



Brush or Pen: 1000 Strokes or a Thousand Words?

By Gilah Yelin Hirsch

In the late 70's I found a silver ring by the side of the road near my house. Despite the fact that it had been mangled and crushed by traffic, I could discern a Hindu female deity on the damaged surface. She carried what appeared to be a brush in one upraised hand and a writing implement in the other. I guessed that the silver spherical image had been a coin portraying the Hindu deity Saraswathi, goddess of knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom, and learning, and was the third in the Tridevi trinity of Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Parvati. Although too damaged to restore, I kept the rather magical ring all these years.

Although I was a writer long before I was a painter, I have been painting and writing simultaneously since the 1970s. Painted images arise within me independently from expository writing and each discipline entails a unique and separate process.

I write about insights that I have gleaned from my personal life and observations collected during my travels, all suggesting an emerging philosophy based on my global anthropological, biological and multidisciplinary investigations. In the last 30 years I have been developing theories of my own in terms of cross-cultural psychiatry, neurology, biotheology, mental and physical healing, many of which already published in multidisciplinary publications, in addition to my book about the relation between creativity and mental illness, *Demonic to Divine: The Double Life of Shulamis Yelin* (Vehicule Press, 2014).

Concurrently, I have also written about my paintings when asked to do so. It has been suggested that I document my process in every major painting, as each of their developments is an evolutionary tale that can also be observed in photos of the paintings during their progress. Furthermore, the titles of the paintings keep changing as the image is transformed and titles are only decided in the last embodiment of the painting.

However, in the late 1980's I also began to create paintings that are specifically narrative, based on dreams and visions emerging from my subconscious. I continue to work individually on these small-scale paintings as these images arise in my life, even while I am engaged in current series that require an opposite approach to engendering an image. I have designated the narrative paintings to an ongoing series called the "Venice Psalter", a nod to the marvelous medieval illuminated narrative paintings that I have always admired.

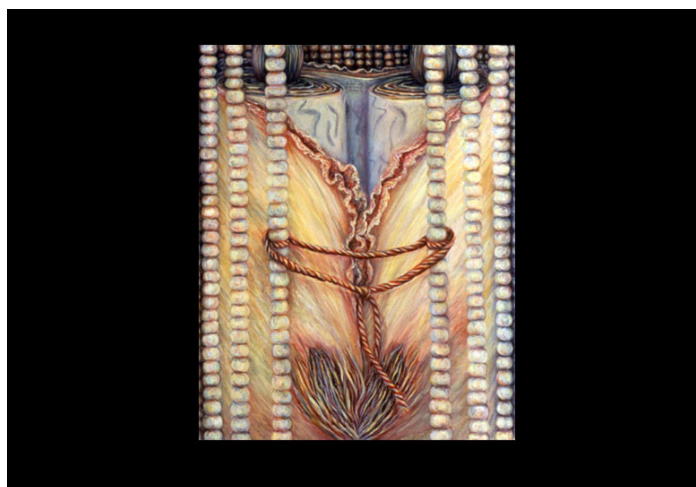
The "Venice Psalter" paintings begin with an image I already have in mind and my task is to execute the image as persuasively as I can. For example, the painting called "Choice" (2010) depicts the protagonist standing on the threshold between this world and the next, having to decide whether to take another breath and return to the much-needed work in the world or be free of the tribulations and entanglements of life on earth.

Choice, 2010
A/C, 36" Diameter



Another of these is "Kol Eesha", (Hebrew for Voice of a Woman, 1999) in which I created a very feminine Torah with only the words *Kol Eesha* inscribed in the holy scroll. This image was prompted by the injunction in Judaism against the voice of a woman being heard as this may distract the male from studying Torah. The painted image rose almost 50 years after the inciting incident, when at 8 years old I asked my orthodox Torah teacher why we were instructed to refer to God only as He, while the names and pronouns of God in the Hebrew text are both male and female. My shocked, incensed teacher grabbed me by my long red hair, threw me out of the class and I was never allowed back. This event pushed my early and perpetual questioning forward and seeded my feminist stance in the world.

Kol Eesha, 1999
O/C, 32" x 28"



I have never considered myself an illustrator, although certain paintings I have created in the past appear to coincide with writings of the present. For example, “Birdman’s Proposal” created in 1999, became a companion image for the essay, “The Raven’s Gift” (Hirsch, 2020).

Birdman’s Proposal, 1999

O/C 36 inches diameter



“Grounded in Light”, however, was created during Covid19 in 2020 and was prompted by the necessity of mask wearing. The ultimate, extremely layered painting reached far beyond wearing a mask for physical health and safety and alludes to the many overlays of psychological masks we wear throughout our lives.

Grounded in Light, 2020

A/C, 51"x 51"



Generally, though, my paintings begin with a word, a thought, a memory, an experience with no final image in mind. I often encrypt letters, words and phrases in various layers to build the ensuing image with meaningful structure and content as I engage in a call and response process between the developing image and my psyche.

Current painting in progress

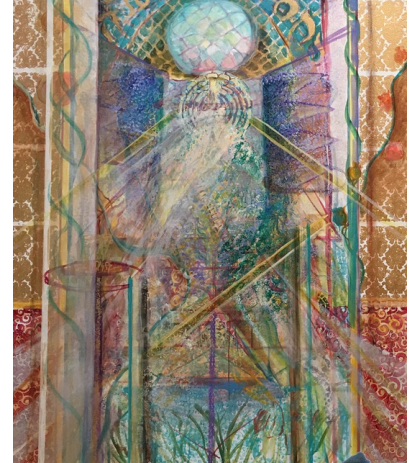
September 11, 2020



September 28, 2020



November 2, 2020



Please visit my website gilah.com in February, 2021 to see the final image of this painting

You can see images that have evolved to their completion on my [website](http://gilah.com).

I often turn the canvas every which way and drop washes (very dilute pigment) over the current image, to see what will be concealed and/or revealed. I welcome accidents of paint drips that may add to new imagery or may evoke another time or space.

I intuitively follow the image for months, adding seemingly random events and information. During this gestation period there are often times when the painting could be said to be finished, but I purposefully choose to chase the image further. Eventually I begin to recognize an original image that has its own life and breath and is demanding only slight adjustments in light, shadow and dimension. During these last stages, I am already beginning another piece, but keep peeking at the last from the corner of my eye. Occasionally I will catch a spot that needs attention. Soon it stops asking and is stable, an authentically new image, replete with its self-generated title.

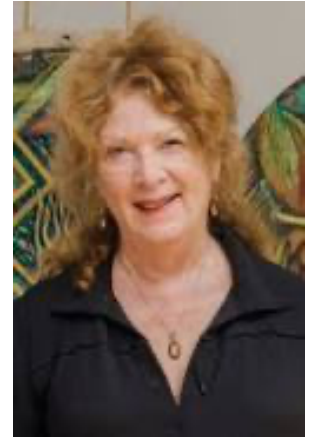
My writing process is the opposite. While painting normally begins with incidental strokes and no intentional goal, writing begins with a developed concept that I wish to transmit coherently in an interesting and evocative manner. While I see the entire gestalt of a painted image at every step of the process, I must read and write each piece again and again from start to finish before I can fully affirm the content. Although I have a goal in mind, the creative adventure lies in the divergent tangents, analogies and metaphors that may arise along each new untrodden path to enrich the foundational idea.

Both disciplines are important to me. A picture may portray an artist's cumulative effect of 1000 words, ideas and imaginations, but a thousand words artfully strung may trigger infinitely more images in the reader.

References

Hirsch, 2020. *The Raven's Gift*, WINN, August <https://winnpost.org/2020/08/21/the-ravens-gift/>

Gilah Yelin Hirsch is a multidisciplinary artist, whose art, films, papers, books have been exhibited and published internationally. Hirsch's numerous national and international grants and awards include the US National Endowment for the Arts; the Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio, Italy; the Tyrone Guthrie Center for the Arts, Ireland, as well as the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine award for her "innovative blending of science and art revealing existing relationships between forms in nature, forms in human physiology and the forms that are present in all alphabets". Hirsch's archives are collected by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. She holds the position of Professor of Art, California State University Dominguez Hills, Los Angeles and resides in Venice, California.



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