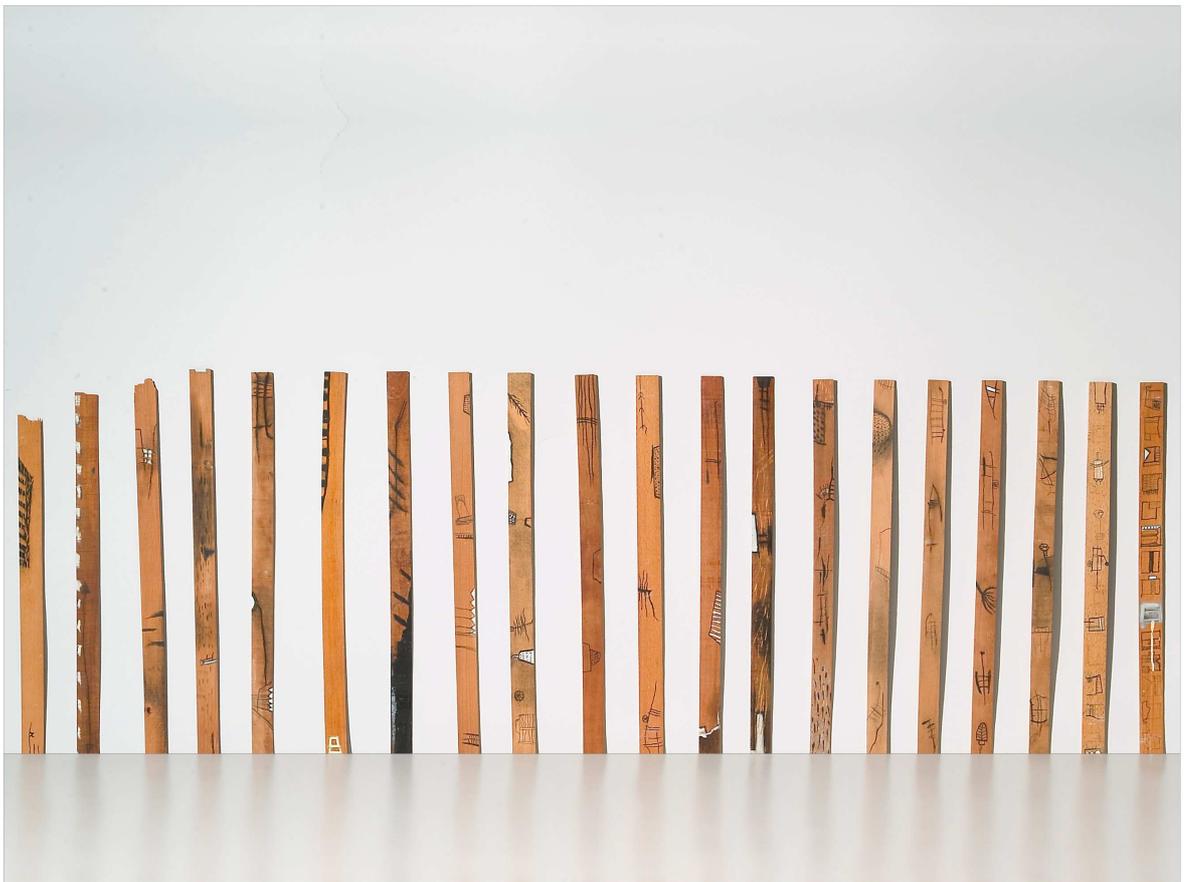




**Hedge, Nona Orbach**

**Dr. Dalya Markovich**

**Tova Osman Gallery, 18.03.04 – 13.04.04**



Hedge, Nona Orbach. Tova Osman Gallery, 2003

The exhibition “Hedge” at the Tova Osman Gallery is a sequel to Nona Orbach's “[Tel Nona](#)” held at the National Maritime Museum in Haifa. This exhibition is a trilogy, the three parts of which are complementary. One part is composed of drawings on paper that are included in the series “[1000 drawings](#)”. Using pencils and oil chinks on little square pieces of paper, the artist has sketched a collection of suggested images: a cypress tree, a leaf, a wheel, a table and a fish – all of them simulating torso representations. The next part, on an adjacent wall, shows narrow wooden strips hanging on a hedge. The third part is an element borrowed from the series “[Large remains](#)” to be



included in the exhibition “[Tel Nona](#)”: it shows a sarcophagus-shaped boat, made of a plastered iron-and-netting framework, resting on the window.

The drawings, hedge, and “[archaeological finding](#)” are all part of a disassembly and recomposition process involving the local identity at different times and spaces. Between the mythical time and space of the *Tel* - or excavation mound - and the actual time and space encircled by the hedge, Nona Orbach strives to explore the multiple meanings of the local identity. She draws, etches and sculpts the various states of matter of the bubbling Israeli character on paper, plaster and wood. Factoring this concentrated solution into particles of the past, the present, and of an imaginary I is part of a pointed discussion of the elements and materials composing the local identity and the grammatical rules that assemble them together.

#### *Tel: The Law of Conservation of Matter*

The Israeli landscape is literally covered with excavation mounds and ruins known as “*Tel*”. Excavation mounds are a physical representation of accumulated time piled up, they are visual samples to witness the destruction left behind by human culture. A *Tel* bears a dramatic presence on the landscape. The numerous strata of stacked memory produce a vertical and defying effect. The artificial salience of the excavation mound disturbs the grammatical rules of topography. In a secretive and dramatic gesture, it stands high, a prominence overlooking the land during a three-dimensional performance that embraces time, action and space. The project “[Tel Nona](#)” deals with the huge memorial board that human history has bequeathed us as well as with the implied meanings that it has been given by Israeli culture.

Archaeological findings have a central role in the construction of a nation's mythical past. As one of the spaces that confine the ancient Jewish time, these excavation mounds have become the subject of intense digging and exploration.

Since the incipience of the Zionist movement, the entrails of the ground have been turned over and over in endless excavations. The urge to penetrate the land in order to extract any historical evidence of an existing relationship with the place has produced numerous archaeological sites, “national parks”, and a variety of museums, all aimed at relating the history of Jewish settlement on the land since



Biblical times. The under-the-ground insight that excavation mounds have made possible into the depths of the past and the abysses of the soul of the Jewish people have been major building elements in the birthing process of a nation.

The intense acts of extraction and revelation carried out during archaeological explorations have incited quarrels between historical times. A recently “rediscovered” past, in the form of jugs, oil vessels, or remnants of ancient baskets, is immediately reset by archeology into the daily routine of the present. Amorphous shades of the past are mended, often with clumsy stitches, to patch them to the extra-contemporary tales. Nona's boat/Sarcophagus is intended to convey a smile to those representations of the Hebrew culture. “From the depth of the earth” located in her own studio, Nona extracts an exhibit that hints at the other, non-Hebrew, cultures that also used to dwell on the land, setting their mark on it, and perhaps hinting also at the fluid and refutable character of feelings of ownership and dominion of the land. The realistic veracity and “authenticity” of the exhibit is no more than a witty wink addressed to the *engagé* effort made by history-archeology. In contrast with the “proper” artifact or exhibit displayed behind glass with abundant scientific verbosity, the boat/Sarcophagus simply rests in the gallery. Since it has not been under the professionally scrutinizing eye of past-hunters, it remains merely a riddle. The boat/Sarcophagus has escaped the lanes of archaeological bureaucracy; it maintains its contemporary reality devoid of any association. Having no connotation to anything concrete-political-national, it will remain, precisely, just itself.

At a metaphoric level, the boat/Sarcophagus could be visualized as a representation of history. Between the light and fluid movement of the boat roaming over spaces, and the coffin, there is an embodiment of the dimensions of time and death. In more than one way, the boat/Sarcophagus mocks the attempt to weave the local native identity from some residual canvas of the past. The loathsome excavation of the past, she claims, will forever remain an obscure, defunct riddle. The attempts to preserve the past, too, are limited. Hoarding, treasuring the past, is a constant Sisyphean, never-ending struggle against the crumbling, demolishing power of time. Even the deciphering of the past is characterized by its incessant fluidity. Like the sailing boat, the interpretation of findings roams along variable trends, fashionable waves and the capricious winds of the times. Deep-diving into the unfathomable waters of the past, Nona's exhibit seems to be telling us, is always a political dive into the abyss of the collective soul.



*A drawing: the meagerness of matter*

From the archaeological evidence, Nona proceeds on to a world of imagery that is closely related to the domains of pioneering Zionism. Against the solid hardness of the materials from which the boat/Sarcophagus has been created, the drawings seem to be made of thin, transparent skin. The clear, concise limits of each sheet of paper and its matter define its textual character. On small pieces of paper, in delicate and suggested motions, the drawings display a wide range of images: a lone cypress, a boat, a falling leaf and a wheel. The archetypal expressions of the new culture, amorphous and fragile in their one-dimensionality, stand out of these drawings. Lacking inside or outside, entirely detached from any connection, these drawings are innocent of any historical or cultural pretension.

The entire large series of drawings is set into a uniform format of 35x35 centimeters. “Casting” the imagery into the fixed size of the square piece of paper heavily hints at the quality of Israeli culture. Whether this hint is aimed at the uniformity of the mold into which the local identity has been poured, or whether it serves as a visual expression of the standardized rules of interaction that have produced it, there is a sense of the heavy, difficult level of impairment kept in stock, in any stock. What do these exhibits have to tell us about the homeland? On what excavation mounds has it been built? What preceded them and what will their future bring?

Although some of the images are frequently and repeatedly quoted in the Hebrew culture, their juxtaposition produces segmented flashes of reality. Thus, the cypress tree which generally either conveys the scent of an old citrus grove in an ancient settlers' village, or denotes the boundary of any military cemetery. Thus, the leaf falling from the branch of one of the ancient Israelite trees, which in past, biblical landscapes, used to cover the mountains of this country and their rolling slopes. Yet, those images lack in substance; they are so airy and thin that they seem not to be backed up by any kind of culture or identity. The fine webs that anchor the imagery to the place tell us about their feeble grasp onto the ground. Meagerness and primacy, the work reveals to us, was not engendered from the material abundance stored in the depths of the earth, but rather from the void, a culture “out of nothingness”.



### *A hedge: Conservation Agents*

Israel is grooved by fences and hedges. From the moment they became a synonym of ownership, they have been the new cartographers that demarcate the Zionist space. At present, fencing is mostly expressed in terms of separation. Fences and hedges are a symbolic and actual representation of the borders of Zionist expansion. In many ways, they are the visual performance of the Zionist victory, the path that delineates its existence, amid the theological, historical and political confusion in which the region is immersed.

Fences and hedges are also a time demarcation. They are the present tense of ongoing events in current actuality; they are the visual effect of annexation and surrender. Boundaries of this kind, however, draw their libido from excavation mounds of the past, which, in turn, have been the creators of the Zionist utopia: they *are* “the Promised Land”. A hedge is the visual articulation of opposing forces – between past and present. It is the instantaneous, momentary *real* time, a means that gives, through its peripheral power, their substantial character to time and space. This is how the hedge also realizes its narrative effect, because the spaces that it manages to swallow and bind together are the raw materials of the national narrative.

“*Hedge*”, the name of the exhibition, suggests idyllic blooming, green hedge-trimming and pruning, a quiet, relaxed country life and the feeling of normalcy. The hermetic confinement behind the hedges and fences with which the State of Israel has been surrounding itself serves as evidence of a lack of vitality. The Separation Wall is the active matrix of a power-based relationship, the structure of domination and control. It is an illustration of panopticon-like entrenchment, constant self-protection, walls of fear that have turned into a sort of imprisoned existence. The living hedge of the lower middle class, the fence made of domesticated vegetation, gets in this work a new significance. It is not a hedge that surrounds pastoral landscapes. Its physical appearance, too, reaching just to chest level, is oppressive and threatening. Nona's hedge is the conservation matter of time and space, it is not living matter. A lack of vitality resides within the material stratum of the hedge. The still wooden rafters from which it is made were once a living organism. The inner edges of the boat/Sarcophagus bear the following inscription made by Nona in black ink:

“We nested in a bubble, we plastered it thoroughly.

We padded its walls with saws and rakes



And with glass shards in turquoise and green.  
We did not know that evil was already among us.  
At its four corners we fixed  
Paper chariots,  
With oaths on their wings  
Sailing on their pedestals."

Thus, between the periodic time expressed by the eternal repetitiveness of the myth and the linear continuity of historical time, between the Biblical space of scriptures and the contemporary Zionist space, Nona has set networks of fences and hedges about existential questions, about ourselves, about life.