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The Garden, the Kaffiyeh, the Tiger and the Diamond

About Keren Anavy's Work- on the occasion of her solo exhibition, 'House & Garden'

At The Janco-Dada Museum, Ein Hod, Israel, February 2015.

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Keren Anavy's works stood out in the *Until You Get Out of My Voice* exhibition which was recently on show at Ashdod Art Museum (curated by Yuval Biton and Rony Cohen-Binyamini). In a white room allocated for Anavy's works, she installed a site-specific installation: in the room's window she placed a metal cutout from which emerged an image of a roaring tiger, woven in an intricacy of Kaeffiyeh shapes. The metal cutout in the window cast shades on the room's floor, which in turn echoed in a complex drawing on the same floor, made in burned black loam. First and foremost, this floor work is centered around substance's memory: what used to exist and then was burned and consumed, what used to exist and doesn't exist anymore. In the topographic layer, the geometrical and symmetrical shapes corresponded to the esthetics of Middle-and-Far Eastern gardens and rugs.

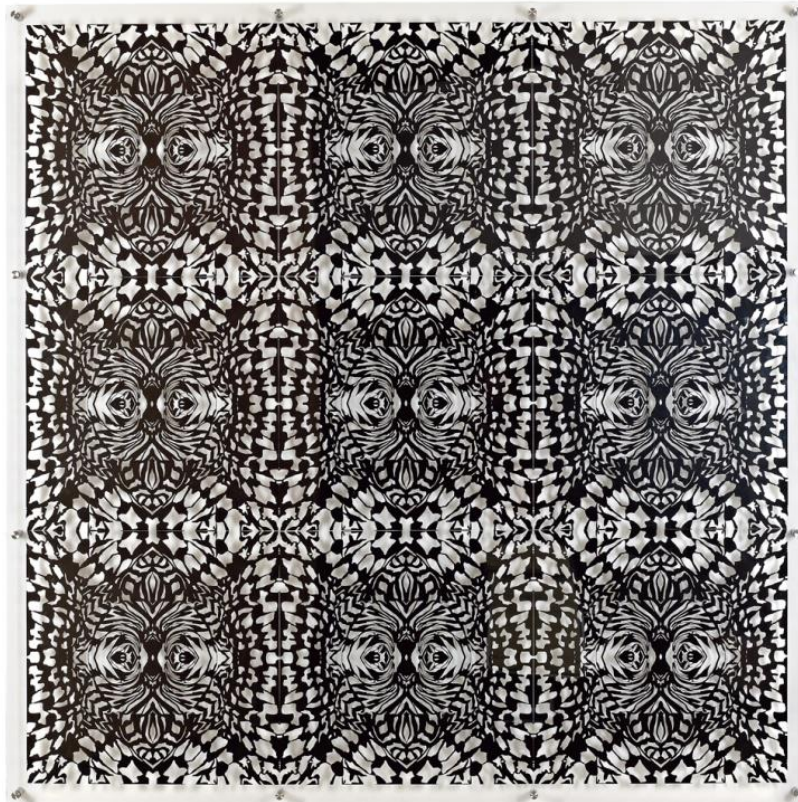


Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2014, in the window: metal cutout 180X90 cm.

On the floor: burnt soil, installation view at Ashdod Art Museum, Photo: Ashdod Art Museum

This entire installation is intricately related to another Anavy work presented at that exhibition: nine replicated paper cutouts, combined together to form one monumental work. Thus an impressive space was created, echoing endlessly-replicated, throbbing and thrilling Arabesque ornaments. Deep religiousness sprouted from this space, religiousness which calls to mind Kazimir Malevitch's Black Square, as well as the huge black Kaabah stone in Mecca.

The Moslem world responded to the iconoclastic prohibition of mimesis by creating the endlessly-repeating pattern. Repetitiveness and replicability of complex shapes construct a morphological miniature which seeks to capture a droplet of divinity; endlessness forms the divine space, and the morphological pattern aspires to produce different plains of the same ontological space. The winding Arabesque pattern renders both the divine and the endlessness visible as void and fullness at once, and asks us to simultaneously experience the endless in both time and space. This brings to mind the art historical term of Horror Vacui, related to both Byzantine and Islamic art.



Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2013, paper cutouts, Plexiglas plates, 190X190 cm, Photo: Ashdod Art Museum

Blackness as a characteristic of both transcendental holiness and ethnicity in Israeli art was the subject of Haviva Pedaya's recent paper about Avshalom's canonical works (in the book *Breaking Walls*) and of Drorit Gur Arie's study of Joseph Dadon's exhibition, presented currently in France, *Black Kiosk*. Anavy's work fits in the same genealogy, with her ability to impressively form holiness through black environmental sculpture corresponding to the Ashdod Art museum exhibition's ethnic theme.

Anavy herself says that she is motivated by the Middle Eastern culture surrounding her: "East and west those coexists and mix around me; media images, Middle Eastern music and architecture, Christian and Moslem. All of these create a sort of shaatnez, a heterogenic mixture, in my art".

This nonchalant orientalizing belongs with the ones who have crossed the lines long ago. Her awareness to her own status and to being a subject intertwined and woven into power structures places Anavy in a much more liberated and open-minded position than that of other artists of her own generation, who usually are attached to a one-track identity. Anavy herself has her B.A in Art History and MFA in a studio program.

Her deep understanding of identity politics was also expressed in the 2007 impressive *Kaffiyeh* series, created during her MFA studies at Haifa University, and it is not merely accidental that these series was never presented in Israel. It is a powerfully chilling series, due to the large paintings' size and volume; Anavy's extraordinary pictorial quality; and her inner thematic syntax.



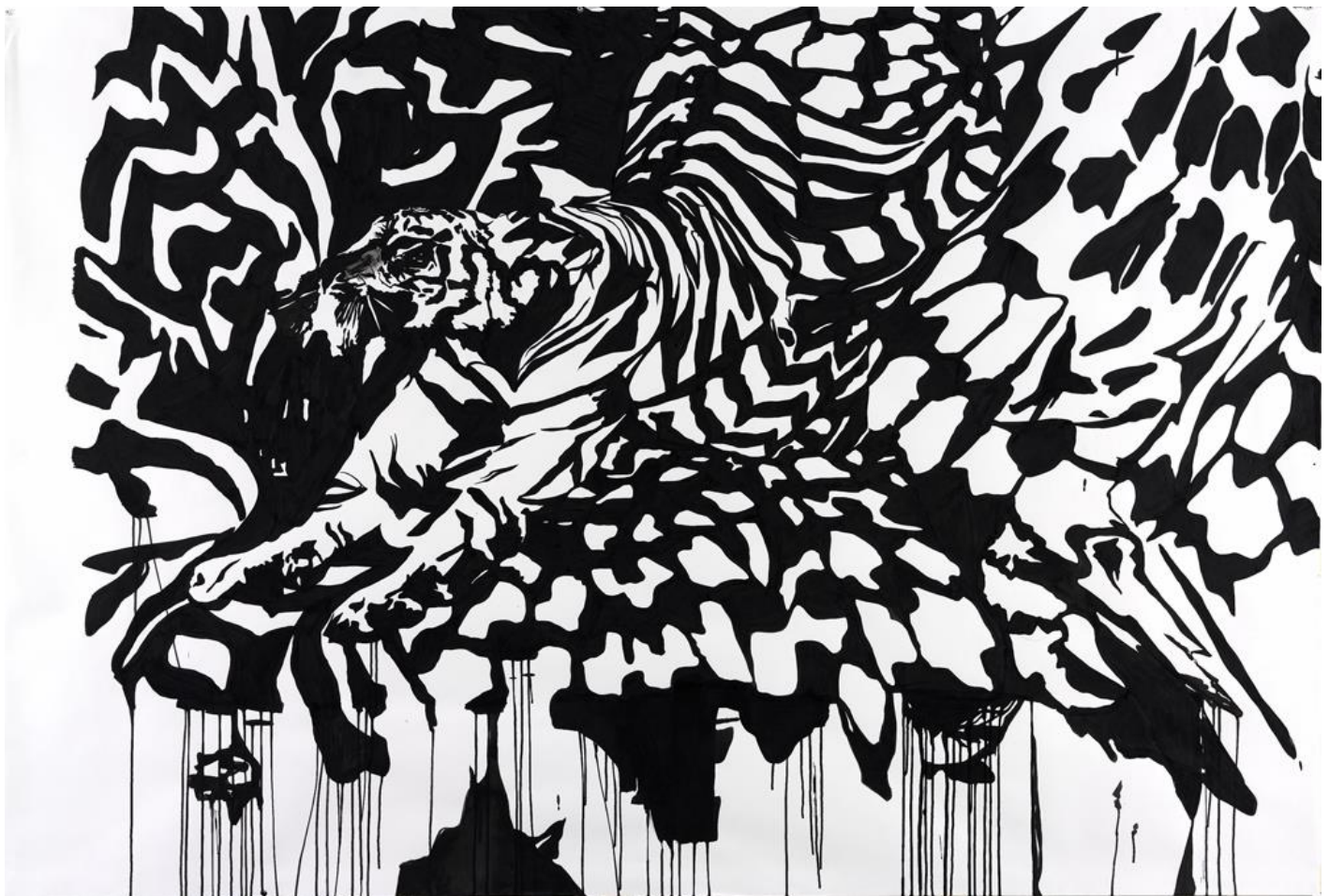
Keren Anavy, Untitled, Kaffiyeh series, 2007, oil on linen, seven paintings: 200X95 cm, one painting: 95X150 cm,

Photo: Keren Anavy

By placing objects in site-specific Anavy creates a holistic environment which asserts its power over the viewers. The bottom line is located, in fact, in the work which deviates from the series, the mouth-gaping tiger. Anavy does not hesitate to challenge us with the deep stereotypes connecting Kaffiyeh wearers to wild animals, nor to depict a blatant connection between Islam and Arabic identity and Africa.

The political connection is made through a typical esthetic motif: the Kaffiyeh formal pattern. The lines shaping Anavy's square pattern are not geometrical and straight but flexible and serpentine, moving between thickness and thinness. They are similar to the animal's lines, the mouth-gaping tiger. The divided aesthetics corresponds to Tsibi Geva's Kaffiyeh series, Deganit Berest's series, *It's not me, it's the Situation* series, and Micha Baram's photographs of sack-covered Arab prisoners' heads.

In Anavy's *Kaffiyeh* series we find the black eye mask suggesting the inherent vulnerability of those who are conceived as victimizers. Thus the potential terrorists turn out to be executed. This entire series captures not only the extent of terror caused by the veiled Kaffiyeh -wearers, but furthermore, it captures the complex political situation in which all of us exist, Jews and Arabs, Moslems and non-Moslems, victims and victimizers. Threads of anxiety are tensely woven into this situation. This Kaffiyeh series has led to large ink drawings, where the tiger has become a paper tiger, and to paper cutouts which manifest the transformation from concrete to abstract.



Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2007, ink on paper, 150X220 cm. Photo: Oded Lebel

Anavy has previously presented highly political realistic oil painting. In retrospect, her excellent oil painting series presented at the 2007 *Photogenic* exhibition at the Tel Aviv Artists' House (Curator: Raz Samira) might have been ahead of its time.

All of these paintings were based on international and local media images. They depict a sequence of events which take place at different times and sites, not only in Israel. All of the works in this series explore the painting-photography relations and the way we conceive an image. A painting like *Hammas Wins Elections from the Blood in the Gutter* series is a visual icon of the recent 'Solid Rock' Campaign. Doctors emerge out of the rabbles, destroyed houses, mass demonstrations, religious people in white caps – this visual repertoire is forcefully attached to Gaza.



Keren Anavy, detail from 'Blood in the Gutter' series, 2007, oil on linen, 50X30 cm, Photo: Guy Mendelin.

According to Raz Samira, "the questions arise from the series are about representation and conditions of representation: picture, gaze, camera, image, memory, occupation, terror, society, photographer, artist, suffering, disaster. She is aware of the medium itself. The medium is 'the story' and it affects the event" (Raz Samira-Dimant, *Photogenic – Exhibition Catalogue*, 2007, Tel Aviv Artists' House).



Keren Anavy, 'The Doctors', 2007, oil on linen, 150X150 cm, Photo: Guy Mendelin

Anavy's work simultaneously includes opening up these options captured by the painting and examining them, as well as the painting's new destinations and its starting point. Her paintings create impressive sculpted environment. An item of Islamic architecture, a three-dimensional Arabesque -the Mashrabiya – is turned by the artist into an impressive sculptural element, presented at the solo exhibition Southern Rose at the Rehovot Municipal Art Gallery (Curator: Ora Kraus).

Kraus pointed out the inter-cultural seam formed in Anavy's works: "Anavy connects Western and Oriental elements in one space, located in the heart of the Middle East, and thus produces an inter-cultural dialogue in it" (Ora Kraus, Southern Rose – Exhibition Catalogue, 2013, Rehovot Municipal Art Gallery).

The exhibition was named 'Southern Rose' due to Anavy's continuous interest in the Rosetta pattern, that cathedral decoration incorporating the white rose, Virgin Mary's symbol. This *modus vivendi* of exploring a symbolic and formal pattern while "stretching" and "tearing" it is typical to Anavy's works and occurs frequently in her art. Anavy accurately draws the different parts of the explored shape, and continues to paint, cut or replicate them, whether in the large paper cutouts or the oil on linen paintings: diamonds reduced to facets, the lines of the Kaffiyeh, Rosetta, Mashrabiya, tree leaves.



Keren Anavy, *Southern Rose* (detail), 2013, paper cutouts, installation view, Photo: Yigal Pardo

The pattern work is explored in two modes: the craft by which they were first created, and the technology which replicates them. Many works exist on the tense line connecting the detached mechanical drawing and the strenuous and monotonous work of a sweaty laboring hand. Deconstruction and reconstruction relate to another component of Anavy's work: studying of primary shapes, the sources. See the Malvich allusion at the beginning of this essay.

However, Anavy's explorations are never unbiased. Her gaze is always charged with a conscious layer, and at times satirical. Such is the crumbling cathedral made of thin paper cutouts presented at 'Southern Rose' exhibition, which seems to tumble down any minute, bound to be torn up. Anavy sees it as a symbol of the "Israeli Cathedral", which tries to no avail to imitate the stable European cathedral. The fragile imitation, which is aware of its own attempted mimesis, is also stressed in the thin-wood Mashrabiya, the paper cutout which "knows" it is not a calligraphic Arabesque, and the transparent paintings glued to the windows (all were presented at the 'Southern Rose' exhibition), in a mock attempt to imitate the Israeli thorny landscape outside.



Keren Anavy, Untitled (detail), 2013, mixed media on transparent paper, 180X84 cm, installation view, Photo: Yigal Pardo.

Anavy seeks to break the dense capsule of landscape-place-environment, each time from a different perspective. She herself says: "My point of departure is frequently the "Israeli"-marked landscape. It started with my oil painting, when I depicted a typical Israeli landscape covered with the IDF military war decoration, continued with my monumental ink drawings of Avital Geva's Greenhouse in Ein Shemer and in the Crossover joint project with the artist Tal Frank where a fragmented and surrealist landscape was painted on rice paper, and still goes on in my current exhibition *House & Garden* where the landscape has turned into lace-fragile white paper cutouts. Over the years the concept of the Place has been transformed from a concrete place to increasingly fragmentary, universal and surrealist environments".

Indeed, the Surrealist Garden is a key motif in *House & Garden*, Anavy's current exhibition at The Janco-Dada Museum (Curator: Ora Kraus), where she plays light-shade games to create shade sculptures. Viewers feel that they are under a sheltering arbor, a soft canopy of vegetal elements paper cutouts.



Keren Anavy, *House & Garden* (detail), 2015, paper cutouts, dimensions variable, Installation view
at The Janco-Dada Museum, Ein Hod, 2015, Photo: Shahar Tamir.

Anavy contradicts nature and culture by forming artificial nature, however with no pretense of copying the "real thing". Compare, for instance, to Israel Hershberg's precise trees painting, and Avraham Pessó's accurate and detailed tree drawings to Tal Shochat's tree photographs – a doctored photography which divulges its artificialness without further ado. Anavy's garden stresses its own artificialness, and that is of course part of the postmodern *Zeitgeist*. The tension between imitation and camouflage (the Kaffiyeh imitation of the tiger's camouflage) is present here too.

Yona Wallach's famous poem 'Two Gardens' (from the book by the same title) which speaks of the Garden in two terms borrowed from the visual arts repertoire of shapes – thin and round – is echoed in this exhibition:

Two Gardens by Yona Wallach

And in one garden all of the fruit is yellow and ripe and it is all round

And in one garden all of the herbs and trees are thin

And when round garden feels thin garden feels round

And when thin garden feels round garden feels thin

And round garden needs thin garden

And thin garden needs round garden

And in round garden pipes go up and down from every fruit

And in thin garden are symbols of directions

And the sounds of ripe fruit go in the pipes

And the thin garden is soundless

And the round garden needs silence

And thin garden longs for sound

And when round garden feels thin garden

The sounds spreads to the fruit sides and does not go up the pipes

And round garden lives its shapes' lives

And when thin garden feels round garden

Its right symbols hit the right fruit and play

This is how the thin garden plays silence in silence

Wallach's words capture the hidden garden, that transcendental garden hovering above every earthly garden. Every garden alludes to the first garden, the Garden of Eden, Paradise; from the Persian Islamic garden to the Japanese gardens via the English garden, the garden is always a site for reflection and holiness. It is a different aspect of Anavy's formalization of religiousness. See also her Ashdod Art Museum piece.

The garden is an island enclosed in space, where a complex dialogue of nature-culture power structures takes place. On the one hand, it oftentimes presents a model for 'good taste', the cosmic order. On the other hand, it is bound to be disrupted, as people walk and play in it. Anavy's gardens depict an accelerated collapsing process: natural wild growth, rotting and entropy are replaced in the delicate paper cutouts garden by dripping, tearing and a slow dissolution of the strict order she laboriously built and now is fading in front of our very eyes.



Keren Anavy, *The Diamonds drawer*, 2010, ink on paper, 225X150 cm, Photo: Guy Mendelin

Anavy's thematic worlds spread over a wide continuum, beginning with the 'hard' political content, painted almost as a poster and concluding with the delicate paradise and the shiny diamond, lands of sensual, transcendental, sweet beauty. Still, in one work which I consider a key work in Anavy's oeuvre, these two works collapse into one. It is (*The Diamond drawer*). Using a typical Japanese esthetic code, a black hand is drawn/painted digging a diamond; the hard work, which in Hebrew is called 'Black Work/Labor' and the exploitation, is woven with the beauty, gentleness and glamour into an impressive work of art.

I would like to conclude this essay with a current work by Keren Anavy, an oil painting which weaves paper cutouts in a different mode of expression, immersed in a bright, surprising color, which connects it to *The Diamond drawer*. Densely crowded into one rectangular form are visual allusions to Anavy's entire artistic repertoire, which exists on the seam between deconstructing and constructing, between colorful and monochromatic, between large bright oil paintings and paper cutouts.



Keren Anavy, Untitled, 2015, oil on canvas, 170X220 cm, Photo: Shahar Tamir