

ILLUMINATION

A FORMER Miss Jamaica (half Chinese, half Afro-Caribbean) lies dying of breast cancer. Outside her hospital room, her three daughters stare in through the aluminum louvered door. Their mother's face is a mask of gold, her head crowned by a nimbus of light. The same face, eyes turned down, appears at the base of a wild-ginger blossom or within the furled scarlet petals of a hibiscus. Elsewhere, the woman's hands grip the sides of a Braille alarm clock while her unseeing eyes stare out from the golden mask. And in the image at the right, also from Anna Ruth Henriques's poignant and beautiful "Book of Mechtilde" (Knopf), a shofar sounds behind a great teardrop holding within it the green sprigs of the tree of life.

Multiculturalism is not invariably a platitude or a shibboleth, and in Henriques's gifted hands it becomes an illumination. "The Book of Mechtilde," composed at her grandparents' house, is far removed from defensive brandishings of ethnic identity. It is, rather, a celebration of the many converging lines of blood, culture, and confession that flow through her mother's and her own history: a Chinese grandmother; a Franciscan convent school; the Jamaican Sephardic Jews of her father's family, the remnant of a community dating back to the seventeenth century; the Obeah animism of the island. All these traditions are poured into a work that has been conceived as a true illuminated manuscript, a reworking of the Book of Job with Sheila Mechtilde Henriques, née Chong, as the sufferer transfigured by affliction. Henriques relates the sad story like a bard, interleaving the images with her own poems and prose.

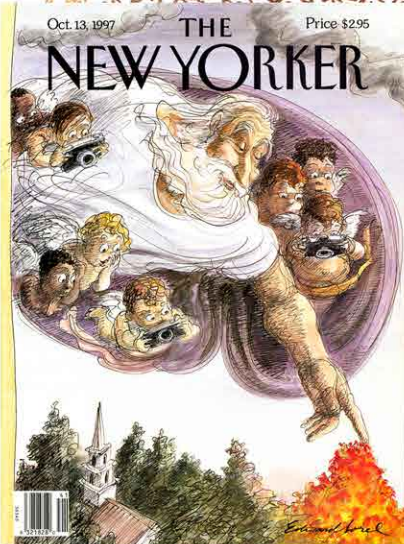
As anyone who goes to see Anna Ruth Henriques's original art work, on show at the Jewish Museum until October 13th, will immediately recognize, it is the illuminations, tightly packed into circular or rectangular box frames, and painted in saturated acrylic and watercolor hues, that communicate the elegy with maximum intensity. Around

them are broad wheels of gold lettering, passages from the Book of Job that act as a setting for the gemlike images. At the outer edges of the page are loosely sketched fields of fish, flowers, and foliage: nature defiant and luxuriant in the face of death. The effect of each subtly constructed page is powerfully musical: medieval plainsong, Jamaican reggae, Sephardic chant, and the shuffling of feet on the sanded wooden floors of the old synagogue echo through the imagery.

Early in the book, the fate of Jamaica (called the Land of Jah) becomes personified in Sheila Mechtilde Henriques's stricken and beleaguered body. Anna Ruth was only eleven when her mother died, and she has subsequently lived in northern France, western Massachusetts, southern California, and Japan. Self-evidently, the stylized iconic manner of Gothic and Byzantine illumination made a profound impression on her. Yet her art is flooded with Caribbean light and dyed with the strong, sensuous colors of its earth and vegetation. (For the drawing section of her high-school art exam, she chose a fish head, and when it began crawling with flies they, too, became part of the composition.)

Much of her work pulses with the vitality of the island cults: crabs, bones, and snakes; eggs and mangoes. But, as befits an artist who has managed, single-handedly, to revitalize an ancient sacred art form, one that beautified both Christian and Jewish texts, she is at her most majestic in images of meditation.

Many of these still moments—Mechtilde climbing the stairs of the family house past photographs of her daughters, as if entering another world, or off in a fishing boat on the horizon—are rooted in the commonplaces of a childhood vision. But their familiarity only reinforces their mysterious power of transcendence, making "The Book of Mechtilde" a more consoling experience than its Biblical model: the whisper through the mangrove rather than the wrathful voice from the whirlwind. —SIMON SCHAMA



Makers. In times of joy, the music rejoiced. In times of sorrow, the music wept."