



Gender and Senses: The Art of Anisa Ashkar

Anisa Ashkar's work uses the different senses to problematize the intersection of categories that compose together her multi-layered identity. Tal Dekel visits her recent solo show and writes about Ashkar's use of the whole sensorium to blend categories, destabilize and dismantle them.

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Walking through the green door of the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva, a multitude of sounds, smells, and images meets the visitors, surrounding them and stimulating all their senses. The exhibition "Anisa Ashkar: Black Gold," now on display at the museum that used to be an Othman mosque, an active place of prayer, is a multilayered project that works its way through the senses and involves all aspects of human perception.

Ashkar deals with the subject of perception to undermine socially-constructed categories. In previous projects, she has used "domestic-feminine" materials such as margarine, flour, sugar, milk, and black coffee, transgressing their normative usage to problematize her multi-layered identity and complex position as a woman and a Muslim Palestinian artist working in a patriarchal Jewish-Israeli society.

In "Black Gold," narratives of Delft China from the Netherlands mix with Arab writing and history. Soft sea sand, gilded dates hanging from the central piece of the space, splashes of red, blood-like beads in mugs of coffee, and soft sounds of music and recorded conversations, all come together in the exhibition hall, creating an overwhelming sensual input.

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[1]Anisa Ashkar, "Black Gold," 2017
Installation view

[40.jpg](#) [2]



[3]Anisa Ashkar, Cup, 2015
Mixed media

This artistic strategy of turning to the viewers' five senses has not started with the current exhibition, but rather be traced to the very beginning of Ashkar's career. By focusing on the “minor” senses of smell and touch¹, she aims to undermine cultural constructions by insisting on expressing her own multiple and shifting identities:

... I start my works with a gut feeling, avoiding any rational analysis. I taste and smell, I rub materials onto the skin, feeling them on my body. Only then do I engage in a reflexive process about the work—a very important aspect. Although the deep political, ethnic, religious, and gender meanings are all there, I only conceptualize them retrospectively. Our culture perceives intuitiveness—relying on the senses—as primitive, feminine, anti-rational, inferior, and unreliable in comparison to the transcendental qualities of Western masculine rationality ... Also, using the “minor” senses serves



me to symbolize my being a minority in many additional meanings ... I am ever-changing, depending on where I'm at ...” (Interview)

This quote explains Ashkar's relation to perception. Employing all the senses, she seeks to undermine, problematize and highlight the political intersections of the different categories of identity such as gender, class, race, and religion.

The sensorium, being much broader than the senses themselves, the sensory environment—which includes sensation, perception, and interaction with the world around us²— is crucial to the understanding of Ashkar's art. She draws on the senses to expose experiences in the world, employing various materials to transgress their normative usages in the service of new and intriguing purposes, the olfactory and tactile qualities of which she seeks to highlight.

In her performance *Barbur 24000* (2004), Ashkar, dressed in a white garment, read aloud, in Arabic (with the Israeli Journalist Aharon Barnea simultaneously translating into Hebrew), the text that was written on the walls—the stages of purification according to Islamic law—while emptying plastic bags of milk into a bowl and rubbing her face in it, as though bathing. This bodily practice — associated with femininity — conflicts with her speech and language, which are linked to masculinity. Her rapid, forceful movements similarly symbolize the violence—physical, emotional, economic, and other—Palestinian women endure on their bodies from both within and without the Palestinian community.

[Anisa Ashkar, Barbur 24000, 2004. Performance \[4\]](#)





[5]Anisa Ashkar, Barbur 24000, 2004
Performance

Gradually mixing with the dust and dirt around it, the milk evokes Julia Kristeva's "abject"³ state: in becoming non-white, unpurified, and contaminated, it symbolizes the way the feminine essence dissolves into the patriarchal order, or the stream of milk flowing from the mother's breasts as white ink that enables writing against the current.

In choosing Aharon Barnea — an Ashkenazi Jewish man — as her translator, she accentuated her identity as an Arab-Muslim-Palestinian woman living in the Jewish State of Israel. Class oppression is also manifested in the title of the work — "24000" is the postal code of her family's home address in the northern city of Acre, a run-down area where non-Jews live. This performance thus called attention to the ongoing relations between various sites of power — Jews and Muslims, blacks and whites, impoverished and affluent, men and women.

Following Edward Said's criticism of Orientalism, in which the West perceives the Orient as feminine, Ashkar has chosen to address it in her *E-Alina* performance at the Bat-Yam Museum, in 2010. Using a substance from the Arab kitchen - black coffee - she brewed it with cardamom in a huge pot, in the main museum hall, targeting the whole sensory system. Experimenting with the black, thick, wet, grounds of the coffee, she said: "...It took me a long time and countless brewing trials to get to this exact smell and texture; the right amount of moisture, so that I would be able to work with it during the performance."⁴ Splashed onto the walls of the gallery, it dripped down to the floor, forming puddles and streaming down the museum's corridors, it looked like "a dark waterfall that clings to the white wall, creating what looked like dark-skinned body tissue," in the words of critic Naomi Aviv.⁵

A young, white Jewish man talked volubly at the beginning of that performance, gradually being interrupted by Ashkar. Having finally silenced him, she forced him to drink the black coffee she had been brewing, and pushed him halfway into the huge pot, as though trying to drown him⁶. Hereby, Ashkar mixed, blurred, and, in fact, collapsed the binary system separating the "feminine" (the body, the multiple, the sensorial) from the "masculine" (the speech, the singular, the rational), as well as the white, affluent and Jewish from the black, impoverished and Muslim.

The performance invited the intense engagement of the audience, as the strong coffee smell hit their olfactory systems even before arriving at the performance hall. Also, watching and experiencing the process of both male and female performers becoming covered with coffee grounds and getting completely wet raised the audience's level of involvement and empathy. The artist tried to show the complex, multi-layered, intersecting positions of all subjects present in the performance – the artist, the male performer, and the people in the audience. Issues of identity construction processes, such as racialization and gendering, take center stage as she uses associations like domestic (feminine) cooking vs. creating high art in the (masculine) public space of the museum, or using Hebrew vs. the Arabic language while heavily relying on the sensorium. In doing so she stresses political aspects and elaborates on the multi-hyphenated identities of all subjects involved.

[Fig. 2 Anisa Ashkar%2c E-Alina%2c 2005-2010%2c performance.jpg](#)

[6]



[7]Anisa Ashkar, E-Alina, 2010
Performance

[Fig. _3_ Anisa_Ashkar%2c_E-Alina%2c_2005-2010.jpg](#) **[8]**



[9]Anisa Ashkar, *E-Alina*, 2010
Performance

The feminist project in contemporary art seeks to undermine rigid gender differentiation and other socially-constructed differences between people while evoking the particularity of each subject. Under this logic, works such as *E-Alina* effectively exemplify how women of non-hegemonic groups can contemplate their existence and understand the world around them from a non-binary perspective and strive to problematize essentialist perceptions, as the artist herself declares:

Those who choose to rely solely on sight and the rational, which is the masculine way, are very different from those who work with all the senses, especially touch and smell, which are considered to be feminine and inferior. I propose an "alternative" way since as a woman and a Palestinian I am compelled to act in the Jewish Man's world. But I will not restrict myself to relying on sight as the central tool for creating and producing art! (Interview).

The various substances Ashkar uses in her art serve her feminist and political agenda. The mixing and blending of substances are also symbols of her hybrid self—a Palestinian living and working in Israel, speaking Arabic and Hebrew; a Muslim living in a Jewish metropolis but going back weekly to visit her family, who lives in a neighborhood of Acre, in the north of the country; and a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Turning back to the current exhibition, "Black Gold," we can see that Ashkar maintains this stance by using sound that is played in the exhibition space; sea sand that can be touched and felt with bare hands; and gilded, sweet dates offered to the audience during the performance *Yummy, Yummy, Middle East*, which was held at the opening night of the show. In that performance Ashkar spoke while performing acts of cleaning an oriental carpet with sea water brought from her hometown, Acre, and then covering dates with gold leaves and offering them to the audience. She turned to embodiment and used the whole sensorium to blend categories, and indeed destabilize and



dismantle them, paying special attention to their gender aspects.

[_S7A4049-1.jpg](#) [10]



[11]Anisa Ashkar, "Yummy, Yummy, Middle East," 2017
Performance

According to the feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young, women do not usually experience their bodies as transcendent.⁷ They do not make use of their physical potentialities, like men do, but rather wait for and react to events. Following this notion, Ashkar's art is an excellent reminder that feminist projects can expose the notion of perception as gendering and oppressive. Such projects can help dismantle socially constructed categories, and raise awareness of the urgent need for a cultural change and equality between social groups. Using the "lesser senses" in her artworks, Ashkar forms an alternative feminist way of acting politically in the world.

[The exhibition "Anisa Ashkar: Black Gold"](#) [12] (curators: Dalia Manor and Sharon Laor-Sirak) is on view at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Be'er Sheva until March 3, 2018.



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- 1. The traditional five senses have usually been arranged in terms of a hierarchy that assumes vision to be primary, hearing secondary, followed at a considerable remove by touch, taste, and smell. Especially since the Enlightenment, seeing and knowing have been equated, largely because sight can operate at a greater distance than the other senses and is, therefore, considered the most objective. With the mind and body regarded as separate, sight was associated with the mind, with reason, rationality, and logic; by contrast, taste, touch, and smell were associated with the body as the source of unreason, the emotions, and irrationality (Dumcum 2012, p. 184).
- 2. Duncum, Paul. 2012. "An Eye Does not Make an I: Expanding the Sensorium," *Studies in Art Education*, 53(3), pp. 182-193.
- 3. Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 4. Armon-Azulay, Eli. 2010. "What does your Face Convey?" In *Ha'aretz*, 29 October, 2010 (Hebrew).
- 5. Aviv, Naomi. 2012. "Tsumud—On Anisa Ashkar and the Exhibition 'Zift', held at Nelly Aman Gallery in 2010." In *Anisa Askkar—Zift* (cat.). Tel Aviv: Ashkar and Nelly Aman.
- 6. Alkhateeb Shehada, Housni. 2012. "And Acre Will Remain in this Consciousness Forever ...: Anisa Ashkar and the Language of the Search for the Subjective: A Critical Reading of the Work of the Artist Anisa Ashkar: Zift and other Installations." In *Anisa Ashkar: Zift* (cat.). Tel Aviv: Ashkar and Nelly Aman.
- 7. Young, Iris Marion. 1990. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." In *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, 27-45. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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- [12] <http://www.ine-museum.org.il/en/exhibition/en-current>