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Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number 6, Fall 5764/2003, pp. 185-197 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsh.2004.0013>

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THREE ISRAELI ARTISTS RESPOND TO WAR

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The following pages present artwork and excerpts from interviews with three women artists who live in Israel and have seen their children serve in the military, and whose work addresses the issue of war. I participated in all three interviews—in the first two as the interviewer of sculptor Hava Mehutan and painter/collagist Dorrit Yacoby, and in the last as the interviewee of Zipporah Lax, curator of my own solo exhibit, “Making a Place for Peace: An Artist Responds to the Crisis in Israel.”

Hava Mehutan works with earth, stone, wood, plaster, and metal. Especially relevant to this discussion are the monumentally scaled earthworks and mixed-media sculptures that she exhibited in the early 1980s, using sand, tree trunks, and metal constructions to suggest body bags, hospital beds, and human forms.

I interviewed Mehutan in the spring of 1994 in her Jerusalem studio, which was filled with tumbling, standing, sitting, and reclining figures, not quite life-sized, but rather like large children. Some gained height from pedestals, small carts, or wagons; others straddled tree trunks or oddly-shaped carved wooden forms. Mehutan, a gray-haired woman with the muscular build of someone accustomed to doing manual labor, told me that she held her first show in 1955 and at one time had three galleries in the U.S. representing her work, as well as representatives in Israel—a network that kept her in shows. However, when she became involved in “protest work,” begun as a way of “getting out the disappointment and depression about the war in Lebanon,” it proved impossible to sell and difficult to show.

“I didn’t plan it, and I was surprised by the strength of the work and the form it took,” Mehutan told me. In one such project, dirt was shoveled up from the desert floor near the Dead Sea and poured into burlap bags, which were placed in the rows of shallow ditches from which the dirt had been excavated, creating a heartbreakingly solemn evocation of body bags.

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Hava Mehutan

above: "Har Sodom" (1984)

below: "Bedwork" (1987)

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"Then I started a new piece," she went on. "I collected these blankets made of cotton batting. Up to a certain time everyone had these blankets, and they really represented the early years of the State of Israel. . . . I had a huge pile of them. I carved these large heads, and they all had their eyes closed, and I placed them on the blankets and painted masks on the sleeping faces. But the work was too much, it was too heavy; I just couldn't go on. In 1990 I just folded them up and put it all away. It was as if I was getting close to something that I just couldn't bear to see.

"What's important in this work," said Mehutan, gesturing toward the figures cavorting around her studio and depicted in the drawings on her wall, "is a liveliness. Finally, I'm not dealing with death."

I asked her, "What was your purpose in doing the earthworks and the 'sleeping figures' that you found so difficult? Did the work come out of a political agenda, or was it an artistic outpouring with no other purpose than its own existence?"

"I wanted to affect people," Mehutan answered. "I was turned off by the entire gallery scene—so I was happy not to sell. The galleries couldn't sell the work, or really show it. I was happy not to be a part of all that. . . . My work was very strong, very powerful. I think to be able to do that kind of work, you have to know what you are doing. On the other hand, you have to allow the part that works without knowing. . . . And then, and this is the interesting part, people come along and see symbols and all sorts of things. That's the participation of the viewer.

"In 1984 there were body bags coming back every day from Lebanon, and I was making a cemetery. I just started digging and then filling the sacks. It was dreadful. . . . [I couldn't] do anything to stop the war, so just the digging and the filling were cathartic."

I commented that she sounded discouraged and she said, "Sometimes I think, 'Does it really matter?' But I have to do this work. It's a compulsion. It's a derangement. There is no use for what I do. In a way it doesn't interest me why. You just live with it."

Several months ago, Hava Mehutan wrote to me about the work we had discussed nine years before. "I was determined to somehow touch people, to shake them out of their apathy. I couldn't understand how people for years could just sit and watch the body bags coming through the 'Good Fence' [as the border crossing between Israel and southern Lebanon was known at the time] every day. Towards the beginning of the nineties I became very

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Hava Mehutan

above: "Situation" (1989)

below: "Situation"(1989)

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depressed, because I felt that no one was paying attention. . . . Now I am again reflecting on a terrible period, the Middle Ages. It's easier to work at a remove of almost a thousand years than to respond to the present."

Hava Mehutan's work was recently exhibited in Ma'alot and in Beit Gavriel Sherover.

Dorrit Yacoby's assemblages of constructed and found materials are composed of recurrent words, painted images of people, plants, and military aircraft, and Yacoby's signature accumulations of candle drippings, encrusted surfaces, and adhered feathers, sand, and leaves. In an intensely personal, ritualistic process, these collages are left outside, exposed to harsh climatic extremes. The resulting body of enigmatic, brooding works is rich in references to chaotic forces and metaphorical journeys, kabalistic and hasidic lore, and the painterly language of contemporary abstraction.

My interview with Yacoby took place on November 30, 1993, in her studio, located in a public shelter in Arad's industrial zone. The enormous, dark, very cold room, smelling sharply of tar, paint, and creosote, was filled with constructions of framed plywood stacked every which way, barely leaving room to walk. Yacoby related to me that she had married right after finishing her army service and had four children in six years, while simultaneously completing her B.A. in psychology. After working for a year as a psychologist, she suddenly—"I don't know how it happened"—shifted towards art, which she went on to study for three years in Beer Sheva and another year in Tel Aviv.

JM: Your work is so . . . the word in English is "visceral." It has to do with the guts. Is this how you have always worked?

DY: [The school I attended] in Tel Aviv was very directed, and that direction was the opposite of mine—very conceptual, very dry, and almost without feeling and without pain, very dull. They call it "Poor Art."

JM: Arte Provera?

DY: Not exactly; it was something very Israeli, and it was very hard for me. I went through a lot of pain and humiliation in that school. After a year I knew that I couldn't go there any more. I left, but it gave me a lot—to see that other direction and then come back to my own. I came back stronger.

JM: Did you have a context for what you were doing? Did you see other work that was like yours?

DY: Because of the distance and having a family, I was separated from the

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Dorrit Yacoby
“Woman Holding the Sun, II” (1995)
mixed media on wood, 200 × 122 cm

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other students, and I was a loner. In a way this was an advantage, because I studied Kabbalah, and I learned that one of the ways the kabbalists got their inspiration was to be alone, to go out of town to a forest or something. I learned that this is the way to come nearer to your soul.

JM: How was your work linked to what was going on in Israel?

DY: I started painting like a woman holding a dead body—a woman in a lot of pain. For a few years I couldn't get out of this. Then when my first boy went into the army, it was a shock. I would hear about soldiers being wounded in Gaza, and I started listening to the radio and watching television, which I never did before. I felt that my son, whom I love, was in danger. It was then that I started to feel connected to Israel's political world.

During the Gulf War he was in Nablus; scud missiles were falling in Tel Aviv and the Arabs were shouting on the roofs, and he was patrolling the streets. I was really worried. There were a lot of planes flying [around here] because of the nuclear plant in Dimona. In this atmosphere, I did a series that I called "War signals." It started with black flags and all kinds of symbols that I felt were connected with war, and then I did a lot of Magen Davids, which I felt were there to protect my son. People said that for them it reflected the anxiety of this human experience.

JM: Did you ever think about leaving the country?

DY: My husband was once offered a good job in Australia, but somehow I couldn't leave. My parents left everything in Canada to be pioneers, to come and build the country. I couldn't betray that vision.

JM: At first it is hard to pick out any images in your work. But if you look at it for a long time there are a lot of specific images, literal images.

DY: Yes, it's very literal. Every painting has a story in the abstraction and the shapes. Over and over, I do the same image.

JM: So when there is a woman in your paintings, is she you?

DY: I think she's like me, like a reflection of my body. Something inside me feels so strongly all the pain felt by women everywhere whose children have been taken in war. I did a very large series repeatedly showing a fallen woman, and suddenly I discovered a feeling of celebration and comfort. I had the feeling that I could be connected to people through my paintings.

The feelings of misery and suffering I connect with the blue paint. I do it with a lot of pigment, very strong. I don't paint rationally. I do it like praying, saying and writing the same word over and over again. It's like power in the pigment, like magic power that reflects from the image. I believe I have

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Dorrit Yacoby

above: "Flying Woman
with Ship with Growing
Trees" (1993-1996)
mixed media on wood
125 × 123 cm

right: "Woman Holding
the Vessel of her Soul, I"
(1995)
mixed media on wood
40 × 50 cm

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a connection to other places and people when I paint certain things over and over. It's necessary to be here, doing this, so that something else can happen someplace else. The paintings of the blue bowl I did for my daughter. It was like cutting the mental cord between our bodies, my daughter's and mine; even though the cord is cut, there is still a connection of love. And so I thought I could transmit something; I could send love through the paintings, through the pigment, through all those layers of paint.

Dorrit Yacoby's paintings have been exhibited in the Vatican, Tokyo, and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

My own large-scale, figurative paintings and limited-edition artist's books have depicted violence in the media, the technological torments of medical life support, and sacred biblical texts. After immigrating to Israel in 1994, I found my work, paradoxically, taking a decidedly softer turn, combining figuration and abstraction to explore psychological and spiritual themes. Since the current intafada began, my work has documented my response to the political and spiritual tensions in Israel as I experience them from Yattir, a settlement in the hills south of Hebron.

ZL: You call yourself an "Israel-based American artist." This sense of displacement appears in many of your collages, especially the house images. When I look at them, I wonder whether the viewer is trapped inside or outside of the structure.

JM: Much of the work I've done since coming to Israel reflects my desire to put down roots, to adjust to the trauma and transitions of life as an expatriate and immigrant. I live in what's referred to as "disputed territory." Every trip away from our home involves a kind of grisly lottery: What route will be safe? Hence the title of one of my paintings: "Afraid to Leave Home. Afraid to Go Home."

ZL: The images are bold and often jarring. I find myself trying to peel back the complex layers of information. Tell me something about the way you layer the images with suspended Hebrew and English letters. Your negotiation of boundary, of place, and of language gives the paintings a floating, dreamlike quality.

JM: My creative process owes a lot to serious, intentional dream work. I have been studying how to use dreams in order to effect change in my life and in the world. Just as dream work allows a person to change psychically

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above: "Hear No Evil" (2002)

below: "Afraid To Leave Home, Afraid To Go Home" (2001)

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and emotionally, I believe that art can also provide a way to understand and transform oneself and, by extension, the world.

ZL: You told me that you had been involved since high school with anti-war activism. You demonstrated for unilateral nuclear disarmament and against the war in Vietnam. You spent much of your youth placing daisies in the barrels of guns, and now you are learning to shoot a gun so as to be able to protect yourself. How has this transition been expressed in your work?

JM: It is most overtly expressed in pieces like the one called "Shomer/Guardian," in which I collaged onto the painting a human silhouette cut from cardboard and printed with a camouflage pattern. It is an actual target that was used for shooting practice and is riddled with holes. But there is so much more behind the making of that piece.

I decided that I needed to be able to take responsibility for protecting myself. There had been terror attacks all over Israel. It seemed like every night on television there were people sobbing at the funerals of their children or children saying eulogies for their parents. We put up bars on our windows, fenced in our yard, and got a dog. The last thing we did was to apply for permission to get a gun.

The first time I went to shooting practice with some of the other women from my settlement was such a traumatic experience! I was devastated to think that I would now routinely be armed in my daily life, and that this is how it is for Jews to be able to live in Israel. I started to cry and almost left the shooting range. I thought to myself, 'I can't do this. I'm an artist, not a soldier.' To calm myself down I took out my sketchpad and started to draw the other women as they practiced. After I had done about four or five sketches, I was able to take my turn with the gun.

ZL: You used one of these sketches in the collage "Primal Memory/Hear No Evil." The woman crouching and aiming a gun is soft and round. Her shoulders curve as she leans into the shot. The straight, angular lines of the rifle contrast with the gentle lines of her body. She could be a grandmother. The imagery is severe, but the woman has a comforting, motherly feel about her.

JM: There is a shocking paradox in seeing the modestly dressed religious women taking aim and assuming the stance of marksmen. These simple little sketches produced strong reactions in people, because both identities are so evident: female and taking aim. I am reminded of the reaction that people had to seeing the actress Linda Hamilton in the movie *Terminator II*. She had

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“Shomer” (Guardian, 2002)
152.2 × 106.5 cm

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trained, was muscular, and carried weapons aggressively. It was outrageous and thrilling to see a woman so strong and willing to defend herself and her child. But this isn't a movie, this is real life. I think there is a startled sense of gender-confusion about what it means to be a strong woman.

ZL: In these works, houses are paired with Hebrew letters and snapshots of the prickly Israeli landscape. They are very simply, almost childishly rendered.

JM: My response to the crisis that is ongoing in my spiritual homeland is to try to make a place for peace in my heart and then from that place of peace to try to change the world. As an artist, it is my obligation and my privilege to use my gifts to turn people's hearts to one another, to celebrate the gentle turning of light from morning to night.

ZL: That explains better what one sees in these photographs—the tops of flowering trees as the day turns to night and the buds bloom and disappear. Despite the social unrest, the seasons persist; the land continues to grow and change, as if oblivious to the anxiety that inhabits it.

JM: Yes, you've nailed it exactly! Making art is at times like being on a raft of safety and comfort. I spent a lot of the last two years trying not to think about the political situation. I would go to my studio and meditate on peace, try to get calm, to suppress the anxiety that makes everyday life in Israel bristle with tension, grief, and weariness. But when I opened myself to the energy of creative work, there was no hiding, no escaping the fear and anger. Instead of being a refuge or a respite, the work became a place for me to engage with and try to make sense of the incidents of terrorism and violence, the watchfulness and military presence on the roads and on the streets. It's a paradox. I look at what fills my studio and realize how much work about the current situation comes out of my attempt not to think about it. There's no getting away from it.

Judith Margolis' paintings and artists books were most recently exhibited at the University of Southern California and at Purdue University, Indiana.