

## Belle Shafir and Hanna Ellert: Split Paths of Time

*“Art is longing. You never arrive, but you keep going in the hope that you will.”*

-Anselm Kiefer

Suspended strands of crocheted horse hair create an enchanted forest, while tiny iridescent portraits flicker like stars beyond. Vibrant threads and yarns are intertwined with ready-made objects, forming cocoon shape structures that climb the walls. Transparent drawings and fabric-like layers are woven into rich, colorful tapestries that hang from high above, as dangling, asymmetrical fringes tickle the floor. Figures and silhouettes take shape from bleeding stains of ink and watercolors, while sounds of hooves and the neighing of horses accompany animated drawings. These are the creations of the artists Belle Shafir and Hanna Ellert in their joint exhibition ***Split Paths of Time*** and they reflect the sediments of the past as they drift in the memory of each artist.

***Belle Shafir and Hanna Ellert: Split Paths of Time*** presents artworks created from a variety of ready-made objects as well as other materials that have been associated with the textile industry and with craft; such as fabrics, threads, yarns, buttons, beads, pins, pompoms, glitter, bells, doilies, and more. The artists’ use of crochet, knitting, sewing, embroidery, and weaving are traditional techniques whose origins can be found in domestic handicrafts that have been regarded as “women’s work,”<sup>1</sup> but have fortunately long been established as a form of “high art,”<sup>2</sup> thanks to feminist artists in the 1970s, like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who helped elevate these traditional female activities and bring about their appreciation and validation in the art world.<sup>3</sup> For Shafir and Ellert, these techniques and materials are a visual means of expressing their own personal experiences and histories, which define each artist as a unique individual, with a distinct identity that exists within the culture and society of the place where she was born, lives and works. Intense emotions stemming from personal memories are what motivate these artists and they are the core element of their artwork.

Belle Shafir’s choice of material is not random, but rather filled with intention and meaning. Suspended crocheted horse hair in *Installation* (2016-2017), is deeply rooted in her childhood

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Scanlan, “Pathmakers: Women in Craft, Art and Design Mid-Century and Today,” *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 8:2, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> William Grimes, “Miriam Schapiro, 91, a Feminist Artist Who Harnessed Craft and Pattern, Dies,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2015, B16, Art and Design.

experiences of growing up on a horse ranch in Germany, where she was raised by parents who were both Holocaust survivors. A dense mass of dangling looped chains made from actual horse hair from her father's ranch creates the sensation of bewilderment in a thick, dark forest, while the sounds of galloping hooves and whinnying horses perforate the air in her multimedia video art work *Subortus* (2015). These art works are indicative of the landscape and environment of the artist's birthplace, yet they also allude to her disorientation within her Israeli identity and personal conflict that wavers between the cultures. Through these split paths, Shafir constructs her own language that defines her individual and cultural presence, as it increasingly resonates with the passage of time. Shafir's artwork urges the audience to participate through its sensory settings and by movement; sounds of real horses, walking through and touching her crocheted forest, or beholding a hologram effect while moving back and forth in front of her *Fairytales* (2017) installation. Shafir combines the ephemeral presence of time with the material tactility of her work, illuminating the experience between the singular and collective.

In her *Tapestry I* (2016), and *Tapestry II* (2016) collage works, Shafir also engages the viewer to walk behind the works to discover different textural creations. The artist weaves carpets from ready-made materials and treated materials, however she also incorporates pieces from previous works. The physical and violent act of ripping her old works and then assembling the fragments into a new context is a process filled with emotion and memories. The new artwork that emerges is layered with even more complexity. Topics pertaining to memory and history are also evident in Shafir's *Retrospectacle Series* (2015), and in her animation video *Whisper of Memories* (2016), in which people are extracted from old photos from her family album and are reanimated in different settings. Shafir includes herself as a child, appearing as a cartoon character that jumps from scene to scene, as she reconnects to her childhood life through her present-day perspective.

Hanna Ellert uses ready-made materials and while creating the artwork, she transforms their context. A napkin is turned into a dress. A bottle cap can become a hat, a mouth or a spot of color. Suddenly a bird's beak appears from a piece of dried glue. Anything is possible, and anything can happen as discarded materials find new identities. In Ellert's drawings there is a spontaneous development from her application of a stain of color on the paper to what it later becomes. She sees figures within them, which then lead her to continue the work, adding touches as newer stains and lines react with the older ones, all connecting to form a personal story. "It is so accidental that I don't understand how I created the work," she reflects. Events and memories such as her son leaving home to begin

his army duty, as well as passed-on memories from her father's survival of the Holocaust play an important part in Ellert's process, especially in her drawings, *Fly Away Little Bird* (2015) series, and *Sacrifice* (2017). Ellert creates cocoon-like structures made from string, yarn, and fragments of old shirts that are wound around ready-made items. In the way that a cocoon envelops and protects the chrysalis<sup>4</sup> while a new body forms inside the shell, Ellert's colorful, wrapped structures insulate and shelter her in a comforting manner from painful emotions, enabling her to deal with them and to come to terms with her own identity. Notwithstanding Ellert's formal artistic training, her artwork has a naïve and recluse quality that borders on *Art Brut* (*Raw Art or Outsider Art*), a term coined by the French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe art created outside the mainstream art world.<sup>5</sup> Dubuffet characterized the movement as, "Those works created from solitude and from pure authentic creative impulses, where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere – are because of these facts more precious than the productions of professionals..."<sup>6</sup>

Ellert is also influenced from her heritage of the Caucasus culture. Her childhood memories of her grandparents in traditional dress as well as their customs are woven into her intricate sculptures, such as in *Red Motherhood* (2016), and *Blue Motherhood* (2016). These works bring to mind the traditional Caucasus women's ornate attire of a crown-like hat and large shawl made of silk brocade, velvet or satin decorated with beads, buttons, pins, coins, sequins and silver tassels. Many ready-made objects can be observed from in-between the threads and yarn, yet many objects are hidden under several layers; secrets that will never be revealed. Ellert's sculptures also have an icon-like and spiritual quality, which are reminiscent of the spirit houses of Far East cultures. They shelter her, allowing her to be absorbed within the work and to be present in that intimate moment.

An outstanding and fundamental element apparent in this exhibition is the artists' use of the line, through which they are able to express themselves. Shafir's and Ellert's line is like a personal handwriting and language. It is delicate, yet dynamic, and it carries the weight of numerous connotations for each artist, including the spaces created between the lines. In Shafir's drawings, the line is a gentle trace of an image from long ago and conjures up memories from her past. "It's not my intention to precisely draw the image from the old photograph, but rather to give a hint of that image, which allows me to relish a certain memory," she explains. The use of thread in Shafir's lines also becomes a physical and aggressive act, in which she perforates holes in the paper, wounding the

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<sup>4</sup> A chrysalis is the form of a butterfly or moth when between the larval and adult stages, in a cocoon.

<sup>5</sup> Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, Flammarion, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Place à l'incivisme (Make Way for Incivism)," (1967), trans. by Chantal Khan Malek and Alen S. Weiss, *Art and Text*, No. 27, Dec. 1987 - Feb. 1988, p.36

material, as seen in her *Tears* (2016-2017) collage series. In her *Installation* work, the frail, light strands of horse hair become kinetic material drawings that are powerful and complex constructions, which sway and flutter between the private and collective memory.

Ellert uses thread and yarn as a drawing device in her work. The use of these materials is second-nature to the artist from the period in her youth, when she was a fashion designer. In her drawings and sculptures the lines create different textures. They relate to each other as they overlap or connect, many times in a clutching state. The lines are also wound around objects, often leaving looped strands or dangling threads. There is great rhythm, depth and energy in Ellert's spontaneous, yet certain drawing line. The lines in her work are figurative to the point of abstraction, as the artist's art emerges from a very private place, freeing her from her physical constraints, giving her strength, and uplifting her soul.

During the artistic process, there is intention in the choice and placement of material for both Shafir and Ellert, yet they both never really know what their final result will be. There exists a certain anxiety that if they verbally define their artwork, the feelings and thoughts of what originally conceived the creation would fade away. For Shafir it is the innocence of the intuitive artistic act that would be lost at that moment, and for Ellert it is the over analysis of the artwork that would cause a lack of interest in continuing the work, as it would answer questions that would no longer need solving.

Happiness, sadness, pain, and longing are basic components of the existential struggle of daily survival inherent in every human, in which lies a keen awareness of the presence of time. The artists' attempt at catching that present time in their work is a way of attesting to and justifying their own existence, while simultaneously trying to understand the flowing progression and the connection between yesterday and tomorrow. Shafir's and Ellert's creative process is a sort of research and gathering of experience, in which each artist can uncover and grasp their true self, by directing the connecting strand of thought, which leads from one work onto the next, from one path on to another. It is an ever-ending journey.

**Shira Mushkin**, Exhibition Curator

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