

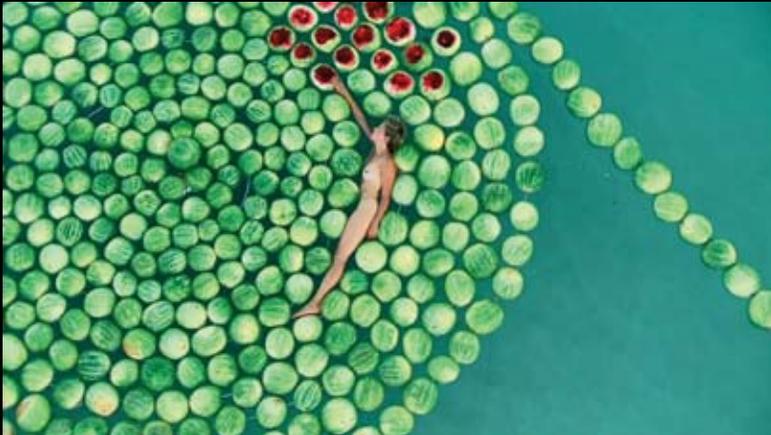
1a.



1. **DEADSEE**, 2005, video stills, video: color, silent, 11 min 37 sec. Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Modern Art Fund for the Twenty-First Century.

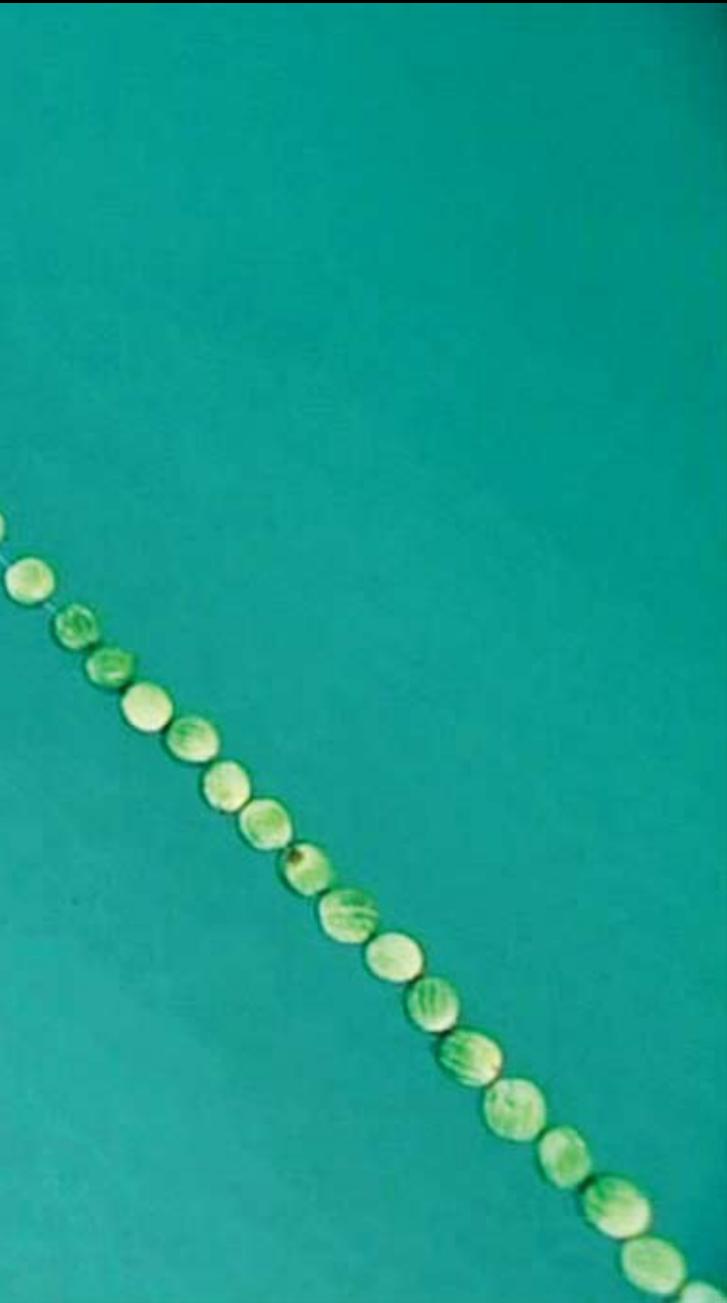
2. **TEMPLE MOUNT** (detail), 1995, 500 mousepads, soup, coffee, sugar, fungi, antibiotics, plexiglass, 2.5 x 2.1 m. Installation view at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

1b.



1c.





**SIGALIT LANDAU**

# Sugar–Rich Cannibalism

The Tel Aviv-based sculptor and video artist, chosen to represent Israel at the 2011 Venice Biennale, grapples with the thorny question of Israeli national identity.

*By HG Masters*

In August 2000, during a hot summer in the picturesque English city of Exeter, a blond-haired woman wearing a baby-faced plastic mask was seen distributing popsicles to passersby from the back of a red concrete-mixing truck that played music as it turned. The red or blue popsicles were molded to look like the corpse of a child, eyes closed and in a fetal position, clutching a bunch of matches. One woman, after pulling the plastic wrapper off the small body, reportedly burst into tears.

The children and adults who ate the popsicles—engaging in a symbolic act of cannibalism—consumed Sigalit Landau’s sculptural representation of the Little Match Girl, a character from a Hans Christian Andersen tale about a poor girl who tries to keep herself alive on a cold winter night by lighting the matches she is supposed to sell. A ritual sacrifice equally primitive and postmodern, Landau’s performance was, in the artist’s words, “An attempt to bring her back to life by feeding her to the living.”

A decade later, Landau remains interested in macabre, mechanical and musical sculptures, as well as in metaphoric cycles of consumption and redemption. At her studio in the south Tel Aviv industrial neighborhood of Florentin in September 2009, shelves that reach up to the ceiling were stacked with blood-red, boulder-sized chunks of what looked like raw meat. Talking with a group of guests, Landau showed off a pair of peeled watermelons that were lying on a bed of rock salt, slowly curing. Rubbing the gravel-sized salt into the skin, she marveled at the melon’s rich red color and texture, observing that the dried fruit evokes human flesh.

Landau’s jaunty personality stands in contrast to her reputation for creating morbid, masochistic and postapocalyptic videos and installations—works that gracefully combine the beautiful and the grotesque, the mechanical and the abject, the domestic and the demonic. Her video *Barbed Hula* (2000), for example, shows the artist on a Tel Aviv

2.





**From early on, Landau's artworks  
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beach at dawn, hula-hooping with a ring of barbed wire as it punctures her naked torso. More than just a feat of endurance, Landau's video is laden with symbolism, religious and political. The spiked wire ring recalls Jesus' crown of thorns and the action itself recalls the self-mortification practices of religious zealots. In writing about the piece for a 2008 catalog of her recent work, Landau observes that "the ocean is the only peaceful and natural border Israel has" and that "danger is generated from history into culture and life," while noting that "centrifugal movement inside a hoop has been practiced by children and adults throughout history in many civilizations, ancient and modern."

Landau has had a long-standing interest in issues of Israeli nationality and femininity, as well as in cross-cultural rituals and religious symbolism. In a 2009 interview with Museum of Modern Art curatorial assistant Paulina Pobocha in *Museo* magazine, Landau commented, "Rituals are performances. They return in time. They live in collective memory, images, symbols and nature's seasons. I like to summon forgotten ones that carry ancient cultural beliefs, preserved in literature and folklore: I don't live according to my religion's rituals, but I am aware of all three religions [with major ties to Jerusalem]."

Born in Jerusalem in 1969, Landau grew up in a family of Jewish immigrants. Her mother's family came to Israel via London after fleeing Vienna in the 1930s; her father's family, originally from Czernowitz (then part of Romania), emigrated after being deported to the Mogilev concentration camp during the war. Speaking with *Tablet* magazine in 2008, she described her parents as "critical and always in opposition to whatever was going on here [in Israel]. There were revolutionaries in my family until more or less our generation . . . It's not a time of revolution, and I miss that."

Yet Landau has consistently found ways to rebel. While speaking with *ArtAsiaPacific* in late May, she confirmed that she was "very political in her youth" and involved in demonstrations and activism, but that these activities have now been largely supplanted by her art-making after she became, "less optimistic and tired of failing to change things." When asked about her most provocative statement, "Art is an opportunity to survive the tragedy of my country," Landau now says, "I hate that quote." She is quick to point out that it came from a German-language interview in Austria and that "the German language translates pompous." In further discussing what she might have been trying to express, Landau does admit that her practice is, "a way to dig or hide or nest, or do things that have to do with survival" and that she was thinking of both the

massive tragedy of the Holocaust that led to the foundation of Israel and the elements of tragedy that exist in Israel today. "This place [Israel] is plagued by lots of hope and lots of despair."

Another component of her rebellion is evident in her understanding of Israeli identity, which, though not anti-Zionist, implicitly includes the multiple faiths of the region. Her recognition of the centrality of Jerusalem as a holy city in these religions (as well their interconnected histories and beliefs), stands in contrast to Israel's conservative religious and political movements that assert that Jerusalem is the "eternal and indivisible" capital of the Jewish state—a claim made by prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in May 2010 to mark the capturing of East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 war.

From the beginning of her career, Landau's artworks have made repeated reference to the Arab communities in Israel and the occupied West Bank. Her installation *Temple Mount* (1995), named for the revered site of the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, as well as the Foundation Stone and two ancient Jewish temples, features the shape of the Foundation Stone scratched into a pile of 500 green computer mouse-pads that were stained with coffee and fungus. When the work was acquired by the Israel Museum, Landau had to assent to its being hermetically sealed. In response, she created a video, *A Conversation with David Bugeleisen* (1995). The work combines an interview with the museum's conservationist, Bugeleisen, with footage of Landau being ejected from the museum into a garbage container (she is wearing a protective suit and air-filtration mask) and traveling in the back of trash-filled container trucks to a garbage dump near the Palestinian village of al-Eizariya, connecting the museum's intolerance of biological entities with Israel's displacement of Arab communities.

Like many Israeli artists of her generation, Landau gained international attention for her work only after spending time in Europe in the 1990s. She was an artist-in-residence at Berlin's Hoffmann Collection, and later lived in London and Paris. Her first major international showcase came when curator Catherine David selected her work for documenta X in Kassel, Germany, in 1997. There, Landau exhibited *Resident Alien I* (1996), a blue metal shipping container, the bottom of which she had heated and then deformed with a hammer, creating a floor that rose up into the container like a miniature landscape, meant to recall the Judean desert, a landscape rich in Biblical lore and now the occupied West Bank. In the back right-hand corner of the space was a box with a rounded opening shaped like "an Eastern toilet-hole device," into which Landau piped the sounds of a local Arab radio station.

In 2000, when Landau resettled in Tel Aviv, her work took a turn for the morbid and despairing, as evident in her popsicle performance work, *Somnambulin/Bauchaus* (2000). The year also marked a dramatic descent into violence with the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, following the failure of further Israeli-Palestinian agreements after the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords and a controversial visit to the Temple Mount by then-Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon.

Capturing the despondent mood of the time was Landau's 2002 exhibition at Tel Aviv's Alon Segev gallery, "The Country," which featured sinewy human figures situated in a desolate landscape. The two-floored installation depicted a Tel Aviv rooftop, with a landscape of a city printed low onto the room's walls. Three cadaverous figures enacted the harvest of fruit, a ritual idealized by early Zionists who in writing, advertising and propaganda promoted Israel's Edenic associations as the promised land. One figure plucks the blood-soaked fruit—made from copies of the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (whose name means "the country"), connecting the fictionalized landscape with the everyday life of Israelis during the

5a.



5b.



4. **ORLA**, 2000, popsicle, 16 x 6 x 7 cm. A part of the performance piece *Somnambulin/Bauhaus*, held at Spacex Gallery, Exeter, UK, in 2000.

5. Installation view of "The Country" at Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002, featuring cadaverous figures enacting the harvest of fruit in a desolate landscape.

6. **A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID BUGELEISEN**, 1995, video in which the artist is put into a garbage container and travels in a trash-filled truck to a dump site in Palestine.

6a.



6b.



6c.



6d.



7a.



7. Installation view of "The Dining Hall" at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2007.

7a. A section furnished as a 1960s-style living room, with three squares of white fabric hanging on the wall.

7b. A kitchen-like room in which voices of women are heard from speakers built into the stove.

7c. A metal space heater with the word "Love" written in neon in place of the heating elements.

7b.



violent period—from desiccated branches mounted to the wall. Another figure carries a sack of fruit over his shoulder, and a third kneels on the floor before a ledger and neon light. The rest of the room is scattered with pots, canisters and other remnants of humans trying to survive.

These hideous figures returned in Landau's solo exhibition, "The Dining Hall" at Berlin's Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in 2007. There, Landau filled the gallery's central space with an ominous installation. One figure approached a large, palm-like sculpture, holding a metal space heater with the word "Love" written in red neon in place of the heating elements. Another held a space heater with the word "Love" written in blue; standing on a yellow ladder wrapped in bloody coils that looked like entrails, he gazed up at a seven-meter-tall pillar of rhombus

***Another part of "The Dining Hall,"  
a domestic interior, situated  
the gruesome scene within current  
intra-Israeli political debates.***

forms that resembles Constantin Brancusi's *The Endless Column* (1938), a memorial to Romanians who died in World War I. Another human body was presented upside-down with its head in a large stockpot, while two others, in similar poses with their heads in buckets, lay on their backs. Situated among this tableau was a long stainless-steel table, recalling both a surgical gurney and the Last Supper, topped by a bed of rock-salt and chunks of flesh-like watermelon.

In the context of Berlin, once the capital of Nazi Germany, the piece chillingly evoked the horrors of the Shoah with its depictions of skinless figures shaving meat from flesh-like columns. In her research about the building and the surrounding, once-Jewish neighborhood of Mitte, Landau found similarities between the red-brick arches in the Kunst-Werke Institute's large hall and the architecture of concentration camps. Landau even outfitted an exposed brick wall in the museum with half of an "Oriental arch" and half of a white-painted door of a crematorium. On the source of inspiration of this latter form, Landau notes that it resembles an oven door, which refers both to forms in Brancusi's studio and that "the whole of Israel is like a crematorium." When asked about the connection between this and the show's location in Germany, she remarks that she has a "macabre sense of humor," but that the whole installation also referred to how Israelis are often compared to Nazis in relationship to their treatment of Palestinians and to the "cycle of victims and victimizers." But amid this maelstrom of references, Landau maintains: "All I'm doing is turning what I see and what I hear all the time back into forms, so that standing in front of it you won't be sure what you are faced with."

With its nauseous conflation of murder, cooking and art-making, "The Dining Hall" confused the categories of "meat" (that which is cooked for food) and "flesh" (the material of living creatures)—which in turn echoes the German language's use of just one word for both, *fleisch*. That the figures were carving objects made from the same material as their own bodies gave the installation its cannibalistic overtones, a suggestion that was mirrored by the figures with their heads in stockpots who seemed to be boiling, or cooking, themselves alive. The blood-red of the melon's insides provided a further visceral conflation between meat and flesh.

Landau's work has been associated metaphorically with cannibalism



since "The Country." Art historian Gideon Ofrat, writing in the catalog of that exhibition about an earlier 2001 installation at New York's Thread Waxing Space involving cotton candy, asked "What is the significance of this sweet vampirism, this sugar-rich cannibalism?" Along with incest, cannibalism remains one of the most universal human taboos. Incidents are known to have occurred almost exclusively during ritual ceremonies involving human sacrifice and in extremely desperate situations in which groups of individuals were facing death by starvation. In this latter context, cannibalism, and specifically the eating of children, is enumerated as one of the sufferings endured by the Israelites during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (c. 598–7 BCE). The Israelites were warned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that failing their obedience to God's laws—despite repeated opportunities for forgiveness from God—they would be forced to resort to cannibalism. The prophet Jeremiah is recorded in Lamentations 4:10 as recalling that during the siege of Jerusalem, "compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed."

Though Landau spoke to AAP about the gruesome scenes in "The Dining Hall" as relating to the influx of Turkish immigrants in German society—she calls the skinless figures "reverse crusaders"—the installation was created in late 2007, just as Israeli fears were being roused by the Iranian government's resumption of its nuclear program, which US and Israeli officials believe is for military purposes. The postapocalyptic setting of figures whose skins have eroded or disintegrated evokes this fear, as well as the punishment of the Israelites who had disobeyed their contract with God. Another part of the installation, a domestic interior with a 1960s-era sofa, chairs and a television also situated the gruesome scene within current intra-Israeli political debates. A television screen



played the scrolling text of an interview between left-wing politician and activist Avraham Burg and Ari Shavit, published in *Haaretz*. The interview is notorious as Burg excoriates the contemporary situation in Israel, describing the whole nation as one with a distorted psyche because of the Holocaust; “A state of trauma,” he calls it. The interview includes Burg’s infamous comments, “We are already dead. We haven’t received the news yet, but we are dead.” Landau’s installation packages together all these fears—those from both the political left about the zombie, living-dead condition of Israel in which, metaphorically, society is eating itself, and the nightmare about a repetition of the Holocaust with the obliteration of Israel—into a scenario that is universally appalling.

That Landau, in her consistent engagement with the myths and roots of Israeli national identity, has been picked by the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport to represent her country at the 2011 Venice Biennale, comes as a surprise. Reporting Landau’s selection in April 2010, *Haaretz* quoted Naomi Givon of Tel Aviv’s Givon Gallery as saying that Landau’s exhibition at Venice will be “based on coexistence on the human plane, and the chronology of settlement in pre-state Israel. Given Israel’s standing in the world today, this project is more likely to contribute to the country’s foreign relations than verbal explanations by ambassadors and official representatives. Landau depicts the significance of ‘live and let live’ in multicultural Israeli society. It’s an excellent opportunity to call for coexistence in our multifaceted region.”

The position of Israeli culture abroad has been increasingly controversial in recent years as critics of Israel have railed against the country’s stated efforts to improve its image abroad through “soft power” tactics, such as culture. As evidence of this post-Gaza War shift in strategy, Canadian activist Naomi Klein has pointed to journalist Ethan

Bronner’s March 2009 article in the *New York Times* in which Bronner quotes Arye Mekeel, the deputy minister of Israel’s Foreign Ministry as saying: “We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theater companies, exhibits. This way you show Israel’s prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war.”

Landau, then, will be caught in the middle of these expectations: serving a new Israeli cultural diplomacy and addressing the fraught task of representing her country on the international stage. But Landau has addressed complexities of Israeli nationality before in high-profile international exhibitions, as in the *Kunst-Werke* exhibition, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York—shows in which

### ***Landau packages Israel’s fears about self-cannibalism and obliteration into a scenario that is universally appalling.***

she did not shy from speaking about the latent violence and fear that underwrites Israeli society and culture. At MoMA she exhibited a room of lampshades made from twisted coils of barbed wire that she had submerged in the Dead Sea until they were thickly and beautifully encrusted with salt, *Barbed Salt Lamps* (2007), and three videos: the above-mentioned *Barbed Hula*, a video-performance of herself floating with a coil of 500 watermelons in *DeadSee* (2005), and *Day Done* (2007), which shows Landau painting the exterior of a run-down house in black paint from a window.

A mesmerizing piece, *DeadSee* is shot from overhead and shows the 500 watermelons, held together by a strand of rope in a six-meter-wide coil. Landau, naked, is nestled between the watermelons, some of which are “wounded” (the artist’s term), cut open to reveal their red flesh. Floating in the super-salinated waters, the end of the coil is pulled off camera, sending Landau and the watermelons into a spin as it unravels. Mythological, ambiguous, laced with hints of violence and vulnerability, *DeadSee* is far from the overt critique that opponents of Israel demand of an artwork in order for it to be “political” and not “aesthetic.” But the work, like the rest of Landau’s oeuvre, is art made by an Israeli in protest and recognition of her country, in resistance to a dogmatic history of a land that has had many occupiers and many residents.

While speaking with *AAP* about her plans for Venice, Landau made it clear that she would be willing to walk away from the project if she does not get what she needs and wants from the foreign ministry to make a good exhibition. But she was guarded about disclosing too many details of her project, in part because it is still in its initial stages. Landau confirmed that the Dead Sea—the lowest place on earth, where her family used to go, in her words, “To say hi to death, have a picnic and come back to life”—will be an integral part of the installation. Her Venice project will also be site-specific, one that tries to transcend the pavilion’s 1950s-style modernist architecture, as well as incorporating the garden, a different entrance to the building, videos as well as sculptures and possibly a live performance or a “negotiation table.” Eagerly anticipating the project, Landau remarks that it will be her largest international showcase. “My huge installations are like operas that are staged for just one night. They can’t really travel because they are site-specific. So they grow in my mind and in people’s memories and become myths.”

7e.



7d. A human figure situated on a wooden ladder, holding up a space heater against a towering flesh-like column.

7e. Installation view of "The Dining Hall" at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2007. Photo by Uwe Walter.

7f-h. Anatomical figures, made from papier mâché, twisted newspaper cords and red paint, in various poses and situations.

7f.



7g.



7h.

