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A Garden of Paintings

“I was thinking of columns extended in the space, with their feet dipped in the ink basin. It makes me think of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which had never existed really and are more of a collective fantasy. Think of this shift from concrete landscapes in the Land of Israel to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.” Yonatan H. Mishal talking with artist Keren Anavy about *Utopia* her new project in Brooklyn, New York



Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2007, ink on paper, 59x86.6 inches

Hello Keren Anavy, we're meeting ahead of *Utopia*, a performance project you're currently working on. Please introduce yourself.

I am a painter and I work in the intersection of nature and culture, which in recent years has extended to aspects of place and site-specificity, how the work relates to the space it is installed in and sometimes executed in as well. It's been my second year in New York now, but at the same time I'm still active in Israel. Up until recently I had a studio in southern Tel Aviv, so there's this like a system for me where things reflect on one another. Aspects of a 'place' are central to my work: what constitutes a place, what in a landscape is indicative of a place, of a culture. For some years now, this preoccupation had undergone a process of abstraction. What I do nowadays pretty much falls within 'abstraction,' but the starting point is still concrete images. It's a process that I have come to view as 'from the political to escapism.' Though 'escapism' might be too strong a word to describe it.



Keren Anavy in collaboration with Valerie Green/Dance Entropy, *Utopia*, 2018

So your work, in the past, was rather political?

Images I have worked with in the past – the tiger and the kaffiyeh – certainly had political connotations to them, and both were clearly recognizable in my earlier works.

I get it when it comes to the kaffiyeh, but not when it comes to tiger.

At the time, I used to work extensively from press images. I ran into an image of a kaffiyehs that I liked a lot. These are works I did during my MFA studies, which had never been exhibited until

very recently, in *Struggle, Protest – Knight, Mask*, a group exhibition at the Haifa Museum, part of a larger exhibition cluster titled *Dangerous Art*. I wanted to dive deeper into the pattern of the kaffiyeh and realized that the pattern is actually based on tiger fur. The two are tied together from the formalistic standpoint, so much so that a pattern is sometimes copied outright, but beyond that they are connected in terms of content and signification. In the past, the kaffiyeh was associated with the ‘fellaḥ,’ the Arab peasant and laborer, it was a naïve image. Today it transformed through media imagery in many ways, mostly into a menace symbol identified with rebellion and uprising, with the protesters – in fact warriors – who use it to cover their faces. The tiger is likewise menacing, and there’s this aspect of camouflage in both – whether for the animal in its natural habitat or for the protestors who cover their faces. To me, there’s still beauty and sensuality to them, in this fabric that shrouds the face as well as the fur of this spectacular and dangerous animal. I was drawn to that, to an exploration of images that are so widely-recognizable in their associations of beauty and dread. I combined the two together and reworked them into these sort of landscapes that build on an amalgam of shapes. A work process evolved from that which is still how I work, to this day.

Do you recognize these patterns in an actual landscape you look at, or do they emerge in retrospect?

No, it’s the landscape that evolves based on the pattern, it’s important to me that the landscape goes through this filter, and that it absorbs the content of this specific pattern. This is where the paper cutouts originated from. I wanted to have an extra enveloping layer, something of a cover, like a tablecloth in way. The cutout is a technique I’d never come to work with if it hadn’t been for my earlier experimentation with kaffiyeh motifs in oil and ink.



Keren Anavy, *Contemporary Orientals*, 2008, ink on paper, 133 X 177 inches

You also do paper cutouts.

Less than I used to. The technique serves the content. So far I had two large cutout installations, and I don't know when will be the next one. Painting is the core, the foundation of my art, along with drawing. That's where I always start from, and not just in the sense of a preliminary sketch. That's the motivating mechanism that gets me working in the studio. At the end of the process, a show might have no paintings in it at all, but it's there at the groundwork, just as in *House & Garden*, a solo show I had at The Janco Dada Museum in Ein Hod, Israel, the whole show consisted entirely of paper cutouts, there was not a single painting in it, but nonetheless it felt to me as the work of a painter.

To the viewer, this is not necessarily apparent.

It's the process that matters to me, this feeling that my art always moves between the poles of politics and aesthetic value.

Also now?

Yes, still. Perhaps to a lesser degree, after all, things evolve. It really peaked in my site-specific installation at the Ashdod Museum, in the exhibition *Until you get out of my voice* (2014), where my interest in pairing these two images reached its height, which also led to what I'm doing today. I exhibited a floor installation made of burnt hamra soil, which was in a 'white cube' space, with an internal window overlooking the museum. On the window I mounted a tiger-kaffiyeh metal cutout where the tiger figure it is still recognizable. Depending on the time of day, the light coming from the window might cast its patterned shadow on the burnt-hamra floor work, which was created according to the light pattern, or you can see it travelling across the wall. To me, hamra soil signifies the land of Israel, but also the Palestinian laborers, the construction workers – the work force that built the land. The soil was simply lying there, it was clear that it's temporary. At the end of the show the sand was collected, paper can't stay forever. Like a paper tiger.



Keren Anavy, *Southern Rose*, 2013, paper cutouts, site-specific installation

Let's discuss about a place.

After the show in Ashdod I came to regard spaces differently. It was followed by my solo show at The Janco Dada Museum, where I exhibited paper cutouts of diamond patterns – an image that I worked with extensively – as well as the rose window from gothic churches, which I combine with the diamond. I came up with my own hybrid – like with the tiger and kaffiyeh, from the standpoint of the work process. I called it 'My Mashrabiya', it originated in the mashrabiya of Islamic art, traditional patterns carved in wood or stone that are typically used to partition public and private areas while creating an ornate shadow play and alleviating heat. In this case – 'My own mashrabiya,' as I like to call it – it is mixed with the gothic rose window, and the diamond of Western culture, it's a mix of cultures. But it's a do-it-yourself kind of mix, anyone can do cultural mix.

So maybe not so much a do-it-yourself cultural mix as a do-it-yourself cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation has too strong a meaning, it comes from a discourse of occupation. I see it more as an opportunity of opening up to these cultures. We can learn about them.

Do not you think you can say what you're doing is cultural appropriation?

You see what I mean? These exactly are the places where art can take action. Art is everywhere. One of the things I'd disagree on is that there is a monopoly over images. There's an endless amount of images. I'm allowed to take and connect them, and through that also to learn about these cultures. I hope that viewers too, who are confronted with a visual array that's rich and seductive, would start asking about these visuals they've never encountered before. Personally I just find it to be interesting. I'm drawn to this type of culture, it's so deeply fascinating to me.

Are you intent on controversial art?

Look, I'm not directed at controversial art, I'm directed at art that interests me, and there are also parts of it I'd like others to find an interest in as well. When I was in my undergraduate studies it seemed odd to me that, only by getting seriously into art history there's any chance of learning anything about the New Testament, the Quran or any number of cultures that existed in Israel. There was this question all of a sudden, why isn't everybody knows of these things? Why should not everyone recognize this cultural space? When I'm doing my art I'm not directed in a didactic way, as you say, to a certain thing. These are the things I'm interested in, and it's important that my art interests others and then they can learn about these things. But I'm digressing. Let me go back to *House & Garden* exhibition. Both these shows, the one in Ashdod as well as the one at The Janco Dada Museum, got me into the theme of nature. In the connection of what nature is and what culture is. At the end of these projects I traveled to New York and began research about gardens, precisely here, in the most urban city in the world

New York is also known for its garden.

Right. Both these projects brought me to a place where I wanted to research what are Botanical Gardens in the West vs. Botanical Gardens in Islam. New York was a good place to start, not just because of its many botanical gardens, also because of the wealth of archival material at The

Metropolitan Museum and in libraries. New York has ‘pockets’ of nature that are in dialogue with the pulse and dynamism of the city. Botanical gardens are supposed to provide a sort of ‘catalogue’ of nature, to index it, to the needs of control. If I need to define a word that characterizes my art, ‘control’ would be it. How I’m able to control a space, the path I’d like the viewer to take in it. How I’m able to control the materials, ink for example, which I frequently work with.



Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2017, ink and colored pencils on transparent Mylar, 36 X 118 inches each

I’m intrigued that you say that, because your art channels a certain brittleness, a loss of control.

That’s true; now that you’re here in the studio you see the works but not the installation – and that is what’s important to me. Because it’s about creating something out of nothing, erecting a new world. You put it together, and this is where this notion of control goes deeper – which is why I like ink so much. Because for the artist, ink provides this tension between control and loss of control, and it has this push-pull relationship with who creates it and with the paper and

surface as well. That's why I'm challenged by this material, more than I am by a technique of oil on canvas where you can correct things and start anew.

Over time I discovered locations that were more interesting me than the botanical garden. For example, The Lowline Lab, a proposal for a community garden under a roadway in the Lower East Side, which is the most crowded area in town. The idea they developed in the lab was to turn an underground tunnel into a park. Sunlight would enter through pipes from the outside and distributed across, through an artificial ceiling. I was fascinated by this combination of nature and the manmade, this insistence on recreating nature with 'natural' means, but under unnatural conditions.

That's true for all New York's gardens.

It's true for the Central Park, where the rocks were brought in; they weren't there on the site in the first place. But the Lowline had this spark to it which was very similar to art to me, because they've created this artificial world.

The way you do.

Yes. There's something much like art there in the sense that the whole endeavor seems so outlandish. Once it's constructed and there's a park under the driveway – it'll makes less sense than the Central Park. This is why it appealed to me so much. I began researching community gardens. They look a lot like botanical gardens, but they're not botanical gardens. Take Wave Hill for example, which is in the Bronx. These are actually the former parks of private mansions that were bequeathed to the city. And they function as a very beautiful parks for the community. That's the sort of places I was interested in. it's like a greenhouse, how can you grow nature inside a reserved place.

And that's a theme you've worked with before.

Yes, I did a joint exhibition with Tal Frank at the Dan Gallery for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv that took its inspiration from Avital Geva's Greenhouse at Kibbutz Ein Shemer. Ours was a hotbed for two artists who collaborate and for artistic processes in general. The end products were diamonds and otherworldly prototypes. The garden in the Eastern tradition, which varies greatly from the one in the West, has the task of governing nature. In the East – as with the woven patterns of carpets – the garden also represents the afterworld. Whether with the Moguls of India or the Persian rulers, these gardens were meant to demonstrate to the subjects how the ruler rules over nature. And if I, as a ruler, can control nature to such positive effect, in a land where water is scarce, then it's in my power to provide a good life to you as a subject. It was a political tool. And that's how I see gardens in general.



Keren Anavy, Untitled, oil on linen, 59 X 37 inches

Gardens are a political tool?

Nowadays there's a more intricate interesting political dialogue between gardens with their communities, but if I step one level beyond that they're still about the relations between man and nature. When I arrived here I saw in one of the gardens a small greenhouse with cacti, a plant that in Israel never gets too much attention. And here they're kept like diamonds. It doesn't sound like much, but when I saw it with my own eyes I was completely captivated, and it looked odd. And suddenly you realize the movement, that these plants are also a reflection of an identity and a culture.

Eventually, after touring these pockets of nature, I started working with colored ink to translate this nature, the blossoming and the flowers and everything I saw into colors. It's not their appearance per se I was interested in, precisely, but how to translate them into colors. I started working on light, color, shapes. I returned to my roots as an artist.

And here we come to your work, which will be shown this week. Tell what you're doing.

I paint on Mylar sheets, dipping them in a bath of ink so that the ink begins to rise slowly. Unlike paper, which absorbs the ink, with Mylar ink has no grip on the support, so it floats about. It allows the image to fuse and dissolve and hence to move from an exterior, palpable reality to an inner one. It starts to reflect a more private state of mind, at least more than I did in the past.

And there's no garden here.

But there will be here a garden of paintings.

The move was from painting the garden to making it.

Exactly. At the time that I was painting them I was thinking of columns extended in the space, with their feet dipped in the ink basin. It's an association about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which never existed really and are more of a collective fantasy. Think of this shift from concrete landscapes in the Land of Israel to the Hanging Gardens. I started working here with Valerie Green, a choreographer, and her company, Dance Entropy. A year ago we had a joint project at Flux Factory, which was an installation of paper cutouts where I tried to emulate, with the paper, certain dance movements. What I was hoping for in the new project is for art to become inseparable from dance. Not as a set design. That you can't disconnect the two. For a long time I've wanted to introduce movement into my works, which I'd like to do through dance. The paintings are still that – paintings – but they're also columns to dance with and to create structures that form and unravel. *Utopia*, a project name, which is temporary. Utopia is only part of the whole.

Keren Anavy and Valerie Green/Dance Entropy, showing *Utopia*, dance performance

Sound and live vocals: Katie Mullins

19.1.18, 19:30

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