

Visual Journeys: The Art of Anna Ruth Henriques

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The art work of Anna Ruth Henriques embodies voyages of discovery that explore landscapes of the heart, mind and soul. Her national, transcultural and autobiographical passages trouble the fixity of Western perspectives about the Caribbean as postcolonial, derivative and outside Metropolitan culture and myth. Her work posits that it is the dynamism of displacement and fluidity, found in the many nations, races, sexual orientations and cultures, that constitutes Caribbean identity. For Stuart Hall, the diaspora experience is defined “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*”.¹ Henriques’ roots are multiple; there is no singular origin. Her father, Ainsley, comes from one of Jamaica’s oldest Sephardic Jewish families and her mother, Sheila née Chong, a former Miss Jamaica, was half Chinese, half Afro-Caribbean who converted to Judaism. Within the Eurocentric context of the ‘New World’, Caribbean people had to invent and re-invent themselves. It was necessary for artists to move beyond the hegemonic structures that placed ‘superior’ Western art in opposition to ‘inferior’ and ‘primitive’ Caribbean art. Henriques’ conflation of both worlds acknowledges her own past while challenging the postcolonial paradigm of her country’s history. In so doing, Henriques’ work generates a definition of Caribbean identity as being manifold, nomadic, and in a state of permanent reformation. Unlike many North Americans and Europeans who narrate Caribbean identity primarily in terms of the African legacy, Henriques foregrounds aboriginal Tainos, Sephardic Jews, and gay men, groups largely invisible in contemporary thought and art.

In *The Taino Series* (1994), Henriques connects the exile of Sephardic Jews who were her ancestors from Spain (Sepharad) and Portugal to the obliteration of the aboriginal Tainos of the

Caribbean. The Henriques family's journey to Jamaica in the 16th century started in southern Spain, through Portugal in 1492, to Amsterdam, and from Recife, Brazil. While imposing their own definitions and interpretations on another culture, the Western conquerors presumed to write and re-write the history of another people. Henriques' work excavates and revisions the fragmented pieces of an earlier period in the 'Old' and 'New' World. George A. Aarons has described one of the pre-Columbian Taino wooden pieces retrieved in St. Ann, Jamaica. (Figure 1) He writes: "The standing avian figure is...semi-oval in shape, supported by a vertical, 'limb-like' shape which rises from the back of the figure between the folded wings....The slightly peaked head has 'staring eye' orbits and...the closed beak rests lightly against the bird's breast".² Aarons' description bears a remarkable semblance to Henriques' *Cocoa Zemi*. (Figure 2) *Zemis* are the sacred deities of the Tainos whose



Fig.1. Aboukir Zemi, Aarons 13.



Fig.2. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Cocoa Zemi*, Taino Series.

mythology and religion were pantheistic, equating God with the forces and laws of the universe. *Cocoa Zemi* seems to materialize from the door of a cave often used by the Taino as sacred shrines and places

of safety. The figure unifies the human and natural environment. The solidity and beige-grey tones of *Cocoa Zemi* takes on the appearance of wood or stone, common materials used by the Taino. This image seems like the principal male Taino deity, *Yocahuna*, usually shown with “outstretched legs, with arms...laid to the sides..., often with some kind of headdress,...with exaggerated eye sockets and mouths.”³ *Cocoa Zemi* is magisterial in his presence, centered and imposing in the image. Although Columbus wanted to destroy the Taino’s ‘atheistic’ religion, that did not deter him from taking back precious objects like their gold masks to his Catholic King and Queen.

Postcards from the Midden (1994) extends the idea of creating memorials for dead cultures. Henriques writes that this series “draws on an imaginary Taino burial ground (midden) from which a variety of symbolic and visual artifacts appear unearthed and recorded. [Figure 3] Both objects and



Fig. 3. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Postcards from the Midden*

images from this imaginary midden are assembled onto postcard-size canvases complete with used Jamaican stamps, as if already dispatched from the island....The midden...comes to symbolize the European destruction of other cultures and peoples. The postcards are the pictorial renditions of the remnants from the earth’s cemeteries”.⁴

In turn, *The Isabella Boxes* (1995) grew out of *Postcards from the Midden*. Again Henriques writes: “The Isabella Boxes extend the notion of imagined amateur archaeology in that these small wooden boxes are also

collections of artifacts reminiscent of another people – of their religion, their art, their encounter with another culture – during the process and in the aftermath of their annihilation....The overlap of histories, cultures and travels is enclosed in these boxes, each a legacy, a ritualistic voyage back in time.”⁵ In the *Isabella Box, Backbone* (Figure 4), the right side of the open box is replete with shells



Fig. 4. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Backbone*, The Isabella Boxes.

interspersed with silver beads that look like pearls from the sea. In the left box there is a photo of Columbus, centered and foundational. Extending out from Columbus are the arms of a Jewish *menorah*, and a Jamaican leaf. Between the *menorah* and the leaf, on the head of Columbus' image, sits a headless, androgynous figure, its backbone most prominent and vulnerable. The four icons of imperialism and genocide coalesce in this box. Henriques engages imaginatively with the exiled status of her ancestors. *The Boxes* refer, of course, to Queen Isabella who instructed Columbus to bring back riches of gold from the Indies; there were none in Jamaica. Henriques believes, nevertheless, that these

“early tourists” would have gathered exotic objects for Isabella. Consequently, within *The Boxes* are artifacts which recall the Taino people who were conquered and eventually extinguished by the Europeans. *The Boxes*, therefore, represent an act of sympathetic and artistic archaeology.

The twelve Giclée plates of *The Exodus Series* (2002) are a “visual meditation on the theme of exile incorporating iconic imagery”⁶, using a digital pen and downloaded internet materials. Henriques went to Seville, Spain in 1992 as Design Coordinator of the Jamaica Pavilion at the Universal Exposition planned to coincide with the 500-year celebrations of Columbus’ departure to the New World. On the last night for Jews on Spanish soil, August 2, 1492, Columbus and his crew probably encountered “long lines of Jews on their way to abandoning the land of Sepharad forever”.⁷ Typically, the marranos (secret Jews) and openly practicing Jews who shared in Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the New World, like Henriques’ ancestors, have fallen through the cracks of history. In Spain, her family’s history became visceral and concrete. Although Columbus sought new territories and gold, he returned with other riches such as spices and, specifically cocoa. Henriques had taken a dozen Jamaican chocolate bars to Seville and she saved the gold wrappers of those chocolate bars, collecting souvenirs of coins and a Portuguese tourist brochure. She arranged her collections on canvas boards in iconographic forms. They were memorials that had the power to synthesize in a single composite image the ‘Old World’ of her family, and a celebration of the ‘New World’ of Jamaica.

The centerpieces are digitized images of West Indian ‘gold’: the wrappers of Jamaican chocolate bars, representing cocoa and cane sugar. Within the centerpieces are emblems from an official Portuguese tourist brochure, as well as the Spanish coins. Markings of Moorish pre-Inquisition, Spain, form borders while other Caribbean spices serve as background, as does a burlap bag of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. Various reproductions of 16th century Caribbean maps weave throughout the layers comprising the images, as does the first page of the original Inquisition

document. In *Manuscript*, (Figure 5) the golden remnants of Henriques' Sephardic background are embedded in the center of the somber tones of the Inquisition document that led to the expulsion and devastation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews. At the top of the central square are the tablets of the Ten Commandments, one admonition of which is "Thou shalt not kill". The three bright orange and yellow circles are Spanish coins and the stone rectangle below is a manuscript whose indiscernible words

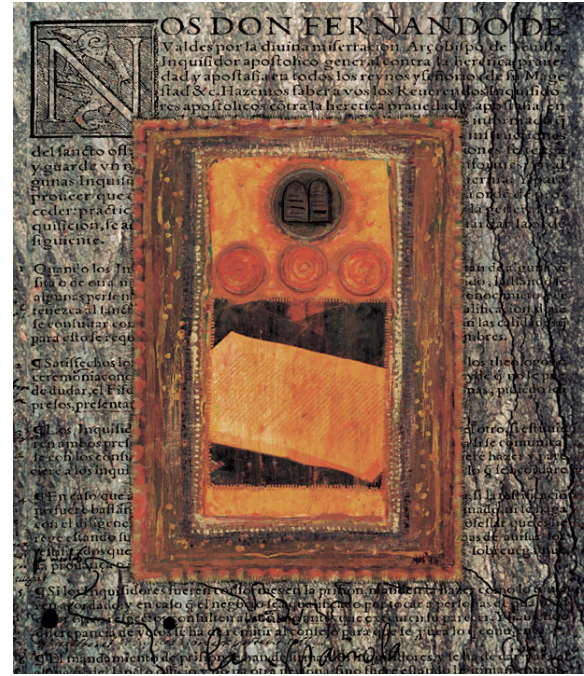


Fig. 5. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Manuscript*, The Exodus Series.

summon up the contradictory laws of the Ten Commandments and the Inquisition document. In *Windows* (Figure 6) a photograph of the Ark of the only synagogue, *Shaare Shalom* ("Gate of Peace"), left in Jamaica merges with a view from a Portuguese window.

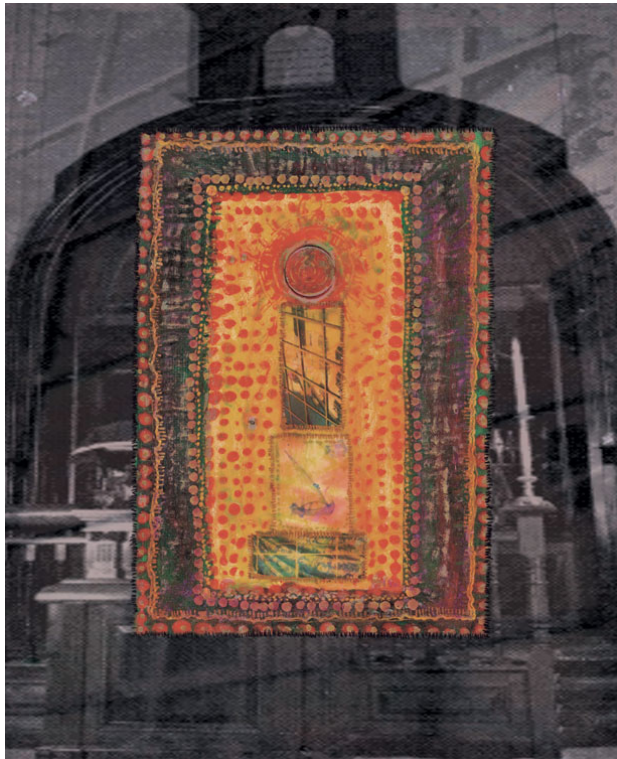


Fig. 6. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Windows*, The Exodus Series

Above the window is the sun of a gold Spanish coin analogous to the two perpetual lights at the sides of the Ark which symbolize the coming together of the Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) and Ashkenazi (European) congregations that took place in 1921. The names of early settlers float forth from a Spanish wrought-iron gate and family crest in *Crest*. (Figure 7) Among those names are both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. In order of sequence from



Fig. 7. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Crest*, The Exodus Series

the top to the bottom of the central square is a Spanish coin, ancient texts, a Spanish-Portuguese family crest and beneath that is a photograph of the synagogue in Jamaica. The historical geography of Henriques' life is embodied in *The Exodus Series*. Each of the 12 images is an ode to one of the twelve scattered tribes, each a visual epitaph to this second Exodus and the impact it had on a people.⁸

Henriques continues to reference the sacred text of her people

in her elegiac paean to her mother's suffering and death from cancer, *The Book of Mechtilde*,⁹ based on the biblical Book of Job. The text that is both written and illuminated by her glorious pictorials brings together her cultural and personal history. Mechtilde is Sheila Mechtilde Henriques, née Chong who, like Job, lived a virtuous life but was afflicted by pain, suffering and loss. In the book, the historical journey of Jamaica, the Land of Jah (the Rastafarian God) is intertwined with Mechtilde's cancer-ridden body. *The Book of Mechtilde* is framed by the existential issues of undeserved human suffering, the apparent silence of God, and separation on the one hand, and the restoration of freedom, spontaneity and loyalty on the other. These concerns are seminal to the history of Jamaica, Mechtilde, and the Book of Job that is Israel's history up to the Exile. Henriques' route from the painful loss of her mother at the age of eleven to acceptance and celebration is a pathway mapped by the exuberant colors

of her illuminations. Nonetheless, lurking above the explosion of brilliant pigments, is a sky that still “carries a shade of grey.”¹⁰

In 1997, the original art work from *The Book of Mechtilde* was shown at the Jewish Museum in New York. The flat pages of the book still capture the intensity of the illuminations displayed in circular or rectangular box frames. Henriques’ work is consistently remarkable for its use of color, achieved by means of saturated acrylic and watercolor tones. Around each graphic, she imprinted passages from the Biblical text in gold ink. Clearly, Gothic and Byzantine illumination have influenced Henriques. Yet her work also reflects ties to Hebrew manuscript painting. The idea that Jews did not reproduce images is a persistent one. However, Hebrew illustrated manuscripts and Jewish prayer books were frequently decorated with figurative art which was further replicated in Christian art. Metaphorically, the words from the Book of Job are like a labyrinth. The first verses that enfold the images of Mechtilde’s life, the center of the maze, leads the viewer, not to intricate passageways and blind alleys but to the ways in which Job’s story commingles with Mechtilde’s. At the outer rim, the particular chapter and verse from the Book of Job is cited and beside it is Henriques’ initials “ARH 1992”. Job, mother and daughter share this life-altering journey. The practice of having the letters themselves form the shape central to the illumination appears to be distinctive to Hebrew manuscripts in which the ideographic images summarized elements of medieval Jewry’s spiritual experience.¹¹ Geometric contours, floral designs, animal and human figures were regularly found in Hebrew manuscripts of Christian Europe. Similarly, the outer framing of Henriques’ work, which is an aesthetic geometry, is patterned in gold with the natural and spiritual topography of Jamaica, tropical flowers, fauna, fish, and shell shapes that remind the viewer of the all-seeing eye.

Since “Mechtilde lived in a land of songmakers” where “in times of joy, the music rejoiced” and “in times of sorrow, the music wept”¹², there is a synchronous relationship that binds people’s lives

to the nation, and to the artistic articulations that express the diasporic struggle. For Henriques, most Jamaicans are linked by exile and love the Land of Jah. The country's destiny and fortunes mirror the vicissitudes and fate of Mechtilde. When her cancer goes into remission, Jah descends into civil unrest and many depart from the Land. As the cancer returns, Jamaica's situation worsens as well. One of the illuminations that accompany this part of her story is of a *shofar*, (Figure 8) the biblical ram's horn

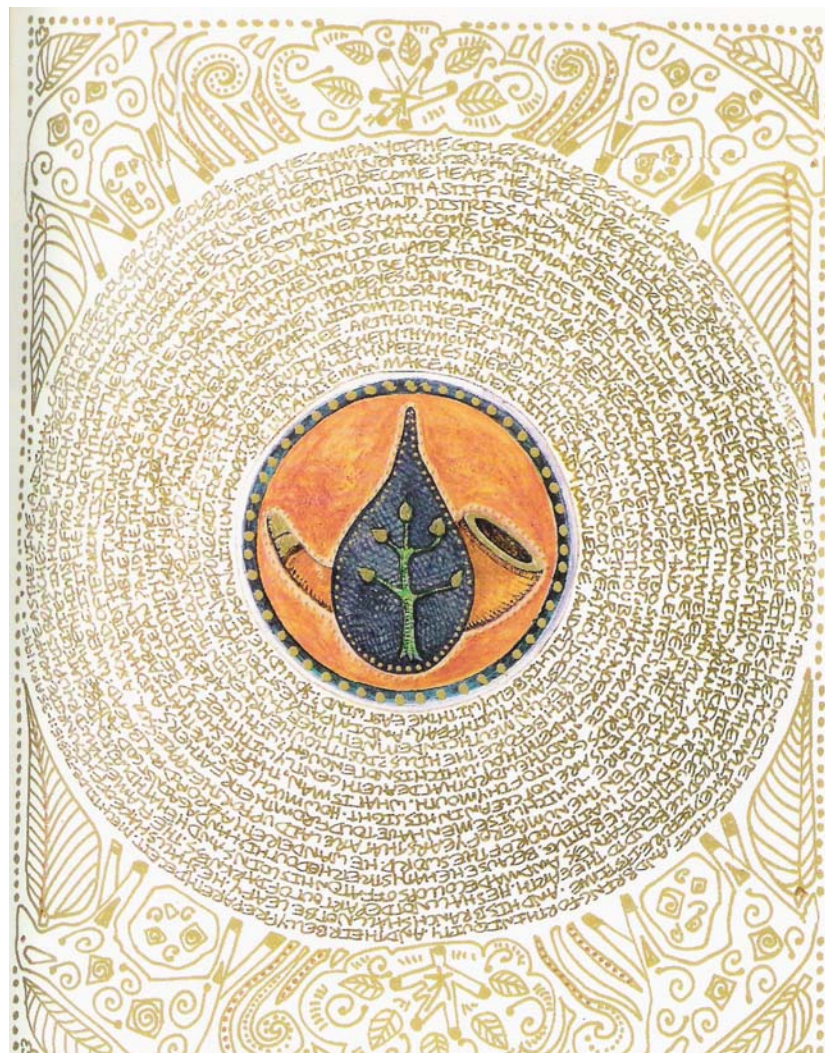


Fig. 8. Anna Ruth Henriques, *The Book of Mechtilde* 27.

writes that iconographic images from fourteenth century Spanish Hebrew manuscripts habitually mirror the circumstance that Jewish history “unlike that of other continuous entities, developed and evolved primarily within multiple societies, cultures, and civilizations, and bears the imprimatur of its

formed into a musical instrument. It heralds an important announcement or a call to arms. A blue teardrop hangs suspended in front of the *shofar* and embedded within it is the Tree of Life epitomizing fertility and eternal life (Genesis 3:9, 22, 24). The *shofar* is like a Sephardic chant and reggae sound that weeps for Mechtilde and the land of Jah but there is always the expectation of immortality and rebirth.

Notably, J. Gutmann

long, diverse, multicultural experience.”¹³ Jamaicans too bear the imprimatur of hybridity and plurality. Henriques’ illuminations resonate with the diversified axes of ethnicity, religion, and cultural mores within the Caribbean diaspora. Educated in a Roman Catholic convent school, Henriques is Jewish and a descendant of Sephardic Jews, African and Chinese Caribbean people. Christianity and Judaism cross-pollinate with Obeah animism in Jamaica. In the last images of *The Book of Mechtilde*, “Duppy Prayer”, death has come to Mechtilde except there is no peace yet for mother and daughter, just sleeplessness, fear of self, and dread of the “Duppy Kingdom”. (Figure 9) A duppy is a restless ghost or spirit of the dead, and often associated with Obeah. It is seen as both an “evil spirit” and a “good” spirit, sometimes called an ancestral being who continues to “take an interest in the welfare of the family”.¹⁴ Mechtilde’s daughter looks away from the flying figure of her mother whose claw-like hand encircles the former’s head like a questionable halo. Significantly, iconographic motifs in Hebrew illuminated manuscripts avoid the delineation of God with the use of rays of light usually indicating the presence of the Almighty. Likewise, Mechtilde’s face is repeatedly crowned by a nimbus of light, with rays of yellow, orange, red and blue radiating out into infinity and the words of the Book of Job. However, there are no emanating rays of light from this image of Mechtilde but her daughter looks toward the Jewish Star of David on her robe and the former’s head is at the top of a Christian Cross. The peace of Jesus must come after, not before, the “fright-filled” Duppy Kingdom. This journey is not about antithetical theologies, but part of the process from pain and loss to healing. The Kingdom of God unites the religions of Mechtilde’s Jamaican sphere, Judaism, Christianity and Obeah. Finally, Mechtilde and her daughter can “rest”. As Mechtilde lies in her coffin, (Figure 10) the rays of light return, emanating from her in yellow and gold. In the end, she is enveloped by the words of Job to his Jewish God as he finally recognizes the correlation between affliction, recognition and revelation (Job 42: 1-6).

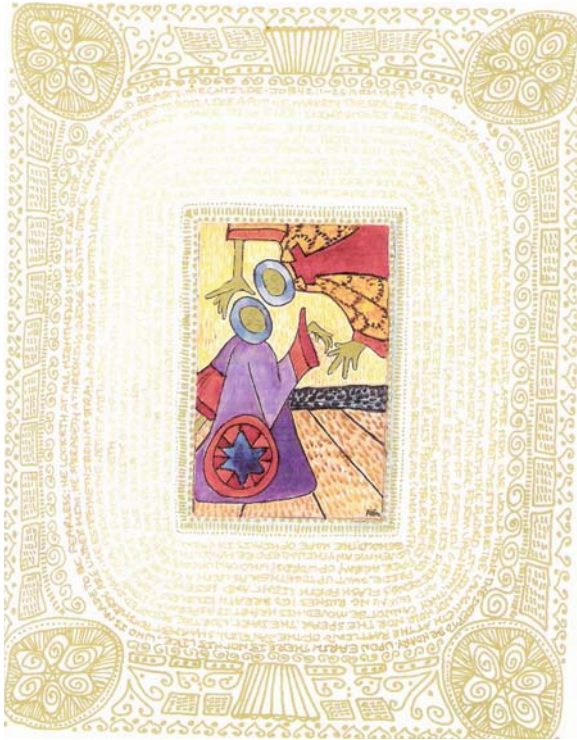


Fig. 9. Anna Ruth Henriques, *The Book of Mechtilde* 79.

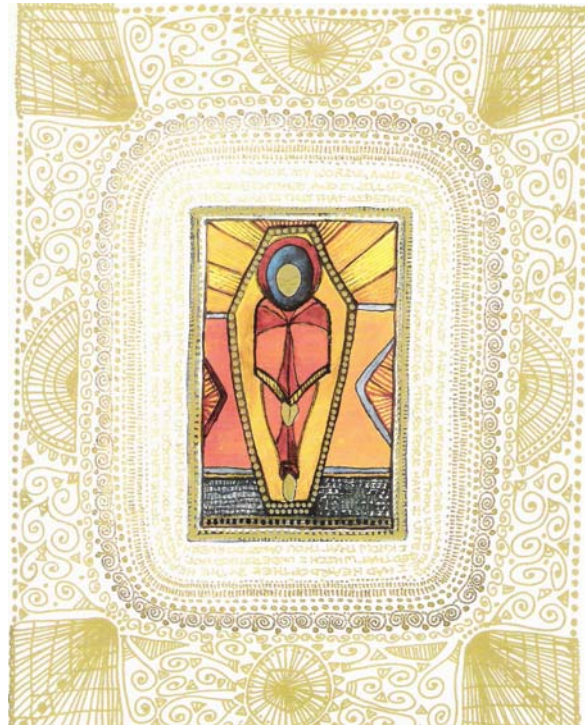


Fig. 10. Anna Ruth Henriques, *The Book of Mechtilde* 81.

Manifestly, the endless transformation of Caribbean identity is the crucible of Henriques' art. Her *Ceres* paintings are abstract, an unusual form for Caribbean artists. Veerle Poupeye has stated that abstract art has been "rejected by many as a concession to North American cultural imperialism".¹⁵ But Henriques' abstraction allows for imaginative possibilities, grounded literally by her textures, use of corn, and the myth of the Roman *Ceres* and her Greek counterpart, *Demeter*. *Ceres* was called 'Corn Mother', the allegorical representation of agriculture. This ancient Western myth and its numerous variations have roots in many cultures. For Henriques, the *Ceres* myth is about a mother's love for and bond to her child. The story about the kidnapping of *Ceres*' daughter, *Persephone*, by the god of the underworld, *Pluto*, has an immediate and profound resonance for Henriques who wanted to integrate the public myth with personal experience. She wrote that in 2001 she began a series of paintings using corn as the primary medium: "A seed, it was a gestating life, waiting for the right moment to burst forth and flourish....Here I wanted purity, simplicity, from an abstracted form. I wanted to create large-scale

meditative paintings that one could immerse oneself into, and explore that strange state between being and non-being, before a new life declared and defined itself. I was in a strange, in-between state myself, having not-so-long-ago experienced the birth of my daughter Ise and, in the same breath, the death of my marriage....Too soon, I was fighting for custody of my daughter in court in New York while living eight blocks from Ground Zero. In the darkness of this period, I sought light....And then it dawned on me that light was before me, emerging from these paintings themselves; the light of their color, the corn kernels a metaphor for new life itself, a genesis, a fresh beginning. Moreover, in an organic fusion of spirit and mind, soul and thought, Ceres herself came through not just as a nurturer of new growth but also as companion in the suffering I faced in the possibility of losing my child".¹⁶ Given Henriques' custody struggles and her journey with Ceres, it is apt that another aspect of the goddess was her name, *Ceres Legifera*, Ceres the Lawgiver.

Grain which is buried in the ground, apparently dead, awakens to new life in the Spring. The grain, therefore, functions as a symbol of rebirth after the darkness of death, a source of hope and a model for triumph over death. But it is a symbol sufficiently elastic to encompass the seemingly polar oppositions of life and death. The genesis of the *Ceres* paintings evolves from the personal and cultural convergence of Western myth with the New and Old World crop of corn. Maize (corn) is a New World crop but Guinea corn belongs to the Old World. In addition, corn is a polysemous image that connotes growth, nurture and possibilities as well as the diaspora, the Middle Passage and death. Guinea corn was brought from Africa as "provisioning for the slave ships" and among Caribbean people of African descent, "parched corn (without salt) was used in Death rituals, the Ashanti regarding asham (*sansam*) as special food for the spirits".¹⁷

Henriques' mixed media (corn kernels) acrylic paintings on canvas mounted on MDF in the *Ceres Series* are untitled. The shapes and materials suggest a connection with a past that promises new

imaginings. The name *Demeter* is etymologically linked to motherhood, female sexuality and rebirth. The Greek *meter* is ‘mother’ and *de* is a female genital sign known as “the letter of the vulva”. In many traditions, doorways were sacred to women and painted red. In Demeter’s center at Mycenae, the doorways of tombs signified the womb of the Goddess which promised the possibility of rebirth.¹⁸ In her *Untitled (Red/Green)*, (Figure 11) Henriques places a solid, square mass of red paint and corn kernels in a border of green. The opaque square evokes a door that is heavy and secure in its foundations. Against the surrounding green, the border is not an obstruction but an entrance into a world that embraces the fertility of nature and Mother Earth. The vibrant red of blood and the deep green are passages between the life-giving principle as well as death. The color symbolism in Henriques’ work transcends a specific cultural heritage and locates her mythology transnationally. Green is emblematic of life but it is



Fig. 11. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Untitled (Red/Green)*,
The Ceres Series

also a depiction of death for the Egyptians who painted *Osiris* (the god of vegetation and of the dead) green.¹⁹

Like *The Book of Mechtilde*, the *Ceres Series* is “meditative”, a medium that one can “immerse” oneself into, as Henriques has written. *Untitled (White/White)* (Figure 12) places an oval or spheroid shape, rich with the consistency of corn, in a field of varying hues of white. Behind the surface of white on white, small dots of pale pink and red barely emerge, reinforcing the resemblance to the vulva. A comparison could be made to *Baubo*, the maidservant who, “completely baring her abdomen in an obscene belly dance, made the goddess Demeter laugh”²⁰ as she mourned the loss of her

daughter. *Baubo* is often portrayed as a face and an enlarged body from the waist down, an expression of female sexuality. (Figure 13) Ancient statuettes of *Baubo* echo the shape in Henriques' painting.



Fig. 12. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Untitled (White/White)*,
The Ceres Series

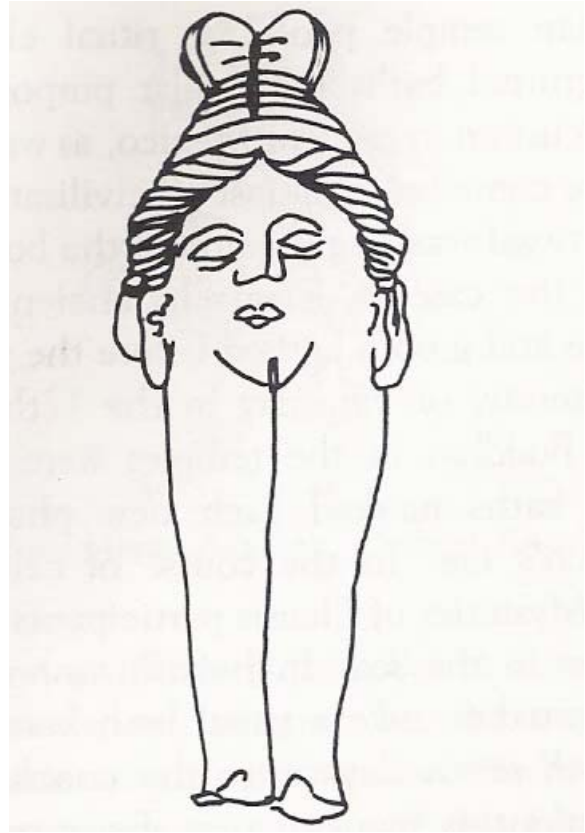


Fig. 13. Terracotta statuette. Priena, Asia Minor, 5th
century B.C. (Biedermann 32)

Cultural intersections proliferate. It is therefore noteworthy that a popular reference to female genitalia in Jamaica is the term “bo-bo”.

Ultimately, Henriques' *Ceres Series* destabilizes the Western myth of Demeter/Ceres. The paintings not only reach beyond differences in cultures but also the dominance of male-centered paradigms. The “purity” and “simplicity” that Henriques seeks in these paintings reverberate back to the ultimate Mystery that was revealed at Eleusis, one of Demeter's most important temples. It was “an ear of corn reaped in silence” that the Jews called *shibboleth*. The Hebrew “ear of corn” was the mystical object displayed as the Ultimate Revelation in the temples of Demeter. It denoted the seed of life as well as the life yet to come.²¹ Henriques restores the “silence”, the female-centered mysticism

of corn in *Untitled (Yellow/Blue)*. (Figure 14) The square of yellow corn kernels seems to burst out of



Fig. 14. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Untitled (Yellow/Blue)*, The Ceres Series

cubed circles in translucent yellows and blues. The forceful presence of deliquescent shades and hues draws the viewer back into time and space, imbuing abstraction with the allusion of mythic shapes and appearances. In Henriques' paintings, the derogatory contemporary connotation of *shibboleth* as a platitude has no place. Barbara G. Walker has argued that it was patriarchal opposition to the female symbol of Eleusis that "later made it synonymous with a false deity."²²

Henriques' deities are genuine not false, true to her female mission of empowerment, solidarity and sustenance.

Lastly, Henriques' art work interrogates compulsory heterosexuality, the ideological standard of what is 'natural' and normative. Homosexuality is therefore, 'unnatural' and deviant, resulting in isolation and segregation. *The Man of Many Letters* is a tribute to a learned man, Richard Cohen Henriques, Henriques' uncle, who died of AIDS at 52 years old. She knew and loved him only during the last two years of his life. Trapped by the homophobia in Jamaica and Judaism, he lived in England for over three decades of self-imposed exile. The series, started in 1994 and finished in 2006, memorializes his accomplishments, marginalization and death. One assemblage, *The Medicine Cabinet*, (Figure 15) pays homage to his research. The glass window of the cabinet reveals the seeds of medicinal plants that he had collected as well as memorabilia from his childhood home in Jamaica used in the alternative practice of Obeah. The top shelf shows an assortment of letters and drawings from his



Fig. 15. Anna Ruth Henriques, *Medicine Cabinet, The Man of Many Letters*

here-nor-there state of one who has never belonged. On the outside is a tinfoil map of the United Kingdom and an inscription of a letter describing his life on that island.”²³ Before Richard died he returned to Jamaica to make peace with his home country and his family.



Fig. 16. Anna Ruth Henriques, *English Exile, The Man of Many Letters*

friends who were also dying of the virus. But this medicine cabinet could not save him. The white ghost-like figure within, made of plastic wrap, was once a life-sized man. He is now diminished and enshrined in this glass case, wasted from AIDS, a neutralized body with little or no human features and discarded like the plastic wrap that transmogrifies his person. His exclusion is transparent in *English Exile*. (Figure 16) The work is comprised of “fragments of a door now hinged together – one fixed, the other swinging half-open, half-shut – which evokes the neither