



Yehudit Sasportas/MATRIX 200

By the River

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**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**



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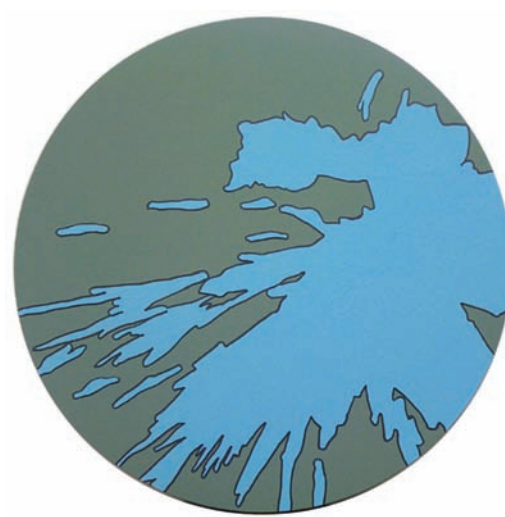
“In viewing my work one encounters an archeological formation, which represents the remains of a former structure: human, architectural, or mental. At first glance, one identifies general, anonymous images, just the ‘hard and basic data.’ Next one notices that the structure itself is full of contradictions and lacks visual or syntactical unity. By the River can be understood as a self-portrait.”

—Yehudit Sasportas¹

Throughout history, self-portraits have served two ends: the artist as his own most affordable model, and a sort of immortalization. While it could be argued that all works of art are self-portraits, when a conceptual artist creates a largely abstracted, room-size floor installation composed of more than seventy panels and deems it a self-portrait, it becomes clear that an extremely complex definition of identity is present. The content as well as the form of Israeli artist Yehudit Sasportas’s installations reflect the intriguing oddity of being (and simultaneously not being, or being more than) a diverse mix of identifiers. Her work fuses drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture and yet is not any of these. Her themes—the problematics of defining form, displacement, and the inability to define a border—are both specific to her own experience living in Israel and almost universally resonant. Found in Sasportas’s work are actions and emotions that embody a global self at the beginning of the twenty-first century: wandering, elusiveness, instability, and concealment; tension, aggression, and lack of control. The honesty of Sasportas’s expression is such that her perspective could be encountered in individuals in the United States, Northern Ireland, Tibet, India, or numerous other places.

The Carpenter and the Seamstress (2000–2001), Sasportas’s most recognized work to date, is an abstraction based on the floor plan of her childhood home, a public housing apartment in Tel Aviv. The eponymous carpenter and seamstress are her parents. A room-scale installation consisting of hand-painted panels covering the majority of the floor and walls, the piece blends rigid, geometric three-dimensional areas on the floor with more sensual, patterned

COVER: *By the River*, 2002 [detail]; acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



two-dimensional decoration on the walls. The wall panels represent a fantasy space — what Sasportas might have hoped to view from the windows of her home as a child. The disquieting fusion of disparate imagery is a colorful representation of her family’s attempts to reconcile the visual language of their native Morocco with the utopian modernist vision they found in Israel in the 1970s. The work can be read equally convincingly as personal biography or pure sculpture.

The Carpenter and the Seamstress reflects Sasportas’s fascination with Israel’s heterogeneous culture, composed of fragmented identities. It also serves as an exploration of the Jewish experience in general, which historically has been characterized by exile and migration and the struggle to maintain tradition in the face of new circumstances. In the installation, the artist contemplates a circumstance in which particular cultural modes lose their ascription to an authentic source, while the visual means of preserving them are flattened, emptied, recycled, and imitated. Her query is a classic concern of diaspora: How do new situations that emerge affect existing ones? And can a culture withstand a reduction to two dimensions?

Inherent in Sasportas’s work is a link to architecture. Giving dimension to culture or ideology has been at the forefront of the development of Zionist modern architecture. While architecture has always been inseparable from politics in a broad sense, the concept of building the state of Israel—long central to the Zionist dream—took on a more literal meaning after Israel’s independence in 1948. Israel then had to build the infrastructure, cities, and buildings that would facilitate a modern, prosperous, and secure land.² As a result, as art historian Andrew Renton has noted, “Modernism in Israel was highly

By the River, 2002 [detail]; acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



politicized. The buildings were about asserting sovereignty over place. It was optimistic and often rhetorically blind to where the building was sited, unseeing what had been there before (might still be there even).³ Sasportas’s work, Renton says, “is about the utopian aspects of Zionist Modernism and the public celebration of immigration, without being a solution to all of its problems.”⁴

In *The Carpenter and the Seamstress*, two separate identities—Eastern and Western, Moroccan and Israeli—are fused together to create one visual language. By contrast, in *By the River*, Sasportas’s MATRIX exhibition, the different identities or groupings remain independent and distinct. The images included in *By the River* generally fall into two categories: those that connote order or control (such as architecture, figures, diagrams, skylines) and those that represent openness or movement (such as magnetic fields, maps, clouds). The visual dichotomy creates an uneasiness that represents a region where any one person has several roles: individual, citizen; historical heir, occupier; artist, soldier.

By the River covers the entire floor of the gallery with multicolored, two-dimensional rectangular and circular painted wood panels in a variety of sizes and thicknesses. Images of mountain vistas, topographic maps, wind patterns, lakes, oceans, volcanic eruptions, electrical wires, urban skylines, magnetic fields, and architectural details coexist here. The sheer volume of images and magnitude of associations bespeaks simultaneity. There are trees that evoke bonsai, mountains reminiscent of Switzerland or the Golan Heights, desert scenes that could be Southern California or the Negev Desert. There are also images of explosions that may be volcanic eruptions or

By the River, 2002 [detail]; acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



other events. Each painted image is a fusion of four or five different sources culled from geology books, scientific drawings, and maps.

Using an earthy, muted palette, Sasportas paints images as if seen through a filter. The artist explains that the idea behind her colors was to have them appear “without light, not alive, always with one tone missing.”⁵ Sasportas has spent the last eighteen months in a partially underground studio in Tel Aviv, working with the windows covered. The absence of natural light, she says, facilitates a neutral surface from which to create her work free of external temptation. An important aspect of Sasportas’s work is the manual labor involved in the production. Each of the panels in the installation is hand cut by the artist and then laboriously painted.

Interspersed with the visual imagery are black panels that initially appear to be monochromatic. In fact, they are filled with bar codes, lines that have varying rhythms. Serving as “black holes,” they are intended to indicate the unexpected depth that can exist beneath a surface. They also serve as metaphors for the gaps that exist in Israeli history, huge spaces of time and place that are covered over by perpetual forward motion and new histories. Thick black lines border the rectangular panels. When speaking of her work, Sasportas is careful to avoid politics and consequently relies heavily on metaphor. For example, in explaining her use of camouflage technique: “It is to cover something or to have the sign. You can have the diagram or data about the thing but you never have the real thing.”⁶

Sasportas is keenly interested in the unexpected associations that occur as a result of juxtaposition. One oft-repeated image is the result of a coffee spill that the artist let dry and then traced. This

By the River, 2002 [detail]; acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



particular image recalls “blot drawing,” a technique described by Alexander Cozens in his book *A New Method for Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes* (1786), whereby an accidental mark can be developed into a composition. He may have been inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s description of a method of “quickening the spirit of invention” by observing in damp walls and stones “strange landscapes,” and “an infinity of things.”⁷ For another image Sasportas lifted small pieces of black paper a few feet above the ground and allowed them to scatter. Next she recorded their places with a marker. Her stated method recalls John Cage’s conceptual operation in which sounds are organized, objects placed, or marks made according to chance. Cage’s description of his process, “What I am doing is not using choices but asking questions,” mirrors that of Sasportas.

According to the artist, *By the River* can also be read as an archive of her unconscious. The title of the installation derives from her vision of someone sitting near a river watching the flow of all his or her actual and unconscious life images. Sasportas explains that, despite the pseudoscientific nature of most of the images, they are primarily from her unconscious. She states, “These images come from my dreams or images that always exist in my mind. They form a profound inner dialogue in the mental space where images come before language.”⁸ She notes that in her MATRIX installation, the architectural plan of her parents’ Tel Aviv apartment has been expanded into the architectural plan of the mind or psyche of the subject, the person (Sasportas herself), who was living there. Sasportas’s emphasis on the use of subconscious imagery has connections to the Surrealists

By the River, 2002 (detail); acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



and their belief that the unconscious is a wellspring of untapped creative ideas. André Breton defined Surrealism in his *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) as “psychic automatism in its pure state.”⁹

Sasportas relies on actual facts to fabricate her complex narrative. Equally distorted as self-portrait and social commentary, the resulting flow of visual information is quixotic. Each gesture functions as a symbol. Recorded is the present, implied are the future and the past. *By the River* is an ambitious attempt to record myriad, constantly shifting, perhaps unknowable terrains: the psyche, the spirit, politics, and geography. Sasportas poses provocative questions: How do we resolve to retain individual identity in a time of overwhelming national patriotism? How can voices of difference coexist with a louder “united” roar? Do we all breathe the same air? The urgency found in the questions Sasportas consciously or unconsciously poses leaves the viewer emboldened by the fact that at least someone is brave enough to ask.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

- 1 Taped telephone conversation between the artist and the author on Monday, August 19, 2002.
- 2 Alan Riding, “Are Politics Built Into Architecture?,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2002, Section B, p. 7, Column 2.
- 3 Andrew Renton email to the author, August 14, 2002.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Conversation between the artist and the author, August 19, 2002.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 www.groveart.com
- 8 Conversation between the artist and the author, August 19, 2002.
- 9 www.groveart.com

By the River, 2002 (detail); acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



Yehudit Sasportas was born in Ashdod, Israel, in 1969. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, in 1993. That year, she continued her studies in the sculpture department of the Cooper Union Institute, New York. In 1999, she received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, in collaboration with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Sasportas lives and works in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2001
“How did it ever come so far...,” Galerie Eigen + Art, Berlin, Germany
“The Carpenter and the Seamstress 2,” Deitch Projects, New York, NY

2000
“The Carpenter and the Seamstress,” Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

1999
“PVC,” Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel

1996
“Trash-can Scale,” Janco Dada Museum, Ein Hod, Israel

1994
“Drawing” (part of “Trier”), Jerusalem Artists House, Jerusalem, Israel

Selected Group Exhibitions

2002
“Hilufim,” The Herzliya Museum of Art and The Israel Museum of Art, Jerusalem, Israel
“Personal Plans,” Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland

2001
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
Gallery Barbara Davis, Houston, TX
Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland
Bienal de Valencia, Valencia, Spain
“Walkabout,” The Ramat Gan Museum, Ramat Gan, Israel; Galerie Kampnagel, Hamburg, Germany

By the River, 2002 (detail); acrylic and ink on MDF; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.



2000
“Platforma,” Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel

1999
6th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey
“Young International Art,” Gallery Eigen + Art, Berlin, Germany
“Art Focus,” Sultan’s Pool, Jerusalem, Israel
“Bad kids, good kids,” The Israel Museum of Art, Jerusalem, Israel
“The Biennial of the Mediterranean,” Rome, Italy

1998
“Israeli Women Artists,” Art Triennale, New Delhi, India
“Women Artists in Israel,” Haifa Museum of Art, Haifa, Israel
“90 Years of Israeli Art,” Works of the Jossef Hachmi Collection – Phoenix Israel, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel
“Barnot, the building, destruction, and restoration of high places, Israel ’48–’98,” Jewish Museum, Vienna

1997
Biennale of the Mediterranean, Turin, Italy; Helsinki, Finland
“Home,” Anadiel Gallery, New Gate, Jerusalem, Israel

1996
“Balanced,” Israeli Painters and Sculptors Foundation, Tel Aviv, Israel
“Yehudit Sasportas and Smadar Eliassaf – Drawings,” Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel

Selected Catalogues and Books

Colombo, Paolo. *The Passion and the Wave—6th International Istanbul Biennial*, Istanbul, Turkey, 1999.
Fisher, Yona. *Yehudit Sasportas: Trash-can Scale*, Janco Dada Museum, Ein Hod, Israel, 1996, pp. 10–11.
Yehudit Sasportas, Nathan Gottesdiener Foundation, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2000.

Selected Periodicals

Hunt, David. “6th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Arttext*, February–April 2000, p. 94.
Mahoney, Elizabeth. “Total Object Complete with Missing Parts: Tramway, Glasgow,” *Art Monthly*, no. 250, October 2001, pp. 36–38.

The Carpenter and the Seamstress, 2000 (installation view—Deitch Projects, New York); marker on nylon sheet, water-based paint, stickers, and MDF panels; 78 3/4 x 393 3/4 x 181 inches (200 x 1000 x 460 cm); courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York.



“Michael Gedalyovich, Nir Hod, Iris Binor, Sigalit Landua, Ohad Meromi, Yehudit Sasportas: Discussions,” *Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol. 7, Winter 1995, pp. 96–117.
Studia Art Magazine, no. 77, 1996, pp. 26–36.
Volk, Gregory. “Dispatches—The Passion and the Wave, The 6th Istanbul Biennial,” *Sculpture*, vol. 19, no. 1, January/February 2000, pp. 70, 72.

Work in MATRIX

By the River, 2002
Acrylic and ink on MDF
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

Please Note:

On Sunday, November 24 at 3 p.m., Adi Shamir, Professor of Architecture and Dean of Instruction at California College of Arts and Crafts, will give a lecture providing a political and architectural context for Sasportas’s work.

MATRIX Curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will lead a walkthrough of Yehudit Sasportas/MATRIX 200 *By the River* on Thursday, January 16 at 6 p.m.

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