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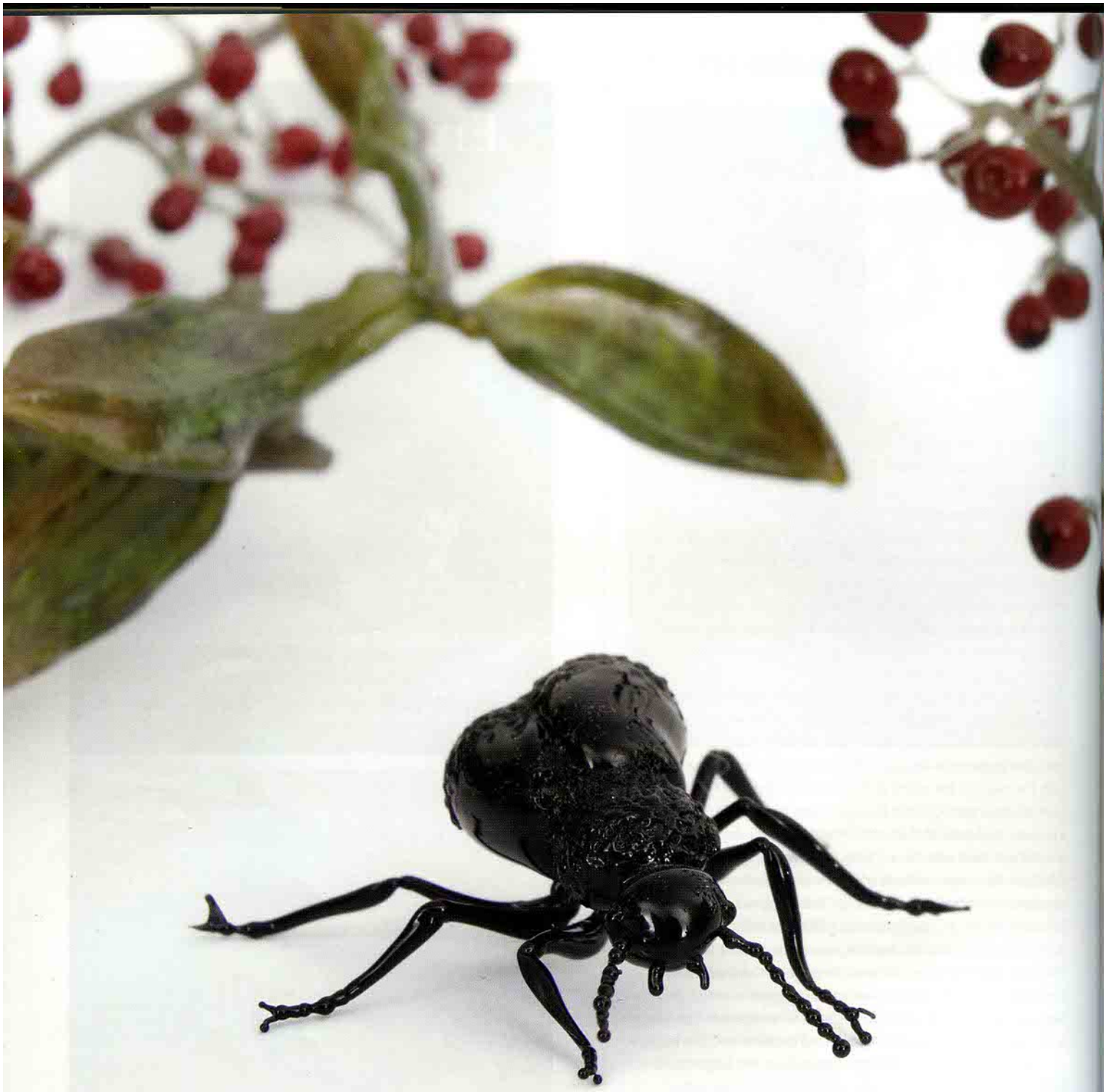

The Code Breaker

Dafna Kaffeman's deceptively simple tableaus of flowers, insects, and handkerchiefs are complex collisions of meaning, an artist's take on a region where positions are fixed and perspectives static on both sides of an intractable conflict.

BY ANDREW PAGE

Students of the Torah remind themselves of four approaches to interpretation through the mnemonic word "Pardes," which is an acronym joining the Hebrew terms Peshat ("plain," for considering the straightforward meaning), Remez ("hints," as in look for the deeper meaning below the surface), Derash ("inquire," or explore through comparative means), and Sod ("secret," or look for the mystical interpretation).

A viewer of Dafna Kaffeman's work in early 2011 at the Katzen Arts Center at American University in Washington, D.C., may find that this scholarly approach is an instructive way to engage her unusual version of visual text. In tableaus of flameworked plants and insects arranged beside or on top of embroidered handkerchiefs, Kaffeman presents small-scale installations that quickly establish layers of meaning to unravel. Kaffeman accomplishes this in the unexpected mix of text fragments, in Arabic and Hebrew, worked onto the hand-embroidered handkerchiefs. These range from quotes excerpted from the newspaper *Haaretz*, a liberal Israeli publication that covers the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians with sensitivity to the suffering on both sides, to the eerie account from a failed suicide bomber reflecting on the life he was about to leave behind. When one understands the sources of the carefully selected snippets of text and Kaffeman's almost poetic framing of them, her work's initial homespun appearance is undermined and gives way to persistent reminders of the conflict that pervades every aspect of the piece. Kaffeman defies all expectations of what should be embroidered onto a traditional mourning handkerchief, meant to absorb tears and comfort the bereaved. One is not comforted by Kaffeman's work, unless one takes solace in its deep humanity, which recognizes the shared aspects of suffering in the midst of bitter discord. What may have appeared at first to be a heartwarming and homespun tableau is turned into an ever-widening collision of words and symbols designed to force a viewer to reconsider not only their own preconceptions about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but the very systems of communication used to describe and make sense of them.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Mantis Religiosa 06* **(detail), 2010. (Text: "I loved her very much") Flameworked glass, embroidered handkerchief. Dimensions variable.**
PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW
COURTESY: LORCH + SEIDEL GALLERY, BERLIN

Red Everlasting 03, **2008. (Text: "If something is precious to your heart and children/ you must assume it is more valuable to your neighbour/ so it will be easier for you to compromise") Flameworked glass, embroidered handkerchief. Dimensions variable.**
PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW
COURTESY: LORCH + SEIDEL GALLERY, BERLIN

Let's approach Kaffeman's work from the first Pardes perspective of Peshat, the plain and simple. She depicts plants and insects from the Middle East, specifically from the area in and around Jerusalem where she grew up. Some species are native; others were imported from other parts of the world and thrive in the unique climate, an aspect Kaffeman finds resonant with meaning, welcoming the idea of the transplant into her work. She is personally interested in the issue of "globalization" and the identity of place, having been educated in Europe—with Richard Meitner and Mieke Groot—at the Gerrit Rietveld Akademie in Amsterdam for her B.F.A., and earning her M.F.A. at the Sandberg Instituut in the same city in 2002. In addition, many citizens of Israel are themselves transplants from Europe and other countries. Finally, the displacement of Palestinians is at the root of the conflict that informs much of her recent work, another way in which "transplanting" is an issue.

Kaffeman's insects and plants are rendered in flameworked glass with varying levels of realism and technical perfection. Those seeking the ultimate in trompe l'oeil in flameworking may be disappointed to see slight variations from nature in the structure of an ant's leg, for example, or in a flower petal that is slightly askew and rendered a bit heavier than it would be in the hands of, say, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, who created breathtakingly exact duplicates of floral and marine specimens for academic study in the late 19th century. Kaffeman's flameworked objects are not botanical studies but metaphoric representations of species of insects and flowers, and the result of Kaffeman's careful study of the natural examples. She often takes apart a flower, leaf by leaf, to distill its key characteristics. The telltale artifacts of their making are not unwelcome, as they help to underscore Kaffeman's interest in these species as metaphors. Yet they are immediately recognizable and function as signifiers.

"I really try to capture the essence of the plants and insects, which means that they should look like the plant. But sometimes I do not use the 'real' color, in view of the fact that each of us sees things differently," Kaffeman

wrote in an e-mail interview with *GLASS*. She considers her intent more "romantic," in that her flowers and insects are designed to elicit emotion and communicate specific symbols. Even her color palette is open to interpretation, as she responded to the question about her preference for muted tones with the thought that everything depends on perspective. "I think it is more how you see that. For me, some are very strong in colors and others are less."

This brings us to Remez, the reminder to look for implied meaning, and so let us consider the flowers themselves. The red everlasting flower, which provided the title for Kaffeman's 2008 series of embroidered installations, has great significance in Israel, where it is used to memorialize the dead, especially those who have fallen in battle. Kaffeman often subverts the iconic power of objects and words, and she did so here by writing the name of this highly

Red Everlasting 07, **2008. (Text: "No one does not fear death") Flameworked glass, embroidered handkerchief. Dimensions variable.**
PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW
COURTESY: LORCH + SEIDEL GALLERY, BERLIN

symbolic species in Arabic rather than in Hebrew, and, taking the layers one step further, had the words embroidered by skilled women in a country far from the conflict—Norway, where the first exhibition of the "Red Everlasting" series took place in 2008 in Stavanger, the fourth-largest Norwegian city. Kaffeman sent each woman a handkerchief with the flower name written in pencil, and each embroiderer was free to choose the color thread she wanted to use. Serendipitously, many women chose blood red, even though there is little chance they could have deciphered the words they were dutifully stitching, which had been traced by Kaffeman.

"The women who embroidered the texts are native Norwegian, with no knowledge of the Hebrew or Arabic language," Kaffeman wrote. "Without knowing the meaning of the embroidery text, the woman who embroidered the red everlasting piece chose the red color."

Kaffeman mines these gaps in communication; the distances between us, be they linguistic, political, or religious, fascinate her. This fascination informs the ten tableaus that make up her "Red Everlasting" series, which married embroidered text fragments from newspaper articles, mourning handkerchiefs, and flame-worked flowers. The embroidered information ranged from a map of a bitterly controversial bridge proposed for the contested Temple Mount in Jerusalem to a quote from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak about broken clocks, a poignant metaphor from the head of state about the frequently delayed timetables for peace negotiations. Benjamin Netanyahu's comment in Hebrew in *Haaretz*, "It is very true that even a broken clock tells the correct time twice a day," is embroidered across the handkerchief in *Red Everlasting 09*, next to Norwegian decorative flowers and Kaffeman's flameworked rendering of a long-beaked stork's bill plant (*Erodium gruinum*), which Kaffeman remembers from her childhood as the "grandfather clock" plant. The flower "grows in Israel, and I remembered as a child growing up in Jerusalem picking the seed of the plants and sticking it on my shirt so that it would turn around like a clock," writes Kaffeman. "We used to call it 'grandpa's clock.'" Her artwork freely mines levels of meaning and reflection, including her childhood memories.

Let us move now to Derash, or learning through comparative means, which is especially fruitful when comparing two series from Kaffeman. Her first attempt to blend embroidered text and flameworked flowers was in her 2006 exhibition "Persian Cyclamen," in which phrases such as "Arabic is not spoken here" were stitched onto handkerchiefs and displayed with flowers. Two years later came the 2008 "Red Everlasting" exhibition, followed up after another two years by the "Mantis Religiosa" series that debuted at Lorch + Seidel Gallery in Berlin in 2010. The omnipresent red color that runs throughout all the works in "Red Everlasting" gives way to a more subtle variety of neutral colors in the six small, more-elaborate installations shown in Berlin. Here, Kaffeman introduced insects as an additional flameworked element, and they seem to stand in as models of human character and behavior. Rather than a variety of topical quotations, the texts in "Mantis Religiosa" were extended quotations from a failed suicide bomber reflecting on the emptiness of his existence and the deadened emotional world that drove him to his brutal attempt in 2003.

The series takes its title from the Latin term for praying mantis. "It is known for making a movement that looks like a prayer before attacking," explains Kaffeman. "As you know, the whole series of the 'Mantis Religiosa' is based on the sentence by a young Palestinian who attempted to commit a suicide attack in Israel." The other insects used in the series—ants, dragonflies—also have morbid associations. "I used some insects that are very symbolic in terms of their reference to death, like the larva," writes Kaffeman.

As in the "Red Everlasting" series, Kaffeman had the embroidery performed by someone removed from the words. In this case, it was former soldiers in the Israeli Defense Force who stitched the words of the suicide bomber onto the handkerchiefs. The muted color scheme was also carefully considered.

"Most of the plants are very low tone colors—very gray and almost dry," Kaffeman writes. "This is for two reasons. First, because the embroidery turned out to have strong colors in it, I felt that the plants could not be colorful. Also, the colors reflect my feelings while working on the pieces and the text which accompanies them. The other reason is that I was working on it while it was winter, and the plants actually had almost no color."

The "Mantis Religiosa" series is pervaded by a kind of faded emptiness, underscoring its morbid and deadened subject matter. Throughout the works in the series, the mood

Mantis religiosa 03 **(detail), 2010. (Text: "who was a year younger than me") Flameworked glass, embroidered handkerchief. Dimensions variable.**
PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW
COURTESY: LORCH + SEIDEL GALLERY, BERLIN

Mantis Religiosa 02, **2010. (Text: "although I loved a girl") Flameworked glass, embroidered handkerchief. Dimensions variable.**
PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW
COURTESY: LORCH + SEIDEL GALLERY, BERLIN

and the meaning are echoed in the work's elements. For example, in *Mantis Religiosa 02*, the embroiderer crossed out the suicide bomber's words "although I loved a girl" with a line of red thread to emphasize his decision to leave the world that has her in it. Kaffeman decided to add a line of ants moving inexorably toward their goal. "The decision to place the ants was because of the social structure they live in."

The final approach of Pardes is Sod, or mystical interpretation. By weaving together objects and text with a range of associations, childhood memories, and collaborations with carefully chosen embroiderers who bring their unique perspectives to the work, Kaffeman creates a sort of mysticism that is highly contemporary. Although it isn't framed in obviously religious terms, Kaffeman's work seeks, through elaborate strategies, to mix intent and serendipity into a tableau that offers us an awareness of the mutability of meaning, the universal aspects of experience that we share, and the societal structures that control us and our behavior. One must consider that Kaffeman's work changed radically when she returned to Israel in 2003, when the Palestinian intifada was in full swing. While she had been experimenting with abstract silicone spheres made up of colorful flameworked spikes, powerfully tactile works that brought up a range of associations, there was a new immediacy to her work upon her return to her native country.

"I felt I could not ignore the situation which I live in," explains Kaffeman. "I think that a few circumstances led me to start and develop a new body of work involving text, embroidery, and glass plants (and later glass insects). These were more subconscious. They came from being part of the very fragile situation in Israel, which has led me to start and develop more political work."

Kaffeman's mysticism is expressed through the complexity of layers that inform her work, layers of meaning and context that challenge our ability to communicate. Though highly political, she maintains that her work is more personal and avoids any easy answers, instead pointing up the complexity of the situation.

Ultimately, Kaffeman bravely steps into a fraught debate with the unique offerings of an artist's perspective. She writes: "An artist can discuss this issue in a way that no one else can." Like music, Kaffeman's visual poems offer the freedom to operate in the language of mood and symbol to reinterpret what is known, to resift attitudes that are rarely re-examined, and to take apart the codes embedded in the thinking of all who are locked in a seemingly endless conflict. ■

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