



FEATURE

This category contains the following articles

An Unshakeable Visionary - On the Late David Koloane

Body, Soul, Nature: How the Summer of Love Revolutionized Our Notions of Health, Happiness and Community

The Summer of Love Experience - San Francisco's Peaceful Revolution

Silencing the Noise: Caline Aoun

I Find Holiness in Everything: An Interview with Yifat Bezalel

A Third Space - ruby onyinyechi amanze's hybrid drawings at Frieze New York

Radical, Reduced, Rebellious - Tate London Brings Contemporary British Sculpture to Berlin

I Find Holiness in Everything: An Interview with Yifat Bezalel

In her art, Yifat Bezalel amalgamates the most diverse spheres: mysticism and pop culture, feminism and religiosity. Above all, however, her drawings reflect her multilayered identity: as a global artist and modern Israeli and as a Jewish woman who is also committed to millennia-old biblical traditions. With her works, Bezalel is represented in the Deutsche Bank Collection. Britta Fierzber, curator of the collection, met her in Tel Aviv for a conversation.

Britta Fierzber: *Your artistic practice is based on the medium of drawing, which you later expanded with installations, murals, and video works. What fascinates you so much about drawing?*

Yifat Bezalel: For me, creating something through low-tech is a state of mind. I belong to those people who need time to observe. This simple activity, especially drawing with a pencil, has something healing about it—but not in the sense of New Age. Drawing belongs to the slow arts and teaches you to sharpen your senses. The act itself lets you see things differently. You can see the DNA of drawing in everything, whether it's the branches next to a highway or films by Jean Luc Godard. Drawing is a kind of level in our consciousness—I mean seeing, as opposed to gazing.

When did you start drawing? Is there such a thing as a first drawing that you can remember?

I started drawing as a child. We had a community center that offered painting classes for adults. I took part, but I was just seven years old. I remember exactly my first Alice drawing. I was already older then. Actually, I wanted to draw a storyboard for a video work that I had in mind. And, talking about inspiration, I was with my parents when I realized I wanted to use the figure of *Alice in Wonderland*. I didn't have a sketchbook with me. But I found a medicine box. I unfolded it and drew on the inside. That was my very first Alice.

As we will see, the figure of Alice has great relevance in your work. I'd like to come back to that later and continue with a more general question: You were born in Tel Aviv, you live and work here. Of course, you travel and are part of the global art world. At the same time, however, you seem to be absolutely rooted here. How does "your place," as you like to call Israel, how do your immediate surroundings influence your work?

Living in Tel Aviv, living in Israel, is like living in another dimension. You are surrounded by countries, which you have no relationship with. If we want to travel from Israel to another place, it is only possible by plane. We move around without experiencing the process of traveling. One minute you are here, the next minute you are somewhere else—without passing through a certain landscape. I also feel that the fact that you live in a permanent war zone influences your thinking, your wavelength. The sad thing is that you get used to this kind of perception and simply become indifferent. You notice that when you're in another place, you suddenly feel something like more space between the molecules in the air.

There is this video work from 2013, "Ha'heder (Sketch Room)," in which you show a room from above in which a female artist works alone. It seems very isolated, but at the same time it's the perfect white cube. Is this a metaphor for

the production and display of your works, or is it a more fundamental statement?

It's a general statement, regarding something absolutely fundamental: loneliness. On the one hand you need it as an artist, on the other hand it's the daily price you pay for your work. The video also refers to Virginia Woolf's feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which stresses how necessary it is to have one's own space as a woman in order to think and create.

There are many architectural elements in her drawings that open up into three-dimensional spaces. At the same time, the drawings in your installations expand into three-dimensional space. What exactly appeals to you about architecture? And how does it inspire your work?

I "borrow" architectural elements for several reasons: I want to literally expand the space of the drawing. The format of my drawings should be as close as possible to the format of cinema. I believe cinema has the greatest influence on the viewer because of the way different elements, sound, editing, shots, and settings are used. I want to "awaken" the drawing, create a holographic space for the viewer to enter. I want the silence to transform into a sound. As in the Hekhalot literature, which deals with the ascent to heavenly palaces that replace the physical sacred temple after its destruction. The mystical texts suggest that this ascension is a journey through one's own consciousness, that's what it's all about. Isn't this something like an ancient hologram? The rituals of the temple transform into rituals of the text. This in turn was written to teach people to build a place for the divine in their hearts instead of claiming land for themselves and clinging to it mentally.

This brings us back to the definition of space—be it spiritual, idealistic, or materially tangible, like land. In your drawings you show soldiers and horses. At the same time you use gold leaf for the backgrounds, which could also symbolize the sun or light. Apart from the preciousness, gold leaf has strong religious symbolism. Can you tell us more about these complex, sometimes disturbing compositions?

First of all, as an artist you often rely on your "material intuition," which is hard to explain. For me, gold is basically associated with worship. This is also a form of protest in these times. I believe that the parts of the picture that I cover with gold leaf attract attention like a honey trap. It's about softening a very hard motif that may be difficult to look at. The gold makes it more pleasing to the eye, even if the picture is tough. It's like dressing up the picture in gold. In a very simple way, the gold elevates the images I draw. At the same time, the gold refers to the golden calf that the Israelites created while Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and had not yet returned with a message of God. This is about the question of what ideas we declare divine.

I see very different references to literature in your more recent works and especially in the titles, for example in "No Man is an Island." But you also refer to religion, as in the video work "Tehilla," or to pop culture, for instance when you allude to Aretha Franklin's famous song "I Say a Little Prayer." And looking at your drawing technique, you can also find references to graffiti art.

Yes, that's true. I have two contradictory sides in me. There is the ancient, religious side, but in the same breath I love the light, the joy. I call that my "Mellow Pop" side. Lady Gaga touches me as much as religious lyrics. I find holiness in everything. In an old Jewish text it says: You have no blade of grass from below that is not superior (an angel) to him from above, and saves him, and strikes him, and tells him how to grow up."

You once described yourself as Alice in Wonderland, who falls into a rabbit hole and ends up in a completely strange, magical world. Would you say this is a form of escapism? And if so, what are you fleeing from?

Alice dares to experience and to challenge herself only while she is asleep. In her real life she has bold thoughts, but she doesn't follow them. The gap lies between your dreams, your inner wisdom and your ability to express it, to create something in reality. I try to escape my boredom and fears, which have solidified into an inner labyrinth with strong walls. But which I can elevate it into an exciting place. I must stress once again that for me the hero in *Alice in Wonderland* is not the main character, but this place—the rabbit hole. For me it's this gap, this transitional area, this fight in which you collect your lumps of coal—while you are clearly aware that these are your diamonds.

Besides Alice and Tehilla, a lot of female protagonists appear in your drawings and video works. Is this a way for you as an artist to reflect on the role of women in society, the female artist in the art world? Or directly: do you see yourself as a feminist artist?

Yes, I am. I firmly believe that women don't have to change and take on male characteristics. On the contrary, I believe in female gentleness and poetic power. These are the supreme strengths of women, who stand completely on an equal footing with allegedly superior males. I am exploring these possibilities precisely because here in Israel men and women have to complete three years of military service. That, of course, shapes the mental structures of women and contributes greatly to the wound that is so present here.

NEWSLETTER

Stay up-to-date on contemporary art-with ArtMag. Register here for our newsletter.

ON VIEW

Silencing the Noise: Caline Aoun



NEWS

At the End of the Anthropocene: John Akomfrah's Video Installation "Purple" at ICA Boston / VIEWS 2019 - Deutsche Bank Award Exhibition at Zachęta / Expedition into a Magical World - Paola Pivi at MAXXI / Work from Underneath - Lubaina Himid at the New Museum / "An Exception in Every Respect" - Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) / She is Me and I am Her - Yto Barrada's Homage to Ethnologist Thié 1/2rié 1/2se Riviié 1/2re / Face Laboratory: Kader Attia's "Museum of Emotion" at London's Hayward Gallery



PRESS

"Sculpture as Adventure" - Objects of Wonder at the PalaisPopulaire



Copyright © 2019 Deutsche Bank AG, Frankfurt am Main