

## FRUMA MARKOWITZ | ARTIST STATEMENT

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“Searching for the Kahinah” is part travelogue, part archive, part fact, part flight of fancy, but mostly a visual journey through the many interwoven narratives comprising a unique fluidity of culture and tradition characteristic of women in the Maghreb (North Africa). During my own travels in Morocco I learned how Jewish, Arab Muslim, and Amazigh (Berber) women shared a confluence of stories and myths, religious belief and practice, designs in personal adornment and handcraft for centuries. I became intrigued. Because it's quite remarkable, and so utterly inspiring, that people we in the West consider at odds with one another, in fact lived side-by-side with respect for years, mostly due to the women amongst them who made it so. This concept is foundational to my project.

The work draws additional inspiration and imagery from a vast archive of photographic postcards dating from the turn of the 20th Century. The photographs depict women, clearly labeled as Jewish, Arab Muslim or indigenous Berber “types.” They were made by male photographers at a time when North Africa was being colonized by Europeans. They were sold commercially as postcards for tourists; souvenirs of a way of life considered antiquated, “barbarian,” and destined to be replaced by a superior (French) culture. As a Jewish woman and a photographer, I find in these portraits, and in what I've learned about the women portrayed in them, a significant emotional point of reference for my own identity and experience. I immersed myself in the myths and stories they hold sacred, studied the symbolic patterns woven in textiles and tattooed on their faces and bodies; learned about their histories, beliefs, and practices in order to know them. In my research I discovered the Kahinah, a true historical figure of the 8th Century, who represents female strength, heroism and leadership for Jewish, Muslim and Amazigh people alike. She is my muse.

Cyanotype, with its rich blueness, is, for me, the appropriate primary process to use in creating these works. Blue is not just any color in the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East. In this part of the world, the color blue represents a deep spiritual force that protects against the Evil Eye, of which women are to a large extent the arbiters thereof. First, I create a richly textured cyanotype substrate that establishes the primary layer for each visual narrative. Then, my imagination and a pair of scissors literally cut the women's portraits out of their posed and imposed reality, and afford them another world - a woman's world - far away from the romanticized version of them as "other." The cutouts are rendered as separate cyanotype pieces, sometimes toned for color variations, and placed into unique, albeit fanciful, cyanotype environments. I employ gold leaf, gold ink, and stitchery to create additional elements that serve to connect all the collage pieces into a unified richly textured body of work with a consistent visual vocabulary. Each completed piece is one-of-a-kind.

The work challenges me, and its viewers, to ask universal questions about how women were and are portrayed, not only beyond the costumes and backdrops that purported to define them as "exotic" at that time, but also in our own contemporary world where images of women continue to be romanticized and objectified as "other." My images aim to turn all of that on its head—to reverse the gaze that is male. Here I offer a point of view that, between moments of factual observation and artistic intervention, considers an alternate space where women look directly back and hold the gaze.