

Exhibition information

YEHUDIT SASPORTAS

THE GUARDIAN OF THE PEARL'S SHADOW

An installation like 'The Guardian of The Pearl's Shadow' by the Israeli artist Yehudit Sasportas works at many levels. Visitors immediately undergo its aesthetic effect, but they can also submerge themselves more deeply to probe its interpretation, symbolic value and meaning. There is room for both analysis and the mystery. Autobiographical elements and oriental traditions are interwoven with scientific insights and the achievements of modernism. Her whole work is an attempt at achieving a synthesis between local particularity and universal dimensions, extreme rationality and a yearning for spirituality. Apparent opposites turn out to be indispensable building blocks for the unity of the world.

An alien presence seems to have lodged itself in the exhibition space, separating it from its immediate surroundings. Visual elements from another age and place have neatly grafted themselves onto the architecture and wrenched it away from its usual context and references. The exhibition space has metamorphosed into an inner space with multiple identities. It could be an aquarium, or a spot on the bottom of the ocean, on account of the marine colours on the walls, but there is also the suggestion of a dead lake on the table, and a black boat gliding diagonally through the space. Or is it a cavern in the mountains, whose contours emerge in the drawings? All this almost ageless visual splendour evokes memories of finds in antique tombs, while the depictions of ancient trees and geometric structures refer to mystical gardens. This mixture of uncertain identities supports the metaphor of a spiritual place, which – although it relies totally on material structures for its concrete manifestations – returns in different guises at different points in time and space.

Through her connections with the Near East, Yehudit Sasportas can draw on pre-modern traditions that are still very much alive there. In the West, the intellectual and cultural climate of the Enlightenment and modernism have done away with the ancient Western heritage and put a new, rational cultural tradition in its place. This climate of iconoclasm and revolution left little room for sympathising with the generally curbing factors from the distant past. Now, as globalisation is accelerating, non-Western cultures are gaining a major share in what the

future of global culture will look like. Because the modern movement never really took root elsewhere, the West is now, by this roundabout way, once again confronted with its eradicated traditions. On the other hand, Western rationality is penetrating more deeply into all other cultures. The former colonial and neo-colonial relations are gradually being erased and replaced by relations of equal partnership. Yehudit Sasportas inherited her sense of craftsmanship and her eye for decorative patterns from her parents, a carpenter and a seamstress. Her family, that emigrated from Morocco to Israel, was steeped in the Jewish-Muslim tradition of multicoloured, abstract structures that are integrated in architecture, furniture, textiles and utensils. The connections between those everyday applications and the didactic illustrations in synagogues, mosques and calligraphy are always close. The spiritual world imbues the applied culture. Strangely enough, there are parallels between the predilection of the modernists for pure form and abstraction and the geometric stylisation of the Near East. One step further, there is the connection between the mathematical structure of the Bible – which is revealed by the Cabbala – and the mathematical analysis of the world in the exact sciences. The Big Bang theory and quantum mechanics unravel the structures at work in the universe down to the smallest particles of matter. Even confusing phenomena find a logical explanation in an adjusted complex chaos theory. The mathematical and repetitive structure of matter is most strikingly reflected in genetics. The excruciatingly slow, blind and yet accurate accumulation of algorithms eventually gives rise to the evolution of the most complex life forms from mindless matter. Cell biology is probably the height of Western rationality and demythologising. Algorithmic structure also plays a crucial role in the development of computers and artificial intelligence. Brain research, genetics and information technology are converging. Places of mystery are collapsing one by one, like houses built of cards. Whoever identifies mystical forces with actual, concrete places and symbols – trees, mountains, shrines, the sky, the underworld, chaotic processes – is bound to be disappointed, because sooner or later, all of nature can be analysed down to the minutes detail. In contrast to ancient Germanic ideas of sacred places, the religious tradition and interpretation of the Near East is not inseparably connected with one existing form or place, although mystical forces are conceived as manifesting themselves temporary in the concrete world, in places, people and situations. Just like all natural and life processes, mystical union is something that grows, evolves and decays in certain places. A mystical place fulfils a temporary and symbolic function; the spiritual dimension shifts over time. The manifestations are temporary; only an ineffable core remains.

Mysticism seeks meaning and harmony, connection with a larger whole across time and space, and a sense of unity in spite of the puzzle presented by fragments of life. This experience cannot be attained merely by mastering a technique or gaining an insight. It demands a surrender of power to make way for acceptance of the universe. It involves a process over time during which there is a slower and more intense experience of time, instead of its consumption. Personal commitment cannot be replaced by money, power, or a ready-made production process. The fact that Yehudit Sasportas makes all her drawings and sculptures herself is closely linked with her approach to the tradition of craftsmanship, the deliberate investment of time in a limited measure of quality, a sustained concentration of intense attention on little. Carefully finishing all the details oneself does not have to be a mind-numbing task. It is the core itself of the mystical experience. In the process of giving shape to her own ideas, she gains new insights. The maximum concentration of energy discharges itself in the quality of matter. This quotidian rhythm of life can be found in the images, which give this energy back to the viewer. Leaving the finishing to other people would actually turn those people into mindless technicians. Even though the artist has clearly formulated ideas about her work, the process of drawing is largely intuitive. Insights become keener as she goes along. Besides representing the investment of her own time, the workmanship involved in her work refers to the traditions and rhythms of life of the Near East. Moreover, her work looks back to an age-old past and ahead at a distant future, with interfaces between archaeological components and science fiction. It contains hints of antediluvian and extraterrestrial dimensions that are beyond the reach of humans. The importance of the abstract repetition of algorithms in the drawings is hard to underestimate. The enormous accumulation of the very simplest structures (algorithms) and the gradual exploration of all the possibilities lie at the basis of the theory of evolution, but are also a principle of information theory. It took nature an immensely long time to arrive at evolved life. Mankind has taken a long time to arrive at the computer, which is currently the main instrument in the evolutionary drive. This human development has branched off from the natural development. Everything in existence has been derived from this same structuring principle of elementary information, whether it concerns trees or computers. At a certain moment, the algorithms in the drawings threaten to overgrow original nature, although that too, on closer inspection, turns out to consist of a play of abstract lines.

Sasportas's depiction of nature is miles away from the romantic idea. In her drawings and sculptures, she primarily expresses our current representational concept of nature as we know

it from computer and media images or from our travel memories. But her own experience with the olive groves of Israel, the mountaintops of Engadin in Switzerland, the European tradition of landscape painting and oriental silk rolls also has echoes in her work. The image of pixels and lines is linked to scientific insights and the evolution of art history. We know about evolutionary biology, quantum mechanics and chaos patterns. Inside views of the particle matter of trees or of the structure of mountains as seen from different angles have the effect of making the general scene fall apart into abstract components. Cézanne made us look at a mountain from several points of view at the same time; Monet told us about his own energy combined with light analysis when he painted the water lilies; and Van Gogh's work was a passionate search to depict the inside of matter. The landscapes of Sasportas are heterogeneous pictures, composed from an eclectic memory. Fossils and computer images go hand in hand. The integration of decay and disintegration can be seen in the uprooted trees, already looking more like fossils, which appear sporadically in the caves. Reflections are given the status of equal partners. Gravity, perspective and compositional unity are exchanged for woolliness, surface structure and fragmentation. We are looking primarily at artificial signs of the landscape, marks that suggest the idea of a landscape in our imagination rather than evoke any real landscape. The heritage of linguistics lingers on in this process, and it is also affected by the spread of digital communication. Our romantic image of nature is based on digital images and cultural-historical expectations, topped with tourist-industry clichés. Evolutionary biology and particle physics have become equal partners of this digitised romanticism. In Sasportas's work, the abstract dimension has gradually come to carry more weight than the decorative element. Here too, we find that both the picture and reality itself can be reduced to on analogous fundamental structures.

Throughout the different dimensions of the installation, there is an ongoing dialogue between recurrent symbols. Modernist architecture is evident in the rigid wall sculpture and in the stepped truncated pyramids on the table. Complex chaotic structures feature in all her drawings, whether they represent mountains, vegetation or stalactites and stalagmites in caves, as well as in the abstracted depictions of trees on the wall panels and the lamp and in the motions of the dragonflies on the table-lake and the ants in the drawings. Archaeological reminiscences hide behind the fossilised trees, the caves, the boat that seems to have slipped away from an Egyptian tomb (or is it a space ship, just like the folding table?), and the stratification on the table. Moreover, both the boat and the table and the stepped truncated pyramids display characteristics of antique scale models of the Near East, which hover on the

dividing line between architecture and sculpture. The architecture and garden layout of the Far East play a role in the wall sculpture, the layout of the table, the lamp, and the abstract decorative nature of the black-and-white drawings. The whole frame of reference of the Far East emphasises the temporary nature of architecture, while the tradition of the Near East makes the Word prevail over the anchored image. Decay and death are represented in the endangered nature and uprooted trees in the drawings, the ashes of the leaves on the table, and the darkness in general. The mystical transition to another state is indicated by the reflections on the table and in the drawings, the numerous suggestions of an underwater world and the caves, but especially by the highlighted boat, which carries the most precious treasure in the installation – the pearls – to an ‘other side’. Because all these representations possess, above all, sign value, they are as many reflections of another life. The title of the exhibition, ‘The Guardian of The Pearl’s Shadow’, indicates that it is not the pearl itself that is cherished and passed on in the mystical garden, but its shadows (or its digital code?). The boat and the lamp touch upon the core of the mystery. Sasportas likes to refer to the four different levels of interpreting, the Pardes, as taught by the Cabbala. First, there is the simple looking at the external appearance of things or representations. After a while, we start to wonder what else they could mean, besides their aesthetics. We discover their symbolic value, and this, through contemporary relevance, finally brings us to the edge of the mystery. Although symbols represent cultural codes, they also serve a personal dealing with those codes. The full meaning of the installation can only be given a personal interpretation by the individual viewer, depending on his or her moment in life, circumstances, and choices. At this point, the analytical discussion of art reaches its limits. We can only point out that Sasportas prefaces her mystical interpretation with a presentation of the current state of scientific developments, that she does not locate the spiritual world in a remote region, but within matter, and that she makes no statements about our personal experience.

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(Translation: Catherine Thys)