

PARDES

**NADAV ASSOR, IRA EDUARDOVNA
AMNON WOLMAN, NEVET YITZHAK**



September 18 to November 30, 2014

Koffler Gallery

Guest Curator: Liora Belford



PARDES — THOUGHTS REGARDING THE METAPHYSIC IN CONTEMPORARY SECULAR LIFE

In a conversation with sound artist and composer Amnon Wolman, he described his memory of avocado kernels taking root in flower pots his mother used to place on the kitchen window. For Wolman and his sister, this became a poetic representation of nomads who carry their roots along on their voyage. This beautiful image accompanied me throughout the process of developing *PARDES* for the Koffler Gallery, while working with Wolman and three other Israeli multimedia artists – Nevet Yitzhak, Ira Eduardovna and Nadav Assor. It is a fitting metaphor that relates to the initial motivation behind this project, of examining our personal connections with essential ideas at the root of our identity.

The term “Pardes” means “orchard” in Hebrew, and has come to symbolize the realm of Jewish mysticism in traditional Rabbinic texts. It derives from a well-known Talmudic parable, Four Entered the Orchard, in which four great sages who enter the esoteric practice meet different fates: one dies, one loses his mind, one renounces the Jewish tenets, and only the fourth enters in peace and leaves in peace. The orchard that offers different experiences to those who dare to approach it posits an allegorical image for the elusiveness of spiritual wisdom, protected by a shroud of mystery. Any quest for mystical understanding poses a unique challenge to each individual. As an artistic research project, *PARDES* aims to explore the metaphysic in secular contemporary life. The exhibition brings together four Israeli artists intrigued by the idea of investigating the Jewish transcendent in their personal, secular “flower pot,” through a process of questioning and relinquishing the very notion of certainty.

Having lived in Israel, where religion is a significant part of everyday culture, I wonder about the impact of mysticism and tradition on contemporary secular life. Artistic production can offer an interesting lens on this investigation. Even from an atheistic perspective, I find interesting correlations between religious experience and the experience of a work of art, both in the process of its creation and its reception. These similarities lie beyond any explicit content of an artwork, but rather in its implicit search for meaning and transcendence. Fyodor Dostoevsky’s belief that if God does not exist, then everything is permitted, has pertinent implications when extended to the realm of cultural production. In this context, the idea that authority and hierarchies should be contested and everything is allowed generates a radical shift in theoretical, conceptual and aesthetic explorations. In a general sense, contemporary Western society gave up the mystical for the physical and this tendency crosses into the artistic discourse and seeps through all aspects of life.

In his kinetic installation, *Ophan* (2014), Nadav Assor addresses these issues through a poignant comparison between angels and drones, revisiting a predominantly military technological device through a spiritual framework. Specifically, Assor examines the Ophanim, a class of angels in Jewish mysticism with the unique attribute of mechanical bodies rather than human or animal ones. Ezekiel describes this body in his prophetic vision of the heavenly chariot as a flying entity that resembles a wheel within a wheel, with eyes covering the rims.¹ This machine-like creature is remotely driven by another class of angels, the Cherubim. Assor’s drone/angel is a hexacopter that chants the biblical verses of Ezekiel’s prophetic vision in Yemenite style (with

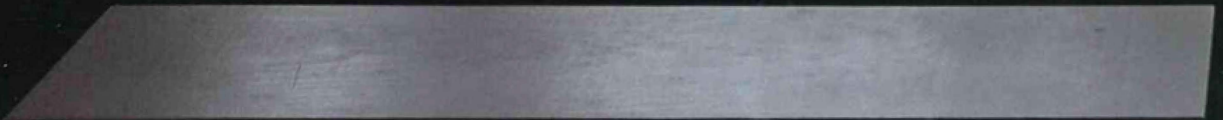
the voice of cantor Dan Jacobi) as it flies. Occasionally, live broadcasts of the Israeli Army Radio (Galei Zahal) infiltrate the drone's voice with random musical transmissions, news or talk shows. When grounded, the drone mutters and hums to itself, sometimes singing verses from the familiar American tune, "Someone to Watch Over Me."

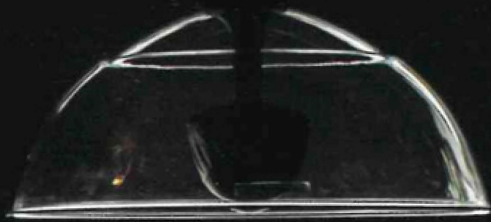
Ophan highlights the fact that drone technology embodies mythological aspirations and undercurrents more deeply than most militarized technologies: these all-seeing flying devices are often invisible but sometimes take on corporeal shape, manifesting the will of a greater remote-controlling power. While the discussion around drones is usually dominated by secretive or mysterious actions, sporadic resistance, and the psychological trauma of both strike victims and operators, Assor drives us to consider the irrational, dark and mystical connotations embodied in the sheer existence of these machines and in our relationship with them.

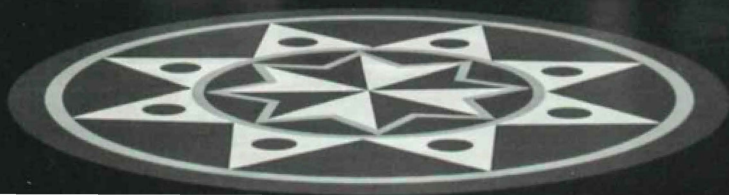
The Pardes parable alludes not only to the realm of Jewish mysticism but also to its glorification through the myth of secrecy that surrounds it. With the proliferation of secular, cross-religious celebrities drawn to the secrets of the Torah through Kabbalah, the esoteric practice has turned into a notion of wisdom that is not necessarily related to religion, accessible to anyone interested in it. In his discussion of the consequences of God's absence, Dostoevsky describes a moral void that secularism has to reconcile. But where traditional religions are waning, alternative forms of non-physical yet non-transcendent spirituality are emerging.

In *A Thousand Years* (2014), Ira Eduardovna points to a common, non-transcendent form of new spirituality: entertainment media. In her three-channel audio/video installation, a sitcom scene of a couple seated in front of a television screen is juxtaposed with the sound of a choir singing about the apocalypse. The song's lyrics quote the prologue of A.B. Yehoshua's book, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium – A Novel of the Middle Ages*.² Eduardovna's work revisits ideas surrounding the year AD 1000, when it was believed that the world would come to an end. Shared by Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike, this mindset reflects a religious vision of linear time whereby the world has a distinct beginning and end. Obliquely contextualizing the scene, Eduardovna's choir addresses a question to us all: "But will there be anyone to remember us in another thousand years? ... will it still feel the urge or the longing to travel back a thousand years and look for us, as you are looking for your heroes now?"

Who is considered a heroic figure today? In his essay, *Moses* (1904), Russian Jewish thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg (primarily known by his pen name Ahad Ha'Am), reflects on people's relationship with heroic figures: "There is not a single great man in history of whom the popular fancy has not drawn a picture entirely different from the actual man."³ Ahad Ha'Am's words suggest that in the portrait of every hero lays the portrait of an era, shaped by the masses according to their moral needs. In *A Thousand Years*, Eduardovna renders a portrait of our era through a sitcom scene of people watching television – perhaps our closest equivalent to a common pseudo-religious experience. In turn, the scene itself is viewed on television screens by the gallery visitor, creating a mirroring effect and ambiguity where subject and object become interchangeable, alluding to the constant blurring of boundaries between reality and entertainment media. Everyone becomes a hero in their own reality television show, in a collapsing spiral of narcissism. Eduardovna's archetypal domestic scene reads, then, as an allegory of society in decline.







But is this decline due to the “death of God,” as stated by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche? Aside from Nietzsche, many of the founding figures of sociology uphold some version of the proposition that modernization necessarily leads to the waning and eventual disappearance of religion.⁴ Other leading scholars suggest that religion seems to be resurgent, or even to have never been regressing, at least not on a worldwide scale.⁵

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an outspoken and controversial Jewish/Israeli intellectual and public figure, asserts that the main problem with Jewish religious laws, one intrinsically linked to the question of their survival, is that the people of Israel in Biblical times are not the same as they are today. Changes need to be made in order to resolve particularly the issue of gender in Orthodox Judaism, where women and homosexual men are disenfranchised.

This relationship between gender and Judaism is one of the main issues examined by Amnon Wolman in his work. In *SoundTallit* (2014), Wolman transforms a prayer shawl – tallit – worn in Jewish Orthodox circles only by men, serving as a clear delineation between genders. Embedding speakers within its fabric, Wolman invites visitors to wrap themselves in the tallit and experience an ethereal musical composition based on manipulated recordings of talking, singing and praying. While Wolman’s *SoundTallit* can be interpreted as an act of inclusiveness and acceptance, it may also read as a more radical call for change. As Leibowitz explains, religious gender-based marginalization “is to deprive them of a basic Jewish right,”⁶ as an individual’s relationship with God exists only in ritual, thereby tying the case of gender equality to the survival of Judaism. For Wolman, his ongoing investigation of gender and Judaism is part of a broader research on models of hierarchy, power and control.

Wolman’s second work in the exhibition, *SoundBook – Architecture* (2014), is part of a series in which he transforms found books on the history of architecture and art, examining notions of control over the organization and dissemination of knowledge. Taking his cue from the ideas proposed by the Pardes parable – that there are manifold paths to enlightenment and varied individual interpretations of the truth – the artist contrasts a pluralistic view with the hegemonic perspective of the book he alters. By laser-cutting into the volume’s pages and incorporating a speaker underneath the book to generate a cacophonous soundtrack of skipping, interrupted readings, Wolman orchestrates sounds and images that expose holes in the transmission of knowledge. Omissions or gaps are inevitable in any scholarly or authoritative publication, resulting from the exclusion of information deemed inappropriate, unimportant, dangerous or subversive at the time. Later discoveries through further research and technological advances may undermine the strongest of arguments.

Further exploring notions of control and diverse perspectives, Nevet Yitzhak’s audio/video installation *A Great Joy Tonight* (2009) explores the construction of cultural identity in relationship to displacement and changes in the political landscape. In this work, Yitzhak processes archival recordings from the Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Arabic Orchestra (1948–1993), to create a new composition. Altering their speed, duration and sequencing, the artist collages fragments from various performances into one unified piece where the sounds and visuals work together seamlessly. By deconstructing and reconstructing these archival materials, she creates an immersive, haunting musical and visual environment that explores the influence of marginalized traditions on the construction of identity and cultural patrimony.

Most of the musicians in the IBA Arabic Orchestra were Jewish immigrants from Iraq and Egypt who arrived in Israel in the early 1950s and preserved the cultural influences, languages and music they brought with them. Their repertoire included original compositions as well as music from the Arab world, becoming a key institution of Arabic music in Israel and drawing listeners from the entire region. The title of Yitzhak's work references sociologist Inbal Perlson's book of the same name, which studies the political and historical circumstances that led these musicians to keep their heritage alive.⁷ According to Perlson, these musicians immigrated to Israel as artists, a profession uniquely defined by its cultural borders, in which one's cultural identity is part of his or her trade. In Israel after 1948 – a new country that sought to relinquish the “Levant spirit” – preserving an Arabic cultural identity was not a valid option. Nonetheless, the immigrant musicians chose to maintain it, becoming “Mizrachi Jews,” an Arab-like identity thus at odds with the image of the new Israeli Jew. The recurrent re-definition of identity can be traced throughout Jewish people's history, linked to events such as the medieval rediscovery of Greek thought, and the modern Jewish Enlightenment and Emancipation. Jewish philosophy has constantly attempted to reconcile new ideas into a uniquely Jewish scholastic framework. With *A Great Joy Tonight*, Yitzhak highlights a recent incarnation of this struggle, giving voice again to a repressed but vital side of contemporary Jewish identity.

The starting point of the mystical attitude toward religious truth is a deep doubt in communication, written as well as oral. Mysticism starts where language ends, and is therefore a distinctively personal experience. As a unique root in each individual's “flower pot,” the metaphysic finds its way into everyday life, even in this contemporary, secular world. *PARDES* reflects upon this mystical attitude embedded in the transcendental world through complex yet interconnected artworks that accept doubt as an entry point. Dynamically sharing physical and acoustic space, the works merge into each other in an ever-changing, live composition. The boundaries between them become ambiguous, allowing room for our own intuitive questions, uncertainties and misgivings around the spiritual realm.

Liora Belford

¹ Ezekiel 1:15–21.

² A.B. Yehoshua, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium – A Novel of the Middle Ages*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York: Doubleday, 1999), prologue.

³ Ahad Ha'Am, *Selected essays, Moses*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), 306.

⁴ Including Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, as well as several giants of modern intellectual life, including Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell.

⁵ See Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, c. 1999).

⁶ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, trans. Eliezer Goldman and Yoram Navon, and by Zvi Jacobson, Gershon Levi, and Raphael Levy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 129.

⁷ Inbal Perlson, *A Great Joy Tonight, Arab-Jewish Music and Mizrahi Identity* (Resling Publishing: Tel Aviv, 2006).

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Liora Belford is a Canadian/Israeli curator currently based in Toronto. Belford's curatorial practice spans the experimental sonic realm, aiming to establish research spaces that ask questions rather than unfolding narratives and doctrines. Belford has curated various exhibitions in private and public spaces in Israel, and was the curator and director of ST-ART, the first Israeli artist incubator project established by art collector Serge Tiroche. Belford has received numerous grants and awards in Israel and Canada, and holds the 2014 SSHRC merit scholarship for her graduate studies at the University of Toronto.

Image credits Cover: Nadav Assor, *Ophan*, 2014 | Inside cover: Amnon Wolman, *SoundTallit*, 2014 | Pages 3-4: Ira Eduardovna, *A Thousand Years*, 2014 (produced with the support of Asylum Arts and Koffler Gallery) | Page 5, top: Amnon Wolman, *SoundBook – Architecture*, 2014 | Page 5, bottom: Nevet Yitzhak, *A Great Joy Tonight*, 2009. All photos: Toni Hafkenscheid.

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