

Rediscovering feminism in Israeli art: New aspects of Pamela Levy's early work

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies the work of Pamela Levy (b. 1949), with an emphasis on the 1970s. I argue that, during this period, she drew upon the American feminist art tradition. Having no counterpart in Israel, where feminist consciousness and its cultural identity politics were to surface significantly only in the 1980s, Levy's feminist art could not have been understood, contextualized and appreciated properly in its time. I further argue that Levy, who immigrated to Israel from the U.S. in 1976, presents a new attitude to "provinciality." She sees it not as a dull imitation of the "center," but rather as representative of a province that is aware of itself and of its sources and culture, and that produces art with its own language and resources, while keeping in touch with what is happening elsewhere. Pamela Levy knew about the feminist art movement in the U.S. and borrowed ideas and elements from that movement, but she also continued to incorporate Israeli elements into her oeuvre, such as local textiles and figures typical of the Middle East.

Introduction

The work of Pamela Levy, born Pamela Denman (Iowa, 1949-2004), may be divided into two main periods, based on differences of media and style. The second period of her work—from 1980 and to her early death at the turn of the millennium—includes mainly oil paintings on canvas, large figurative scenes combining human figures and landscape. It is in this period that she found fame in Israel and these are the works which became identified with her style.¹ And yet, during the first period of her career-

1 Levy was awarded important prizes and grants, such as the Guggenheim Foundation Grant in 1980 and the Israel Minister of Education and Culture Prize for Painting and Sculpture in 1990. She held several solo exhibitions in galleries and museums, starting with very few small ones in the late 1970s

—from 1976, when she came to live in Israel, until 1980—she created textile collages, evincing the genre of “women’s art,”² in the sense of her choice of materials and techniques associated with women’s products.

This paper focuses on Pamela Levy’s first period work, produced during the 1970s. I argue that, during this period, she drew upon the American feminist art tradition, with specific emphasis on the theory and practice of the Feminist Pattern and Decoration Art Movement. Having no counterpart in Israel, where feminist consciousness and its cultural identity politics were to surface significantly only in the 1980s, Levy’s feminist art could not have been understood, contextualized and appreciated properly in its time.

It should be explained that Levy, who immigrated to Israel from the U.S., cultivated relations with feminist activists from overseas. As is well known, in the 1970s, women all over the world began to be aware of a new political reality which championed the rights of a wide range of minorities who had suffered social, economic and political oppression. At the beginning of that decade, young women artists throughout the world began, independently and contemporaneously, to create radical alternative feminist art that sought to effect a reform in the status of women, in the attitude to their creative endeavors, and in their place as women and as artists in the public arena.³ I would suggest that Pamela Levy was doing just that in Israel, far from the central stage of activities in America. Despite her physical distance from the hub of political and artistic activity, her work displays clear ties to contemporary feminist thinking and American artistic creation.

And yet, I would like to argue that she did not see herself simply as an artist living in the periphery. In my eyes, she presents a new attitude towards “provinciality”-----no longer as a dull imitation of the center, but as a representative of a province that is aware of itself and of its sources and culture, and produces art with its own language and resources, while keeping in touch with what is happening elsewhere. Pamela Levy indeed knew about the U.S. feminist art movement and borrowed ideas and elements from it, but she also continued to pour Israeli elements into her oeuvre, such as local textiles and typical figures from the Middle East.

and building up to prominent ones in the 1980s, with a 1994 showing at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and a 1999 exhibition at the Hertzlia Museum of Art. From the 1980s up to her death, she was also invited to participate in many group exhibitions.

- 2 The very general term “women’s art” usually refers to art works made by women, mostly dealing with the female body or issues related to women’s lives. Here, I use the term to refer to art works from soft materials like textiles, fur, lace and wool in ways traditionally associated with female occupations, such as sewing, knitting and weaving. For further discussion, see, for example, Broude (1982).
- 3 The feminist art created in the 1970s mainly in the U.S. was profoundly influenced by the ideology and political discourse of the movement known as radical feminism. For more on the agenda of radical feminism and art, see, e.g., Cottingham (2000:126).

Levy's coming of age as an artist occurred in the second half of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. Her formative years as a young American woman and an artist were the tumultuous years of social revolution, during which she was an undergraduate at the University of Northern Iowa. Shortly after her graduation in 1972, she lived in an artist commune in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Kopler, 2002:30). Santa Fe at that time was famed for being a center of art and culture, attracting numerous artists and intellectuals. It was home to prominent women artists like Georgia O'Keefe, considered one of the "founding mothers of feminist art" (Buhler Lynes, 1992:437), and to the leading feminist artist Judy Chicago,⁴ both of whom Levy admired. It was here, I propose, that Levy first became acquainted with the newly forming feminist art project and was especially drawn to and influenced by the Pattern and Decoration movement.

As is well known, the 1970s in America, and particularly the first several years of that decade, witnessed a major eruption of art created by young women artists, who were molded and inspired by the great revolutions of the 1960s, and who identified themselves as feminists and their art as feminist art (Garrard, 1994). The Civil Rights Movement protesting inequality of blacks, the student revolution protesting institutional and state brutality, the peace movement protesting the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution protesting conservatism and fundamentalism, the Women's Liberation Movement protesting women's oppression and discrimination-----all sent waves of a major culture shock into the American art scene as well. Women artists of the early 1970s were also prompted to question and undermine the basic hegemonic assumptions regarding the canon of American art and the place, status and position it allotted to women. In conjunction with the feminist project, they largely sought to expose the deeply embedded bias against women artists and women's art, which resulted in oppression, marginalization and exclusion. Along with other Second Wave radical feminists,⁵ theoreticians and activists, feminist artists were exploring possible answers to questions regarding femininity, sexuality and female experiences, in order to forge a liberated and authentic identity and voice. Their artistic endeavor included formulating a new visual language that would capture the essence of their oppression and invent avenues of expression to counter and overturn it. One of the more radical expressions of this artistic creative drive was the Feminist Pattern and Decoration Art Movement, which flourished in America in the 1970s, and which joined the feminist politics of accentuating gender and sexual difference as a basis for equal rights of inclusion.

4 Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.

5 Feminist art created in the 1970s in the U.S. was allied with radical feminism. For a detailed discussion, see, e.g., Tong (1989:95-138).

The Pattern and Decoration feminist artists in America aimed to challenge prevailing notions regarding what was considered “art” and to expose the ways in which it was subjected to the politics of gender, viz., to the systematic hierarchal ordering of works of art in line with the gender divide. By turning to “low” materials (cloth, wool, thread) and methods (sewing, knitting, weaving), which were traditionally and historically identified with femininity and womenfolk’s work, they attacked the well established division between forms of “low art” and “high art,” a classical separation which governed Western esthetics over the centuries and was responsible for the relegation of women’s decorative and ornamental oeuvre to the position of “low art.”

Calling the equality bluff: Women in Israel

In order to discuss Pamela Levy’s early art, created in her new home in Israel, and to consider it as having feminist components (Levy immigrated in 1976 and converted to Judaism before marrying her Israeli husband), it should first be viewed within the wider Israeli feminist political context. In the last two decades, much has been written about feminism and women’s positioning in Israel and the reasons for the fallacies and misconceptions of the feminist ideology among Israeli women (see, e.g., Izraeli et al., 1999). The research has pointed to several reasons, the major one being the influence of the ethos which proclaimed equality between the sexes (such as the kibbutz), alongside the dominant role of the army, to which Israeli women were also conscripted. These factors created the misconception that women in Israel were already emancipated and did not need the “novelty” of feminism, as Orly Lubin explained:

Being a woman soldier gained women entrance into the modern nation’s meta-narrative and its cultural manifestation as equal, active members. On the other hand, entering the collective, that is, consigning oneself to “what it means to be a woman in this place, on this territory” [in the State of Israel] means paying the price of serving the collective needs (2003:164-165).

Even in a later decade, during the 1970s, Israeli women were against feminist ideology, as explained by psychologist Ariella Friedman: “Unlike their sisters across the ocean, for Israeli women, the feminist manifesto brought no dramatic novelty... for they have had the same roles and jobs as men had, and they believed that they had been receiving egalitarian treatment” (1999:25). In addition, it should be mentioned that, during the period in which Levy created her early art discussed here, Israel was in two major wars (the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973), which shifted the public’s attention and preoccupation (artists among them) further away

from gender and women's issues, to deal with more urgent and fundamental issues of the struggle and survival of the young nation.

The Israeli art scene showed no sign of incorporating feminist components in art works during the 1970s.⁶ In an Israeli art journal article on feminist art in the country, influential curator Sara Breitberg-Semel stated that "women's art" had been non-existent in Israel in the 1970s: "Although there was a large body of Israeli art and there were many women artists, the combination of the two had no real significance" (1979:50). For over a decade, the subject was not addressed again by critics, until an exhibition entitled "The Feminine Presence" opened in the summer of 1990 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and the curator of Israeli art, Ellen Ginton, tried to explain the reasons for the lack of feminist art in Israel in the 1970s. She maintained that Rafie Lavie (b. 1937), a prominent artist and teacher, had shaped a whole generation of outstanding women artists during this decade, encouraging and promoting their work (Ginton, 1990). Yet at the same time, Lavie had also advocated the local consensus that there is no such thing as women's art—in other words, that one can not and should not find a specific group of art works that manifest feminine elements of one gender group. In her catalogue, Ellen Ginton called attention to an Israeli anomaly with respect to America: Israeli women artists during the 1970s were in fact suspicious of and prejudiced against feminist ideology. It is interesting that leading women artists like Michal Ne'aman (b. 1951), Tamar Getter (b. 1953) and Deganit Berest (b. 1949) had begun exhibiting in the early 1970s and were immediately embraced by the critics and the public, though only in the 1990s were they joined by others displaying much more overtly feminist work. Moreover, and most interestingly, not only the critics, but also the women artists themselves were totally silent with respect to their gender and tried to avoid creating art relating to their positioning as women in the Israeli culture. In effect, proclaims Ginton (1990), these women artists denied this issue all together, although they were wholly aware of the awakening feminist movement in the U.S. Thus, what was rejected in Israel by the establishment, with the full consent of these women artists, was the very concept of "women's art." Instead, mainstream Israeli art of the time was characterized by conceptualism and minimalism, in works like Joshua Noishtein's (Tammuz, 1991:278-279).

Imported language, local material

Taking the above into consideration, I wish to examine Levy's textile art, dated from her early period, which was considered unfathomable or a "curiosity" in Israel in the

6 There was one exception: the artist Miriam Sharon. For a lengthy discussion of her feminist art, see Dekel (2007).

1970s (Tal, 1981). These works were virtually ignored by critics and the academic world, and have never been systematically documented and analyzed within the framework of Israeli art history. I consider them in relation to the American feminist art of the same period and to the feminist theoretical thought from which it sprang, and establish the strong correlation between them, alongside local elements and components.

As suggested, Levy drew her inspiration directly from contemporary American feminist art. Her textile collage works from the early period joined the cutting edge of the feminist art produced at the time, mainly in the U.S. (Gouma-Peterson, 1999:29). She was one of the only Israeli women artists to incorporate these materials in the late 1970s in a clear context of feminist ideology,⁷ at a time when feminist collages abroad had their heyday and were part of a diverse body of art created in the genre of Pattern and Decoration (Stein, 1989:157-158).

Levy's early works are large-scale collages, ranging between 40X60 to 80X95 inches, and consist of pieces of fabric painstakingly hand-stitched together and drawn on in oils and watercolors. Prints, swatches of flower-patterned fabrics, glued paper, and hand-embroidered images are also incorporated into the collages. Some of the images are abstract, while others are figurative and readily identifiable. The works have a deliberately careless appearance, and were defined by the artist herself as wall hangings, as they were exhibited unframed and loosely hanging (Fig. 1).

Levy worked in stages. She first went to the market, particularly the flea market in Jaffa, learning her new environment and the Israeli people. In the markets of Jaffa and Jerusalem, she searched for fabrics originally produced for the textile industry, cheap secondhand tablecloths, small handkerchiefs or old clothes from which she tore off pieces to use in her compositions. She explains that she was looking for inexpensive, readily available materials, "the sort that any woman in Israel might find in her simple home."⁸ Thus, for her collages, she chose what she herself called "feminine" textiles, the products of women's work (Kopler, 2002:3). This choice of textiles reflect, in addition to the "feminine qualities" she testified to, a clear fascination with the

7 Bianka Eshel-Gershuni is another Israeli artist who has used "feminine materials" since the late 1960s. However, Eshel-Gershuni did not consider herself a feminist artist, and from the start wanted no identification with women's issues. She claimed that high quality art should not bother with questions such as whether it was created by women or men, and that gender is not a factor to be taken into consideration. Moreover, she did not make use of sewing and textiles as did Pamela Levy, but rather of "cheap" materials, such as plastic dolls, feathers and nylon stockings, regarded as inferior materials and associated with kitsch. A decade later, the artist Yocheved Wienfeld created a series of art works clearly evincing gender issues and feminine oppression, but she did not create them within the framework of feminist ideology and within a wide political movement, but rather worked intuitively.

8 Interview of the artist in her home, July 8, 2004.

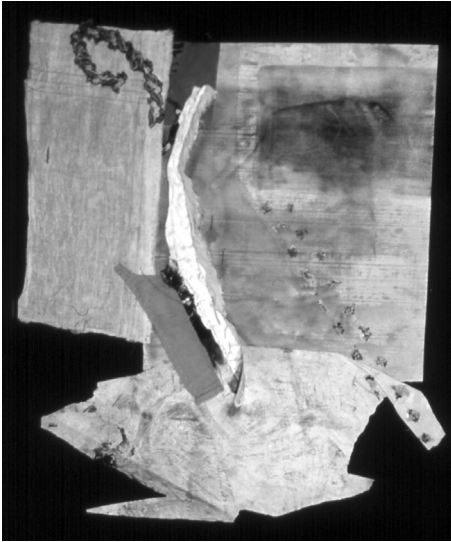


Figure 1: Pamela Levy, *Basketball Court*, 1978, mixed media, 43 x 55 in., collection of Yuval Levy, Tel Aviv.

“Oriental” qualities they hold.⁹ To the textiles, she added her own woodcuts which, she declared, were like the stamps used by the women of India and Persia to print patterns on their simple fabrics. The artist owned an original wooden carved stamp of this sort from Ethiopia, and she herself created others in the same spirit for her textile projects,¹⁰ such in as the collage entitled *Triptych*, which incorporates four circular printed patterns (Fig. 2). After spreading the fabrics on the floor, Levy added further elements, sewing them on or attaching them loosely, almost provisionally, using marking pins or glue. She then incorporated painted images into the abstract compositions, producing works rich in texture and media.

This creative process is very similar to that of the American feminist artists during the 1970s known as the artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement, who were politically allied with radical feminism (Nochlin, 2000:7). The members of the movement sought alternative modes of expression to replace the language and techniques of a male-dominated world and art. They argued that, throughout history and particularly in modern art, crafts and decorative art had been marginalized, dubbed derogatively “women’s art,” considered an inferior form, from which Western “fine” art emphatically distanced itself. The Pattern and Decoration artists set out to

9 The Orientalist tendency and fascination in Israeli art in general, and in Levy’s art in particular, is discussed later.

10 Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.

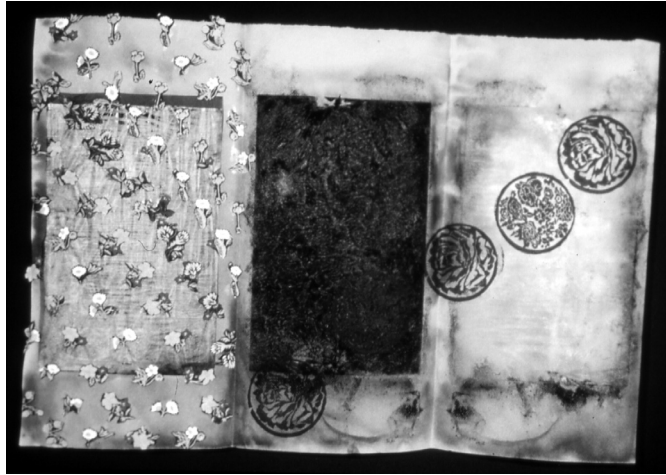


Figure 2: Pamela Levy, *Triptych*, 1977, mixed media, 71 x 47.2 in., collection of Yuval Levy, Tel Aviv.

deconstruct this binary perception by seeking cultural systems and perceptions which avoided the branding of ornamentation as feminine, and in which the “decorative” had not undergone a process of gendering. In non-Western cultures, such as Islamic, Mexican and Hispano-Moorish art, they found that the ornamental was not considered as merely an art form devoid of cultural and esthetic content, and, moreover, it was not designated as the work of women alone. Amy Goldin, a visiting professor from New York at the University of California at San Diego, introduced students to art forms that were not produced within the Eurocentric art world, such as oriental carpets and Third World weaving (Broude, 1994:211). This cross-cultural comparative critical method thus challenged the claim to trans-historicity and universality of the concept of art and the artistic in the Western art establishment. The work itself of the feminist artists in the Pattern and Decoration movement displayed aspects of their ideology, in that it sought non-hierarchical images and compositions, and avoided compositions with a central focus of the famous “single vanishing point.”¹¹ These works, argues art historian Norma Broude, presented a clear feminist statement and were loaded with personal and political significance (Broude, 1994:208). Writing in 1977 about the significance these works had for her personal development, Miriam Schapiro, a leading artist of the Pattern and Decoration movement, explains: “I wanted to validate the traditional activities of women, to connect myself to the unknown women artists

11 The geometric single vanishing point system originated in Western Renaissance art.

who made quilts, who had done the invisible ‘women’s work’ of civilization. I wanted to acknowledge them, to honor them” (Schapiro, 1977:296).

In light of subsequent feminist theories of *écriture féminine*,¹² it seems that the feminist artists who established the Pattern and Decoration movement and who, alongside with producing their work, also argued, taught and theorized its rationale, were the precursors of the concept developed so brilliantly only a decade later. Such was Luce Irigaray, who introduced the idea of a non-hierarchical language and of the artistic notion of “fluidity” in form and matter in her seminal “Mechanics of Fluids” (1985a), *The Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985b) and other groundbreaking essays that have rocked the basic concepts of the canon of Western art and have laid a foundation for an alternative order and understanding of art. Much of this line of thinking is evident in the Pattern and Decoration movement from its very beginnings.

The influence of the American Pattern and Decoration movement

Among the prominent American women artists who most certainly influenced Pamela Levy (still living in the U.S. in the early 1970s) were the feminists Miriam Schapiro, Sherry Brody, Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff. Schapiro was one of the key figures in the Pattern and Decoration movement. In both her personal life and her art, she viewed her role as a mediator between the polarities that perpetuated the patriarchal structure: the personal vs. the public, “crafts” vs. “fine art,” and the feminist movement vs. the mainstream art world, as she stated in an interview with Ruth Applehof in February 1979:

Part of my ethos is... to know how far I can go with it [her art] because it’s so taboo in terms of high art. I’ve chosen to use fabric and decorative arts to express my beliefs. ... For me the fabric of my art and the fabric of my life neatly equate each other (cited in Gouma-Peterson, 1980:48).

In 1972, Schapiro and Brody created six miniature rooms entitled “The Doll House” that were exhibited within the collaborative feminist environmental art piece called *Womanhouse* (Gouma-Peterson, 1999:70). One of the rooms, named “The Seraglio”

12 This term is usually reserved for a particular kind of critical writing by women, emanating from the feminism of contemporary French critics, such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. What unites this form of feminist criticism is the belief that there is an area of textual production that can be called “feminine,” that it exists beneath the surface of masculine discourse, and that it only occasionally comes to the fore in the form of disruptions of “masculine” language.

(a harem in a Turkish palace), contained textiles adorned with particularly colorful embroidery and ornamentation, linking it to exotic Persian interiors. For Schapiro, who had been brought up on the modernist tradition that totally rejected any hint of decorative art, this work was a critical turning point, an act of rebellion that led to her artistic emancipation (Broude, 1994:208). All of her work thereafter was done in this style alone. It included collages of fabric swatches glued on an acrylic ground, produced at a time when the predominant style involved grids and geometric shapes. Relating to the significance of this type of art for her, she explained that she was attempting to honor and validate traditionally female activities throughout civilization (Schapiro, 1977:296). Schapiro's numerous works from the late 1970s—fans, hearts, quilts and houses—contained political messages, such as revalidating women's productivity and thus repositioning them in an egalitarian status with men's cultural production. According to art historian Judith Stein (1994:228), although artists before her had used the collage technique to incorporate bits of fabric and lace into their work—such as Robert Rauschenberg, who glued quilt swatches onto his work (e.g., in *Bed*, made in 1955; see Fig. 3)—before the 1970s no artist had allowed the textiles to speak for themselves and signify their innate power and creative source, as had been done by Schapiro and other feminist artists.

Another example of Schapiro's use of "crafts" is the series of works *Me and Mary Cassatt* from 1976 (Fig. 4). Like Levy, she incorporated female figures amongst the abstract pieces of fabric (for a comparison, see Fig. 5 by Levy, made in 1979). In the center of the work is a reproduction of a painting by Mary Cassatt—a woman at her toilet holding a mirror—that Schapiro glued on a canvas, and it is surrounded by swatches of bright fabrics painstakingly stitched together, clearly in homage to the American tradition of quilting. This work by Schapiro is a particularly important one because of the ironic paradox it presents by introducing the "lowly" materials of women's art, such as sewing and embroidery, into the context of "fine" art in a reference to an Impressionist masterpiece produced in the "traditional" medium of oil on canvas.

Like Miriam Schapiro, Pamela Levy employed the "feminine" materials of fabric swatches, and performed the stereotypically female activity of sewing them together. She combined a variety of images, both figurative and abstract, with a wide range of materials of varying textures. Many of her works include female figures, as, for example, in the piece from 1979 that combines different media, such as textile and colorful plastic sheets, and decorative and abstract images with a monumental naked woman standing on the left hand side of the collage (Fig.5). Over the years, the female figure increasingly became her central interest.

Levy's collages display a wide variety of figurative motifs from different contexts, especially feminine images, relating to the world, role and status of the woman as the artist perceives them. Thus, she employed figures of brides or Bedouin and Arab women, the latter primarily in the form of Hagar, the only biblical figure to appear in



Figure 3: Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955, combined painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt and sheet mounted on wood, 6 ft. 3.25 in. x 2 ft. 7.5 in. x 6.5 in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 4: Miriam Schapiro, *Me and Mary Cassatt*, 1976, acrylic collage, 30 x 40 in., private collection.

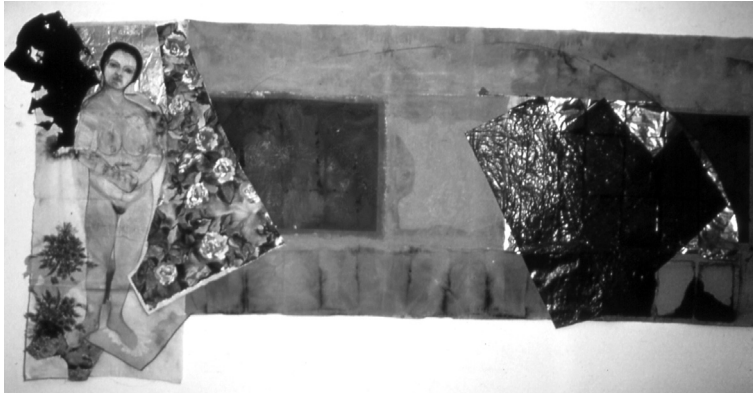


Figure 5: Pamela Levy, untitled, 1979, mixed media, 47.2 x 27.5 in., collection of Yuval Levy, Tel Aviv.

her work from this period. Hagar, an Egyptian slave taken away from her home and family to be given to Abraham, who gave birth to Ishmael, considered the father of the Arab people, was eventually denounced and expelled to the desert (Genesis 16, 3; Genesis 21, 1-10). Her figure has long been used as a symbol of alienation and exclusion by several women artists, such as Edmonia Lewis.¹³ Levy's use of the image of the Arab woman, alongside images of Arab men and boys, should be mentioned here in relation to the prevailing use of Orientalist images and ideology by several Israeli artists, since the end of the nineteenth century.

The perception of the East by Zionist thought, and consequently the arts, often used the image of the Arab, among several other images and characteristics (Zalmona and Manor-Friedman, 1998:vi.) This tendency has to do with anthropological conceptions and esthetic principles, but it should be remembered that East and West are not categories that reflect reality, but rather that the East is, at best, a set of ideas that are agreed upon and that "The East" exists only in the eyes of the beholder. As Edward Said explained it in his seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978), it is the ways in which the West looks upon the East, and in fact invents it, only to get feedback, in a perfect mirror image reversal (the East being perceived as an unchanging, history-less world, barbaric and sensual). In other words, in the context in which Israeli artists created, even representations of reality they produced, however realistic and "documentary," are nothing but a rendering of the scene according to ideological imperatives and a certain world view, whether conscious or unconscious.¹⁴

13 For a further discussion of the use of Hagar's image in Israeli art, see Zalmona, (1998:70–71).

14 It should be mentioned, as Yigal Zalmona explained, that the Zionist approach to the East is a particular instance of the Orientalist ideology. It is an approach far more complex than the classic

Duality is one of the themes connecting many of the Israeli artists depicting the East in their art works. Works like that describe Israeli culture and experience from the point of view of the tension between the need to merge into the East and become a part of it, and the wish to be distinguished from it, to see in it an “otherness” and to belong to Western culture (Zalmona and Manor-Friedman, 1998:vi.). Ever since the beginning of Zionist settlement of the country, one can see a dialectic movement between an increased and lowered preoccupation with the image of the Arab—all according to periods of an impending encounter or confrontation with Arab neighbors (Zalmona, 1998:ix). Levy’s immigration to Israel in the 1970s occurred within a particular chapter of the State of Israel, in the sense that after a long period in which Israelis had no daily urban-modern, normalized encounters with Arabs, and hence scarcely depicted urban Arabs in their art, the 1967 war led to renewed contact between Israel’s Jewish population and its Palestinian neighbors—an intense encounter that was largely unfamiliar to Israelis of the younger generation. The rich blend of cultures and religions of East Jerusalem, made salient by the 1967 war and introduced to Levy, the young immigrant who settled in Jerusalem and made it her home until her death, left a powerful impression which was soon integrated into and reflected in her art (as in the work of other Israeli artists of her generation).

Looking back at Levy’s work, we can see that the figure of Hagar recurs in many of the collages, either as an embroidered image or as a printed image in which a traditionally dressed woman with a head cover stands alone (Fig. 6). Levy’s interest in Hagar represents another major feminist aspect of her work: the political, as expressed in the familiar phrase “the personal is political” (e.g., Eisenstein, 1983:35–37), and where telling one’s own story reflects both the experiences and status of other women. I believe that Levy’s work, in addition to having abstract and decorative components, also contains a discernible personal narrative that identifies it as social protest art. Levy, who converted to Judaism after she came to Israel, feared that she herself would become a sort of Hagar, and in fact this is reflected in her personal story of coming in holy matrimony and then divorcing her Israeli husband. In this sense, according to Levy’s own view,¹⁵ her work is autobiographical, as it parallels and reflects her personal struggle as a new immigrant sensing isolation and estrangement from veteran Israelis, having no real professional or social connections with them. After her immigration to Israel in 1976 and to a certain extent to the day she died, Levy suffered from a sense of foreignness and a duality regarding her local identity, as well as a certain resentment for not being fully accepted into Israeli society and the Israeli

European Orientalism, since in this approach the East is conceived not only as the locus of the ancient history of the Jewish people and its supreme origin, but to an equal extent it also represents “the other,” fundamentally exterior, sometimes antagonistic.

15 Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.



Figure 6: Pamela Levy, Hagar, 1978, mixed media, 59 x 21.6 in., collection of Yuval Levy, Tel Aviv.

art world. In this respect, she applied one of the central principles of the then popular radical feminist ideology, which advocated the conveying of personal testimony and experience of the oppression of women. The political feminist movement saw the exposure and enunciation of oppression as a road to self and social awareness, a proactive step toward female empowerment and, most importantly, an impetus for meaningful concrete change.

Levy's use of the figure of Hagar, and other Arab women in later works, as the "other" in the reality of Israeli-Jewish hegemony was thus a precursor of the theme with which she would later deal in her more famous paintings, such as *Palestine, the Birth of a Nation* (1988), depicting a young woman running naked, which became a landmark in Israeli art (Teicher, 1998:24). It is interesting to mention, in relation to this painting, that it has, like her early works, traces of Orientalist components, as she—like many other Israeli artists—tended to see the East as a locus of Eros. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Israeli artists have presented the image of "the Arab" according to the Orientalist stereotype that identifies him or her with nature and Eros. This representation may, on the one hand, reflect an admiration for the harmonious relationship Arabs have with nature, but on the other hand, it may also reflect an attitude inflicted by the Orientalist stereotype of the people of the East as belonging to a lesser race of humans, closer to nature and the world of animals than to human high culture (Zalmona, 1998:xi).

Another central character of the Orientalist thought that may have been absorbed by Pamela Levy is her frequent depiction of naked young women. In Orientalist thought, the East as a whole was often conceived as a feminine entity, and the image of the Oriental woman was merely its metaphor. This may explain Levy's decision to depict a young Arab woman (and not a man) running naked in the painting mentioned above, as a metaphor for "Palestine" as an emerging young nation.

Art historian Gideon Ofrat has noted that Levy showed loyalty to the motif of the woman, but he emphasized her image in relation to the home rather than to ethnic origin. According to Ofrat, "Pamela Levy's collages are the teeming world of childhood, a world of freedom, bright colors, and toys and games through which the artist returns to her youth and her home" (1979:19). Yet this return to childhood is not exactly idyllic, he claims. Ofrat finds violence, pain and turmoil in her works of that period. They are therefore not the products of a romantic nostalgia, but rather expressions of a psychological self-analysis, which is inevitably painful.

Animals also figure in the collages, among them camels. Unlike veteran immigrants or Israeli-born artists, who were well familiar with the image of the camel (ever since the days of the Bezal'el Art Academy, established in 1906), Levy first encountered them upon her arrival in Israel, in the markets of Jerusalem's Old City. In the aftermath of the 1967 war, this scene, together with the close encounter with the ancient desert culture of the Sinai Bedouins, the West Bank towns and the rich blends of cultures and religions in East Jerusalem, all left a powerful impression, which was soon reflected,

sometimes with an Orientalist-romantic flavor, in her art. Other images incorporated in her collages were cats, butterflies, horses and chicken taken from the illustrations in her young son's books. The collages also contain plant motifs, Jewish motifs and Christian images, such as the Madonna or St. George and the dragon.

This complex juxtaposition of images was joined together from different worlds, often in an associative manner that is enigmatic for the viewer, into one complete harmonious art work. In works like *Triptych* (Fig. 2), she indeed brought together elements from different categories: abstract woodcut prints, pieces of bright cloth and metal pins, together with pieces of plastic wrapping and paper cuts of small blooming flowers, all side by side on one large canvas. In such works, she strove to create a new order and new contexts, taking components from different categories and bringing them together "to establish a new world order through which things that could not be expressed in the old order could now be said" (Levyta, 1978:11). This, I argue, is another sign of Pamela Levy's strong connection with feminist thought. This approach of bringing elements from different categories, often in an associative and enigmatic way, evokes the theories of French philosophers Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, who called for an alternative "feminine writing" (*écriture féminine*) mediated by the female body. The feminist artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement believed that such forms had innate feminine rhythms that reflected their experiences as women, experiences deriving from the biological and physiological conditions imposed by the female body—that is, from the very fact that the artist lived in the body of a woman (Dekel, 2004:67). Hélène Cixous (2001:628, 633) expressed this idea most precisely by arguing that the characteristics of female creativity (feminine writing, art, etc.) were not to be found only in respect to thematics and genre, but also in the structure, rhythm, texture and tonality of the work of art. Luce Irigaray was one of the leading proponents of the need to develop feminine art mediated by the female body and feelings. Her ideas were particularly apt for the Pattern and Decoration movement, not only because of her desire for a diversity of feminine images devoid of hierarchy, but also, and primarily, because she was an essentialist who sang the praises of the female body and called on women to connect with their bodies and use them as a channel for their creative activity: "The feminine ... 'style', which, of course, is not a 'style' at all, according to the traditional way of looking at things ... takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things *tactile*.... It is always fluid" (Irigaray, 1985a:78-79).

Levy's collages highlight the values of breaking with tradition and of protest. Her use of images from children's literature and women's magazines are a sign of her desire to expand the boundaries of legitimate sources of inspiration to include those not considered "proper," along with her consistent conscious effort to eliminate the hierarchical division between crafts and art, and this was, as mentioned, the goal of the Pattern and Decoration movement. Motifs drawn from Spanish and Ethiopian folk art, American quilts and other traditions regarded as "crafts" served her as equally

legitimate sources of inspiration. In *Triptych* (Fig. 2), one can see how she made use of pieces and swatches of fabrics and drew upon traditions considered non-canonical, such as Ethiopian carved stamps (seen on the right), Indian dyeing (a coloring technique, in the center) and “childish” images taken from children’s literature and illustrations (like the flowers on the left). Furthermore, her works display an attempt to discard the traditional Renaissance geometrical perspective (of the one vanishing point) in favor of a non-hierarchical arrangement of the sort used, for example, in Islamic art (e.g., Fig. 1). This desire to abolish boundaries is as apparent in the feminist collages of Pamela Levy as in the collages made by members of the Pattern and Decoration movement in the U.S.

Valerie Jaudon, another prominent member of the Pattern and Decoration movement, first encountered feminism in the early 1970s, and chose to implement its political ideology through the principles of the Pattern and Decoration artists. Her most famous works were produced in the late 1970s. These consist of large woven textiles covered with intertwined strips of fabric, both straight and sinuous, in a composition lacking any vanishing point or central focus. They bring to mind Celtic or Islamic patterns, as in *Aberdeen* from 1981 (Fig. 7), and strongly evoke the textiles made by Pamela Levy in Israel, since they, too, had no focal center and could be hung in various positions.

Levy acknowledged that she was influenced by feminist theory regarding use of the non-canonical inventory of images suggested by cultures outside the Eurocentric world and of materials considered inferior by mainstream art.¹⁶ She was particularly intrigued, she explained, by the idea of combining elements from “high” and “low” art.

Another noted feminist artist, Joyce Kozloff, began her career as an abstract artist creating the sort of geometric works that dominated the contemporary art world, and became interested in patterns and their cultural significance after a trip to Mexico in 1973. In Mexico, she started sketching patterns from pre-Columbian folk art and local carpets, textiles, ceramic tiles, woven baskets and architectural designs. In the wake of this trip, she produced a series of acrylic paintings, among them *Three Facades* (Fig. 8), using repeated patterns inspired by the ceramic decoration on the walls of the churches she had visited (Broude, 1994:221). In order to learn more about ornamentation, Kozloff went to Morocco in 1975 and Turkey in 1978 to get a closer look at the beauty and complexity of Islamic designs. Throughout this period, she created progressively larger textiles, exhibiting them in the same galleries that displayed abstract works of grids and color fields. Sensing the tension between her art and the “sterile” gallery showing the “high art” of the dominant schools (mainly

16 Interview of the artist in her home, July 8, 2004.

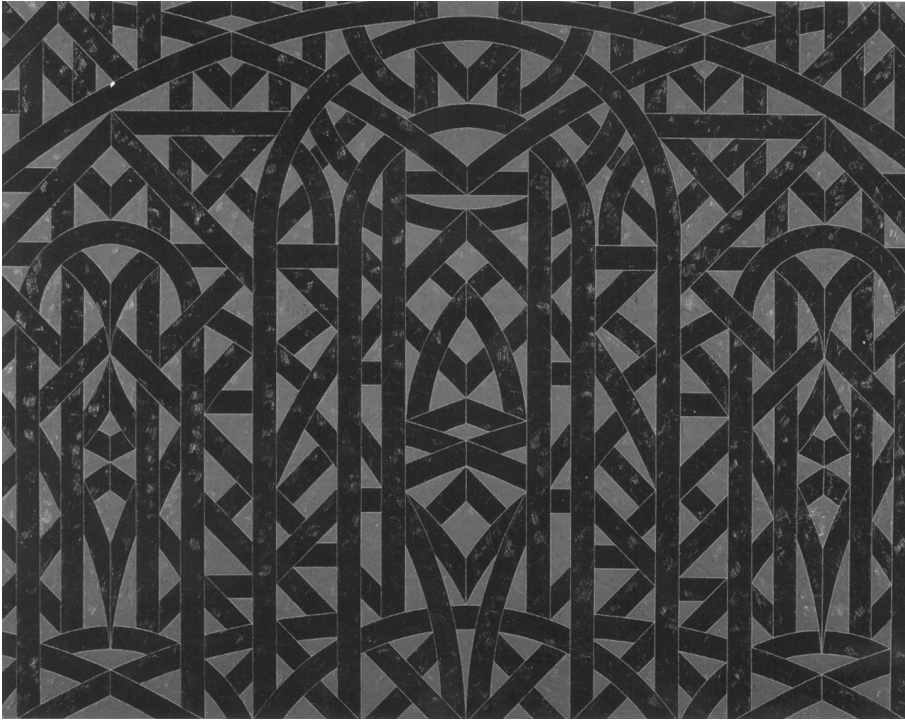


Figure 7: Valerie Jaudon, Aberdeen, 1981, oil on canvas, 102 x 136 in., Pehr Gyllenhammer Collection, Sweden.

varieties of the abstract), she began looking for a different way to display her works. Their proportions grew larger, until they became huge installations, some taking over several halls at once, such as the installation she exhibited at the Whitney Biennial in 1979, consisting of hand-painted glazed ceramic tiles and silkscreen printing. According to the artist, a single work, *An Interior Decorated* (Fig. 9), for example, might contain decorative elements drawn from a wide range of sources: Indian ceramics, Moroccan designs, a Viennese book of art nouveau patterns, American quilts, Berber carpets, Egyptian wall paintings, Islamic calligraphy, art deco designs, ancient Sumerian relief, Romanesque relief and painted Chinese porcelain (Broude, 1994:297, n. 28). Kozloff's works can be compared to Levy's, as they both sought decorative elements in popular culture and found inspiration in "low art."

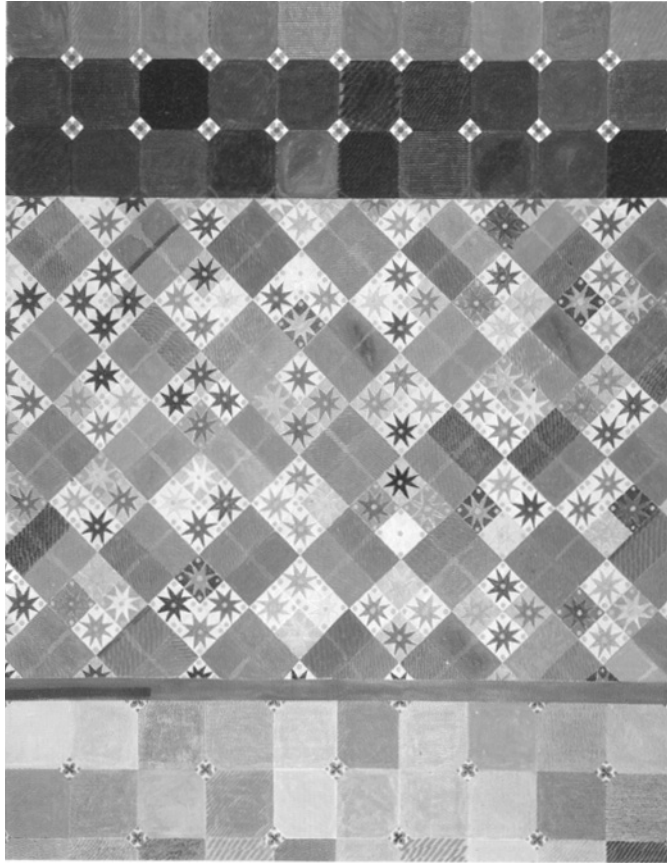


Figure 8: Joyce Kozloff, *Three Facades*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 59 in., collection of Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Additional influences on Levy's art

The notable influence of American feminist art on Pamela Levy notwithstanding, we cannot ignore the impact of the Abstract Expressionist art that still filtered through art programs at that date. But mainly, we must not ignore the impact of proto-pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose work she said she admired.¹⁷ Viewing the works she produced in the 1970s as a rebellion against artistic hegemony (like Abstract

¹⁷ Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.



Figure 9: Joyce Kozloff, *An Interior Decorated*, 1979, installation: hand-painted, glazed ceramic tile floor and silk-screened hanging silks, private collection.

Expressionism) or artistic perfection (Conceptualism and Minimalism), she was attracted by what seemed to be the “sloppiness” and randomness in Rauschenberg’s paintings, or more precisely, the deliberate appearance of carelessness. His use of paint drips similarly conformed to her desire to avoid a fastidiously polished artistic look (compare Levy’s and Rauschenberg’s work, Figs. 1 and 3).

Rauschenberg's influence is also apparent in another technique Levy employed in the 1970s: the transfer of newspaper images to textiles and the juxtaposition of images and prints taken from the mass media and personal sources. Moreover, like Rauschenberg, she combined these elements in an enigmatic composition with no apparent logical connection between them. In her early works, Levy conducted an artistic dialogue with Rauschenberg, borrowing elements from his work and creating collages of her own that contained references to his paintings, in which the parts and themes are virtually hermetic and unfathomable.

Nonetheless, unlike Rauschenberg, Levy placed great emphasis on the act of sewing, linked to women's art and the sphere of the home where women and girls were once occupied with domestic activities. Thus, while her work is reminiscent of Rauschenberg, it at the same time refers explicitly to the medium of folk quilts, painstaking labor performed by anonymous women and girls in private, intimate, domestic spaces (Mainardi, 1982:335). Levy relates that she became interested in the medium of authentic quilting in the early 1970s, when she was still living in the U.S., and collected books on the subject. She also recounts a personal experience that left a very strong impression on her: still in the U.S., she accompanied a close friend on a symbolic, ritualistic visit to the home of his grandmother, where he was presented with a traditional quilt on the occasion of his wedding.¹⁸ Thus, despite the obvious influence of Robert Rauschenberg—breaking out of traditional frameworks, rebelling and ridding herself of the need for artistic perfection and polish, as reflected in a deliberate randomness and the use of paint drips, as well as the borrowing of media images—Levy was not guided solely by his principles. In my opinion, his approach was not the sole source in her mind when she created her textiles. In fact, I believe she took the idea of shattering the hierarchy of “high” and “low” art not only from Rauschenberg, but equally from feminist ideology and feminist art, as she acknowledged that she was gravely drawn to and influenced by it: “I learned about Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro and about radical feminism when I was still an undergraduate in Iowa. I read texts and I knew them all [the feminist Pattern and Decoration artists].”¹⁹ The dialogue with the work of Robert Rauschenberg, on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of the inner truth of her personal feminine world, along with the technique of sewing drawn from the past, on the other, resulted in a rich and fascinating body of work that is complex both in form and in iconography.

As I see it, Levy's stitched textiles arouse clear associations with contemporary feminist ideology and art in the U.S., whether or not this was her deliberate intention. This is in contrast to the scarce interpretations of these works, such as by art critic, Gideon Ofrat, who claims that Levy did not arrive at the feminine aspects of her work

18 Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.

19 Interview of the artist in her home, July 8, 2004.

via the feminist route, but by taking a very honest, deep and personal autobiographical route. In his view, she created impressive “women’s art” not because feminism was in fashion, but because she was expressing herself sincerely, and due to its nature such an expression would have a feminine quality (Ofrat, 1979). In opposition to Ofrat’s view, I believe that the obvious and crucial connection with American feminist art at the time cannot be overlooked. These were the core subjects of concern in discussions of women’s art during the 1970s in America, and they are the central subjects that should be considered in a discussion of the early work Pamela Levy then created in Israel, since she was a newcomer from the U.S. and was familiar with these ideas. When asked if she was familiar with the feminist art being produced in the U.S. in the 1970s, Levy responded that indeed she was, although less so when she was still living in America and more so after she came to Israel.²⁰ She stated that she preferred feminist art from the West Coast, and was less drawn to that from the East Coast. This is particularly discernible from the nature of the work originating in California, the unacknowledged center of the Pattern and Decoration movement at the time. These elements should be taken into consideration when analyzing her collages, alongside analysis of the meaning and reception of the materials, symbols and images originating in the multiple visual cultures of Israel.

In an interview in 2002,²¹ Levy insisted that she “invented” the idea of feminine collages, working independently and starting to create in the medium only after moving to Israel. She explained that the Israeli art journals did not keep local artists up-to-date on what was happening abroad, and she therefore worked on her collages for at least two years before she learned that other women were producing similar works and realized that she “was not alone.”²² And yet, despite the artist’s claim to originality and complete independence of thought in regard to the origin of her collages, I believe that her American background, that is, the American culture and especially the art which she absorbed before immigrating to Israel in 1976, had a deep and significant impact on the creation of her collages made in the 1970s.

In conclusion, I have attempted to show the possible connections and obvious similarity—if not deliberate borrowing—between the work of the American feminist artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement in the 1970s and the thinking and art of Pamela Levy in Israel. As suggested at the beginning, she did not see herself simply as an artist living in the periphery, far from the center, but rather viewed herself as a representative of a province that is aware of itself and of its sources and culture, and produces art with its own language and resources, while keeping in touch with what is happening elsewhere. Pamela Levy constantly integrated components from

20 Interview of the artist in her home, July 8, 2004.

21 Interview of the artist, February 19, 2002 (in Kopley, 2002:30).

22 Interview of the artist in her home, March 12, 2004.

mainstream international art, such as Robert Rauschenberg's work, alongside local arts and crafts artifacts, Orientalist elements and feminist principles. The fluctuation of identities within her—Jewish, Christian, artist, mother, American, Israeli and feminist—all join into a unique merging of international and local ideas that reflect her unique position as a woman and an Israeli.

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