

Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs Is Rocking London's Tate Modern

Tel Aviv-born video artist Nira Pereg assesses a career in which she is constantly examining her complex connection to Israel



Nira Pereg. 'The video works are mostly short because life is short and because I'm a poet, not a novelist.' Credit: Ella Barak



Naama Riba
May 1, 2023

Follow



Listen to this article now

21:41

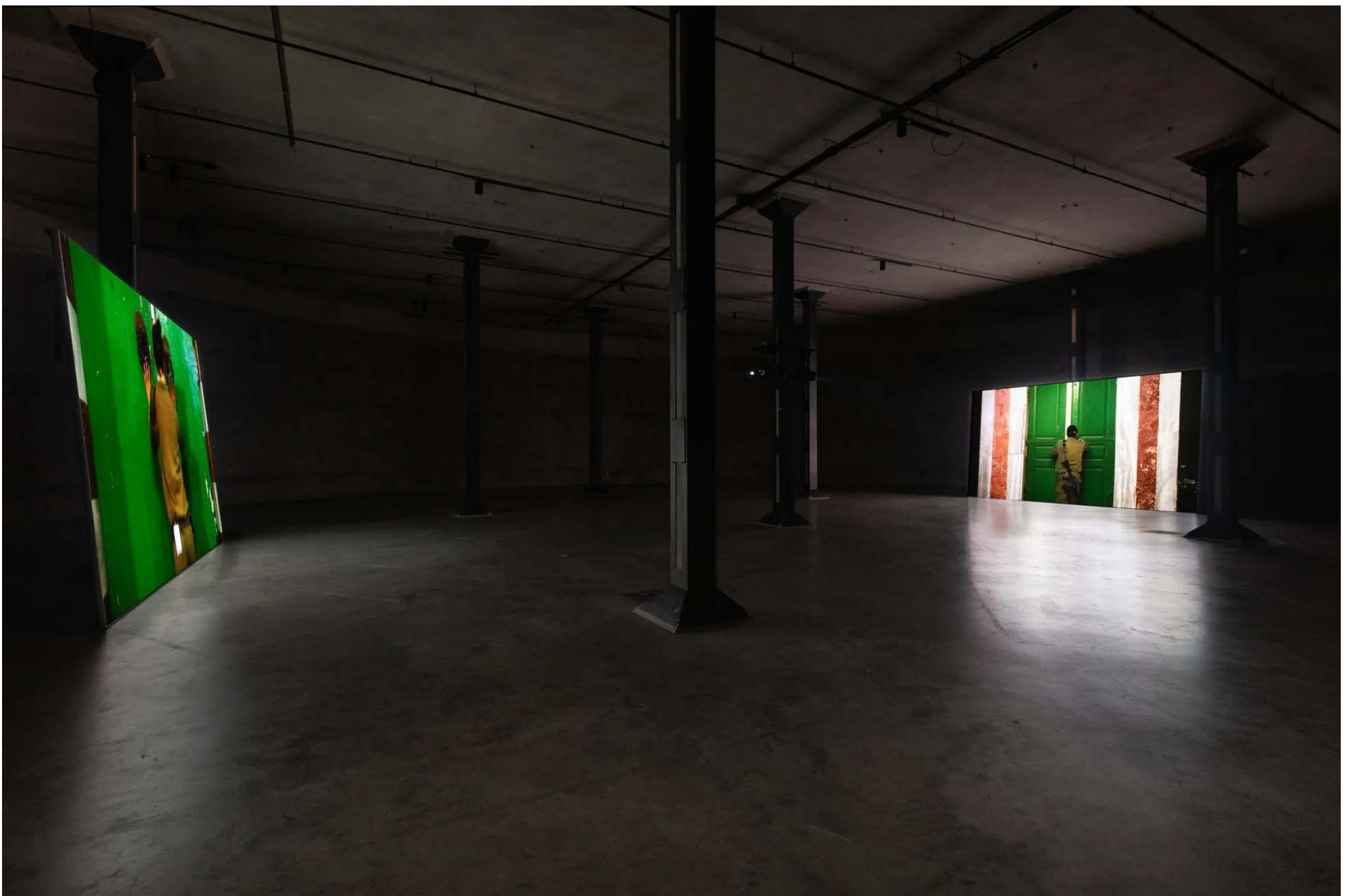


Powered by [Trinity Audio](#)

Upon entering artist Nira Pereg's apartment in central Tel Aviv, it is hard to misconstrue her political identity. The visitor is met by numerous representations of Palestine: from various miniatures and a calendar to maps of Palestine on which there is not a trace of the State of Israel. Even the fabric of the towels in the guest bathroom recalls a traditional Arab headdress.

Indeed, Pereg greets her visitors today wearing one as a scarf around her neck. "This is an Iranian designer's kaffiyeh. I wear it in Israel and recently people have been stopping me and saying that they see it as an act of solidarity," she says.

She adds that her home was recently renovated by a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. "He came in and said, 'I see that you're for Palestine.' I told him I was in favor of equality and coexistence. Perhaps I'm trying to surround myself – in both my home and my work – with reminders, to myself and my viewers, that they're like a protest march of identities. I collect maps of Israel with writing in Arabic rather than Hebrew. Art deals with representation: it's always a representation of something, it's not the thing itself."



"Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah" screening at the Tate Modern in London. Credit: Photo @ Tate (Sonal Bakrania)

Pereg, a professor in the art department at Shenkar School of Engineering and Design, Ramat Gan, is one of Israel's most globally successful artists. The Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Goetz Collection in Munich and others in the United States, Canada and the Netherlands all feature her work.

Breaking news and the best of Haaretz straight to your inbox

Email *

pereg.moshe@gmail.com

Sign Up

Please enter a valid email address

She has been exhibiting throughout Europe since the early 2000s and recently scaled new heights: Her 2012 video work “Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah” is [on show at London’s Tate Modern](#), which acquired it a few years ago, after previously being exhibited in Israel, at the Venice Biennale, the Museum of the Art and History of Judaism in Paris, and elsewhere.

Although long-form video artworks are all the rage in many museums these days, Pereg is not part of this trend. She works almost exclusively by herself and edits alone. Consequently, her films are short – most being only a few minutes long.

“The works are mostly short because life is short and because I’m a poet, not a novelist,” she explains. “There aren’t any benches in my exhibit spaces because it’s a physical act to look at art. Video is sculpture in time, and you have to stand in front of it and feel time.”

“Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah” is intended to provide just such an experience – standing and facing time – and also features short films. It is displayed as a diptych and its two parts, “Abraham Abraham” and “Sarah Sarah,” each last about four minutes.

Pereg filmed the video at Hebron’s Tomb of the Patriarchs – the putative burial place of the biblical figures Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah. It is one of the most important holy sites in Judaism and also one of the holiest places in Islam.

However, it has been hermetically divided between the Jewish and Muslim prayer spaces since the massacre perpetrated by Jewish terrorist Baruch Goldstein in February 1994, when 29 Muslim worshippers were murdered.

Ten times a year, on the holidays of the respective religions, each side receives full “ownership” of the site for just 24 hours, enabling worshippers to use all its rooms – under close supervision of the Israeli military, of course. “Abraham Abraham” and “Sarah Sarah” follow what Pereg calls the unique “bureaucratic” moment of this temporary change of ownership.

The Israeli jumping up and down with sorrow

The chilling illustrations used to convict Adolf Eichmann

As Israel's protest gets serious, performance art takes the stage



Some of the artifacts in Nira Pereg's Tel Aviv apartment. Credit: Hadas Parush

The videos show how the holy arks for housing Torah scrolls, the plastic chairs and the carpets are removed, under the close watch of Israel Defense Forces soldiers. In “Abraham Abraham,” the Jewish area is cleared of all the portable contents within a few hours, and Pereg shows the brief moment when it is empty after the army has inspected it and before Muslim worshippers come in with their own paraphernalia and transform the space into a mosque for the next 24 hours. In the second film, the entire site becomes a synagogue for 24 hours.

The two works reflect each other, both in length and structure. However, they were actually filmed several months apart, only after all the requisite permits were obtained from the top religious figures and the IDF. And if for a moment it looks like this exchange testifies to religious coexistence, Pereg hastens to explain that this is far from the case. On the contrary: It is the result of a lack of religious tolerance.

“Through its conduct at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, I can see modern Israel in its entirety. And through external Hebron, it is possible to see the Palestinians’ present and the apartheid that I fear is our future,” she says. “The French film director Jean-Luc

Godard, my mythological father, once said that Israel is fiction and Palestine is a documentary film.”

Are you aware that [Godard was accused of being an antisemite?](#)

Breaking news and the best of Haaretz straight to your inbox

Email *
pereg.moshe@gmail.com

Please enter a valid email address

“The harsh Israeli eagerness to seek and find antisemitic roots at a time when Israel itself is a racist state is ridiculous in my eyes. Godard was original, and for me that is the only standard. And going back to his statement: It’s possible to view in this way all the places here that are sacred both to the Palestinians and the Jews. The arrangements emphasize the Israeli occupation and controlling of the Palestinians. I’m not only interested in seeing how this controlling works and is maintained, but also chiefly in trying to experience this space anew when there are no users in it. Without the guise of one religion or another, and without army uniforms and cocked rifles.

“I wanted to be there in the silence for a moment and to see what all the fuss is about. To stand facing historical time. This is perhaps the most spiritual experience for someone who does not believe in God.”



One of the Polaroids of Nira Pereg in her 1999 work "Earth." Credit: Nira Pereg

Transitional moments

Pereg has never worn a military uniform. She was born in 1969 to a creative family, she says, and lived most of her life in Tel Aviv. Her grandfather was an architect and contractor. “He hung Yona Wallach’s greatest poems on the wall at the age of 70, made mosaics in the afternoons and sculpted with building materials he brought from work. He would take us to a museum every Saturday morning – often to the same museum – and if the exhibit hadn’t been changed, then it was to the same exhibits. I don’t remember him burdening us with explanations, so we would just wander around. I love to wander around museums.”

Her grandmother was an artist. “There was always a vase of flowers in her studio, which she would paint in parallel to commissioned portraits. She always painted with love.” Her father, meanwhile, was the graphic designer Moshe Pereg (“He is a great graphic designer”), whose most famous work was the symbol for the new Israeli shekel.

“Maybe it was from him that I learned to represent things in my own way,” she says. “He worked nonstop and his studio was one of my favorite places as a child. I solved riddles there like: What does this logo say to you? I learned to be a person with an opinion.”

Even so, it was not obvious that she would follow in their footsteps. She did not study art in high school, for instance: “I read and wrote a lot. Poems, plays, thoughts. I’m not one of those people who knew from an early age they would be something specific; I was more attracted to writing.”

Then at 18 came Pereg’s draft notice and refusal to report for duty. “I was a hippie and a pacifist, and I refused to cooperate with any organization that bore arms and with Israel’s policy in the territories and in general. At the time I was really in the minority – it was very rare. We’re talking about the end of the 1980s. I went through seven committees until they agreed to give me a document stating that my release was for conscientious reasons.”

How did your family react to that?

“My parents gave me freedom and respected my decisions. Political issues weren’t major topics of conversation at home. It came from outside. I started to pay attention to this in the ’80s. There were Palestinian workers in Tel Aviv: construction workers, cleaners. I remember hearing about an acquaintance of mine who had an Arab partner and everyone was shocked by that, and then I realized that there was something complex in our reality.

I also remember that we went on a class trip to the Old City in Jerusalem and I and a girlfriend decided that we would speak English and be tourists, supposedly – and I saw that the Palestinians had maps of Israel that were written in Arabic.

“I didn’t know there was a different narrative. I knew there were good guys and bad guys. That there were heroes and terrorists. That there were victims and enemies. I never encountered any discussion of this in the public space,” she adds.

After skipping military and national service, Pereg applied to study at New York’s Cooper Union. “I went there on a full scholarship, which was possible at the time. It was a defining moment for me – because the second I started studying art, I knew I didn’t want to stop studying it. Ever.”



A map of Palestine at Pereg's Tel Aviv apartment. She told a Palestinian contractor she was "in favor of equality and coexistence." Credit: Hadas Parush

Pereg’s works are all filmed in fraught Israeli spaces. She does not have an actual studio; she works outdoors and never stops moving. She breaks down the space and builds it anew, and over the years this process has been through various confluences of religion, state and security. Her themes are political, without ever becoming placards.

“I’m in this intimate and complicated relationship with Israel, and in all my works I’m really trying to figure out this connection,” she says. “One time I’m in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, working on the story of a tomb in which no one is buried,” she adds, referring to her 2015 exhibit “The Right to Clean” at the Israel Museum’s Ticho House – four video works that documented cleaning works at the church in the Old City’s

Christian Quarter. “Then I’m at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, which is considered sanctified because someone is buried there. It’s amazing, absurd and stimulating to think about these things differently.”

She has presented these encounters, between the sacred and the profane, in a trilogy that is focused on boundaries and barriers. The first work in the trilogy, “Earth,” was created in 1999 and consisted of 15 Polaroid photographs taken in Jerusalem, in places that constitute a mix of secular and religious sites. Pereg herself appeared in the photos, as though hovering in the air – an effect she achieved by asking passersby to capture her as she jumped.

In 2008 she created the second work: the video “Sabbath” documents the start of Shabbat. The barriers are temporary, but they define clear boundaries between the aforementioned sacred and profane. And in 2018 she created the final work in the series, “Theos & Krateo” – from the Greek words for “god” and “ruler” – a title that seems even more relevant these days. This was filmed on Jerusalem’s Bar-Ilan Street, which is the only street in Israel that the police close on the eve of the Sabbath and not ultra-Orthodox Jews themselves.



Three years later, she exhibited "Twilight Zones" at the Braverman Gallery in Tel Aviv, where the three videos were screened alongside elements Pereg had created from objects used by police around the world to delimit areas. These included decorative statues and a kind of golden lamp. The gallery space featured metal fences used as barriers, while the wall featured a work resembling a window, on which Pereg hung a large collection of red and white blocking tape that looked like a thick curtain. She also hung gold and silver pendants on the replica of a security fence: Anyone buying a pendant received it in packaging resembling a rock, which enabled them to smash the fence.

So you're saying we have too many barriers and fences here?

"I'm not explaining the reality, but rather presenting it at the moments of transition," she responds. "My videos don't explain why the roads are closed on the Sabbath or why Muslims clear out their spaces in the mosque. Anyone in the mood to discover is invited, and there's always a text" to explain what's seen in the video. "This is important, because it demonstrates and confirms the extent to which the reality is fantastical. But first, there is a perplexity, a question, a deciphering. The spectator is active; they don't fall asleep in front of the story."

Pereg recently added another work that deals with barriers and barricades as ornamentation in the urban space. The exhibit "The Script Remains the Same" was held last autumn at Depo Istanbul (whose owner remains imprisoned over accusations that he tried to bring down the Turkish government). She received a particularly complex and challenging space there, with nine dominant columns. She decided to create a virtual reality installation, consisting of pieces of barrier that alter and close around the viewer, inspired by the practice of "[kettling](#)" – the police tactic for crowd control during a demonstration or protests.

"I built the space in three dimensions so that the visitor is always surrounded by columns and attacked by columns," she says. "As an Israeli artist invited to the Turkish space, which is

really fraught, I was very cautious. This created a work that is more universal and three-dimensional, drawing our attention to the fact that every space can close at any given moment – because of the regime or the censor, or because it will not survive economically.”

Working in a place like that must raise a lot of questions about censorship and self-censorship.

“I’m very wary of that. This is something I always deal with and feel. I feel its vibe in Israel too, of course – especially after what happened at the Ramat Gan Museum of Art,” she says, referring to the removal of [David Reeb’s work “Jerusalem,”](#) at the behest of the local mayor in 2022. “We have to grapple with the question of where to show, what to show, and to what extent a museum is prepared to be political – and this is no small consideration for the artist.

“Self-censorship is something an artist is always working against, but I want to make lemonade out of the lemon. Self-censorship can also be fruitful, because it forces you to find ways to show things. Like what happened to me in Istanbul. When there are political tensions and budgetary concerns, you have to find sophisticated tools for saying what you want to say.”

‘Truman Show’ in Hebron

Pereg is the first female Israeli artist to have an exhibit at London’s Tate Modern, following in the footsteps of male photographers Roi Kuper and Gilad Ophir. The museum, situated in a repurposed power station on the south bank of the Thames, chose to place “Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah” in one of its huge basement spaces that previously served as fuel tanks.

Pereg saw in these spaces a place that is half temple, half shelter. The video is shown on a gigantic screen that faces another gigantic screen, so the viewer cannot watch both videos simultaneously but can hear them. Here, too, there are no benches so visitors are forced to move around and stand in the space.

Over the past decade, she has gone back and updated the accompanying text. “When I exhibit abroad, I’m actually providing the context of the event I’m documenting and explaining Baruch Goldstein’s massacre [at the Tomb of the Patriarchs]. I go over this explanation again and again, until I feel that my works are like a memorial to those who perished in the massacre,” she says. “Not many people know, but the Palestinians call it the ‘Ibrahimi Mosque massacre’ – so not only is the place called by a different name but also the event. In Israel, it is called by the name of the aggressor.

“Ultimately, as we know, he became a hero [to far-right extremists]. Yitzhak Rabin erred when he decided that Goldstein would be considered a pariah and not be buried in a Jewish

cemetery. Paradoxically, his grave ultimately became a pilgrimage site. This is the story of this place – endless complexity. And you see the mechanism working and being maintained to perpetuate the ostensible order at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, which was actually defined in wake of the massacre.”

Pereg would return to the site and document more bureaucracy surrounding worship in 2015, when she was allowed to spend an entire day there filming the *adhan* – the muezzin’s five calls to prayer between 4 A.M. and 9 P.M. from the minaret, which has remained on the “Jewish side” of the site. The resulting video, “Ishmael,” follows the muezzin’s passage, accompanied by Israeli soldiers, from the mosque, through the synagogue and back again.

This video is even more absurd than its predecessor. Any viewer not familiar with Israel, Judaism or Islam will struggle to understand what they are seeing: a Muslim cleric at work, accompanied by Israeli soldiers.

“Yes, the religious ceremony doesn’t begin with the call to prayer itself but way before that, and it’s a meeting place for the power differentials. But, ‘Wait a minute, what’s actually happening here?’ is always a common reaction to my works. I don’t provide the entire background; I don’t present any narrative apart from my gaze.”

Pereg is currently working on a third video for her Tomb of the Patriarchs series, intriguingly titled “Esau.”

What are the most interesting reactions you’ve had to your Tomb of the Patriarchs videos?

“There are huge differences depending on the place where the works are shown. I got the funniest reaction in New York when I showed ‘Ishmael.’ All of a sudden, these images, which are obvious to us, became so strange and discombobulating – much more so than in Europe, where they’re more familiar with what’s happening in Israel. People asked me how I managed to build such a realistic set and where I found such good actors! And that was great, because that’s what I’m always striving for:

taking the reality to an extreme, until it becomes artificial, ritualistic, repetitive.

“All of us are actors in a play, a ‘Truman Show,’ and I always feel uneasy when I’m in that for too long,” she adds, referring to the 1998 Peter Weir satire about a man inadvertently living his life in a reality TV show. Like after two hours at a shopping mall, you’re dying to escape. The artificiality is suffocating.”

Do you feel that Israeli artists who criticize Israel are more welcome abroad than those who create nonpolitical art? Could it be that your reception is connected to that?

“I find that the work at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, for instance, is exhibited a lot and has won prizes because it asks a question and makes people think – just like this place and its behavior make me think. Make me feel. But I can’t answer your question. I’m not an art critic or even a big consumer of art. I’m very busy doing what interests me and bringing the contexts together. How is it possible to bring this dirty, fraught and dusty place into the sterile museum? What happens when a visitor wanders through the museum and encounters this reality? I present the perspective of only one person.”



Nira Pereg's "Theos & Krateo" (2018). Credit: Nira Pereg

Israeli curators are perhaps better positioned to answer that question than the artist herself. Independent curator Chen Tamir believes international audiences “want works about Israel that align with the prevailing point of view about it abroad: critical of the political situation, but with nuance, with intimacy, with beauty – and with two sides, not just the Jewish side. Nira Pereg knows how to do all of this perfectly.”

Tel Aviv Museum of Art Chief Curator Mira Lapidot, meanwhile, notes that Pereg has a “special sense for interesting phenomena in the hyper-complex Israeli space. She has a good eye, she’s curious and she’s patient. Her second talent is to transform this into good art. This is already a lot more complex. What makes her works strong is the injection of an anthropological dimension into the political. In this sense, ‘Abraham Abraham Sarah Sarah’ is a real masterpiece.”

Do you think it's easier for an Israeli artist like Pereg, who makes political works, to succeed overseas?

Lapidot: "I think there's a lot of interest in what's going on here, and therefore this naturally creates great interest in works that deal with that. This is just the same as other turbulent regions in the world, and the curiosity about art that comes from those places and that illuminates the reality there. Israel is just on steroids in that regard."

Pereg herself may not be able to explain her success, but as she sees it, there's no such thing as a nonpolitical Israeli artist. "As a teacher for 20 years in various art departments ... I can say that there's no nonpolitical art and there's no act an artist does that isn't political. The political, in my eyes, is everything that is public. Everything that exists in the space where power relations operate. The viewer of art is the public, and the public is a political human space. You know what, even if the work is in a studio and there's only one casual viewer, or even if that viewer is the artist alone – it's political. The artist as citizen."

Click the alert icon to follow topics:

 Israel culture  Israel-Palestine  Hebron

Comments

Name

Enter the commenter display name

Comment

By adding a comment, I agree to this site's [Terms of use](#)

Send



In the News



'AI Is Not Only a Threat': How We Should Respond to AI, According to Israeli Web Pioneer



Hebron's Tomb of the Patriarchs Is Rocking London's Tate Modern



Mission Improbable: Eating Out in Jerusalem on Shabbat





The Israeli Jumping Up and Down With Sorrow



Israel Is Touting a Hollow Coexistence in Haifa. The Real Story Is Much More Inspiring



Breeze Tel Aviv: A Dream Dwelling in the White City

© Paid by Inter Real Estate

ICYMI



Netanyahu's Coup for Dummies: Israel's Constitutional Crisis, Explained



'Israeli Army Chiefs Paved the Way for Ben-Gvir's Rise'



The Israelis Destabilizing Democracy and Disrupting Elections Worldwide

