

# Hibernating with Mary and Helène

BY MARIE-ELSA BRAGG

The work of the great Jewish artist Helène Aylon, who died earlier this year, will help me in my seasonal contemplation of birth, death and resurrection

Every year, when winter triggers my hibernation instinct, I look forward to the seasonal contemplation of Mary, a woman pregnant with God. I slow down, turn inward, in the hope that it might help me see her a little more. And as a companion I choose a creative woman to accompany me. In the past it has been Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Julian of Norwich, Anni Albers, or Barbara Hepworth. This year, I have found the artist Helène Aylon (1931-2020). She was still creating new works of art at the age of 89 when, sadly, she died in the first wave of Covid-19 in New York.

Helène was born in the Israel Zion Hospital, Brooklyn. In her autobiography, *Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released*, she vividly describes living in an Orthodox Jewish community where her entire world—family, friends, school, shops—was within a handful of streets. Her life was full of ritual. She shared a room with her Baba (grandmother) who kept a *shisel*—a special bowl of water—under her bed so that, on awakening, she could lean over and give thanks for the restoration of her soul before her feet touched the ground.

She prayed throughout the day—on entering and leaving rooms or house, before and after meals, on washing her hands and lighting candles. Her food and clothes reflected Orthodox history and culture. But in her teenage years, she found the careful strength to ask questions about the place of women and the depiction of a wrathful God.

At 17, she married Mandel H. Fisch, a rabbi. They had two children and when they were old enough for kindergarten, she secretly began forbidden secular art classes at Brooklyn College, using her maiden name “Greenfield” so as not to be found out. Sadly, two years later in 1956, her husband died of cancer. According to tradition, she should then have married a man in her husband’s family to carry on his name, but she wanted freedom and took the step of creating a cover name (Aylonna is Hebrew

for Helène) to enrol in a full-time art course which included classes with abstract painter Ad Reinhardt.

Helène, a promising student, was taken by Reinhardt to visit Mark Rothko on East 66th Street. His “huge studio was bare and immaculate, with a large bouquet of white chrysanthemums”, according to her autobiography. They talked about Barnett Newman’s sculpture *Tsim Tsum*, a kabbalistic term for the contraction of the infinite light of God to make room for the finite universe. For the first time since entering the art world, Helène felt comfortable enough to confess, in confidence, that she was from an Orthodox Jewish background. Rothko responded by talking about his Russian Orthodox Jewish life in a *cheder*—a religious school—from the age of five. He talked about Martin Buber’s essay “I and Thou” and said that “we may need our souls to have an encounter with God but it will not happen unless we patiently allow God to manifest”.

They talked through the afternoon and into dusk. He brought out his latest paintings to see what Helène thought of them. When they looked at his black and brown canvases, she told him she saw the void from Genesis and the line separating the black from the brown was the firmament dissecting the void.

Helène’s art career was both soulful and radical. In 1971, as a teacher at San Francisco State University, she invited a black woman with her baby to pose as Mary in her life-drawing class. Helène put the students’ pictures up around the university halls for Christmas, a move which got her into trouble because it was seen as an overly bold statement about racism and religion.

In her 1970s work *The Breakings*, she poured gallons of oil paint over panels lying on the floor. The top layer of oil would eventually form a skin over the wet paint beneath and when the panels were lifted up by four “midwives”, the wet paint would seep, drip and sometimes burst through, giving birth to new shape, new colour, new life.

In the 1980s, a project saw women carrying sacks of sand, stones and earth from devastated districts to healing areas. Japanese participants carried soil from Hiroshima to a river. American women rescued earth from military or nuclear sites across the USA, and then travelled miles to leave the sacks in places such as a park near the United Nations headquarters in New York.

In her last phase of art, which she called *The Liberation of G-D*, Helène placed a transparent overlay on each page of the five books of Moses and underlined every place where she felt there was a woman missing or a woman talked of in a misogynistic way or the idea of what she called a “patriarchal God” being wrathful and vengeful. She sat in a gallery and had projected on to her face the name of God that should not be spoken or the text prohibiting women’s voices being heard in synagogues.

So, I will watch the passage of Mary throughout Advent this year, with Helène Aylon by my side. I expect we will, at some point, hold the thought that Mary does not have the name of God projected on to her skin but has God literally in her belly. Perhaps Helène will see the humility of Mary carrying her baby from a dangerous land to a safe stable as a response to our current political upheaval and environmental ignorance. I believe that we will think about the messiah and mysticism and Kabbalah and the idea that we all have a divine spark within us. Helène will tell me about her painting and I will tell her about the feminine imagery of the Eucharist in my last book *Sleeping Letters*. We will contemplate the circular shape of birth, death and resurrection, her now in the afterlife and me, for the moment, on the ground. Together, I think Helène and I, hibernating with the image of Mary, will have the strength to remain side by side in the low winter sun and remember the voice of Rothko saying “wait for God to manifest” in this complex but inspiring world. And then, after taking our time with the long process of pregnancy, we will sit vigil all night waiting for the seep and burst of new paint. **S**



Helène Aylon, who died from Covid-19 earlier this year, with her work “The Notebooks”