In the late 19th century, Southern California attracted misfits, idealists, and entrepreneurs with few ties to anyone or anything. Swamis, spiritualists, and other self-proclaimed religious authorities quickly made their way out West to forge new faiths. Independent book publishers, motivational speakers, and metaphysical-minded artists and writers then became part of the Los Angeles landscape. City of the Seekers examines how the legacy of this spiritual freedom enables artists to make creative work as part of their practices.

When religious and cultural symbols are removed from their corresponding set of principles, iconography becomes a series of abstract glyphs. In her art practice, Helen Rebekah Garber extracts the images and representations tied to religion while deflecting established aesthetic structures, and her dismantling of the building blocks of ideology leads to a compellingly nonrepresentational visual lexicon.
Garber approaches each piece of her art as though she's forming a kind of visual riddle or invocation. "I'm interested in iconic form and also the dissection of that form with intricate subparts that provide further details relating to the entire context," Garber tells The Creators Project. "Peak experiences in the abstract and the underlying patterns in nature are also recurring themes within my work. Codexes act as delivery systems for secret messages."

Her complex, transformative approach to religious imagery is likely rooted in the artist's own experiences growing up as the daughter of academics, with an orthodox Jewish mother who came from a large Yemenite immigrant family and a father hailing from a farm in rural Iowa. Garber spent her teen years in the East Village, frequenting nightlife hotspots such as CBGB's, the Roxy, and the Limelight. Her unconventional adventure not only inspired Garber to explore her creativity, it also gave her the tools she needed to become a self-reliant contemporary artist and survive. "I was exposed to creative people living truly alternative lifestyles," she explains. "I think my early experiences probably helped to form an independent, anti-establishment streak."

After studying classical figurative painting at the New York Academy of Art and the Long Island School of the Arts as a teenager, Garber says she hit a wall creatively: "I wanted to explore wider reaching concepts, and I felt that figuration was too limiting for what I was trying to accomplish. I returned to school at CalArts, where I received a sound theoretical education and began the process of deconstructing and rebuilding my practice."

Garber found herself building a new aesthetic vision from scratch while making sure that it was intricate enough to continue exploring new methods and ideas. "I am also really interested in romanticism and the underlying historic feminine aesthetic in relation to these ideas, and how themes of beauty and nurturing are presented as weaknesses in a masculine, capitalist society," she says. "Examining these things has become a taboo in contemporary art, so I try to push the envelope with various visual delivery systems. I play at subverting this idea by intervening with contemporary principles, creating a conflict of aesthetic versus content duality in the work. I want the work to be confrontational by presenting quintessentially 'female' ideas and qualities with great power and presence. It's a way of stating that we as women need not conform to masculine ideals and emphasize the power and value of a matriarchal model."
Not only is Garber an artist, she's also a perinatal RN, helping stabilize newborn babies after birth.

With her background in science, Garber says she was influenced by a wide variety of research, specifically with themes of spirituality relating to science. "I'm interested in the raw human experience relating to spiritual growth on a pragmatic, earth-bound level," she says. "More recently I am drawn to explorations of the mystical feminine as relating to life giving and nurturing. The experience of giving birth and becoming a mother has had an effect on my practice, and I want to start a conversation that discusses these values as powerful, instead of minimizing them in relation to masculine value.

Garber came to Los Angeles on an extended vacation six months after 9/11. She stayed on a horse ranch for five years where she rescued animals. She moved to Rome for a bit and returned to LA in 2007, and hasn't left since. "I feel most comfortable connecting with my own spirituality in the wide, open spaces in the west," she says. "My husband and I try to get out to the desert as often as possible because we find it has a cleansing effect on our psyches, just listening to the wind blow over the flat earth. The sun bleaches and purifies everything, cleanses the palate. Every time we go to the desert I feel closer to the earth's energy and further from all of the static of contemporary life."

Right now, Garber feels that the world needs aesthetically engaging and prepossessing works of art that are permeated with personal meaning. "I believe in the power of that personal investment; it communicates great psychic energy and spiritual investment to the viewer. This energy becomes embedded in a good piece of art and transforms it into a spiritual touch stone, for those who learn to read it. When one makes something with absolute integrity, it becomes a gift to art lovers who spend the time to try to understand and connect with it. This, I believe, is the true value of art."