

# The hand as paintbrush

Maya Zack's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is no less than ingenious, despite the fact that she revolves around the words of a man-poet and doesn't permit herself to lose control

Tal Niv

1. She is lying on the floor – in this drawing, “Trace,” which describes a crime scene – and the ink stain is a bloodstain. This is the image of Maya Zack herself, in all her physicality. This is also the woman that Zack has portrayed in her video works, “Mother Economy” (2007) and now “Counterlight.” A feminine character based on that of Friederike Schragger, mother of the Jewish, Romanian-French poet Paul Celan, who wrote in German.

She is a woman who resembles the actresses in Zack's video installations, whom the artist resurrected from the Jewish-European enlightenment that was obliterated, and out of the theoretical work about remembrance and analogism. And I identify that woman.

I am thinking: Bloody hell, Zack. This is an exhibition by a genius woman. And in my mind I compare – even though the comparison to a man's artwork is problematic, when it is a woman depicting herself – her richness of artistic expression and technical aptness with those of William Kentridge. At the opening of her exhibition, “Counterlight,” at the Tel Aviv Museum, standing there in front of the huge canvas. Wow, I am thinking, Maya Zack, you're like William Kentridge. Piquing our interest, exercising total control in all disciplines of the plastic arts, from illustration to cinematic expression. I do not share her wish to put speech and speaking at the center of history, but my heart nevertheless skips a beat.

Maya Zack has drawn a woman here who is drawing herself in blood that flows from her brain and oozes out of her mouth. The drawing is not a “study,” a visual preparation for something, but a raising to the nth degree of the line that distinguishes between existing and not existing at all.

2. Intelligence at the Tel Aviv Museum. Zack's drawing is hanging on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition, which is also an archive complete with high shelves, from which a huge plastic sleeve leads to the realm of the real created as the inner exhibition space of the reconstructed world. I know that the symbolic, the imaginary and the real are all laid out for me so well. Zack's three-dimensional objects

shown at the space are breathtaking. Looking at Paul Celan's mother – the woman whom Zack recreated (in her own image) in her video and her drawings, and whom Zack reflexively placed inside the pleated bellows of an old-style camera. Inside a world of ideas, like the *sephiroth* of the kabbala.

I am standing inside the huge archive room that Zack created. And the bloodstain, and the hair, and the hairstyle, and I know her eyes are brown (and see that later, in her videos), and the death, and the reflexivity – as intellectual phenomena, as emotional disorder, as a glance of apprehension – all are there across from me. Maya Zack reacts to her intellectual environment and to the fact that research and knowledge have been perched at the top of the pyramid of expression.

I see myself lying on the floor. And I think, a talented woman cannot be murdered while she is writing. So the pencil has to be dipped in blood.

But still, through the distance she has gone, through her intelligence (although knowledge is a prerequisite for her), Zack has turned her hand into an ink brush and her mouth into blood. A woman lying totally alone. A woman whose hand is drawing herself, dressed in order to cover up, not to emphasize anything; a woman whose hair is curls and waves and dark and held together. A woman whose libido is all but untamed.

3. I walked into the Maya Zack exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum and was embarrassed that I had once written an adulatory review about a single work of art that appeared in an amateurish and embarrassing group show, like the one once mounted there about Walter Benjamin. Photocopies of documents were displayed as if they were authentic documents, as if the curator hoped the visitors would not notice.

And here, on a completely different level, was a perfect work of art, a neatly turned phrase that was constructed

like a world inside a world, and Celan's mother inside the bellowing folds of the camera. As if in a personal adaptation of Plato's allegory of the cave.

At the entrance space, I read, “Years. Years, years, a finger feels its way down and up” – poems by Celan. And then I see that in “Counterlight,” Zack cast, once again, a slender and dark brown-eyed woman, a woman who looks like her. And I walk into the exhibition space through a passageway built to resemble a bellows, a black lung. And in the second space, three-dimensional objects are displayed on a table. And there's a screening of Zack's “Mother Economy,” in which a woman from 1940s' Europe is measuring and marking, making a cake as if in a laboratory, sketching as if in an architect's office. And I am thinking – feeding of the intelligence. Food for thought. Where are the children who can eat this food?

4. I know that Zack calls this figure of the scientist-researcher “Mother.” The idea is to address the issue of nurturing. But I cannot see sentimental motherhood here. It is a magnificent exhibition, of an intensely talented, inquisitive and practical woman, about whose ability adjectives are inadequate.

A coldness blows through the bellows installation through which I passed to the other side. A coldness I can understand. It is focused on an enlightenment movement that stumbled. Focused on an elitism that may induce anxiety or alienation in others. Zack holds up for view a pre-contemporary woman, an anachronistic pioneer, like Madame Curie – or, in my mind's eye, Anna Freud, a daughter who preserved her father's archive, served as a conductor and regulator of the knowledge, and a caretaker of her own research work. She is in control.

5. The drawing is part of a much broader array that Zack has created, interestingly enough, around a man: Paul Celan. I am still thinking about the question of whether this is dependence on a “subject,” in other words an inability to relinquish a history that has already been investigated. The bio written on the wall says that Celan committed suicide at 49, but it does not say he had a son. One child. Who survived.

I stand before this drawing and understand the skill of its creator, and see myself lying on the floor. And I think, a talented woman cannot be murdered while she is writing. So the pencil has to be dipped in blood. The drawing here is also related to the concept of mathematical infinity. With which Zack is also familiar, and this can be proven with mathematics in the second room. After all, that which is infinite cannot be forgotten or disappeared, but will



“Trace,” by Maya Zack (2012).



Above and below, screenshots from Zack's video work “Counterlight” (2016).

return. The drawing is large enough to be considered life-size.

Nili Goren curated, and Maya Zack is Dr. Frankenstein. The woman is her monster. “The engagement with absence and memory also links me to Celan's work through the experience of losing his mother, who was murdered in a forced labor camp, and the unrealized farewell with her, hinted at in his poems,” Zack told Goren in a conversation that appears in the catalog. “My mother died when I was 20. While the circumstances were very different, she too was far from me when she died (shortly after she fell ill, she went to Venezuela, where she passed away). Her death left me with a constant desire to illustrate the incident, so as to bid her farewell. The various scripts, which haunted me in my dreams, attempting to fill the void, may be resolved in the project ‘Counterlight.’”



Alex Gordon, 35, left, and Simon Gingins, 31; live in Konstanz, Germany; flying to Zurich

Hello, can I ask why you visited Israel?

Alex: Two reasons. Shall we start with the first?

I study fish and I did research in Eilat, in the Red Sea, about the evolution of social behavior in fish. The study began in Australia. At the moment I'm doing a post-doc at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, but I'm originally from Australia, where the largest coral reef exists.

So, what brings you to the small reef in Eilat?

Alex: Because in Eilat the coral reef is accessible, which is unusual. And Eilat is geographically closer to Europe and safer compared to Sinai. Maybe next time I'll try Jordan.

And the second reason?

Alex: We are planning a cooperative project with the Weizmann Institute [of Science, in Rehovot]. An Israeli researcher and I received a scholarship to do a joint study. We just got it a few weeks ago, and I'm meeting the Weizmann researcher here at the airport so we can discuss working together.

Can you tell me about your research?

Alex: On the Eilat reef, I studied a group of fish from the damselfish family, called the black-bordered *dascyllus* – *dascyllus marginatus* in Latin. They are a good research subject. It's always difficult to follow individuals in a school of fish. In this species there are four to 15 individuals in a group; they have a hierarchy, there are relationships and the group is very stable. They frequent the same places all the time. It's difficult to follow other schools of fish – tuna, for example.

So you spend your days snorkeling around fish? Sounds like a dream job.

Alex: No, we set up cameras near them. Simon here is in charge of the technology.

Simon: I'm in charge of placing the cameras. At Max Planck, they use technologically sophisticated equipment. They like high-end equipment. We use 3-D imaging, which allows us to follow each individual and to mark tracks.

Alex: In diving, that's almost impossible.

You just track them, without inter-

Departures | Arrivals



vening?

Alex: No. I've manipulated groups so they would be more willing to accept individuals. The collective structure is usually based on size, because the biggest fish is also the strongest. If there is too big a gap in the hierarchy – between the largest and the next-largest – the school can be damaged and fall apart. So we simply remove it from the water and put it back with a new member, or without a previous member.

Do they get along?

Alex: It takes the fish time to reorganize. An individual wants to join a group that's good – that provides protection, access to food and shelter. An individual may seek the group most attractive for him, but the group itself may not necessarily want him to join. In other words, individuals have their own preferences, and the group does what is possible for it. There is not an unlimited number of individuals, so a conflict is created by a fish's arrival.

Sounds familiar.

Alex: Whenever a group of individuals comes together they will have conflicting interests, and that can lead to a conflict. I study the way in which the conflicts influence what happens at the

group level, the collectivity, the society.

What have you learned?

Alex: It's a situation that is constantly changing. Sometimes all the individuals cooperate, when they share the same interest. But even if they arrive in the group with an identical interest, it changes over time, and then conflict arises. I want to examine whether, despite the conflict, the groups and collectivities still exist. In other words – how groups are formed and survive.

Will the research with the Weizmann Institute also deal with this?

Alex: My next study will be about spiders and their decisions in a difficult context. Among spiders, the males decide who to mate with. There are a great many complex relationships within a group. Many choices relate to how the group is formed; I examine whether it has in fact reached its optimal solution. Whether the spiders have achieved a successful collective solution to complex tasks.

Can you infer anything about human beings from this?

Naturally, there is a resemblance between human society and animal society, but I try to avoid drawing implications.

Liat Elkayam, Photos by Tomer Appelbaum



From left, Itay Covo, 32, and Gil Hertz, 30; live in Tel Aviv; Nogah Hertz, 30, and Ben Lev, 32; live in Givatayim; arriving from Geneva

Hello, can I ask you a few questions?

Ben: No telepathy please, okay, girls?

Twins – are you alike in personality, too?

Itay: Nogah is more “still waters run deep,” Gili is more sharp-tongued and assertive. She's the voice of reason.

Nogah: We are very much alike. We are also alike in the things we do in life. We didn't go in different directions.

Gili: I am an industrial designer. Nogah: I am an interior designer. Itay: I am a graphic designer.

Ben: We've been together for four-and-a-half years.

Nogah: We know each other from the army.

Ben: The four of us have a WhatsApp group, and sometimes I write something and they send the exact same reply back, at the same instant. On the trip, people asked us whether we're twins, too, and that made it really creepy.

Where were you?

Ben: Mont Blanc. I'm always looking for the next trek, places that are beautiful and where you can also walk a lot. Nogah and I were in Georgia two years ago and we met a young woman who had done Mont Blanc with her mother. So I checked out trekking forums, and it looked good.

Gil: It was easy to persuade us.

Itay: He threw out an idea and we went for it.

How do you do Mont Blanc?

Ben: There's a classic way: The route is circular and you walk counterclockwise. It usually takes 11 days. Some people do it in eight, but that means walking 10 hours a day.

Itay: You go through three countries. You start in France, at Chamonix, then pass through Italy and Switzerland, and back to France.

Nogah: It's a very difficult trek, with a cumulative ascent of 10 kilo-

meters. Every day you go up around 1,000 and down 1,000 meters. The distance isn't an issue. Usually in treks it's about how many kilometers you have to cover, but here it's how far you go up and down. We walked between five and eight hours a day. At night you sleep like the dead.

Ben: On the second or third day, we barely walked, the fourth day was borderline, and after the fifth day, it was magical.

What was hardest?

Gil: The end of the day. We walked on ice, on a steep slope, and below us was a cliff. That was on the ascent to a cabin in a very snowy area, elevation 2,400 meters, a very narrow path. We were afraid of slipping; there's an abyss to the right.

Did you train for the trip?

Nogah: We run a little in Israel. Gil: We ran a little in Tel Aviv and we also climbed Mount Carmel with backpacks. Itay walked up six flights of stairs every day.

Itay: They have nothing to grumble about, they support each other, but we men can't show weakness.

Ben: Mont Blanc doesn't tolerate grumblers!

What was the most fun?

Ben: It's a very rewarding trek. The views are incredible, there are cabins along the way. Some cabins are dug into the earth and have ecological showers, and there is always beer and espresso and desserts.

Nogah: Most people sit outside the cabin, without phones or books, they just sit a few hours and look at the view.

Ben: As soon as the Europeans get to a cabin they have a glass of beer in their hand.

Gil: The other trekkers are amazing. It's a circular route, so there aren't many options. Usually, whoever you start the route with, you see them the whole way.

Ben: There's a huge range – from kids of 17 to Europeans of 70.

Gil: Relatively speaking, it's a trek with a lot of older people. There's a group of Alpinists who are used to this kind of hiking and walking in snow.

Nogah: And everyone is very nice. What do you eat along the way, before getting to a cabin?

Nogah: The Israelis take tahini and cucumbers. We switched fast to smelly cheeses and gave up on the vegetables right off the bat.

Gil: Our bags stink of cheese!