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Appropriating Canaanism: Ruth Patir's Reanimation of Judean Pillar Figurines

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Abstract: This article addresses a body of works by the video artist Ruth Patir, in which Israeli womanhood in the 2020s is interrogated through Iron Age female statuettes, known as Judean Pillar Figurines. By means of motion capture technology and 3D animation, Patir features contemporary Israeli women uncannily moving and speaking through the bodies of millennium-old female figurines, whose history and function are still under debate. In *Petah Tikva* (2020), Patir situates these hybrid figures in a modern IVF clinic, offering a biopolitical perspective on Israeli society's compelling maternal impulse. *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019), in turn, ponders Israeli women's legitimation of their femininity, across the generational gap between the artist and her mother, here cast in the role of an imposing Iron Age figurine. The paper addresses Patir's work in both biopolitical and phenomenological terms, arguing that the sensual appeal of the archaeological objects often undermines the videos' political critique.

Keywords: Ruth Patir; *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019); *Petah Tikva* (2020); Israeli art; archaeology; Canaanism; biopolitics; feminism



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1. Introduction

A group of archaic terracotta figurines, popularly known as “fertility goddesses”, are seated on bright colored plastic chairs in the waiting room of a current day medical clinic (Figure 1). While unmistakably recognizable as archaeological specimens, their movements and body language belong in the present day. Browsing through cellphones, leafing through a magazine, or watching TV on wall mounted screens, they respond to the clinic's automated announcements as would any contemporary patient.

The title of this single-channel 5:27 min video, *Petah Tikva* (2020), plays on the double meaning of the clinic's geographic location in *Petah Tikva*, a small town in central Israel, and the Hebrew term for hope, *Tikva*. That the place is a fertility clinic might be inferred from the all-female crowd and the posters of babies on the wall. Yet, another hint that reproduction and fertility are at stake is given when the camera peeps over the shoulder of a “woman” leafing through a magazine that features anatomical images of human reproductive organs, coupled with essays on surrogacy and assisted reproductive technologies. In yet another video by Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019), an imposing female statuette fills the screen (Figure 2). Her hands are folded under her bust in a posture distinctive of Judean Pillar Figurines, a type of late Iron Age figurine found in archaeological excavations in the precincts of ancient Judah (Darby 2022). The scene is disconcertingly (and hilariously) anachronistic. When the figure speaks, her intonation and parlance are immediately recognizable as present-day Israeli. Invited by an off-screen voice to play a suggestive “girls' game”, she elaborates in a deadpan manner that she would “marry Obama, ... have sex with Clinton, ... and kill Trump”, hence the title of the video.



Figure 1. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.



Figure 2. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019), still (detail) from single-channel video.

In the present paper I address these videos by Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020), and *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019), and also attend in brief to the video *6000 Years of Art in the Land of Israel Hitting on Me* (2021). In *Petah Tikva* and *Marry Fuck Kill*, Patir has digitally animated Judean Pillar Figurines (referenced in archaeological studies as JPFs), dating from the 8th to the 6th centuries BCE, of which over a 1000 were found in archaeological excavations in Israel. This particular type of female figurine, with large breasts and a pillar shaped body (Figure 3), is attributed to the kingdom of Judah (יהודה). They disappear altogether from the period after the occupation and devastation of Judah by the Babylonian empire in 586 BCE (Darby 2022; Deutsch 2022; Kletter 1996).



Figure 3. Ceramic Judean pillar-based figurine Beth Shemesh Iron II 800-586 BCE, Penn Museum 02. Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons, accessed on 2 October 2022.

These archetypal figures emerge from the deepest strata of Israel's history, before the term Jewish as it is known today had come into existence (Schwartz 2012). They resurge in Patir's video art, with an uncanny effect. In a uniquely devised technique, employing a motion capture suit, Patir captured video footage of current day Israeli women, including her mother, and converted them into digital avatars. The avatars were subsequently re-embodied as Judean Pillar Figurines that come to life on screen in life-like human dimensions. The uncanny anachronism, whereby Iron Age terracotta bodies manifest current day behavior, moving and talking like Israeli women, becomes in Patir's hands a compelling tool for interrogating identity and gender in 2020s Israel. Granted, the anachronistic twists played on the figurines are very funny, hilarious even. Yet, these videos render a complex and stratified picture of Israeli womanhood. Moreover, the unique technique and resulting aesthetic of Patir's experimental video art merit critical attention in both conceptual and phenomenological terms.

2. Archaeology and Identity in Israeli Art

The Ancient Near East held an allure for artists committed to Zionism since the turn of the 20th century, long before the designation of "Israeli art" came into effect. As Manor-Friedman (1998) has shown, early Zionist artists approached the mythical/archaic Levant as a bridge to Israel's primal golden age, an era deemed foundational to the project of forging the New Jew. Artists' attitude to the material culture of the Ancient Near East changed over the years, with the evolution of art in Israel before and after its establishment as an independent political entity. Originating in an ideological concept, of archaeology as a founding component of Israeli identity, the attitude flipped since the 1970s to critical interrogation of this very frame of thought (Manor-Friedman 1998, p. 94). At the turn of the 20th century, the founders of the Bezalel school of art, a keystone of Israeli art history (Manor 2005) harked back to the imperial grandeur of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt in search of what they perceived as historically faithful imagery of biblical times. Thanks to the growth of biblical archaeology in the 19th century, details of dress and other stylistic

features of the cultures of the Ancient Near East were available to interested artists. These features were readily harnessed for the project of re-materializing the mythical past of the Jewish people, a time when, to quote Bezalel's founder Boris Schatz, "We were a healthy and free people in this place" (in [Manor 2005](#), p. 53). Thus, for example, Ephraim Moses Lilien's Illustrated Bible of 1908 depicts Moses as bearing an Assyrian beard, headgear, and a royal gown. The prophet's facial features, in turn, recall those of Theodore Herzl, the prophet of Zionism, thereby situating Lilien's Assyrian reference within the ideology of the Jewish national revival ([Manor-Friedman 1998](#), p. 97). Recourse to stylistic attributes of the Ancient Near East was driven by an ideological rejection of the diasporic existence of the Jewish people, endorsing in its place a newly forged Hebrew, or *eretz yisraeli*, identity ([Manor 2005](#), p. 70). In the particular case of the Jewish national movement, emerging around the turn of the 20th century, the circumstances of bi-millennial diaspora entailed geographical relocation and resettling in the mythical land of origin. The material culture of the ancient peoples of the region, made accessible through archaeological excavation projects in the Near East, became a key resource for the formation of the new Hebrew style. The culture and imagery of the Ancient Near East came to embody the collective cultural and national unconscious of the nascent Israeli entity.

The 1920s and 30s ushered in a modernist turn, which entailed rejection of the orientalism and biblical symbolism of the Bezalel school. The artists of this generation still resorted to the monumental sculpture of the Ancient Near East, yet with an emphasis on its archaism, thereby forging a local version of modernism in touch with European art's primitivist trends ([Manor-Friedman 1998](#), p. 99). A case in point is Avraham Melnikov's monumental *Roaring Lion* (1928–34), a memorial to the pioneer settlers of Tel Hai, whose resonance with the lions flanking the gates of Assyrian palaces had been pointed out already at the time of its creation ([Manor-Friedman 1998](#), p. 100).

The 1940s and 50s, encompassing the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and its War of Independence, saw a shift in the significance of Ancient Near Eastern imagery. In the effort to forge a national identity for the fledgling Israeli polity, at the time struggling for its very existence, it was crucial to tap the deep reaching roots of Israel's past in the region. The 1940s saw the emergence of the Canaanite idea, a new inflection of the dichotomist view on local ("Canaanite") vs. diasporic identity, one that veered away from the Jewish vs. Hebrew dichotomy that informed the first decades of art and culture in Israel ([Manor 2020](#); [Ohana 2012](#); [Manor-Friedman 1998](#)). In its original political formation in 1939, under the name "Young Hebrews", the Canaanites, thus designated derogatorily by the poet Avraham Shlonsky, posited a regional identity that was not exclusively Jewish. By anchoring Hebrew language and culture in the geographical region of the Levant, rather than in a common ethnic origin, Canaanism opted to sever the ties between modern Israel (not yet a sovereign political entity at the time) and the historical Jewish diaspora ([Hofmann 2011](#); [Ohana 2012](#)). While visual artists were not among the committed members of the movement, the historiography of Israeli art has canonized *Nimrod*, a 1939 sandstone sculpture by Yitzhak Danziger (Figure 4), as the epitome of the Canaanite idea ([Manor 2020](#); [Zalmona 2010](#)). For [Ohana \(2012, p. 15\)](#), *Nimrod* "signifies an anti-Jewish rebellion via a daring leap backward to a mythical idol-worshipping culture". Nimrod, the biblical hunter and rebel against God, was depicted by Danziger in the archaic style of the Ancient Near East, with which he became acquainted during visits to the British Museum while studying in London ([Zalmona 2010, p. 123](#)). However, the significance of this work, and of Israeli art of the period more generally in this respect, was not confined to Canaanism. As [Manor-Friedman \(1998\)](#) and [Manor \(2020\)](#) convincingly argue, Israeli artists at large were not committed to the Canaanite movement's ideology. Rather, they resorted to the motifs of the mythical warrior and of ritual sacrifice in the context of the Jewish population's struggle over the land of Israel, culminating in the near-devastating attack on the newly established state in 1948. In this frame of reference, *Nimrod* came to embody the heroic Hebrew warrior, past and present. Thus, for [Zalmona \(2010, p. 119\)](#), the body of *Nimrod* merges seamlessly with the hunting falcon perched on his shoulder, forming a "four-eyed

war machine". Additionally, deemed significant was the sculpture's reddish sandstone, which on the artist's account was brought from the 1st century BCE Nabatean city of Petra, now in Jordan. For Danziger, the stone connected present day Israel with ancient times, by invoking the enigmatic Nabateans and their magnificent palaces, carved in the red rocks of Petra (Zalmona 2010, p. 119). Danziger referred to working on the Nubian sandstone as "merging into the rocks of the desert" (Zalmona 2010, p. 123).



Figure 4. Yitzhak Danziger, *Nimrod*, 1939. Nubian sandstone, 95 cm × 33 cm × 33 cm. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Collection; <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons, accessed on 2 October 2022.

Artists of the "1948 Generation", as they are known in Israel's cultural historiography, also turned to ancient ritual sacrifice, metonymically invoking the country's fallen sons. Images of ritual altars found in archaeological excavations were recurrent motifs, alongside depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac (Manor-Friedman 1998, p. 107). The "Nimrodic order", to adopt Ohana's idiom, "symboliz[ed] heroism, a sense of mission, and self-sacrifice" (Ohana 2012, p. 15). Notably, even though a counter current of Israeli art, embracing European modernism, took precedence in the 1940s–50s via the group called New Horizons (Ofakim Hadashim), the two tendencies (i.e., the local-regional and the international) coexisted, at times even simultaneously in the work of individual artists (Manor-Friedman 1998, p. 104). Indeed, Ofrat (2004, p. 319) asserts that an undercurrent of attraction to the ancient history and material culture of the region continued to inform Israeli art beyond the aforementioned formative decades.

Nimrod and its conceptual lineage bear significantly on Patir's video art. Her 5-channel video installation, *6000 Years of Art in the Land of Israel Hitting on Me* (2021), presents animated images from the archaeological album *6000 Years of Art in the Land of Israel*, compiled by archaeologist and former IDF general Yigael Yadin. In the artist's words, "The figures in the book were humorously animated to 'catcall' the viewers in the show, thus creating an homage to the undocumented legacy of macho-culture and sexual harassment" (Patir 2021). Here, as in the works on which this paper will dwell at more length, Patir explores the potential of anachronism as a critical tool, bringing the archaic figures to life only to sabotage their aura of timelessness. Winking, whistling, and blowing kisses and

catcalls, the Chalcolithic figurines that Patir chose to feature in this video are subject to irreverent treatment; their loss of aura is as disconcerting as it is humorous.

In turn, her choice of Judean Pillar Figurines in *Marry Fuck Kill* and *Petah Tikva* is more layered and complicated. Unlike *6000 Years*, *Marry Fuck Kill* (hereafter *MFK*) and *Petah Tikva* beg further attention to nuance. There is more to Patir's animation of Judean Pillar Figurines than sabotaging the haloed position of archaeology in Israeli culture. The particular choice of archaeological objects, the specific ways in which anachronism is deployed in *MFK* and *Petah Tikva*, and the unique technique involving motion capture video of actual women, require digging deeper into their negotiation of womanhood in 2020s Israel. Employing small rather than monumental objects, which are domestic rather than palatial, and obviously and expressly female, Patir's videos reflect on the "Nimrodic order" (Ohana 2012) with outright critique. Upon the artist's account (communication with the author, August 2022), she first took interest in these particular archaeological items while working on an earlier video, *Love Letters to Ruth* (2018). The latter video offered a cutting feminist critique on probably the most renowned IDF general, Moshe Dayan, an amateur archaeologist and notorious womanizer. Dayan was known for his private collection of archaeological artifacts, obtained in mostly illegal ways. While she was busy creating a grotesque digital avatar of Dayan, an epitome of the Israeli militaristic macho man, Patir developed a concern for the numerous female figurines in his collection, seeking to endow them with agency and power of speech (communication with the author, August 2022). In what follows, I begin with a brief review of the current archaeological knowledge about these figurines, before proceeding to attend closely to the videos in which they are re-animated, two and half millennia after having been molded in clay in Judean workshops.

Here, a caveat is in order. The artist does not claim archaeological or historical accuracy in her works, nor does she assert extensive knowledge of the archaeology and history of JPFs. She often misdates and otherwise confuses the historical data pertaining to the figurines, referring to them not as Judean but rather as "Canaanite deities", which probably resonates with her critique of the "Nimrodic order". This said, I premise my discussion on an understanding that archaeological insights about the specific function and history of Judean Pillar Figurines are pertinent to any analysis of their resurgence in 21st century Israeli art.

3. Judean Pillar Figurines

Judean (or Judahite, see Deutsch 2022) Pillar Figurines (JPFs) are terracotta statuettes featuring female figures with hands folded beneath oversized breasts above a cylindrical lower body (Figure 3 above). JPFs have been excavated in large numbers in the geographical precinct of Judah, from Jerusalem through Beersheba. Dating from the 8th–7th to the 6th century BCE, and completely disappearing in the wake of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE, they form a distinctly specific Judean type (Deutsch 2022, p. 164). The main attributes distinguishing JPFs from female figurines from other cultures of the Levant are the absence of genitalia and the position of the hands, which appear to be folded under the breasts, rather than cupping them (Deutsch 2022, p. 164). The figurines were whitewashed, with details such as eyes, hair, and jewelry painted on. The white paint covering the body might indicate that the figures were perceived as clothed, rather than naked (Deutsch 2022, p. 166). While originating in the 10th century BCE, JPFs proliferated significantly during the late 8th century BCE, in the wake of the Assyrian conquest and destruction of Samaria (722 BCE), and the subsequent invasion of Judah in 701 BCE (Wilson 2012; Byrne 2004). In current archaeological research, JPFs are regarded as household items that might have been employed in "magico-medical, exorcistic, and apotropaic rituals which, according to ancient Near Eastern textual sources, typically took place in the home and were the concerns of the entire family, male and female alike" (Darby 2022, pp. 203–4). While they have earlier been identified as female deities, mostly *Asherah* (Kletter 1996), current research emphasizes that associating JPFs with sexuality, conception, or birth, and/or with the

notion of “fertility goddess”, as they are known in the popular idiom, are unsubstantiated by archaeological evidence (Darby 2022, p. 178).

The majority of JPFs were found in Jerusalem, the Judean capital, and were apparently distributed across all levels of Judean society, including the political and religious elites (Darby 2022, p. 198; see also Byrne 2004, p. 140). These specimens of material culture, suggestive of idol worship, apparently went unchallenged by the religious hegemony of Judah. Discussing findings from Area G of the City of David, Darby points out that even “an elite quarter with connections to the religious and political hierarchy did not eschew figurines” (Darby 2022, p. 198). Whether this tolerance indicates a lack of monotheistic zeal, or rather casts doubt on the figurines’ hypothetical cultic function, seems impossible to determine on the premises of current available knowledge. Still, while Darby (2022) advises caution in interpreting the function and meaning of JPFs, the popular notion of “fertility goddesses” remains pervasive in the public realm.

As Darby (2022) and Deutsch (2022) elaborate, archaeology has “more questions than answers” as to the precise nature and use of the JPFs. However, interesting attempts have been made by Byrne (2004) and Wilson (2012) to explain their specificity and exclusivity to Judah, and the reason they “seem to explode in popularity during the eighth and seventh centuries” (Wilson 2012, p. 260). Byrne (2004) and Wilson (2012) proposed interpretations of JPFs that take into account the geopolitical circumstances of the period, namely, the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the consequent subjection of Judah to Assyrian imperialism (Wilson 2012, p. 270). Byrne (2004) perceived the proliferation of JPFs as a material expression of the growing annihilation anxiety in Judah, in the face of the Assyrian devastation of Samaria in 722 BCE. As Byrne (2004, p. 142) writes, “[p]olitical agendas of social reproduction frequently respond to real and perceived threats to communal existence, and these agendas often imprint themselves into material culture. In the case of late Iron II Judah, the threat was real”. In turn, Wilson (2012, p. 270) rejected Byrne’s concept of JPFs as “reproductive propaganda”, proposing instead that the sudden proliferation of JPFs in the late 8th and during the 7th century BCE reflected an effort to reinforce Judean ethnic identity in the face of Assyrian cultural dominance in the Levant. JPFs, Wilson (2012, p. 175) asserts, represent “an attempt by the Judean populace to maintain ethnic identity on the periphery of the Assyrian empire . . . contributing to an ongoing cultural discourse within the Levant”.

Whether bolstering ethnic identity through stylistic difference, or responding to violent imperialism with “fertility propaganda”, a genre of terracotta female figurines with a pillar-shaped lower body, large breasts, and folded arms, flourished in Judean households of the late Iron Age. The fact that the JPFs belonged in the private domain of the home, rather than in grand ritual and imperial contexts, plays a central role in Patir’s adoption of them as the protagonists of her videos. Her choice of these crudely fashioned popular objects, suggestive of a matriarchal home cult, counters the male-dominated narrative of heroism and sacrifice embodied in the “Nimrodic order” (Ohana 2012). Challenging the primacy that Israeli art of the first decades assigned the grand mythical figures of the Ancient Near East, Patir proceeds to resurrect the female statuettes that populated Judean homes during the late Iron Age. Appropriating female objects from Dayan’s collection, and from the Israel Museum’s national collection, she grants them agency and turns them into moving and speaking subjects. In what follows, I offer a close look at *MFK* and *Petah Tikva*, in order to unpack the specificities of Patir’s manipulation of JPFs, and her uniquely devised animation process, bringing Judean Pillar Figurines to life in 2020s Israel.

4. Archaic Matriarchs: From *Shebaziya* (1939) to *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019)

The first JPFs were unearthed around the year 1900, and were subsequently excavated in their hundreds in Judean archaeological sites. Nonetheless, they were obviously not included in the construction of the new Hebrew style, sought after by the Bezalel artists. Nor were they considered a viable portal into Israel’s ancient past, which Israeli artists rather sought in Mesopotamian and Egyptian reliefs and sculpture. Female figures represented

within this scheme also conformed to the monumental code, mainly in contexts of Eros and fertility. Thus, a Chalcolithic figurine excavated in Beersheba in the late 1950s was elevated to the epic rank of a Venus in Mordechai Ardon's painting *Venus of Beersheba* (1962). I thus turn to *Shebaziya* (1939; Figure 5), Danziger's female counterpart of *Nimrod*, as a point of departure for addressing *Marry Fuck Kill*.

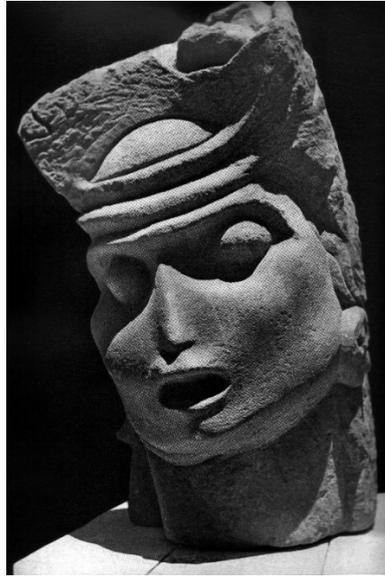


Figure 5. Yitzhak Danziger, *Shebaziya*, 1939. Nubian sandstone, h. 48 cm. Collection of *The Phoenix*, Photo by Zilman, 1956. Yitzhak Danziger, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c6/Shebaziya.jpg>, accessed on 2 October 2022.

Shebaziya is a larger-than-life female head, carved in sandstone like *Nimrod*. Her features are modeled in archaic style, the facial expression austere. Yet, unlike *Nimrod*'s severely pursed lips, *Shebaziya*'s are slightly parted, suggesting a measure of sensuality. The headgear, in turn, evinces power and dominance, perhaps royalty. The title *Shebaziya* is believed to evoke the Shabazi neighborhood in Tel Aviv, at the time home to Yemenite Jews whose dark skin and overall exoticism ignited the imagination of many an Israeli artist of European descent. While the work does not invoke a biblical figure, it distinctly resonates with *Nimrod*, reflecting the effect of the Ancient Near East on half a century of Israeli art.

Patir became acquainted with *Shebaziya* through a colleague, the Israeli performance artist Ana Wild, whose work targets Canaanism through feminist appropriation. Inflecting the concept of Afro-futurism, Wild has formed a unique artistic language that she dubs "Canaan-futurism" (communication with the author, August 2022). Contemplating *Shebaziya* in conjunction with Patir's imposing matriarchal figurine (Figure 2 above) affords a view on the socio-cultural chasm separating *Marry Fuck Kill* from Danziger's Canaanism, reflecting profound changes in the discourse on Israeli identity. Through this improbable conjunction of Danziger and Patir, one realizes, however, that archaeology bears no less valence in 2020s negotiations of Israeli identity than it had almost a century earlier.

5. *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019)

Marry Fuck Kill (MFK) begins with a figurine coming to life on a shelf in a museum display (Figure 6). She begins swaying, then dancing to *The Platters*' 1950s pop hit *Only You*. The other figurines in the display remain immobile throughout. Technically, a digital 3D model of the figurine was amalgamated with video footage of the artist's mother, to create the effect of an archaeological object moving with natural ease. The motions are thus the mother's, while the archaic body belongs to a digitally modeled JPF. Embodying a live performer in a 2500-year-old terracotta body was enabled by means of a motion capture suit, transforming the live performer into a digital avatar manipulable via animation. When

queried about this unique animation technique, Patir explained that it was devised to avoid the use of generic digital avatars, of the type used on gaming platforms. In particular, she says, she was antagonized by the female avatars' stereotypical motion schema and way of talking. Motion capture, in turn, enabled her to record individual body language, while the performer remained protected against overly intimate exposure thanks to the enveloping layer of animation (Sheleff 2022). Patir's process thus brings archaeology into conjunction with gaming technology and motion capture video, to a compelling effect.



Figure 6. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019). Still from single-channel video.

Like *Shebaziya*, the protagonist of *MFK* is an imposing matriarch, modeled in archaic style. In the first 2:25 min of this 13:51 min video, she is the only living entity on the display, and thus a subject among objects. The subsequent scene switches to life-like dimensions, featuring her as a compelling figure, dramatically lit against a black background. Notably, the artist's mother, Ziva Patir, whose motion and speech animate the archaic body, is a daunting matriarch in her own right. A prominent scientist and businesswoman, she held key positions locally and internationally. Throughout the video, Patir engages in dialogue with her mother. While the artist remains off-screen, the mother is mediated through the ancient body, maintaining a protective distance while negotiating present day concerns of Israeli women.

Anachronism is key to Patir's aesthetic. At once funny and uncanny, it is instrumental in reclaiming the ancient figurines from the custodians of the "Nimrodic order", and bringing them closer to present-day gallery visitors. What if the female figurines that Moshe Dayan collected (just as he collected women, Patir says) were given power of speech, despite the fact that most of them visibly lack a mouth (communication with the author, August 2022). Thus, while *Shebaziya* is frozen in archaic majesty, the central protagonist of *MFK* is alive with a sense of humor, mixed with self-reflexive irony as if aware of her own anachronism. Wrested from the reified museum display, in which she had been bracketed as part of a national collection, she jokes about an archaeologist being the optimal partner for a woman of age. With this apparently offhand joke, she flips the notion of women as "collectible", asserting her own prerogative of choice and flouting ageism in the same move.

Marry Fuck Kill is rich with more anachronistic twists, such as when the mother figurine deliberates on her weekly use of her cellular phone, while standing in a desert landscape with a horde of figurines in the background, dancing ecstatically to techno music (Figure 7). She also brings up Obama, Clinton, and Trump as potential partners, and proceeds to tell a funny and sexually suggestive anecdote pertaining to being a young woman in an all-male environment.



Figure 7. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019). Still from single-channel video.

Yet, feeding on the same anachronism, the compelling materiality and sensuality of the terracotta bodies complicates the image of contemporary Israeli feminists, here represented by the artist's mother, a technologically and culturally savvy professional. A conversation between the off-screen artist and the mother figurine, here seated on a desert rock (Figure 8), openly addresses the gap between first and second-generation feminists, with regard to acknowledging their femininity. Thus, the mother asserts, "It's hard for me to be a sexual object . . . my sex (so I thought) should not be factored into what I say. In my generation, we wanted to be successful despite, and we did not think of our sexuality as instrumental in our success" (MFK, 10:35–11:02). In turn, Patir offers close up viewing angles on the heavy bodies and textured "skins" of the matriarchal idols, here raving in the desert (Figure 9). In this she appears to assert, and legitimate, a concept of contemporary womanhood of which femininity is part and parcel. Considered in phenomenological terms, the aesthetic emphasis on surface and texture allows an "archaeological unconscious" to emerge and resonate within the space of Israel's 2020s reality, bringing forth feminine currents that had been understated, if not repressed, within the "Nimrodic order".



Figure 8. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019). Still from single-channel video.



Figure 9. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019). Still from single-channel video.

6. Fertility Goddesses and Israeli Mothers: *Petah Tikva* (2020)

If *MFK* immerses viewers in an intuitive and sensual negotiation of womanhood, *Petah Tikva* proceeds to take issue with the compelling pronatalism of Israeli society. The average fertility rate among Jewish women in Israel, across the different sectors of society, is significantly higher than in Europe's industrialized countries (Birenbaum-Carmeli et al. 2021; Okun 2016). Israel, the "land of imperative motherhood" (Remennick 2000), has high recourse to assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs). With IVF and egg freezing (*Oocyte Cryopreservation*) technologies generously supported by the state, Israeli society manifests a pervasive maternal (or rather parental) impulse. That this tendency is not exclusive to women has recently been reflected in the struggle to legitimate surrogacy for homosexual couples, affirmed in a supreme court ruling.¹

Among the motivating reasons for Israel's pronatalist bias, sociological research counts the pervasiveness of familism in Israeli society (Okun 2016), namely, the tendency to base everyday life on close family structures. Other aspects, perceived as driving Israeli society's parental imperative, are: (1) anxiety related to loss of life in war or terrorist attacks; (2) the perceived threat of losing the privilege of Jewish majority ("the demographic threat"); (3) a religious imperative, especially among the orthodox sectors; and (4) the collective trauma of the Holocaust, entailing an imperative to make up for the loss of the 6 million (Birenbaum-Carmeli et al. 2021; Okun 2016). Under these circumstances, sociologists such as Larissa Remennick (2000) have focused on the pressure put on Israeli women to fulfill their reproductive role, as it were, and the social marginalization of women who do not partake of the project of reproduction. This view of Israeli society resonates quite suggestively with Byrne's (2004) claim that the JPFs fulfilled a role of "reproductive propaganda", constituting the material expression of a reproductive urgency arising in the face of pending annihilation. Although concrete historical resonance is not the crux of my argument here, especially since Patir denies awareness of Byrne's or similar theories, still the fact that these suggestive artifacts from Israel's mythical past have come to life in an Israeli artist's negotiation of identity and womanhood begs further elaboration.

Petah Tikva has been accepted in the Israeli media as a gesture of pure sociopolitical critique, "saying 'no' to those who allow themselves to blatantly breach the private space of her friends, colleagues, and family members, demanding to know when and with whom they would decide to reproduce" (Bernard 2020). Nevertheless, the work is ridden with inherent contradictions, which the above reading does not and cannot account for. Granted, on first and even second glance, the work might indeed appear fiercely critical of Israeli biopolitics, pertaining both to societal pressures and to state policies, that support assisted reproduction and encourage big families through the social security system. Furthermore, the swapping of Israeli women with allegedly primitive creatures might insinuate, by implication, that contemporary Israelis uncritically succumb to a reproduction imperative inherited from less enlightened times. To underscore this reading, one has only to take a look at the texts reprinted in the *M/otherland* magazine, with which the avatars pass their time in the clinic (Figure 10). Sophie Lewis's radical essay, "Full Surrogacy Now", begins by describing pregnancy and childbirth as a "bloodbath". For lack of better reproductive solutions, Lewis advocates "gestational communism" and "abolition" of the family. "What if we reimagined pregnancy . . . as work under capitalism—that is, as something to be struggled in and against?" she writes, outlining a utopic order whereby "every pregnancy be for everyone".²

Biopolitical critique notwithstanding, two aspects in *Petah Tikva* add nuance and complexity to the work, somewhat weakening its political edge. The first is the biographical fact that Patir has recently undertaken the physically and mentally challenging process of egg freezing (communication with the author, August 2022). Documenting the experience via a motion capture suit, she intends to eventually incorporate the video materials into a new work. With the artist so intimately involved in the concerns tapped in *Petah Tikva*—embracing, in effect, the very social/medical practice that is subject to critical scrutiny in the video—any reading thereof should carefully avoid political dogmatism. As it turns out,

Petah Tikva interrogates Israeli society's deep seated maternal imperative from a profoundly conflicted, first person perspective of a young Israeli woman.



Figure 10. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.

The internal conflict that riddles *Petah Tikva* is further staged through Patir's introduction of an "invasive species", consisting of Chalcolithic animal figurines, dating from 4500–3600 BCE (Figure 11). These animals predate the JPFs by over three millennia, and are thus extremely ancient in relation to the Iron Age figurines, emerging from the deep recesses of an "archeological unconscious". Anachronistically, the Judean figurines encounter these uncanny Chalcolithic animals via youtube videos playing on cellphones and TV screens (Figure 12). However, the situation is layered even further. The footage of Chalcolithic animals is in fact amalgamated with, and animated by, real YouTube videos taken on the streets of present day Haifa, in Northern Israel, where wild boars have recently infiltrated the urban environment, a veritable invasive species disrupting everyday life. The Chalcolithic animals seen on the clinic's screens are thus doubly alien. A wild species, unsettling life in contemporary Israel, assumes the guise of a Chalcolithic horde emerging from a chronologically remote era. These animals sound a "call of nature", literally heard on the soundtrack as strange mooing sounds emitted by the animals (Figure 13). These sounds appear to unsettle the "ladies", who are watching from within the neatly ordered medical clinic.



Figure 11. Chalcolithic Cornet called Bazikh, Israel Antiquities Authority. Hanay, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons, accessed on 2 October 2022.



Figure 12. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.



Figure 13. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.

Patir's introduction of untamed nature into the fertility clinic calls for a phenomenological analysis, beyond biopolitics. While political critique can only go so far, attention to the work's phenomenology reveals its compelling invitation to engage on a sensual, non-verbal level, via close views on massive arms, heavy breasts, and rough, earth colored skin (Figure 14), in addition to the strange sounds emitted by the animals (Figure 13 above). Through textural and sonic excess, appealing to haptic and auditory sensibilities, Patir invokes a primal call of nature, rendering it viscerally present. Figuratively speaking, the figurines' roughly modeled clay bodies seem more real than the plastic seats that barely accommodate them. Immediate sensual identification with the (reproductive) female bodies, and with the ancient animals, precedes and might even obfuscate political critique. Sensed as close and present through material richness, the figures emerging from the deepest layers of Israel's historical unconscious become strangely relevant to the concerns of current day Israeli women.³

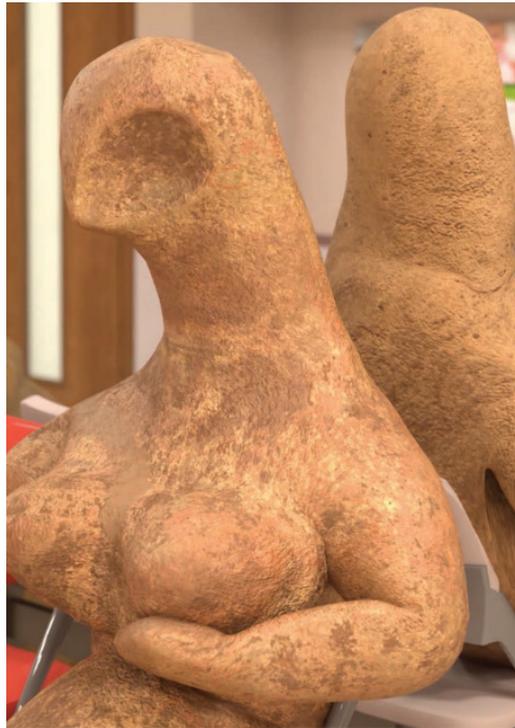


Figure 14. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.

Chronological layering, or *heterochrony* (Bal 2011), is central to the aesthetic of *Petah Tikva*. For Mieke Bal, heterochrony, or multilayered time, is an essential aesthetic trait of video art. As a time-based medium, Bal (2011, p. 212) asserts, video is best equipped to forge an experience of time as “contrived, manipulated, and offered in different, multilayered ways”. In *Petah Tikva*, Patir introduces heterochrony through the formal trope of *mise-en-abyme*, or screen-within-screen compositions, in which multiple historical and contemporary layers are put into play (Figure 15). Here, a 21st century cellular phone is held in the massive terracotta hand of a Judean figurine, dating back to the 8th century BCE. In turn, the phone displays a Chalcolithic animal emerging from the 5th or 4th Millennium BCE, roaming a present-day Israeli street, in reference to the invasion of Haifa by wild boars (see also Figure 12 above). Patir thus forges a heterochronous structure resonating with Jewish and Israeli history, compellingly leaping back and forth between the remote Israelite and Judahite past, and Israel’s present moment.



Figure 15. Ruth Patir, *Petah Tikva* (2020). Still (detail) from single-channel video.

7. Conclusions: Portrait of the Artist as an Archaic Figurine

I conclude with Patir's intimate self-portrait as a pseudo-archaeological figurine. Having herself scanned and modeled in 3D as a terracotta figurine, that is slightly more realistic than her Iron Age protagonists, became the artist's ultimate move of appropriation. It is a statement of personal investment in the videos' negotiation of Israel's archaeological unconscious. In the ending scene of *MFK*, she appears as a pseudo-archaeological object, handled by Moshe Dayan's huge fingers, which are also digitally rendered in 3D (Figure 16). In the *M/otherland* magazine, in turn, she is pierced by hormonal syringes, invoking the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian in the context of Israel's pronatalism (Figure 17). In line with my argument throughout this paper, however, I suggest resisting the temptation of an uncomplicated biopolitical reading, rather attending to the ambivalence underlying this self-portrait of the artist as an archaeological avatar.

In a past interview (Gillerman 2019), Patir remarked that her sense of identity had changed in the course of her studies at Columbia University, away from Israel. On her account, she felt compelled to shake off her professors' assumptions on the universality of art. Rather, she opted to attend to aspects of her identity "that I cannot run away from: Israeliness, womanhood, feminist discourse, a certain ethical discourse; this was also the reason I felt a stranger abroad and had to return to Israel". The foregoing entanglement of Israeliness with womanhood and feminism is a useful key to elucidating Patir's recourse to Israel's archaeology, and by implication her portrayal of herself as an archaic Judean figurine. The ambivalence, as I see it, lies between the politically problematic history of archaeology in Israel, reviewed earlier in this paper, and the appeal of its actual material objects, which still convey a strong sense of place and historical rootedness. Here, I opted to show that *MFK* and *Petah Tikva* evince a tension between political critique and sensual investment. In a single move, Patir reaffirms the femininity of the JPFs (in *MFK*) and grounds Israel's pronatalist impulse in an historical yet instinctive call of nature (in *Petah Tikva*), at the same time wielding a sharp biopolitical critique thereof. She thus expropriates Israel's archaeological unconscious from the grasp of the "Nimrodic order", reanimating it with figures of intimate, private, and unapologizing femininity. Forging a local version of second-generation feminism, embodied in female figures from Israel's mythical past, Patir pictures a multidimensional Israeli womanhood in the third decade of the 21st century.

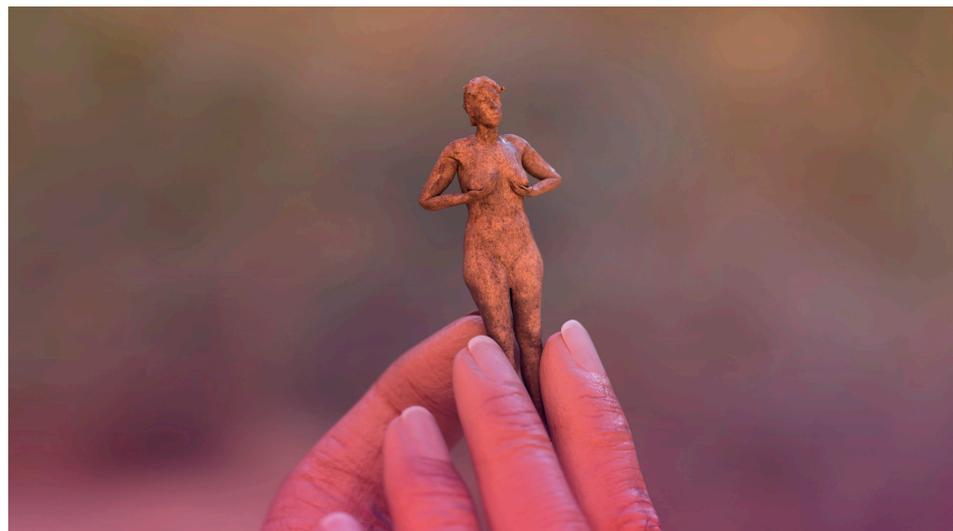


Figure 16. Ruth Patir, the artist as a clay figurine in *MFK* (2019). Still (detail) from video.

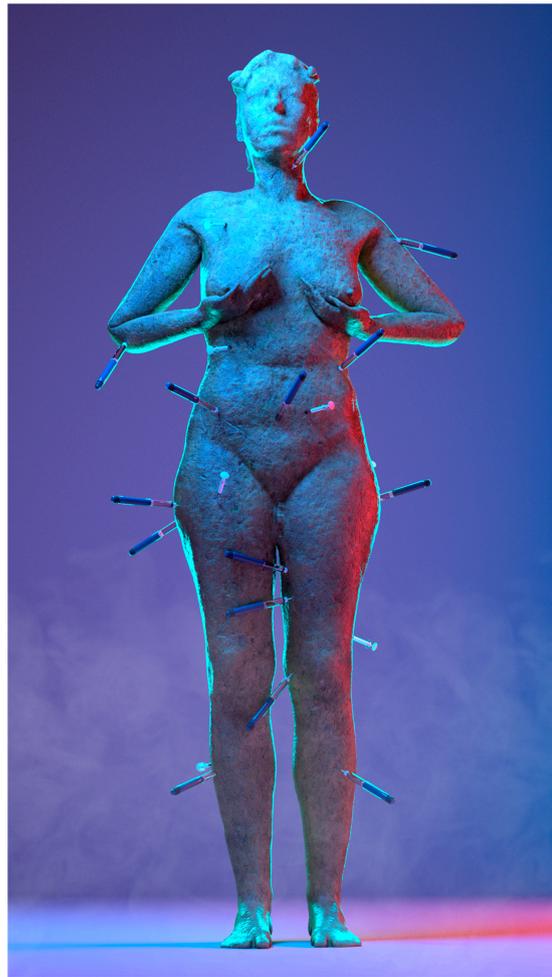


Figure 17. Ruth Patir, *Marry Fuck Kill* (2019). Still (detail) from single channel video.

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Notes

- ¹ See *Haaretz* daily newspaper on the supreme court ruling: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/2020-02-27/ty-article/0000017f-e7c4-d62c-a1ff-ffffe8510000> (in Hebrew). Accessed 18 August 2022.
- ² The idea of “gestational communism” recalls the debate in Israel’s early day Kibbutz communities, whether children were private property or belonged to the collective.
- ³ For a phenomenological discussion of skin and presence in contemporary art see Hava Aldouby, “Ruptured Envelopes, Double Shells: Skins in Art in the Age of Global Mobility”, *Art Journal* 81:3 (Aldouby 2022, in press).

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