

lorch+seidel contemporary

E-88 | Cotton Plant | Dafna Kaffeman | Solo Exhibition

14 September – 21 October 2017 | Exhibition Information

2017-08-01



DAFNA KAFFEMAN

*Cotton Plant*

Assemblages · Prints · Objects

lorch+seidel contemporary

14 September - 21 October 2017

Reception to the honor of the artist

Wednesday, 13 September 2017, 19-21 h

Special thanks to

The Jerusalem Print Workshop and Ran Segal

Kindly supported by the Embassy of Israel.



BOTSCHAFT DES  
STAATES ISRAEL

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“I took three empty bottles I found at home,  
we found two more and drove to the gas station ...  
We were all heated up and angry  
and we agreed we would burn down something that belongs to Arabs.  
We tried to find the store  
of an Arab to burn down,  
and then we talked and decided to take it a step further.  
We said: *they took three of ours,*  
*let's take one of theirs.*  
We decided to do away with someone,  
to kidnap him, beat him to a pulp and dump him.  
We saw a tall guy. I told them:  
*this one, we can subdue him, get out of the car quickly ...*  
I saw N slap the guy,  
and M grabbed his mouth so he won't scream.  
They forced him into the car. The guy tried to go berserk,  
started to yell Alla Akhbar.  
At this point M choked him and I yelled:  
*finish him off, finish him off. He should kill him.*  
The guy began to rattle, at some point  
he stopped struggling. I was afraid he'd rise up against us.  
I decided to drive toward the Jerusalem Forest to get rid of him.  
I told M to press hard and finish him off so he won't get up,  
I was trembling at the thought that he might turn on me.  
I hit the guy in the head with the crowbar as I was saying:  
*this is for Shalhevet Paz. I hit him twice*  
*in his head and said to N: get the gasoline.*  
He started pouring the gasoline on the guy's head  
and then gave me the bottle and I kept  
pouring the gasoline on the guy's legs.  
I kicked him three times and said:  
*this is for Eyal, and this is for Naftali, and this is for ...*  
I don't remember the name of the third,  
maybe Gil'ad ... I lit the guy with the lighter  
and everything was on fire.  
We were shocked because what we did was not like talking.  
We're merciful Jews,  
we're kind-hearted.  
We got bummed out.”

*Transcript of the murder of Mohammed Abu Khadeir*  
Nir Hasson | Haaretz Newspaper | 12 August 2014  
Translation Beatrice Smedley

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"I hit the guy in the head with the crowbar and said *this is for Shalhevet Paz*. I hit him twice in his head and said to N: *Get the gasoline*. He started pouring the gasoline on the guy's head and then gave me the bottle and I kept pouring the gasoline on the guy's legs. I kicked him three times and said: *this is for Eyal, and this is for Naftali, and this is for ... I don't remember the name of the third, maybe Gil'ad ...* I lit the guy with the lighter and everything was on fire."

Im Juni 2014 wurden drei israelische Teenager von palästinensischen Terroristen entführt und getötet. Kurze Zeit später kidnapteten drei israelische Jugendliche einen 15-jährigen Palästinenserjungen, schlugen ihn zusammen, übergossen ihn mit Benzin und zündeten ihn an.

Kaffeman platziert das bestürzende Geständnis eines der jugendlichen israelischen Kidnapper, abgedruckt auf Papier, inmitten ihrer zarten Radierungen von Zweigen und Blüten der Baumwollpflanze. Das reine Weiß der Baumwolle, die üblicherweise mit der Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur verbunden wird, verkehrt sich in Kaffemans Drucken in ein düsteres Schwarz und lässt die lange Ausstellungswand wie ein verbranntes Baumwollfeld erscheinen.

Im zweiten Teil der Ausstellung arrangiert Kaffeman gläserne Nachbildungen von Pflanzen Israels - Zweige, Blüten und Samenfrüchte - auf weißen Filzhintergründen, die wiederum mit Zitaten aus Lehrbuch über die Flora Israels bedruckt sind. Jede Pflanze hat hier ihre eigene kulturelle und ikonografische Bedeutung. Die Anweisungen aus dem Buch wurden im Jahr 1965 verfasst und lesen sich heute wie aus der Zeit gefallen.

Kaffemans stille Gegenüberstellungen von aktuellen politischen Geschehnissen und hergebrachten Denkansätzen sind keine Partei ergreifenden Anklagen. Sie vermögen vielmehr durch ihre Zuspitzungen den Blick des Betrachters zu erweitern und durch das Festhalten bestimmter Ereignisse die Aufmerksamkeit dorthin zu lenken, in diesem Fall auf die für Außenstehende kaum nachvollziehbare Spirale der Gewalt, die sich in ihrer höchsten Steigerung gezielt unschuldige zivile Opfer sucht. „Ich glaube, dass es einen Unterschied macht, ob solche Vorgänge in Vergessenheit geraten oder im Bewusstsein bleiben“, so Kaffeman.

"If you thirst for a homeland and seek shelter in its bosom,  
love it and live it in its mountains and valleys, its flora and fauna."

"And if you believe in your power, commune with the plants and animals you are growing,  
study their properties and learn to control them and bend them to your will."

Homeland Plants – A Survey of Their Life, Injuries and Diseases | Yavne Publishers | 1965

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In June 2014, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian terrorists. A short time later, three young Israelis kidnapped a fifteen-year-old Palestinian boy, beat him, poured gasoline on him, and set him on fire.

Kaffeman places the disturbing confession of one of the Israeli kidnappers, reprinted on paper, amid her delicate etchings of cotton plant twigs and blossoms. In Kaffeman's prints, the pure white of the cotton wool – a plant often associated with the exploitation of both humans and nature – becomes a sombre black, so that the long exhibition wall resembles a burnt field of cotton.

In the second part of the exhibition, Kaffeman assembles replicas of plants from Israel – twigs, blossoms, seeds – in front of white felt backgrounds that are imprinted with quotations from a guide to Israel's flora. Each plant has its own cultural and iconographic meaning. The book was written in 1965, and when read today, its admonitions seem almost to have fallen out of time.

Kaffeman's quiet juxtapositions of current political events and conventional lines of thought are no partisan indictments. Through their pointed emphasis, they seek instead to broaden our perspective, to steer out attention – in this instance, toward spiral of violence that is almost incomprehensible to outsiders and that, in its most extreme forms, targets innocent civilians.

"I think it makes a difference whether such incidents are forgotten, or instead remain in our memories," Kaffeman believes.

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## THE COTTON PLANT

A patriotic landscape, a crumbling political and social reality, an idealized nature and a conflicted identity, an elaborate symbolism and a fractured national ethos, an ongoing fragility and eruptions of violence – all these pervade Dafna Kaffeman's solo exhibition of glasswork and prints that evoke and confront these powerful and overwhelming issues. The works revolve around two main axes: the role of plants in conjuring up a collective, idealized Israeli identity and the kidnapping and murder of the Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir, which took place on July 2, 2014, one day after the burial of three murdered Israeli teens. The 16-year-old Khdeir was forced into a car by Israeli settlers on an East Jerusalem street. Results of the autopsy suggested that he was beaten and burned while still alive. The killers explained the attack as a response to the abduction and murder of the three Israeli teens on June 12.

Kaffeman confronts the terrible act and the violent reality with splendid fragile sculptures of plants and plants' parts made of frameworked glass on a one-to-one scale. These perfectly mimetic glass plants, which are easily mistaken for real, belong to the flora of Jerusalem that is part of Kaffeman's childhood landscape and memories. The glass plants are presented in the form of botanic books, yet set against white felt "pillow-like" backgrounds rather than blank paper. These pillows are not blank but stamped with parts of the opening paragraph of Joseph Carmin's 1968 book *Plants of Our Country*, a survey of the plants of Israel that entwines love of the motherland with knowledge of the local flora and fauna. This connection has been an intrinsic part of European national movements since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along which Zionism emerged.

One of these ensembles of plants stands out with another kind of stenciled stamp that reads: "The cotton plant was burned while still alive." This sentence joins the flora glass sculptures and the inconceivable line from the transcript of the murder as the three killers described it to the police.

The horrific transcript lies at the heart of the second group of works in the exhibition, which consists of a series of etchings and screenprints Kaffeman made during a special residency at the Jerusalem Print Workshop. The prints deploy repetitions and variations of flora images, in particular of the cotton plant, which is connected to the human body through clothes and bed linen, echoing the human life cycle--from diapers to bandages to shrouds.

The prints were made with a variety of techniques, including sugar lift, screen-printed photo-transfer, Chine-collé, open-bite and screenprinting that followed the etchings. The attempt to dissect and reassemble the plant while breaking up and recomposing the transcript text turns the works into an outcry of protest that holds within it the beauty of art and, at the same time, views images as texts and words as images. The prints form a wall of protest, with the etchings and screenprints swaying between the testimony of delicate flora images and a pamphlet-like fragmented text that tries to tell what defies comprehension.

The prints are accompanied by a series of repetitive refined sculptures of *limonium sinuatum* that echo the reproducibility of the printmaking technique. The perennial *limonium sinuatum* is called "immortality" in Hebrew yet here it is made of glass, constantly at risk of shattering into thousands of shards. On a nearby wall a flame-work glass wolf hovers like a dark shadow, both prickly and vulnerable, menacing yet fading away like a mere silhouette.

Irena Gordon



BROKEN MIRRORS NEVER AGAIN REFLECT,  
FALLEN FLOWERS CANNOT RETURN TO THE BRANCH.<sup>1</sup>

The event is setting fire to a person. The motive is revenge. We have the testimony. It starts with three empty bottles carried by three avengers. "They took three of ours, let's take one of theirs." This is the logic of discount. We collect only one third of the debt. The three of ours they "took" are three Jewish youths (Gil-Ad Michael Sha'ar, Yaakov Naftali Frankel, both 16 years old, and 19-year-old Eyal Ifrach), who were kidnapped and murdered in Gush Etzion on June 12, 2014. Their bodies were found on June 30, 2014.

On July 2, 2014, shortly after their funeral, the 16-year-old Muhamad Abu-Hadir was kidnapped and murdered to avenge the kidnapping and murder of the three. On July 8, 2014 operation Protective Edge was launched, during which some 2,000 Palestinians, the vast majority unarmed, some 70 IDF soldiers and five Israeli citizens were killed. Of course, these data merely allude to the extent of the physical and emotional devastation.

Other murders preceded the murder of the three youths, and the single murder wasn't the last. Dafna Kaffeman's work tries to convey something about the reality of revenge. The walls are brimming with plants. More than three, more than three and one more. Quantity is not the issue. The issue is profusion. The fire of revenge has a force of its own. It's akin to the attempt to burn down only one tree in a forest. A burning tree is no longer in your hands. In fact, the youth was burned in a forest. The Jerusalem Forest. One doesn't need an extravagant imagination to imagine this fire spreading and burning down the entire Jerusalem Forest. Perhaps Kaffeman's series imagines this extended fire. In this sense it does not only "document" past events symbolically, but also forecasts a possible bleak future.

The printed testimony tells about a single murder, but the works are many and call for extension. The exhibition wishes to recreate not a garden or a nursery but an immense burned forest. This is how one may imagine it. Just like the viewer of a landscape painting knows that the landscape stretches beyond the picture frame, so this series is merely a sample. One can imagine the prints extending sideways and beyond the walls. The form of subject and variations, that is, the very seriality, is charged with meaning and contributes to the works' malaise, in the sense of "who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire." (*Unetanneh Tokef Prayer*)<sup>2</sup>

This series plants and ruins, figures and disfigures simultaneously. Two forces are at work here side by side: the delicate line-drawing force, with its almost botanic intention, and the burning, blotting-out force of stains. The steel wool, which seems to scrub the plants and clean off their life, generates the black stains; and the thin stylus creates life in the lines. The works emerge and annihilate themselves at the same time. Haim Guri's first book of poetry is titled *Flowers of Fire* (1949), and there's a historical continuity between the flowers and the fires of the War of Independence (1947-8) and the flowers and fire of the three bottles.

The cover of Guri's book featured a red, exploding flower painted by Moshe Tamir. In Kaffeman's prints the fire has already died down. What has been left is the melancholy of charcoal and steel wool scratches that don't scrub off dirt but generate burned "dirt." Guri's book includes the famous poem that opens with: "Look, here our bodies are lying in a long long row." The soldiers Guri wrote about in his poem were killed in Gush Etzion, not far from where the three Jewish youths were kidnapped, which led to the burning of the Palestinian youth. The long row Guri wrote about stretched far beyond what he could have imagined. It turned into a row of domino tiles downing each other by the logic of vengeance: "They took three of ours, let's take one of theirs." It began before those three, it went on after this one.



This is how a field looks after a fire; this is how a long row of bodies looks. After the triple murder the government proceeded to annex (this, of course, is too neutral a word) 4,000 dunam in the Gush Etzion region. Operation Protective Edge began. Etc., etc., etc.

The avengers are striving for greatness. The words they use betray their mindset. When one of them says "we decided to do away with (Hebrew: *lehakhrim*) him" he refers to the biblical meaning of the Hebrew verb *lehakhrim*: "For Joshua did not draw back the hand... until he had destroyed (*hekhrim*) all who lived in Ai." (Joshua 8:26).

In the sages' and in Modern Hebrew *lehakhrim* means to enforce social ostracism or the forfeiture of assets, not to take someone's life. The act of vengeance under discussion harbors the intention to return to the era of the land's conquest by Joshua, to direct, harsh retribution without intermediate processes or judiciary institutions. The pretension, however, collapses at once. The testimony closes with "we got bummed out." The times of Joshua Ben Nun are indeed far away.

Fire can burn and kill but also create. How so? Dafna Kaffeman creates also glass flowers. The great fragility of these slender glass stems elicits almost concern in whoever holds them. Glass is made from a blend of sand (silica), limestone (calcium carbonate), soda ash (sodium carbonate) and other components. To induce the chemical reaction that will melt this blend into glass, high heat (1000° C) is required. This heat may come from fire. The fire (of a torch) will also allow the artist to turn raw glass into a flower.

The presence of fire at this exhibition is, then, double-faced. In the glass works it is the animating, creative force; in the prints it is alluded to in the touch of steel wool as an annihilating, burning force. This is certainly not an optimistic show. It is an elegy but it still contains the ember of a fire that is not *only* catastrophic. Perhaps it is this ember that allows us even nowadays to draw flowers, to create flowers, even when the flames fill our eyes and souls.

Ironically, the three young bottle holders also realized this: "We are merciful Jews. We are not heartless." They thus leave the world of Joshua and the Bible for the world of the Talmud: "Three characteristics distinguish this [Jewish] nation: mercy, timidity and charity" (Yebamot 79a). These words come chillingly close to the mindset that generated the art exhibited here. Mercy, shown in the delicacy, the sensitivity to details, to the human beings and to the flora. "The heart," too, is shared by both the firesetters and the artist. The difference lies in the measure and the intention: they and she are holding the same material: glass. Hers is flowers, theirs is bottles filled with gasoline. She and they are close to the fire. She uses fire in order to create beauty, while they lit a deadly fire. She, unlike them, doesn't need to burn someone's heart in order to realize that she has one.

The mirror is almost broken, the flowers fell and were burned. Still, someone lifts the mirror and holds it up to reflect the disaster.

Dror Burstein

Translation Beatrice Smedley

1 *Zen Sand*, translated by Victor Sōgen Hori, University of Hawai'i Press 2010, p. 430.

2 Sefaria Community Translation, <http://www.sefaria.org>