

FAILED GREAT ESCAPES AND SUCCESSFUL FEMINIST MIDRASH—MY *BIBLICAL DOMESTIC* SERIES

My *Biblical Domestic* series (2021 onwards), consisting of over 20 watercolour paintings, three oil paintings and many drawings, can be understood as a series of failed great escapes. Lightly depressed biblical and historical women bolt out of old master paintings hung in major museum collections, only to become trapped in my household chores. These women want freedom from the stifling institutions where they have been trapped, constantly ogled by a mostly male gaze, and from their scratchy, uncomfortable costumes and mind-numbing (and mostly unpaid) modelling work. Suddenly they are free to travel. Unfortunately for them, however, it is to my messy life in Hampstead, northwest London, where they are greeted with overflowing bins, piles of unfolded laundry, my demanding tween-aged son and my own ageing body. Disenchanted and even more depressed, they dream of returning to those art gallery walls.

— I began this series of artworks during the Covid lockdowns of 2020–2022, a period when I felt I had disappeared. Research has shown that the lockdowns reversed feminist developments in the home and household. My own experiences support this, as I was endlessly catering for and cleaning up after my husband and primary school-aged son, with no domestic support. I couldn't get to my art studio as it was across town, so I only had the kitchen table to work on. The first series of drawings were small watercolour paintings, in which I vented my frustrations with my tiny brushes and my bright colours. The paintings could be packed away quickly in my sketchbook, when the table was needed for meals or for my son's schoolwork. Domestic-themed and domestic-sized, these paintings were an attempt to remind myself of my own agency, even under duress. I couldn't visit galleries, but I could certainly make the galleries come to me.

— Covid lockdowns are a thing of the past, but my collection of painted women has continued to grow in the present. This metaphor for being out of place and out of time seems to speak to a part of me that doesn't quite fit into everyday life. Perhaps it was being caught up in the labyrinth of Orthodox Jewish ritual and patriarchy for much of my teens and early twenties, under the control of self-imposed religious obligations, which leave me—even now, in my fifties—out of synch, a bit too old, overdressed, underprepared and *othered* in the world in which I live. Maybe these paintings also

remind me that, even though I identify as a progressive Reform Jew now, I still hold on to a few residual rituals and ways of thinking that are antiquated and don't serve me anymore. But like a tree that continues to grow and bloom even as it leans against a wall, I can't quite let them go.

— Either way, the anger, frustration and awkwardness of these women are mine, even though not everything they say or do is me. I loved my doll's house as a child, reacting to and improving my own childhood experiences with my little figurines. Similarly, I have creative licence in my painted scenarios, and I delight in my poetic freedom to tease my audience's empathy and to live a life on paper that echoes my own experiences. Think of it as enhancing the colouring on a photo, so it's just that little bit too bright and garish to be real, even as it is always based on reality.

— And like in that protected private world of my doll's house, where I would escape family arguments and sibling strife, I revel in my feelings of freedom on the canvas and watercolour paper—hard-won, but so rewarding. My paintings have found a language that is my own: part comic, part fine art. My technically slow painting style records transient feelings in glowing colours while I meditate on the throwaway hours of emotional and domestic labour that fill my days. I invent a new visual language with each painting, as I collage and overshare my daily life through the images I use: my pelvic scan, my son's Minecraft gold bricks, and the Poems on the Underground I see on the crowded London tube.

— My images are often paired with short text, either within or accompanying the actual artwork—a nod to the world of comics and to text art. They are also a commentary, akin to the biblical commentators I would read when I was learning Jewish texts in an Orthodox Yeshiva. These commentators have traditionally only been men, but if many thousands of years' worth of commentaries were developed and written down by men, what different ways of thinking were lost, what experiences of women were never referenced? Meet a new tradition of feminist midrash, often considered to have been begun by Judith Plaskow in her ground-breaking 1972 essay *The Coming of Lilith*, in which Lilith is reimagined as Eve's ally, and together these women find their own voices and power, which unsettles God and Adam. Feminist commentaries are a form of biblical exegesis that bridges past and present, with interpretations that fill in the gaps in biblical texts, as they amplify the role and impact of women in the stories. My paintings are also midrash, my own annotations in a world of religious writings and paintings, where too frequently women and their struggles are overlooked.

I give these women—middle-aged, people-pleasing and undervalued—time and a non-judgemental space to express their true, impolite and unapologetically furious selves.

— For example, in *John for Dinner* (2022) the accompanying text reads: “Salome, unquestionably Northwest London’s hostess with the mostess, was eager to impress her fancy new neighbours, so she spent an entire day cooking John the Baptist. How was she to know they were vegetarian? Please note it is not absolutely necessary to have a double oven for this recipe, but it does help.”

— Inspired by Sebastiano del Piombo’s 1510 painting *Judith (or Salome?)*, my painting *John for Dinner* was set in my own kitchen, with my own temperamental double oven. While we don’t know which renegade, head-chopping, biblical woman is being recorded in Sebastiano del Piombo’s painting, either way her resting bitch face—or as my son would call it, “bombastic side eye”—is easily recognisable as the face of someone who is just so over accommodating other people’s needs. Mess with her at your peril. She takes her prisoners and cooks them.

— But like me, these women, even when faced with freedom, and a space to express themselves, cannot entirely remove themselves from the world they inhabit. In *Mary Self-Soothes* (2025)—inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Study for the Madonna of the Cat* (c.1478–1481) and by my own love affair with a neighbour’s cat—Our Mother of Sorrows, who faces so much in her mostly unseen struggles, chooses to have a moment’s quiet peace from her emotional labour. Her anxious thoughts and obligations surround her, but the sweet, warm, purring cat brings her temporary respite from her probably fairly obsessive concerns about her health and the world at large.

— I recently discovered the ink and watercolour painting *Mary Magdalene Overcome by Despair and Loneliness gets Drunk with the Cats* (1993) by the Portuguese artist Paula Rego. The Virgin Mary in my painting is teetotal, so she’d *never* do that, but she thinks she might have that other Mary round one day, for a cat playdate. Finding an ally in another woman is essential to the feminist women’s movement. And women and cats go together so well.

— But the Virgin Mary will have to tidy the garden first, as it’s got a fair bit overgrown.

— And she’s still got standards.

// About the Author

Sarah Lightman is an artist and writer. She completed an Art Foundation course at Central/St. Martins, attended The Slade School of Art for her BA and MFA and has a PhD from University of Glasgow in women's autobiographical comics. As well as the recipient of numerous awards and grants, Sarah is faculty at The Royal Drawing School, London and was Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She is author of her graphic memoir, *The Book of Sarah* (2019), co-edited *Jewish Women in Comics: Bodies and Borders* (2023), and edited *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews* (2014). Her exhibition *Biblical Women Ageing Disgracefully*, curated by Dr. Dawn Llewellyn, has toured Storyhouse Chester and Chester Visual Arts in 2025, and opened at St Paul's Clifton and Cotham Parish Church in 2026. Another exhibition of her work, *Encountering Biblical Bodies: Sarah Lightman's Biblical Women* curated by Dr. Holly Morse and Dr. Siobhan Jolley opened at University of Manchester in 2026.

For more information see: sarahlighman.com.

// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Marietta Kesting / Franziska Rauh / Mona Schieren / Rosanna Umbach / Kea Wienand / Elena Zanichelli / Anja Zimmermann

// www.fkw-journal.de

// License

This work is licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND License 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

