

Clever art for scary times

Ruth Noam's unusual works are moved by the energy and tempo of Israeli life, harnessing the violence and stress to make something uniquely expressive

• By CARL HOFFMAN

Finding her studio is a bit of a challenge. I have the right street - not much more than an alley, really - in the middle of Tel Aviv's Florentin neighborhood. I am standing in front of what I think is the right-number building, according to the slip of paper on which I jotted down her address. But nothing in, around or near this decrepit old structure looks like it is occupied by anyone or anything.

After several circuits of the place, I notice a guy standing around, idly smoking a cigarette, and ask him whether he knows anything about Ruth Noam, an artist whose studio is supposed to be here. He smiles, nods and leads me toward the end of the building, then bangs loudly on a shuttered iron grille.

The grille then slides upward, revealing the artist, her cramped and colorful studio and what appears to be a giant black ant hooked up to a respirator. But more about the giant ant in a moment.

Noam was born in Casablanca and was brought to Israel at the age of three. She has been back to the Moroccan city four times and has lived in other countries, but declares, "I am an Israeli girl."

Asked whether she considers herself an Israeli artist, she replies, "Yes. I am moved by the energy and the tempo of life here in Israel. The energy, the violence, the stress in the country; the relationships between people. I think these things affect my work."

Violence, it seems, is the major theme of her most recent work, the giant black ant on a respirator, which she calls *Ant Colony Collapse Disorder*. Made of black fabric on an iron frame, the large arthropod is connected to an air pump which alternately inflates it into a phallic shape and deflates it into a limp, forlorn-looking piece of black cloth. Inspired by our most recent war in Gaza during the summer of 2014, the ant expresses Noam's idea of masculine power and masculine violence.

Rather than express her feelings on the spot, she hands me a printed explanation that reads, "In the background, on television and the Internet, we were faced by the constant stream of images showing the horrific violence committed by ISIS [Islamic State] and Boko Haram - annihilation, beheadings, repression and rape of women. Meanwhile, local media featured constant reporting on threats from Hamas, rockets landing on southern Israel, the bombing of Gaza from the air and sea, and, of course, the terrorists' underground tunnels. Every possible screen intimidated with its outpouring of male energy rejoicing at the battle: generals, religious leaders, politicians, in uniform and in black suits, scenes of destruction, ruins, terror and fear, screams of women and mothers and orphans in shock..."

"My desire to make this masculine power visibly present was reflected in the marvelous ants, made out of material into which I could 'breathe the breath of life.' I could create the illusion of being big, strong and omnipotent, yet in the blink of an eye this illusion could be punctured - literally."

OTHER WORKS express her feelings about different issues. Noam guides me past the insect and leads me to a wall installation of three large silver-colored aluminum ears, each with a tiny video going on in the center of the ear.

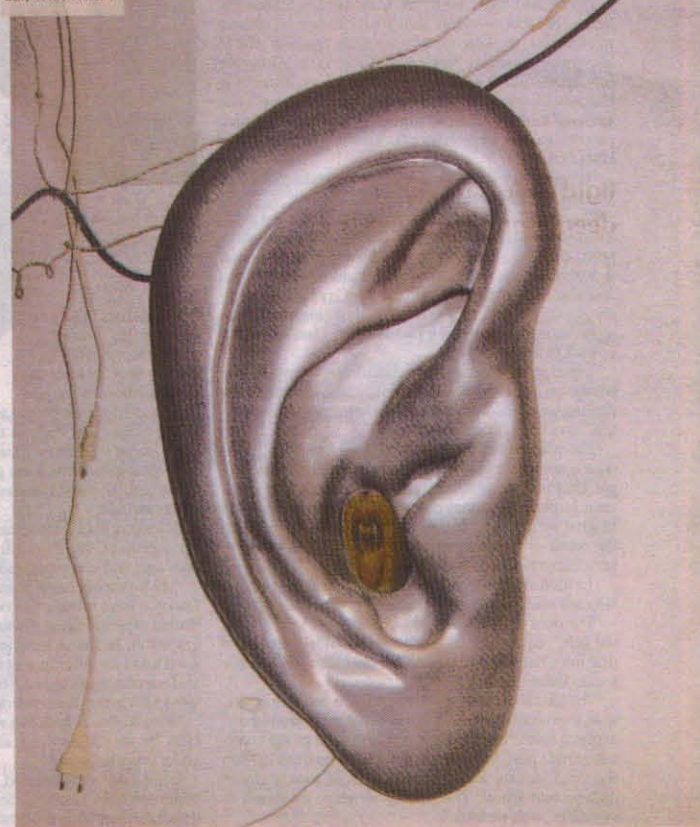
I stand in front of one ear and watch an attractive young woman blow kisses in the shape of hearts. After a moment, the woman sticks out a long reptilian tongue and begins catching and sucking back the hearts like a lizard zaps flies. A minute or so of this and the tongue disappears into the woman's mouth, which has now grown two rather frightening-looking fangs.

Noam watches me take in the video and explains, "It's the difference between what you hear and what you understand. For example, sometimes you think I'm blowing kisses, but the interpretation may be wrong. You think you

'Second Childhood.' (Photos: Carl Hoffman)



Ear, with video.





Artist Ruth Noam in her Florentin studio.

'Bee Colony Collapse Disorder.'

understand one thing, but the meaning could be something quite different.

"It's also a paradox, because the ear is for hearing but you are seeing a video in the middle of the ear."

The other two ears similarly reflect the theme of reality versus perception, one showing how we organize what we see into our own artificial categories and conceptual boxes, the other relating how our culture determines the way we interpret symbols.

I want to say to people, 'Relax. The world is beautiful. There are better things to do than fight.' We have other, deeper problems, like the disappearance of the bees
— Ruth Noam

Ears also figure into work that Noam is doing for a future solo exhibition, which she says will consist of much larger ears made of latex that will be placed on a gallery floor and made to rock like babies in the fetal position. The ears, and which statements she is using them to convey, are still works in progress.

Noam's career as an artist has been sort of a work in progress as well. Until 2009 she was a full-time organizational consultant and trainer, and CEO of a company called Impact - Center for Organizational and Individual Training. Art was a hobby. But with a new marriage and a desire to construct a new life, she made the decision to leave organizational psychology behind and let art become the driving force in her life. She studied sculpture under David Peer at the Avni Institute of Art in Tel Aviv, with further studies in India and Mexico.

Asked whether she considers herself an essentially figurative artist, she tentatively says yes, but explains that her work revolves more around whatever it is she wants to say. The statement Noam is trying to convey



'Swamp.' (Ruth Noam)

always supersedes pure figurativism, as she creates her image to accommodate her message. Her ant is more human phallic than ant-like, for example, and the figures in *Swamp*, her exhibition at the Artists House in Tel Aviv, display supernaturally elongated necks to express her idea that we emerge from a putrid swamp but attempt to rise high above it.

Why depict people rising from a swamp? "Human beings take their nourishment and energy from a swamp," she details. "The food we eat is not good, the air we breathe is not good, the water we drink is bad water. The information we receive is misinformation. I made a lot of different characters there - old, young, white, black, every head distinct. But each one feels tall, free, reaching for the sky. Yet the reality is he is stuck in the swamp, rooted to it, receiving bad nourishment - physically, emotionally and spiritually."

Another interesting work is *Second Childhood*, in which several people are riding, in standing positions, on the backs of ducks. One is holding a balloon. Their bodies are large; their heads are small.

"As we get older, are bodies grow bigger and bigger, but our minds become smaller and smaller," she says, laughing.

A work in which both statement and im-

age conform more closely to what most of us would call realism are the gold-plated bees in *Bee Colony Collapse Disorder*, Noam's depiction of what she considers our most serious looming problem.

"All the world is having different problems, like war and ISIS and everything else. But in maybe five years, there will be no more bees. No bees, no life. I've made something which is like a silent appeal from the bees, in which the bees are saying, 'People, look at us. We are disappearing. No bees, no life.'"

Quizzed about her artistic influences, Noam reflects for a very long moment and says, "I think it is not an artist. It is the atmosphere I live in here in Israel. I think it's the violence."

"I want to say to people, 'Relax. The world is beautiful. There are better things to do than fight. Stop the violence, everywhere.'"

"I try to say that we have other, deeper problems, like the disappearance of the bees. All of us, like the big ant, have a pump machine that allows us to breathe, and when the electricity is off, then we will stop breathing, no matter who we are - rich, poor, black, white, Jew, Arab, everyone."

Ruth Noam's exhibition "Swamp" is showing through 2016 at the Artists House, 9 Alharizi Street, Tel Aviv; (03) 524-6685.



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