A close-up photograph of a hand with bright red nail polish holding a thick, black, braided rope. The rope is coiled and loops across the frame. The background is a plain, light grey color.

The Art of Exclusion : Art, Identity, and Inequalities in the Israeli art world.

By Curator Sharon Toval

EMAMI 24 Conference:
Empowering Artists Minorities



INTRODUCTION

A little Bit of Background

- 1.Discrimination in Art:** Symbolic institutional discrimination exists in Israel's art scene, similar to many other countries.
- 2.Cultural Influence:** Israel's local culture has been shaped by Jews of European descent over the past century.
- 3.Exclusion of Non-European Jews:** Jews from Arab countries and North Africa, who immigrated in the 1950s and 1960s, were excluded from this cultural shaping—the **MIZRAHI Jews**.
- 4.Sophisticated Discrimination:** Over time, this discrimination has evolved into more covert and refined mechanisms.
- 5.Barriers in Artistic Recognition:** These include biases in awards, exhibitions, art collections, and participation in key committees.

The Illusion of Accessibility

Symbolic Violence

Pierre Bourdieu "L'Amour de l'art: Les musées d'art européens et leur public« - 1966

KEY ARTISTS FROM
THE 90's

Meir Gal

“9 out of 400 (The west and the Rest)”

1997

9 pages concentrating on Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African Jews) history out of 400 Ashkenazi history pages- this is the history learning book in high schools at that time.



Meira Shemesh

“Self Portrait - Iraqi Expressionism”

1993

Meira Shemesh, a Tel Aviv-born artist from an Iraqi family, painted a self-portrait: she replaced her black hair with blonde plastic hair and adorned her eyes with two blue stones.

Meira represented herself as a Western beauty, using "low" materials.

Throughout her paintings, she offered an alternative, **non-canonical aesthetic**, seemingly primitive, one that rejects "high art."

She referred to her paintings as "Iraqi Expressionism.“ She claimed that the genre painting need an expression of itself.



Meira Shemesh

“My Mother Dress”

ReadyMade from “Meta-Sex” exhibition, Ein Harod

Museum of Art

1994



Shula Keshet

“Lovesick”

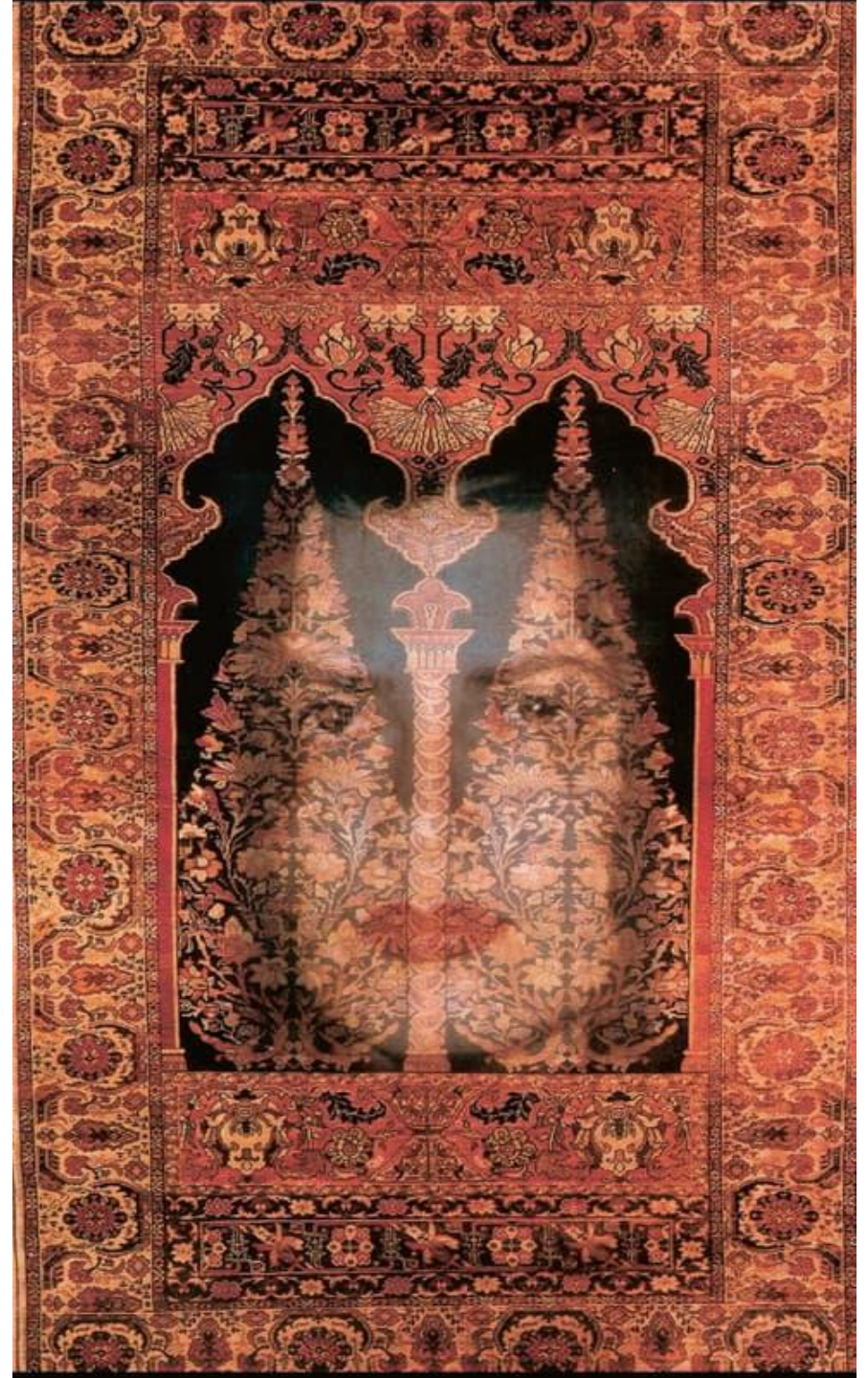
1999

Shuka Keshet is an Israeli **social and political activist** one of Israel’s first feminist Mizrahi artist, uplifting the voices of feminists from marginalized communities through activism, politics, and art. To address the compounded social and economic disadvantages facing these women, she co-founded and directed **Achoti – For Women in Israel, a Mizrahi feminist movement.**

She is of Iranian descent, a descendant of the Jewish community of **Mashhad in Iran**, a community that was forced to convert to Islam but secretly preserved its Jewish identity.

The topic of Islam is etched in her family memory, they had two names (Muslim and Jew) dressed up in two cultures, etc. All of this converges is a source of inspiration and a connection to Jewish Mizrahi art from lands of Islam.

In August 2024 this artwork was censored from being exposed in a carpet show at the Muslim Art Museum in Jerusalem because of the image of a women represented on this prayer carpet.



Pinhas Cohen Gan

“Tunis, Tunisia” (These are the Names Series)

1992

Pinhas C.G is a Moroccan born Israeli artist (1942) and one of the founders of the Mizrahi Identity in Israeli Art. (Israel’s Prize in Painting – 2008).

In “And These Are the Names”, a series of 39 drawings out of a hundred created in **1992 for the Istanbul Biennale**, he erected a **memorial for communities assasined in the Holocaust, especially for the communities of Libya and Tunisia**, where the Mediterranean Sea, lying between Europe and Africa, appears like a festering wound.

The tally of communities enables Cohen Gan to **attempt, in his own way and voice, to bridge the gap between North and South.**



Eti Abergel

“Variation on Happiness”

2006

Eti Abergel has repeatedly presented this installation consisting of a large circle of **Moroccan slippers made of white plaster.**

Occasionally, some of the slippers were gilded or made of plastic, but all were positioned to face the center of the circle. A large tangle of wire intruded into the space of the slippers, evoking a closed, protected environment.

The white color, symbolizing mourning, combined with the removal of the slippers' functionality due to their fragility, and the circle as a secretive, almost sacred space, **resonated with a longing for a beloved, mythological, and unattainable ethnic identity.**



Photo: Courtesy of Braverman Gallery.

The diptych critiques renowned Israeli artist Moshe Gershuni's artwork "Golda," a symbolic figure (Golda Meir) linked to national memory and the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War 1973. This war, which resulted in significant casualties, cast a shadow on Golda Meir, Israel's prime minister at the time. Though a national investigation absolved her of guilt, her leadership was widely criticized.

Shish incorporates this narrative by inscribing "To Golda" on the left drawing and "You are nice" on the right. **These phrases allude to Meir's infamous dismissal of the Mizrahi Black Panthers—a social movement advocating against systemic discrimination—when she remarked, "They are not nice."** This work layers political critique with cultural memory, interrogating the dynamics of leadership, accountability, and societal fractures in Israel during the 1970s.



Khen Shish
"To uproot the queen's eyes"
2003



Khen Shish
"Golda"
2003

HSHUMA EXHIBITION

MACT MUSEUM | SWITZERLAND

2019



left
Mati Elmaliach (1979)
Untitled, 2018.
Pigment print on archival paper, diptych.
Courtesy of the artist.

centre
David Benarroch (1982)
Untitled (Sideboard), 2016.
Archival pigment print, four units.
Courtesy of the artist.

right
Eyal Assulin (1981)
Moti, 2018.
Plastic, fiberglass, industrial paint, 8K gold,
gourmette and pendent. Private collection, Israel.





Tal Shoshan
painted
photography



Yosef Joseph Dadoune (1975)
Jewish Women Stereotypes 1910-1930, 2018.
The artist's private postcards collection.



Yosef Joseph Dadoune (1975)
Jewish Women Stereotypes 1910-1930, 2018.
The artist's private postcards collection.



ppg . 27-30
Vered Nissim (1980)
If I tell You the Story of my Life, Tears Are Coming out of My Eyes, 2015.
Video 12'26"
Courtesy of the artist.

RIMA: Passages in Separdic Sculpture

Rochester Art Center | MINNESOTA, USA

2024









Poor representation of Mizrahi Art

The Illusion Of Accessibility

- This subject has historically been considered explosive and risky to address, structured deliberately as a taboo for the convenience of the majority.
- Dr. Ktzia Alon introduced the first academic course on Israeli Mizrahi Art at The Institute for Israeli Art, albeit with some hesitations. But this is a good start. While there are a few courses on Mizrahi culture, they are often linked to broader topics like feminism, poetry, and music
- Associations related to Mizrahi causes are growing, focusing on areas such as feminism, music, and festivals. Notable examples include **Ahoti**, the **Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow**, the **Israeli Andalusian Orchestra**, the **Jerusalem Orchestra East-West Association**, and the **Jerusalem Oud Festival**, among others.
- Mizrahi-origin curators focusing today on this topic remain extremely rare—there are perhaps one or two, myself included.
- Despite the Mizrahi cultural richness, no major museum exhibitions have focused on Mizrahi art in recent years. Additionally, there are no dedicated art galleries or museums of this typology, nor are there art prizes specifically recognizing artists exploring these subjects.

Few important group research-based exhibitions have been shown on this theme:

“Block” – Curated by Ami Steinitz - Ami Steinitz Contemporary Art Gallery – 1997

“Kadima: The East in Israeli Art” – Israel Museum of Art - 1998

“Mizrahi Library - Curated by Ami Steinitz” - Ami Steinitz Contemporary Art Gallery – 2000

“Sister: Mizrahi Women Artists In Israel” - Curated by Rita Mendes-Flohr, Shula Keshet – Artists’ House Jerusalem, - 2000

“MIZRAHIOT” (Mizrahi Women) – Curated by Ami Steinitz” - Ami Steinitz Contemporary Art Gallery – 2000

“Mother Tongue – Curated by Tal Ben Zvi” – Mishkan Ein Harod Museum of Art – 2002

“Hshuma” – Curated by Sharon Toval – Artists’ House Tel Aviv, MACT Museum of Art, Switzerland - 2018-2019.

Many solo shows by artists searching on the theme

There's a lot to do

In general, we need a fair distribution of cultural and educational resources in Israel.

There needs to be formal institutional recognition of the cultures of marginalized communities, alongside support from state institutions. This will pave the way for acknowledging the value of all societal groups.

Build artistic legitimacy to work and research about the theme of Mizrahi Art in visual arts:

- **Encourage Academic research about Mizrahi Art**, Include oral histories and traditional knowledge to preserve authenticity.
 - increase Education by providing academic courses on the subject
 - **Support Artists and Practitioners**: Offer grants, residencies, and commissions to contemporary artists working within the tradition or reinterpreting it. Prioritize their inclusion in exhibitions, festivals, and publications.
 - Public Art Prizes and Funds to support research and exhibitions
 - **Curate Exhibitions or events** contextualizing Mizrahi Art within its cultural and historical framework.
 - **Create Dedicated Spaces**: museums, galleries, or cultural centers specifically devoted to MIZRAHI Art celebrating its role within the cultural heritage of the country.
- Etc.

Each step requires collaboration between communities, institutions, and policymakers to build a lasting cultural legacy.

In summary, it can be said that Israel has been undergoing a "Mizrahi Revolution" over the past ten years, notably led by intellectual and creative women.

Artistically, a new generation from diverse ethnic minorities is emerging, boldly reclaiming their original identities as integral and authentic components of their

Israeli identity. This shift challenges the traditional perception of the "pure Israeli," historically portrayed as a post-Zionist, white, male figure. Instead, Israel's cultural identity is becoming more diverse, vibrant, and socially inclusive, reflecting a richer tapestry of voices and perspectives.



Guy Levy
“The Untold History”
2018

Thank you for your attention