

Fields of tension

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Fine-tuning, attentive listening, and searching fill the exhibition space in Ruth Noam's *No Storm in Sight*.

The initial sensation is one of disruption. Can a small black pool and a floor installation of enlarged ears be a threatening landscape? What is the meaning of the terrible amputation, cutting off the organ of hearing from the head and heart, from understanding, and emotions? Is the water in the pool toxic? Perhaps the water was struck by in the same catastrophe that shrunk humans - to an ear, to pure obedience?

The ears, cast in industrial polymers and looking like actual flesh, are installed on the floor. They are of uniform size, in a range of skin tones like monuments to lost entities. A closer look shows them to be connected with electrical wire, forming a colony that can propagate and spread. . Their vibrations could be breaths or perhaps end-of-life spasms.

The works bring to mind Ron Mueck's hyper-realistic sculptures in which the human figures are enlarged or reduced, making the viewer painfully conscious of observing an artificial object. Noam challenges her viewers: the gaze on the ears is from above (and not at eye level). The range of colors bring to mind a laboratory for assembling an artificial being whose organs can be a customized, as in the eye laboratory in the film *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982). The film makes it clear how difficult it is to distinguish between human beings and "replicants" (the film's robots, who have a limited life span set by their human makers).

The question of what defines human becomes acute when looking at former references to ears in Ruth Noam's oeuvre. Her series from 2013-2014 featuring sculptures of her right ear enlarged 10 times its size was a reflective examination of the messages that shaped her perception of her world. She examined these messages by exploring the sense organ of hearing, with its different sensitivities from the eye's function of sight, the sense that is irreplaceable for visual artists. Noam titled the series of three ear sculptures with video films *Editing Room*, which emphasized the selection and filtering of data and values taken in through the ears. The video films represented various realms of thought, from the fundamentally spiritual and abstract to the sensuous.

The connection between the field of ears to the "Journey to the Absolute Known," the pool of water and its system of drainage channels, is multilayered.

The drops of water slip down white aluminum channels that are coated with sophisticated material from the nanotechnology industry, causing each glistening drop to remain separate. They fall slowly into the pool to create slight ripple in the

water, signs of movement dispersing and without leaving a trace. The falling drops and the ears comment on how we assimilate values, opinions, and stereotypes. The black pool fills up repeatedly and infinitely with each movement of the water as the drop shatters. The pool and the ears are linked by a sense of doom, creating a field of tension. They are both containers of meaning and words*; there is a gap between the metonymic organ and the human figure and what the natural pool simulates.

Small-scale realistic sculptures of black metal flies, which Noam placed in several points on the gallery walls, emphasize the artificiality and unnatural nature of the act of making art. The flies insinuate death, putrefaction, and crude existence as compared to the ordered cleanliness of the water system, the pool, and the ears.

Ruth Noam does not grant her viewers the luxury of setting out on a distant journey of observation and escapism without a reminder of human weakness and the troublesome present.

** It is interesting to compare the contemplation of nature and observation of water in shaping a spiritual world as seen in Jewish texts: "By age 40 he [Rabbi Akiva] had not studied at all. Once he was standing at the mouth of a well, and asked 'Who hollowed out this rock?' They answered him, "Was it not the water that constantly falls on it?" They further said, 'Akiva, are you not familiar with the verse, 'Water wears away stone...' (Job 14:19). Rabbi Akiva immediately made the following logical deduction to himself: 'Just as the soft [water] shaped the hard [stone], words of Torah -- which are as hard as iron -- all the more so they will shape my heart which is but flesh and blood.'" (Avot Derabbi Nathan 6:2).*