

american samplers, series 3 (the chicken chronicles, nos. 1-14)

susan c. dessel



In 2008, artist susan c. dessel returned from participating in the Hunt's Bay Cemetery Restoration Project (Port Royal/Kingston, Jamaica). The earliest grave at Hunt's Bay, the oldest extant Jewish cemetery in Jamaica, dates to 1672. Dessel was drawn to the iconic imagery and epitaphs on the gravestones, particularly those of the women, and upon her return to New York City she began to research the women buried in the three Manhattan cemeteries of the first Jewish congregation in New York, Shearit Israel (Remnant of Israel, also known as the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue).

Dessel's work gives voice to the women buried in these cemeteries, women who have largely been forgotten by history. Buried in these three Manhattan cemeteries between 1682 and 1851,* they were usually referred to as daughter of or wife of during their lives. By cross-checking source materials, Dessel was able to locate the names of 216 Jewish women and girls** along with references to 30 female slaves, 10 by name. She honors them through her work.

History

In September 1654 the first group of 23 Jewish refugees arrived in Nieuw Amsterdam (New York) from Recife, Brazil. They had been forced to abandon their comfortable life when Recife's Portuguese conquerors gave all practicing Jews three months to leave. It is recorded that four men, six women and 13 children joined the three Jewish men who had arrived in Nieuw Amsterdam before them.

Community

With the arrival of women, a community was begun: marked by marriage, children, customs, traditions and religious observance. This tiny community began to negotiate its way within the context of the majority Christian community.

Luis (Lewis) Moses Gomez and his Jamaican bride, Esther Marques, arrived in New York City in 1696. By 1705, Gomez was an established leader of the New York Colonial Jewish community, and by 1714, the Gomez family purchased property in the Newburgh-Marlboro area to expand their enterprises and fortunes in the fertile Hudson Valley, but did not live there with their families. The establishment of Jewish communities outside of New York City developed during the mid-to-late 1800s.

Remembering

The early Jewish settlers were refugees and immigrants; exiled or self-selected, all sought better lives for themselves and their families regardless of the unknown, the uncertainty, and the daily hardships that faced them in Nieuw Amsterdam/New York. Their new lives were complex: marked by civil law and freedom, by the pulls of tradition and the allures of choice.

The women were guardians of the welfare of their families, striving to keep body and soul together in a strange environment. They struggled to take care of their homes and families, holding on to a sense of self while caring for others' needs and wants.

Traditions

In american samplers, series 3 (chicken chronicles, nos. 1-14) the artist privileges women's work by referencing the tradition of American samplers. Initially used as examples, samplers became a learning tool for girls and women, a demonstration of their skills, and ultimately decorative pieces of storytelling.

The artist has selected food as the central visual image for this installation as the kitchen was women's domain. Because of their dietary restrictions, Jews were forbidden to eat plentiful local food such as lobsters and instead killed and prepared chickens following the laws of kashrut (kosher slaughtering). Even as wealth accumulated, women were still responsible for maintaining strictly Kosher homes by closely monitoring any household help in the kitchen.

The drawings reflect issues of inclusion and exclusion, refugee and immigrant Jewish women keeping traditions, rituals, family and home together, tasks that many refugees and immigrants still face today. They depict the various stages of raising, slaughtering, preparing and eating chickens as kashrut required. The use of birds is reminiscent of art created by and for the observant Jewish community throughout history where representations of the human form were not allowed. Through these references placed by Dessel throughout the drawings, we sense the profound societal and cultural "ebb and flow" that confounded this first Jewish community and continues to impact on the maturing of immigrant communities.

Support

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* In 1851 a NYC law was passed banning burials below 86th Street.

** Sixteen women and girls of the Gomez family were identified among the 216 women and girls buried in the three cemeteries of Congregation Shearith Israel (The Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, NYC).