

“BIBLICAL WOMEN AGEING DISGRACEFULLY”

An exhibition by SARAH LIGHTMAN

SARAH LIGHTMAN is an artist and writer. She completed an Art Foundation course at Central/St. Martins, attended The Slade School of Art for her BA and MFA and has a PhD from University of Glasgow in women's autobiographical comics. She was an Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She is Faculty at The Royal Drawing School, London. She is author of her graphic memoir, *The Book of Sarah*, co-edited *Jewish Women in Comics: Bodies and Borders*, and edited *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including a Will Eisner Award, The Susan Koppelman Prize, a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award, a South Atlantic Modern Languages Association Book Award, two Hadassah Brandeis Institute Research Awards, The Principal's Early Career Mobility Fund (University of Glasgow), The Slade Duveen Travel Award, The Slade Life Drawing Prize, UCL, The Slade Prize, UCL, The Coldstream Sessional Prize for Excellence, UCL, UCL Travel Grant, The Rothschild Foundation, The David Foundation, European Association for Jewish Culture, and The Arts Humanities and Research Council.

Her solo shows include “Sarah Lightman - Drawing from Life and Literature” at The Knapp Gallery, Regent's University, “The Book of Sarah” at Koppel Central, London, “Sarah Lightman - Art and Film” Mother Egg Review Gallery, “Sarah Lightman and Charlotte Salomon Artist Intervention” at Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, “Food, Family, Feelings” at Old Dominion University, “The Book of Sarah”, at Occupy My Time, Deptford, London and “In Memoriam” at New Hall Art Collection, University of Cambridge. Her group shows include Ruth Borchard Self-Portrait Exhibition, Dulwich Open House Festival, Wells Art Contemporary, Islington Arts Factory, The House of Illustration, Jewish Museum London, The Cartoon Museum London, Koppel Project Hive Gallery, Oranim College Israel, King's Place Gallery, The Collection, The Centre for Recent Drawing, Ben Uri Gallery London, Mall Galleries, The Jerwood Space, The Cartoon Art Museum San Francisco, The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State University, Space Station Sixty Five, Jewish Museum Florida, Oregon Jewish Museum, The Washington DC JCC, Yeshiva University Museum, and Koffler Centre for The Arts.

Giclee prints of all artworks in this exhibition are available on request. For more information please visit

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Catalogue Essay by DR. DAWN LLEWELLYN

Eve, Mary, Bathsheba, Lot's wife, Susanna, Salome, Judith, Timoclea, Lady Cockburn, The Lady in Red, The Soldier's Wife; the women in Sarah Lightman's vivid paintings are both familiar and unfamiliar. While it might take a moment to place their names immediately, they are women who feature in religious texts, historical accounts, and the canon of Western art. At

the same time, although these women have been central to the stories that have shaped our social world and have inspired religious teachings and doctrines, it is rare to see them presented fully, on their own terms. Too often, even these most famous of women are given only a secondary or partial role, or if they are depicted, they are usually idealised in impossible ways: scapegoated, brutalised, or sidelined as the object and instrument that serves the “malestream” narrative. Mary’s purity is venerated; Eve, not Adam, is blamed for the fall of humanity; Lot’s wife (usually unnamed) is turned into a pillar of salt; Timoclea is raped; Bathsheba and Susanna are survivors of sexual voyeurism; Judith’s and Salome’s (who is nameless in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew) beauty proves deadly; Lady Cockburn is defined by her motherhood; and the “flesh and blood” women behind *The Lady in Red* and *The Soldier’s Wife*, like so many, are unknown and rendered passive subjects on their painters’ canvases.

This is, of course, not the whole story. These are versions of women’s lives that have been told and retold through the “male gaze”, androcentric readings that centre men’s but neglect women’s authority, knowledge, understanding, relationship to the divine, their bodies and feelings. In “Biblical Women Ageing Disgracefully”, Sarah Lightman offers a playful feminist corrective. She reimagines these women, once painted by the great “masters”, places them in scenes from her life, and gives them her mid-life body. In a witty recognition of female aging and the gendered, mundane relentlessness of domestic chores and tasks, Eve, Mary, Judith and their sisters in this series share their realities that are usually silenced and devalued by patriarchal, religious ideologies. Eve feels a failure, and for Mary, a perimenopausal bleed ruins a holiday, the Angel Gabriel announces her menopause (not the conception of Jesus), and she’d prefer running a boutique in Hampstead or petting her neighbour’s purring cat to childcare and soft play. Lot’s Wife now needs Tena pads, not Tampax; Bathsheba is tired of the piles of dishes and flooded floors; and Susanna just wants a bath, in peace. Judith and Salome are consumed with shopping and cooking (but, respectively, they have to fit the heads of Holofernes and John in the kitchen, somewhere!); Timoclea struggles with the rubbish; the Lady in Red is keen to impress the other school mums; and the Soldier’s Wife and Lady Cockburn are depressed, overcome by the impossibility of motherhood. In keeping with Adrienne Rich’s feminist “act of re-vision”, a “looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” to transform the “cultural history” that has limited and restricted the lives of many (Rich, 1972, 18; c.f Ostriker, 1993), Sarah’s work re-interprets these past narratives to create new, empowering understandings, with humour.

Sarah’s work is also a reminder that although it may appear that religions are fixed and stable phenomena based on given certainties and absolutes, its texts, practices, doctrines, and teachings emerge through ongoing processes that are dependent on particular historical factors. For example, feminist theological scholars have been wary of the authoritative status attributed to the Hebrew and Christian biblical canons because its content, development, and dissemination occurred in patriarchal societies. The means of selection that managed which texts were included or excluded, the construction of the narratives, the credence and value the canon has subsequently been given, and its cycles of analysis and re-analysis reflect the male-dominated cultures that have been in the privileged position of shaping its formation and transmission. This has distorted and omitted women’s interests, and therefore one task is to read and reread scriptures. Another task is to create art, literature, poetry, and music that resonates with women’s experiences of the divine and to use these images as a “new textual base” (Ruether 1985:ix, Cannon 1988, 1989) which inspires, and from which feminist theology thinking can begin (Fisk, 2014; Llewellyn, 2015, 2017; Walton 2007, 2007, 2008).

In this exhibition, Sarah offers an intimate rereading of the women's lives. In Jewish feminism, theologians have drawn on *midrash*, a classical rabbinical practice of interpreting the biblical (and other sacred texts) to explain its inconsistencies in light of the world of the interpreter, and theirs and their community's concerns. Hidden in the text's contradictions are multiple meanings that can speak to their present questions and dilemmas, while still maintaining the Bible's especial status. To rectify the relative invisibility of women in the Judaic and rabbinic texts and responses, feminists began to produce their own *midrashim* from the perspective of female characters. Famously, Judith Plaskow (2005, [1972]) retells the Garden of Eden story from Lilith's point of view, rescuing her from her usual demonic characterisation (itself a midrash to reconcile the two Genesis accounts), and instead depicts her as an empowered woman who befriends Eve. Together they leave Adam, God, and the Garden to instead share a sisterhood that is "bursting with possibilities" to build a life of their own.

Sarah, too, has searched the texts, looking for glimpses of how these historical women's worlds resonate with hers. Rather than be satisfied with the silences that mean so little is known about their struggles with work, childcare, chores, and the body, Sarah paints them into existence. Experiences that are usually stigmatised and shamed – menstrual blood, hormonal fluxes of perimenopause and menopause, aching bones, tired and wrinkled eyes, drenches of sweat, incontinence, the pain of depression and lament, looser skin, softer bellies, sagging breasts – are imprinted into religious and historical narratives, in recognition and in celebration.

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DR DAWN LLEWELLYN is Associate Professor of Religion and Gender at the University of Chester. She draws on feminist qualitative approaches to examine gender and feminism in contemporary Christianity and new spiritualities. She is the author of *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality: Troubling the Waves*, and has co-edited *Reading Spiritualities* (with Deborah F. Sawyer), *Religion, Equalities and Inequalities* (with Sonya Sharma), *Female Faith Practices* (with Nicola Slee, Kim Wasey, and Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz). In addition, with Sian Hawthorne and Sonya Sharma, she edits Bloomsbury's series in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality and they recently published *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality*. Dawn is currently completing her latest book, *Narratives of Choice: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Christianity*, which explores Christian women's reproductive agency.

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