrahamic faiths, but instead recognize their impacts on my faith and their shared vision of a just, moral world. In addition, since ancient times neither Judaism nor Islam use figurative, pictorial images. Images of god or holy people are forbidden. In Judaism, God is an unimaginable, un-representable force. Christianity being a highly representational tradition, was the easiest to draw images from. In fact, the abundance of Trip-tychs, Madonna and child paintings, frescoes, and stained glass pieces were overwhelming. I looked more specifically at Black Marys, in particular one from Montserrat, France that I have visited and a few from the afro-Brazilian art cannon. In some forms of Catholicism, The Virgin is worshipped similarly to a goddess, in that pre-Colombian Aztec and Mayan goddesses were absorbed into her power, or perhaps the other way around. I sought out pre-Christian, pre-Jewish, and pre-Muslim pagan deities to create a reimagined female goddess for adoration.

In my heritage figure, I used references of a stone carving of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, and war (Image 5). An 18th- 7th Century BCE dedication in her honor proclaims "...Unto the passionate Goddess who loves righteousness; Ishtar the Queen, who suppresses all that is confused. To the Queen of Heaven, Goddess of the Universe, the One who walked in terrible chaos and brought life by the Law of Love; and out of Chaos brought us harmony..." (Stone, When God Was a Woman, x). These types of proclamations still exist in similar form within currently practicing, popular religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, they are directed toward a sometimes "genderless" though in reality a deeply historically masculine god. This goddesses' power, symbolized in her super-human fierceness and animal features, harkens a past when certain societies did not have a history of "the weaker sex". In fact, Stone references Ishtar's human worshippers in the city of Nimrud, "women served as judges and magistrates of the courts of law" (Stone, 4). Ishtar's aviary features, while primarily to symbolize a unity with all creatures of nature and the power of the hunt, also serve to juxtapose my Brazilian goddess's aquatic features. This duality in my goddess duo covers the sea and sky, where ancient peoples often saw manifestations of god.

In addition to Ishtar, I looked toward Asherah (Image 6), who in pre- Judah Babylonia was God's wife and consort. She is sometimes associated in connection to Ishtar, Egyptian Isis, and others. She was referred to as a Creatrix and a sea goddess, but was later edited out of tradition and her worship was considered idolatry. However, she is

mentioned as a symbol or as inanimate objects like a tree and a sacred pole or wreath, alluding to the power of growth she once held. I brought these goddesses into contemporary faith. The mingling of myths gave birth to this new goddess. She shares a confidence and stubbornness of Ishtar. She possesses the ability to create and destroy. Most goddesses did.

Another symbolic moment seen in my “heritage painting” (Image 7) is a pomegranate over the deity’s heart. The pomegranate is considered by biblical scholars to be the most likely fruit in the Garden of Eden, not an apple. Pomegranates grew where Torah (Old Testament) stories took place, not apples. They are clearly referenced in several other places throughout the Torah. The pomegranate also has a long symbolic history from the ancient Greek myth of Persephone, queen of the underworld, to modern Christianity. In fact, they are referenced in most major religious texts, including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Islam. In Kabbalistic traditions (Jewish mystic practice) the pomegranate is used to bring fertility and lucrative business when “burst” on holy days. They were also seen on ancient Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian sacred spaces and royal costume and décor. Like the evil eye, or the Khamsa hand, the pomegranate is a truly interfaith symbol. However, unlike other symbols, it exists here at Scripps College. Therefore, the pomegranate heart of the deity alludes to the endurance of old traditions, and effectively places this goddess in the context of Scripps.

The abstract sculptural component of the altar to my heritage was a simple one, a carefully selected smooth bark-less stick, resting in a casual manner inside a recycled cardboard carton. This piece is meant to stand in for all that cannot be represented in the figurative pieces. It stands for Asherah as a tree of life and an inanimate mother, and

finally a pole referenced in biblical texts. The form this particular stick takes could be likened to a geological crack in the earth, a metal vein, or a human vein. This piece could also be interpreted as a symbol of creation, of conception if the stick is seen phallic and surrounding material yonic. Read from the perspective of the oppressed Jewish people, the stick is resistance and the lifeline that flows through the surrounding culture. The stick, heritage and hope in a world of great tragedy and struggle, the surrounding cardboard the bumps of the past and present. This piece is formally inspired by the shrine series of Tobi Kahn (Image 8). This series is abstract and organic, but thematically working out of a post-holocaust memorial tradition.

Together, the two mother goddesses plus the abstract creation representation in my overall installation (Image 9) creates the beginning of an expansive and encompassing series. One has wings to roam the skies and heavens, another scales to navigate earth's largely unexplored oceans. Together, they provide comfort for mortal women, particularly marginalized women and women of color.

Image 1 Sea Goddess, after Iemanjá



Images 2, 3, and 4, Borges, 2009, 2003, 2007



Image 5 Relief Carving of Ishtar, Old Babylonian origin

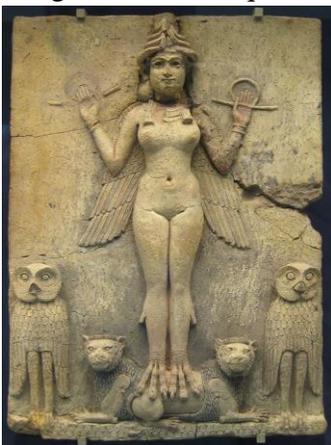


Image 6 Relief Plaque of Asherah



Image 7 Original Painting detail



Image 8 Tobi Kahn Shrine: "Mydah"



Image 9 Project Installation



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