

## 19. EXCAVATING THE BLUEPRINT

**You describe yourself as an artist, an art therapist and an art educator. How did this come about? Which of these three roles appeared first in your life and how do you divide your time between them?**

Ever since I was a child, I liked exploring materials and asking questions. As an adolescent, art helped me overcome challenging times. From my therapist's perspective, I can say that art-making has been a central path to finding who I am—a path to being.

My BA studies at Oranim Academic College exposed me to a completely unknown world of art and education, and the connection between them. One of my teachers actually studied at the Bauhaus, others had a deep interest in teaching in a new revived country. It was a perfect school for me, since I wanted to connect education and art, though at the time did not perceive myself, yet, as an artist.

Being a fresh art teacher, I initiated a large art studio in our community centre, which was also available for our next-door neighbours from the Muslim Bedouin village. I had the privilege of trying out my educational ideas and choosing my colleagues. It was fascinating to realise how much richness and joy could be produced in a well-organised open-studio environment—where participants explored their own personal path, choosing their materials, subject-matter and workplace.

We were six art teachers who emphasised genuine processes and we developed group-based personal tutoring methods for all ages and cultures. Thus, the open-studio method, having personal tutorials, generated sincere creative expressions. It became obvious that if a person, regardless of his/her age and artistic knowledge, receives a reflection of his/her interests—s/he will eventually flourish like a plant in sunlight. Additionally, it was evident that such a teaching environment dramatically reduces aggressive behaviours, mockery and cynicism. This experience taught me that if a person has a place in the world, less vandalism and violence would occur.

During that time, I was trying to figure out my own artistic language in a rented studio. I was contemplating how to integrate my cultural heritage and the complex and rich environment of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern atmosphere and influences present in my world since childhood. This quest was very different from the widespread American influence on the local artistic world. From this perspective, I felt lonely.

In the 1980s, fascinated by the notion of creativity, I found that the syllabus closest to my interests was the Art Therapy MA programme. It was a wonderful, enriching process, which provided me with a profound understanding of my deepest

motivations. I learned to trust the process of art, and became even more aware of the spiritual qualities of matter. It gave me the legitimation to play steadily and express myself as an adult, utilising all my artistic aspects: creator, educator and therapist. All these facets flourished in an open studio setting, which is the fundamental way I teach art and work as a therapist. Since then, the studio has become my co-educator-therapist. It is an extension environment, facilitating all I do for others and myself.

The common denominator of these parallel and joined paths is manifested in a huge manual called *The Spirit of Matter* (Orbach & Galkin, 1997), mapping a hundred art exercises as part of a six-stage journey. Each exercise is richly analysed from all technical, emotional and social aspects. It is widely used by all the helping professions, artists and educators. It will be published in English in 2016 as an e-book.

**You currently hold a teaching post at Oranim College in northern Israel. How did the formative years you have just outlined influence your teaching methods?**

I learned about asking questions, playing and curiosity, mostly through observing my late father. As an exceptionally creative biochemist, he often said to us: “A carpenter creates a chair every day—I try to invent a way of sitting”.

My BA degree at Oranim exposed me to a completely unknown, almost utopian world of art and education. I consider this chapter of my life to be the foundation of my formal education. Until then, most of the time I felt like a fish out of water in school. Even art lectures at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem seemed like sleepily citing others. Intellectual stimulation and creativity was not part of the deal, so I left the prestigious university and came to this northern idealistic college.

The staff of the Oranim Art Department included excellent, devoted educators with a Kibbutz educational background, as well as artists. My Ceramics teacher studied at the Bauhaus, thus I would fanaticise what it would be like to have Paul Klee as your teacher. They were all deeply involved in art and culture. One of them, the late Arie Rothman, an etching master and a phenomenal drawing teacher, became my role model with his deep humanistic understanding and compassion towards our struggles.

It was a perfect school for me, since I saw myself more as a creative person than an artist, and did not think I would actually become one. I was interested in following my vague impression that art has something to do with individual growth, thus I was deeply curious about adult creativity. How did they lose it on the way?

For the first time as a student, my teachers were actually interested in our art and our thoughts. I was not intellectually and spiritually lonely anymore. I could finally breathe within a wonderful group of students searching for their own path.

In my teachings and as a therapist, I still hold basic concepts I believed in way back in the 1970s, and was even more certain of them observing my own teachers. For example, I believe that observing, caring and knowing your students is the prime path to a meaningful education. The person is more significant than the art product.

It is quite easy to believe in the idea that the roots of education are found in a process of curiosity, goodness, a safe place and mirrored reflection in an open art studio environment. Since every person is unique in his/her own way, his/her inner journey can be as deep as s/he is capable of. Competition is tougher but only you can become more you.

This brings me to the idea of the quest for one's spiritual blueprint. Searching for and identifying the genuine qualities of one's blueprint eventually conveys a more authentic life and art. It creates an inner calmer home, and envy becomes less significant. Thus, as I see it today, in art education and in therapy, this is what we should aim at.

Carefully noticing and observing the blueprint of one's students is deeply effective. Thus, it can also serve as a social tool for a more open-minded society. I truly believe that education is a wonderful, humanistic key, vital to a more generous society. At its best, it conveys kindness, curiosity and compassion. This is possible in all parts of society.

**Artists, art therapists and art educators all have 'clients'. How would you distinguish between these three kinds of client? What different professional relationships do you develop with them?**

Using art with students, with artists, and with all ages of clients in therapy, I seek the principal phenomenon of the spiritual blueprint. I find this phenomenon to be an accurate foundation and the deepest common denominator of my different overlapping professions.

What is this spiritual blueprint? Every human being has a typical set of actions, likes and dislikes that make him/her him/herself. When assembled and marked on materials, all these movements, orders, activities and attractions leave a genuine visual blueprint of the creator. It is an alchemic process where matter commutes into spirit. It is the fundamental visualisation of the soul, mind and feelings. These archetype patterns, seeds of humankind, were inherited from our ancestors and culture. At the same time, they are also our unique combination of us as one of a kind.

Although a human being is bound to follow the archetypal process of children's drawings going through the specific developmental stages, each person has his/her uniqueness within this universal outline. If you set one child's drawings, sculptures and toys on the floor chronologically from childhood till adulthood, there will be basic characteristics that mark a collection of parameters accompanying us throughout our lives. Naturally, we develop and enrich our artwork, but a child whose deep interest is in composition from the start, will make this evident later in his/her life. Alternatively, if a child loves details, they will be there when s/he grows up.

My students are usually surprised to observe their own kindergarten drawings. Their main artistic qualities are frozen in the past waiting to be unfolded, named and acknowledged as part of them in the present.

Why do we need to explore this phenomenon? My observation is that if a young artist-to-be cognitively recognises his/her basic actions, materials, images and so on, then s/he will have a deep rich well for his/her creation. It is an anchor of his/her inner self. Recognising parts of it supports the lonely times in the studio. It is a safe place within. Moreover, in naming the parameters, they become more present, thus more approachable and conscious in the artistic process. The blueprint will vary and become enriched if a child continues creating freely.

This is an extremely useful phenomenological tool for art teachers. If they develop a habit of naming and identifying each of their students' parameters, this will enable them to provide accurate, relevant tutoring to each and every one of them. They would actually see their students.

Finding and naming the blueprint serves me differently during the therapy process. The aims are different. As a therapist, my aim is to walk together with my client, assisting him/her as s/he explores his/her emotional obstacles. This process is done mostly through art-making, but my responsibility and concern are his/her

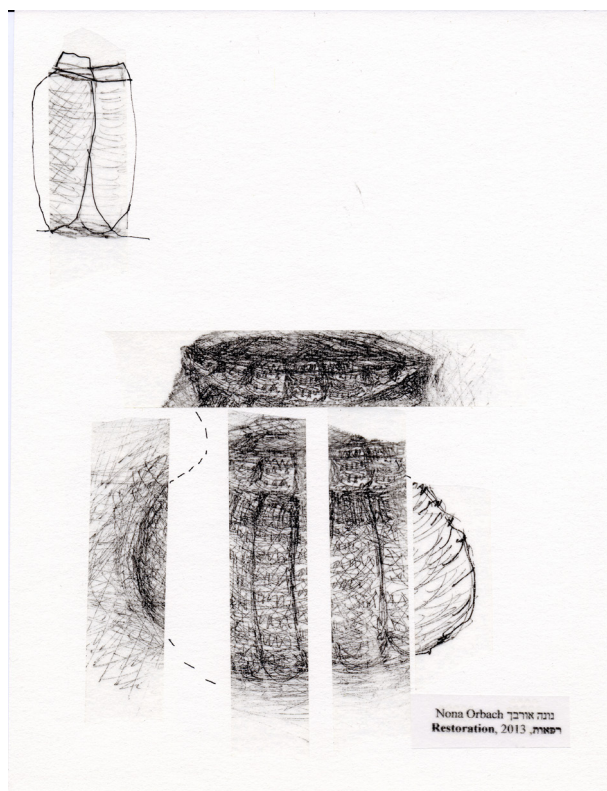


Figure 55. Nona Orbach, Restoration 1, 2013, collage on paper

well-being and health and not good art. Here art serves as a vehicle for health and the soul.

As for students, my aim is to teach them about the lonely times in the studio and how to overcome artistic blocks. Naturally, emotional aspects arise. We can talk about it a bit, but I am not responsible for that. The difference is in the kind of responsibility.

**You also like to compare yourself to an archaeologist when you talk about your multimedia, artistic work. What do you feel you are seeking during these artistic ‘excavations’ and how is this archaeological work related to your region?**

I grasp the process of art-making as a possible path to better understanding what our purpose on this planet is. In the privacy of the studio, I try to find the meaning of life through media, actions, and written words. It is an intimate, lonely and fragile quest. I am continuously playing with tools as I did as a child, inventing inner worlds, which I hope correspond with the art world.

In every backyard in Israel, you can find the remains of someone who lived there before. A mosaic, a coin, a bone. Since I was a little girl, I have been daydreaming about people living on this earth before. Through these remains, I would vaguely sense these people from different times and cultures. I imagined what they wore, their tools, their houses and the sound of their languages.

Furthermore, my founders who came from Russia to Palestine in 1882 filled my imagination with images. Older uncles told intriguing stories about them. In our tiny village, we also studied about them in school as we had about the Egyptian pyramids, hieroglyphs and the Romans. Various eras and cultures mixed in my mind. Visiting my family in Jerusalem included a trip to the archeological collection at the Israel Museum. I waited anxiously to meet the tiny clay Goddesses every summer.

At the age of eight, I also wondered if there was a heaven. The notion that my parents will die one day was devastating.

On a hot summer day, playing Five Stones on the cool floor, I said aloud the word ‘I’ and grasped it fully. There is only one I in the world! I had an image of my skin as a bag holding this Me within. I instantly comprehended that one day I will also be leftover bones. Lonely and sad I went on playing, trying to compete with myself and erase these frightening thoughts.

Unknowingly, my first artistic project was burying a notebook in our orchard with all the history and knowledge of the world. I imagined future people would find it one day and know what was here, and who I was. It seems I had created my first archaeology-related-installation. I could describe myself as a tiny bead on a lengthy neckless of time, a long and rich history before and after me.

It is only natural then that in the late 1990s I invented the virtual conceptual archeological site named Tel-Nona. It is where I mentally and spiritually still dig for finds. I am simultaneously the mound being dug, the digger, the methods and the findings. It is my ongoing adult playground. I feel free to invent or find different

cultures that have the foundations of all my life parts and knowledge. Through archetypes, both personal and collective, I can relate to different aspects of my creation as well as to artistic philosophical issues. My personal archetypes resonate with collective ones. It is an endless excavation zone—virtual, spiritual, physical, emotional and playful.

I am part of a Mediterranean heritage of cultures, many lost and unknown to us. At the same time, I am also part of the contemporary art world. I connect the dots of the mysterious past and the unknown future. I am in search of the blueprint of our existence, trying to relate to the timeline of art and history that brought me here at this time.

Bodies of artworks are still unfolding at Tel-Nona. It is an endless, rich, conceptual platform for my inner research as a human being and as an artist. There is a complex world of an archaic journey to our deepest and archetypal essence dormant since our birth and from the day men drew on cave walls. Our personal archetypes overlap the collective ones.

As I perceive history, it is merely a coincidence that an earthquake, fire or war did not destroy the Coliseum or Michelangelo's sculptures. Thus, I believe there must have been many more artefacts that vanished due to human stupidity or the powers of nature. Since my childhood, queries and feelings of loss have filled my imagination about the ancient library of Alexandria. What was lost forever? What did Aristotle's second book contain? What did Sappho's eight hundred poems sound like? Over the last few years I have been reviving the ancient library metaphorically through my tiny perspective as an ongoing Internet art project. I have also invented a character named Mound Hacker who leaves ostracons at archeological sites, mapping them on Google Earth. The ostracons lead through a link to the blog mentioned above, for people to think about our stupidity as we destroy our own knowledge.

These two bodies of conceptual art-works, which were exhibited in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, are a metaphor and an example of how we build huge complexes of knowledge and easily lose them. On the other hand, with the notion that humankind reinvents ideas, and the thought that knowledge does not really die, I propose these bodies of art.

I am grateful to the coincidence of artistic freedom we have these days. I can play as I wish, searching within my world, but at the same time belonging even more to my anonymous artist ancestors. I admire the clay masters of Mesopotamia, the scribes at Alexandria library, the Etruscans and brave Phoenicians sailing the Mediterranean with the merchandise and exchanging goods and knowledge.

**How do you think have the historical, political and cultural dynamics in Israel affected your professional identity or identities?**

I do not know how is it to be other than a Jewish Israeli woman. But throughout my life, even as a little girl, I sensed 'spirits' of 'others' from past times all around me through cultural leftovers such as coins and mosaic fragments I was told were





Figure 56. Nona Orbach, Restoration 3, 2013, collage on paper

Roman. When I was four years old, we climbed a huge vessel at Haifa Port, which took us to America. My father was going to work on his PhD in Washington DC and my mother was afraid to fly.

I still remember the shining silver dolphins he pointed at as they were chasing our huge ship. We sailed for two weeks in vast waters, and I closely followed our approach to each and every harbour. At first, the horizon would crumble, next there were mountains, after that we could vaguely see houses. Different shouts and sounds were heard at each harbour as the massive ropes tied us to the deck. Following that came smells and tastes. Sailing around Mediterranean harbours, I unknowingly experienced cultural richness and diversity through all my senses. I sensed I was surrounded by many others who were unlike me. They believed in Gods that were different from my father's.

We did this journey again when I was twelve. Therefore, when I say 'Mediterranean', it is deeply rooted within me through these intense expeditions,

although I could not have grasped it then. When I learned some history and the history of my family, it always went back to the same point, we are not alone here, we never have been. We are a part and an outcome of many cultures.

For a long time these vague wonders stood in contrast to the Israeli culture of building a new home for the Jewish people after two thousand years of Diaspora and the Holocaust. There was a notion that we had come to an empty place with almost no one living here, only desert and thorns. However, I do recall my uncle citing Ruben Lehrer who had emigrated from Russia in 1882 saying: "We must find a way to get along with the Arabs around us. They are like the earth and sky". Years later, when all my older uncles died, and I asked my cousins, no one remembered such an idea expressed in our family. As the years pass by and our dream of a solution of peace gets further away from us, and viciousness and terror are all around, it is discouraging. Thoughts of personal safety repeatedly cross our minds. This is true of my students as well. Our optimism was deeply wounded when Rabin was assassinated.

Therefore, I am trying to assist future art teachers on their journeys, so they will support their children in finding their voices within their own communities. Recognising the blueprint of any creator is fundamental to any art process. This is even more so in a multicultural society where conflicts, hatred and fear are part of one's existence. A good art teacher in a school can make a big difference for many children, helping them to grow with less hatred and more open-mindedness.

We have a lot of work to do.

**You have just referred to the future art teachers you teach. What kind of university course do they follow? How important is art practice within this course?**

The degree in Art Education at Oranim is four years long and art classes combine traditional courses in various media with more innovative workshops that encourage students to think beyond the medium. The students also follow school-based workshops and theoretical courses in art history, contemporary art, local multicultural art, philosophy and critical thought. The department also has special activities, new initiatives and cooperative projects that take place both within and outside the campus, in the department's gallery and in art events in Israel and overseas. The staff includes experienced experts in pedagogy, artists, researchers and curators who are active in the local and international scenes. The academic staff accompanies the young artist-teachers during their journey, in which personal expression is translated into a more global activity.

**What are these artist-teachers' perceptions about their social standing and future prospects? How much does ethnicity affect their understanding of themselves as artists and/or teachers?**

Most of the art and education students at Oranim are women. Being an artist in Israel means that you need to provide for yourself. Teachers' salaries are not high,



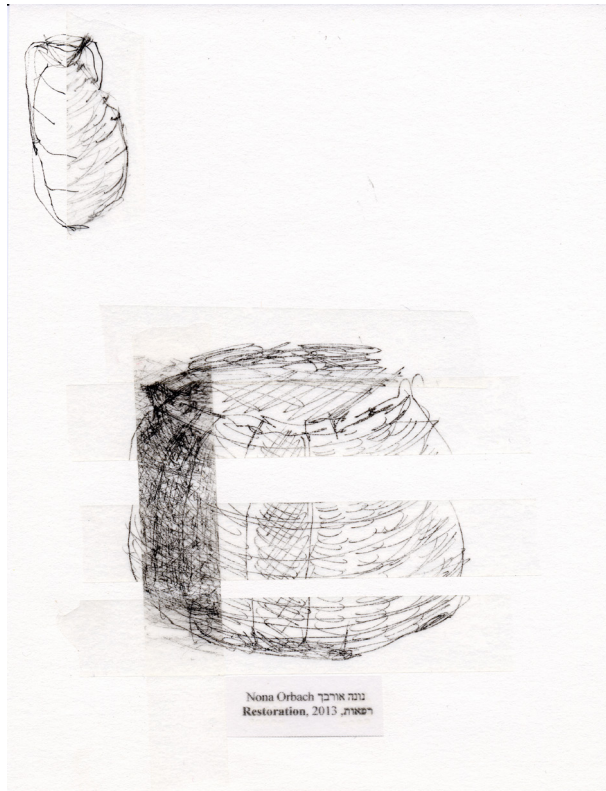


Figure 57. Nona Orbach, Restoration 7, 2013, collage on paper

but still there are those who choose this profession. A few of our students want to become artists, while others are more interested in community issues, politics, gender and education. A few are interested in continuing their studies in art therapy. In my courses, twenty-five percent of the students are Christians, Druze and Muslims, while the others are Jews. For most of them, this is the first time they have studied together in a multicultural environment.

Generally speaking, Jewish students would have studied art in high school or different private or community courses, and would have been exposed to exhibitions. As for the Arab students, my impression is that this is usually their first encounter with the contemporary art world. This is a very interesting phenomenon. Most Arab students I have taught began painting and drawing as little girls, discovering it as a way to pursue their inner world, mostly on their own. Perhaps it is an unconscious window searching for their personal identity. Moreover, drawing naturalistically is praised a lot, thus, they usually have quite good drawing abilities. Many of them

draw portraits of their family members, animals and close surroundings. I assume it also serves as a nonverbal path to receive acceptance and praise for their artistic work, especially if they portray their elders.

Nevertheless, when they begin their studies, they soon realise that there is much more to art, and they encounter obstacles. Belonging to a traditional society, they are torn between a large family and community-based behaviours on one hand, and their personal urge to express themselves as young individual women on the other. These conflicts surface when they are exposed to a secular world of art expressions, which can sometimes be rude or conceptual, and thus distant from the exercise of drawing a portrait diligently. We try to assist them, and eventually they do discover artistic ways of expressing their heritage in contemporary ways. In fact, Arab art students are a unique growing population in our college. Moreover, quite a few of them have become well-established in the local art scene.

Naturally, those who have more support from their families thrive as artists and teachers. Those who pursue teaching are deeply motivated to share their new knowledge with others within their communities. The ones who are art-driven are given opportunities in our college, such as a studio and support in making connections with galleries. They are all pioneers in their societies and create deep changes for the next generation.

For this reason, the process of learning and identifying their personal blueprint is a meaningful tool for all of them. They can move closer, to who they are individually, and combine, if necessary, their tradition and heritage. The conflict is metamorphosed into an interesting cultural bridge that links their ancestors' memory and archetypes with their own uniqueness.

#### REFERENCE

- Orbach, N., & Galkin, L. (2016). *The spirit of matter: A database handbook for therapists, artists and educators* (Kindle edition).