

Al-Tiba9 Contemporary Art

November 25, 2021

10 Questions with Ophira Spitz

Ophira Spitz graduated in Geography Teaching Studies at the Kibbutzim Seminar (1977-81), and then pursued East Asian Studies at the Tel Aviv University (1992-94). Later on, she joined the Art Studies program at Minshar College, Tel Aviv (2014-18). Her work includes painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation, and touches on all aspects of nature, environment, geography, and topography. Born in Tel Aviv(1959), lives and works in Tel Aviv.

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Ophira Spitz Portrait

ARTIST STATEMENT

Ophira Spitz's art includes painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation and is influenced by various aspects such as nature, the environment, and topography. One can identify in the works different forms related to botany and cartography. Through her art, she aims to merge and combine various worlds. Her technique, respectively, is varied and extends from laborious crafts to free and automatic actions. The drawings, for example, have repetitive lines and forms, like an embroidery pattern that spreads and expands, while its general look brings up the association of an organic shape, a climbing plant, or a fossil. In the "Rocks" sculptures series, the surface is covered with shredded geographic maps, and their amorphous form eludes internal organs. The actions of experiment and play, dismantling and assembling, create a new body that seeks to undermine reality and raise questions on its significance and feasibility.



Border Line, installation view, 2019 © Ophira Spitz

INTERVIEW

First of all, introduce yourself to our readers. What is your artistic background and how did you become an artist?

I am very happy to be appearing here. My name is Ophira Spitz, I am a multimedia artist with a studio in Tel Aviv. I have always been interested and sensitive in the aesthetic dimension of life, reflected in all spheres as a young woman and later as a wife and mother. I had a great passion for visual art and fine literature even before beginning to make art.

After years of studies and teaching geography, I decided to make a change. I was then about 30: one day, I found myself at home facing the arts and crafts materials of one of the kids. I was drawn to the canvas and oil paints, understanding only later that oil takes a long time to dry. While working on the canvas for about a week, I began to feel the material, with a limited palette of blue, green, yellow, and white. During the act of painting and for hours afterward, I felt a sense of elation, and my energy changed. Working in secret, just me, the paints and the canvas, was an experience similar to writing in a diary, which I then hid. My partner discovered the painting right at the very last brushstrokes. He loved it and immediately hung it in a prominent place in our home.

When I made my first painting, I was still a student of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University and had selected courses engaged in ancient and classical art. These were the corridors that led me to be a self-taught artist during my 30s, still engaged in parenting, couplehood, and making a living.

By the beginning of my 40s, I decided to concentrate solely on my art and rented a studio in the heart of the Tel Aviv art scene. I also began the full-time four-year program at Minshar School of Art, Tel Aviv. I exhibited at the graduates' show, which opened many doors for me. Now I am an exhibiting artist with a growing presence in the Israeli art world.



Border Line, installation view (detail), 2019 © Ophira Spitz



Border Line, installation view, 2019 © Ophira Spitz

What is your personal aim as an artist?

As an artist, I attempt to formulate questions addressing personal and social borders.

Life and borders have undergone far-reaching changes worldwide since the last few centuries, mainly in the West. My oeuvre involves constant research, raising issues of territories and borders – concrete and fictional, and examining them through several points of origin: Do they exist, or not? Who sets the borderlines, are they still used in the 21st century, and how do they impact society? How do the waves of migration of the past few decades affect the cosmopolitanism of nations and peoples? Are borders relevant? What is the border between the individual and the public in various cultures? How are social media involved in interpersonal borders, and to what do they contribute?

My research uses the language of cartography present in road maps and old globes and atlases that I collect from my nearby environs and also seek out at open-air markets.

My objective is to pose these questions; I arrive at the answers in my studio through creating installations and objects reflecting the global and not necessarily the local.

Through my work, I strive to express that being a human being is part of a greater whole as we are all world citizens. Along with these works, and sometimes in direct references to them, I find the fascinating worlds of nature, the flora and the fauna. I research the phenomena of communication and socialization among ants, observing how they are similar or different from human social media.

You use a wide range of mediums and techniques and they all seem to have a specific meaning to you and your production. How do you choose them and what do they represent for you?

I choose among a variety of mediums and techniques according to the subject of my work and the installation I am creating at the time.

In my works that deal with objects resembling celestial bodies, similar to Earth in their surface but with amorphous shapes and variations in size, I have chosen to use hundreds of pages of road maps and maps extracted from old atlases.

My background includes years of teaching geography, therefore the subject of cartography is deeply rooted in me. Working with these soft materials has allowed me to re-sculpt continents, planets whose surface area language resembles road maps we are familiar with, and allowed me to express my desire to pursue questions, such as: Do global climate change create new boundaries? In this turbulent time of global migration, does a physical boundary also create an emotional boundary? What is a personal boundary, and how does it differ between societies or people?

These works of maps on objects of varying sizes deal with dismantling, reassembling and creating a rock-like surface that is also part representing, in my eyes, the deconstruction of Earth. They symbolize the continual shift of boundaries as well as my secret aspiration of finding solutions and new places in the universe in which human life can prosper.

In each space, the installation was different and fascinating, and prompted me to think more deeply about the work. At the exhibition "Border line", that took place in the alternative space of Beit Tami as part of the Fresh Paint Contemporary Art Fair (2019) in Tel Aviv, I also referred to items and furniture already present in the space, and the boundaries of the installation changed throughout the creative process. There, I had to defend the community's works, displayed on the shelves, from the visitors' touch. I concealed some of them behind my objects while intentionally highlighting others, and used police marking tape, normally used as a warning sign prohibiting crossing or access to an area, thus creating additional boundaries within the exhibition called "Border Line".



Border Line, installation view, 2019 © Ophira Spitz

The interaction with the audience was fascinating. Questions were asked, and the objects and markings created an interesting dialogue between the people as well as with me. The encounter with children in both spaces was also interesting, and I documented it out of the ambition to create another exhibition or installation, focusing on the question of whether or not it is permissible to touch a work of art. What are the boundaries? The question of "holiness" when addressing or touching works of art.

I allowed both children and adults to touch the objects and examine them closely, and in some cases, even pick them up. This was a profound experience for me and for some of the visitors, as well. Throughout this process, in a hidden and latent way, I worked with myself and the audience regarding the limits of touching the works and their caution. Parents would often stop their children from touching and ask them to stand at a distance.

In my laborious drawings, I examine personal boundaries. The experience of silence and the silence itself that I enter into while working evoke repetitive personal thoughts, similar to the repetitive lines of the drawing. The result is an aesthetic meditative piece that sometimes evens the viewer into spirit, which resembles nature and organic forms in an infinite network of lines.

For my works, I use different surfaces, such as paper, canvas, wood, and iron, which I oxidize, roughen or incorporate organic materials and various metals to create different textures that lead me to in the final piece.

In this process, the research of materials is alternately measured and random. As a result, I am able to freely work and create with the generated forms, where I frequently intervene with a thin 0.05 pen drawing. I am fascinated by this technique, and at times the result of this process will be ready for presentation only after a year or two.

For instance, I once left a plywood board in my studio yard for almost a year. The result was a piece in itself, prompting me to attempt drawing the form created on paper. This drawing evolved into a large-scale paperwork (3.5 m long and 1.4 m wide) that contains a repetition of the shape. In another example, I left a large canvas without gesso coating out in my studio yard for a month and a half in winter and placed various metals and oxidants on it, letting them interact with the rain. As a result, I received a "painted" canvas, on which I continued to work in the studio using a thin 0.05 pen (the size of the piece is 3.5 x 2.4 m).

Furthermore, I work with cotton fabrics cut into long ribbons, which are supple and flexible. I utilize hundreds of meters of this material for site-specific installations where I disrupt, block, and create an incoherent tangle of threads and borders related to mapping and testing boundaries.

Cartography and geography are two important references. In your work you often include them, whether as a graphic element or as a concept. What messages do you try to convey? And why did you choose cartography and geography in particular?

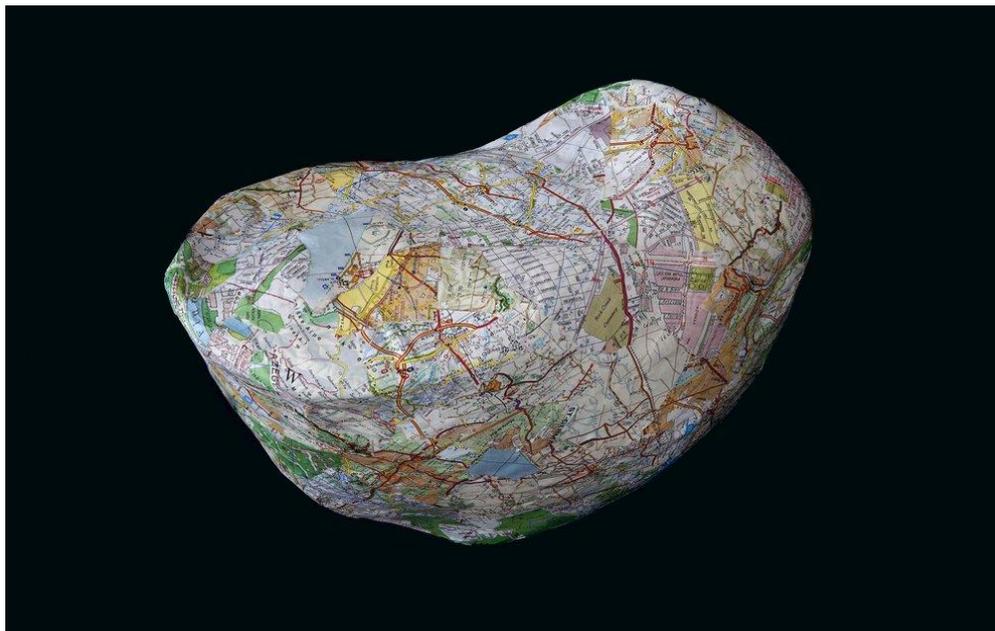
I strive to weld different worlds together through my art, using varied techniques, moving from laborious handwork through free, automatic action. Through experimentation, play, deconstruction and assembly, I make objects and new environments that constitute challenges to and meditate on order and current reality, raising questions about their significance and feasibility.

I first selected the language of geography and cartography because I have an undergraduate degree in geography and was a lecturer in the subject. From childhood to adulthood, geography impacted my life, and it remains one of my most important resources. I consider geography as an instrument, a book to read, and an orienteering guide. It is so built into my life that only later did I realize that most people are unfamiliar with the language of maps in their daily life.

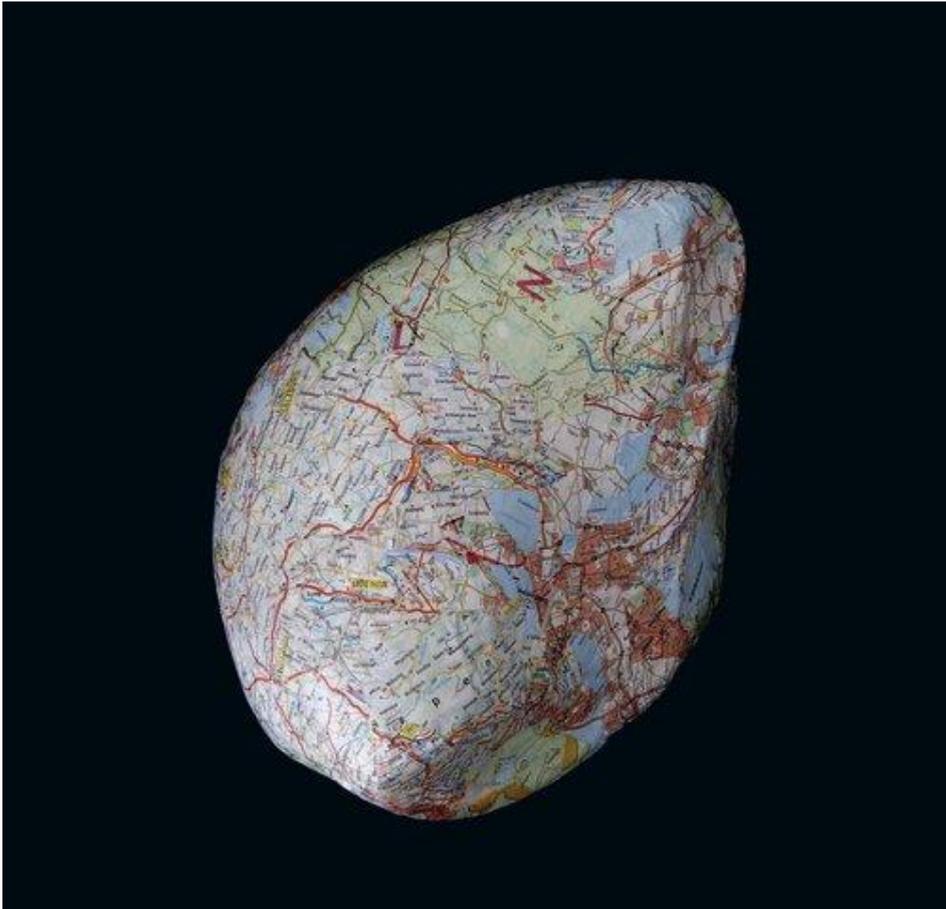
Working with geographical materials is a way to channel my environs and make people from more distant locations aware of this, conveying content and thoughts about the importance of examining borders. For example, are the borderlines between individuals and countries really open, or are they essentially closed?

To reflect my interest in these issues, along with disrupting maps and images of our planet, I also use the language of dense, laborious drawing with intensive lines. One example is the many drawings I made on different surfaces of thousands of tiny ants. The possibilities embodied in this language (sometimes drawn on road maps) enable me to expand the discourse on borderlines during this current era of dominance of social media. Although we are connected to each other over huge distances, face-to-face encounters are never unneeded. This gives rise to questions such as whether physical distance also creates emotional distance. Is there such a thing as social integration? Can we create it artificially? I represent my questions using the drawings of many thousands of tiny ants and other laborious drawings on atlases and road maps.

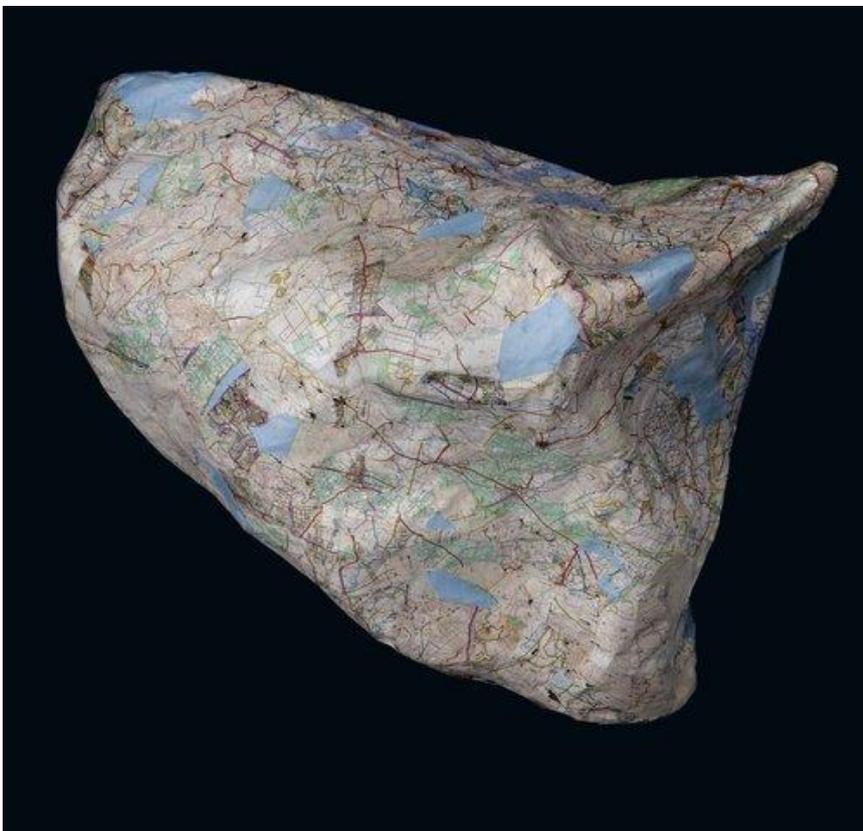
My engagement with ants and flora (now at a stage too early to describe details) is my way of studying and representing concerning global issues such as how climate change impacts humans, flora and fauna. I am studying how living things create new boundaries, and, moving from the general to the specific, I wonder what a personal boundary is. How do interpersonal and inter-social boundaries change?



Celestial Bodies #1, photography, 60x90 cm, 2018 © Ophira Spitz



Celestial Bodies #3, photography, 60x90 cm, 2018 © Ophira Spitz



Celestial Bodies #8, photography, 60x90 cm, 2018 © Ophira Spitz

Let's talk about your creative process. Do you meticulously plan every work, or do you let shapes come alive by random interventions?

This is a very interesting question. Yes, some of my works are carefully planned in advance. At the beginning of the process, I make drawings to examine the relationships through making clear models. Of course, before beginning, I read texts on the subject and experiment through trial and error as to which materials to use, whether the medium I selected expresses what I would like to present, and other similar questions. In my objects and installation with roadmaps and atlases, I examined options of size and shapes that would best express what I wanted to say. I first collected maps from people and created a small-scale model of the work, with several different installation ideas which I discussed with the curators.

In my works with rust, I use various parts of old metal objects placed on the canvas in the studio courtyard. Some of the elements were planned, such as the size of the canvas or where to place the various objects. But the result was a time-specific work, and many of the shapes and stains were created coincidentally. The creative process and the painting arose from what nature created (rain and sun's effects on the iron elements), became the background for what came next. The continuation took place through my manual work and was planned in accordance with what rust and the sun created. I worked on the surface by drawing, placing gold leaf, industrial paint, tar, and more.

Why do you use this visual language? And where did you get your imagery from?

After completing my bachelor's degree in geography, I was an educator for many years. Despite having left teaching many years ago, I continue to find the field of geography fascinating. Geography has influenced me throughout my childhood and adulthood and is still one of my most valuable resources. I constantly examine the environment from a geographic perspective. These tools are very fundamental to me and have become intuitive.

Nature is a source of inspiration for me. In addition to wandering around my close surroundings, I also travel with my camera around the country and the world. The images of nature are an important and crucial reference in my research and creation process in the studio. My photographs are occasionally processed and altered digitally.

I collect road maps and atlases from friends and family, and look for them in markets in Israel and abroad. I also find photo references on the internet. These images are cut, duplicated and turned into various collage works that preserve some of the cartographic information of the map while also distorting it. My interest in borders and territory is closely linked to my installations, in which I use hundreds of meters of cotton fabrics cut into thin ribbons. It relates to borders and the terrain by working with the space and transforming it, redefining its boundaries and form.



Birds, Mixed media, variable dimensions, 2019 © Ophira Spitz

Where do you find inspiration for your work?

My sources of inspiration are many and varied. I mostly look at nature around me and take a lot of photographs of wild landscapes, flora, and fauna that I encounter on trips and hikes. These materials then become part of my image bank from which I draw my inspiration in the studio. So they are a kind of raw material to which I refer to again and again. I am fascinated by old globes and atlases whose maps, names, and encoded cartographic language are often irrelevant. I use these to create new worlds. I constantly search for new meaning that enables me to create my own interpretations of the universe and our place in it.

What do you think of the surge of digital exhibitions? Do you see them more as an opportunity or more as a threat?

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has entered an accelerated process of using virtual means to experience reality and maintain a high level of communication and contact through familiar technologies. Virtual communication became extremely important over the past two years, considering the regulations enforced on most people living under social distancing and isolation conditions. The digital and virtual space entered nearly every sphere of life, not only through business meetings on Zoom. The world of art and the ability to experience art and show what was happening in the personal studio space as well as in large-scale museum exhibitions became increasingly relevant.

One example is video screenings and sound works, through which the artist's and art world's ability to cross geographical borders and arrive at additional destinations is becoming more and more powerful. During this era, we are living, experiencing, and consuming more data digitally on computers and cellphones. This is why works using the digital language and mode of displaying artworks are highly accessible through numerous platforms.



Border Line, installation view, 2019 © Ophira Spitz



Border Line, installation view, 2019 © Ophira Spitz

What are you working on now, and what are your plans for the future? Anything exciting you can tell us about?

I am currently preparing for a duo exhibition to be shown during Illustration Week Tel Aviv in November 2021. The works engage in my autobiography through laborious drawings. In addition, we will be showing works in a variety of other mediums, including illustrations, sculpture, and installations corresponding with our private history and weaving associative "threads" between the artworks and the viewers.

My research continues on how roadmaps represent three dimensions on two dimensions. One example of my research-based works is drawings and sculptures on bindings of old atlases, while at the same time I am developing a project of a large rujum (pile of stones) made mainly of paper from which I construct large stones. I then draw different forms on the "stone" simulating organic forms. A rujum is the mark hikers make on the ground or as stacks of stones on nature paths all over the world so that other hikers can follow a safe trail. The rujums are an ancient tool for marking out paths, with the following trail marker visible. Thus in practice, the hikers map the area in a kind of "crowd wisdom."

My future project will develop my cotton thread project, which also speaks of borderlines and markings. I envision a site-specific installation in a huge space, allowing the viewer who "hikes" through the piece to have a tactile experience and not only a visual one.

My research engages in the lives of ants of various species worldwide, leading me to think about a future project on this theme. I find this very exciting, but it is too soon to reveal more details.

Finally, share something you would like the world to know about you?

Knitting, crocheting, and embroidery symbolize my grandmother's house. I learned these crafts as a child from her, but I neglected them for many years, to take them up again only when I began to make art in my 30s. In several of my works, I incorporate knitting methods. In these works, I try to repair and restore, and I attempt to connect these broken objects that were severed from their source, such as a table I found missing its tabletop, a street bench split in two, and more. I consider embroidery as laborious, intimate, and domestic work. There is something soft and protective in handwork, and it also symbolizes the attention paid to a loved one. Along with the theme of borders in which I mostly engage, the act of connecting broken pieces fascinates me both conceptually and visually. Thus, the restoration of the destroyed object represents my desire for Tikkun Olam – 'Repairing the World'.