

## Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden

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### *Introduction*

The entry point into the exhibition *Ruth Dorrit Yacoby: The Door to the Secret Garden* is a contemporary analysis of the late artist's oeuvre. Yacoby who passed away in 2015, left behind one of the most the most enigmatic bodies of work in modern Israeli art history. It is my responsibility, as the curator of the first major exhibition of Yaakoby's oeuvre since she passed away, to administer a renewed reflection in the context of Israeli and international art: its past relevance and what its future significance may look like.

The artist Ruth Dorit Yaakoby was born (1952) as Ruth Yaakoby to mixed Jewish parents. Her mother, Judith, (1914-2015) was born in Canada with Ashkenazi, European roots. She immigrated to Israel with her family in her late twenties. Joining the British mandate in Palestine she later she joined the Hagana, a Jewish underground organization that fought for independence from the British mandate and used her position in the British army to smuggle documents.

Yaakoby's father, Abraham Ben Dan (1912 – 2012) was born in Iraq with Sephardi Jewish roots. As a child, subsequent to his father's passing, his family fled to Singapore. When he was seventeen he immigrated to Palestine. He also joined the Hagana, working under-cover, disguised as an Arab, he gathered intelligence against the British mandate. After the establishment of the state of Israel, he worked as a journalist in the Jerusalem Post and later was a social worker.

After they married the couple settled down in a Moshav near the Sea of Galilee, a type of communal living structure pioneered by Zionism based on cooperative agricultural community of individual farms. The family farm specialized in beekeeping, avocado, olives and poultry farming.

Yaakoby left the family farm in the north to the Naqab with her husband, Giyora Yaakoby who worked as an engineer in the Dead Sea mineral refining industries. In the city of Arad where the couple settled, she began her studies to become a psychologist and began working as one in the city. Yaakoby gave birth to four children - one after the other. She began her art studies as a mother in the south, and later enrolled to the Midrasha, one of the main art schools in the center of Israel.

Although she initiated her creative path later in life, Yaakoby's oeuvre includes thousands of artworks. The immensity of her oeuvre reveals Yaakoby's dedication and totality to her art practice. The subject matter of her art encompassing universal concepts such as birth, death, creativity, faith, spirituality, feminism, ecology, womanhood, motherhood, history of conflicts and struggles of the region and more.

צילום שלה בסטודיו?



Ima, 107 x 77 cm., year?,

## *Ruth Dorit Yaakoby: A Feminine Voice from the South*

Previous researches have analyzed Yaakoby's oeuvre through spirituality, Jewish religion, woman's art, bereavement, abject, textiles etc. The conceptual background of the exhibition *Don't Trip: Handle with Care*, is based on the fact that after her passing there appears a need to re-read Yaakoby's oeuvre through a new perspective. The current exploration is directed through two main channels: (1) feminist studies and its specific iterations in Israel, especially within woman living in the periphery (2) Yaakoby's peripheral, southern locality and how it resonates in her work.

Looking back at Yaakoby's oeuvre one realizes that, at times, it diverges with the Israeli canon and at times contradicts it. In contrast to female artists of her generation whom she exhibited alongside<sup>1</sup>, Yaakoby was never entirely associated with one or other Israeli art currents. Administering an analysis of her oeuvre through feminism and locality activates her unique voice drawing it closer to the Israeli art canon.

Although Yaakoby exhibited widely in the Israeli context, her overall exception into the local art field was tepid. This came in great contrast to the fact that she was well received in the international context.<sup>2</sup> The inconsistency in her reception may lead one towards the impression that certain attributes of Yaakoby's work did not attune with the overarching tendency of the Israeli art discourse at the time.

I will assert that Yaakoby's living and working conditions in the geographical periphery, have contributed to her missed reception in the local context. The fact that she joined the art scene at a later age (already as a mother) along with concepts that

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<sup>1</sup> For example: the group exhibitions "Feminine Presence"<sup>1</sup> (1990) in which she exhibited with Tamar Getter, Deganit Brest and Michal Ne'eman that have been largely associated with Israeli Arte Povera (Dalut Ha'chomer).

<sup>2</sup> In the year 1996 alone, she held solo exhibitions of her work in China, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and Germany.

appear throughout her oeuvre associated with her femininity such as womanhood, motherhood and care probably triggered her positioning as an outsider artist.

My acquaintance with the artist is a key link for this research and exhibition. I moved to the Naqab desert city of Arad with my family when we returned from the United States in the early 1980s. Later I pursued my fine art studies in Israel and abroad. Upon my return to the city after my studies and after ten years of professional experience within the context of global art centers, I founded a local artists' residency program " Arad Art and Architecture" and subsequently the first major art center in the Eastern Naqab desert - "Arad Contemporary Art Center". My professional activities in Arad led to my personal acquaintance with Yaakoby and her family.<sup>3</sup>

As a curator coming from Arad, I have developed a concept of a local genus of the production and display of culture that is largely based on the specific living and working conditions presiding in the margins of the globe – especially in the southern hemisphere. I have come to name this concept: 'a southern state of mind' and to consider it as a swift warm gust of air rising from the south disrupting congealed ideas of art and culture of the west. The concept of 'south as a state of mind' is based on the idea that is not necessarily referencing the southern hemispherical location, but rather a notion of a force that destabilizes widely accepted approaches and conventional forms that have structured the history of culture in the west. I have recognized this approach in Yaakoby's oeuvre as a responsive attitude or an emotional state that reverberates unstable spirits of creativity into her studio and artwork.

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<sup>3</sup> After Yaakoby's untimely death, I assisted the family in cataloging her estate. This was accomplished in the form of a digital database of thousands of items.



Ima Malka 2, 244 x 122 cm., technique?, year?

In order to demonstrate unstable spirits of creativity, I cite curator Talia Rappaport addressing Yaakoby's material-based expressivity in the exhibition [catalog \(?\)](#):

...More modern precedents that come to mind in the face of the expressive power of the material, the crispness and graceful nature of the works (of Yaakoby H.K.) are 'painters of the material' especially Dubuffet and Tapiés who has strived for the most original and essential through the use of casual everyday materials. And who even created in his works a kind of primordial mystery...

By associating the expressivity of her work to celebrated European male artists such as Dubuffet and Tapiés, Rappaport seems to overlook the locality of Yaakoby's self-expression. A careful investigation of her individual expressivity including the spontaneous appropriation of everyday materials, may be associated to the disposition embedded in her living and working conditions in the city of Arad – a city on the edge of the Negev desert.<sup>4</sup> Natural relics such as leaves, twigs and branches that she collected on her morning excursions into the desert were combined with

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<sup>4</sup> Yaakoby's expressive tendencies can be associated with the history of the desert as the cradle of human communication in which rock drawings (still) dot the landscape and pictograms of pre-linguistic forms of communication are exhibited in an open-air museum not far where Yaakoby lived and worked.

domestic debris such as broken furniture, windows and doors from her meanders in the city. This mixture of materiality and expressivity brought Rapport to reference western, male artists which, in hindsight, contributed to the overlooking of Yaakoby's oeuvre in terms of the local conditions in which she operated.

*Reclaiming her birth name Ruth*



Ruth was Born in the Forest, 107 x 77 cm., year?, technique?

After studying art and raising her children to a ripe age, Yaakoby was drawn to the realm of Kaballah<sup>5</sup>. Her quest to study the set of esoteric teachings touching on the relationship between eternal God and the foundation of mystical religious interpretations within Judaism brought her to meet the Israeli poet, author, cultural researcher and professor of Jewish history and the acclaimed Mizrahi feminist intellectual Haviva Padaya (b.1957).

During the time Yaakoby encountered Kaballah, she committed a performative act that one must consider as a major turning point in her life and work. In ? Yaakoby re-acquired her birthname Ruth that was changed by her mother at a young age to Dorit. This act is considered as the reclaiming of her birth name and also as a tribute to one of the most complex female characters of the bible. By assuming at a later age her birthname 'Ruth', Yaakoby emphasized her renewed interest in religious and spiritual motives.

The book of Ruth was written in Hebrew<sup>6</sup> was based on two biblical woman characters Ruth and Orpah. The two women of Moab, who had married the sons of Elimelech and Naomi planned to return to their native Bethlehem after the death of their men. Ruth's refusal to leave Naomi behind declaring a complete dedication to Naomi, brought her to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem, marrying Boaz, a distant relative. The biblical tale of Ruth arouses questions regarding the social construct of womanhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society, challenged through her quest for fulfilment of her gender role in a patriarchal, male-centered society.

In his essay "Israeli Art Discourse and the Jewish Voice"<sup>7,11</sup> the Israeli art historian, David Spreber deals with the break in the discourse that secular Zionist-nationalist developed with sentiments of Judaism from the diaspora. Sperber notes

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<sup>5</sup> a set of esoteric teachings meant to explain the relationship between the unchanging, eternal God, the infinite and the foundation of mystical religious interpretations within Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> 6th-4th centuries BC

<sup>7</sup> Sperber, David, *Israeli Art Discourse and the Jewish Voice*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2011, p.110-129

that many contemporary Israeli artists, such as Igal Tumarkin based themselves on the Nietzschean notion of "the death of God", repressing a widely accepted traditional religious discourse<sup>2</sup>.

Pedaya explored religion as a cultural enterprise and not necessarily through its holiness or sacredness. As a Mizrahi female intellectual and a woman of mixed identity she critiqued Israeli society continuous oppression of women, especially Mizrahi women living in the periphery. Through her encounter with Pedeya and Kaballah, Yaakoby became interested in a wide range of religious and traditional beliefs through notions of womanhood and motherhood. This brought her to explore a variety of religions and faith. Her solo exhibition, "Gate of Tears, Rain of Roses" was held in the Roman Catholic Church of the Vatican (2001)<sup>8</sup>. The main text of the catalogue was written by Pedaya, who wrote:

The observer of Yaakoby's works feels that her art is carved out of the abysses of the soul and that he is looking at a story whose existential power draws from the effort and striving for spiritual and creative development along with the urge for self-realization as a woman and mother.<sup>910</sup>

This citation from Pedaya's text makes clear that she recognizes the strong link between religion and feminism in Yaakoby's art. A link that is made explicit in the painting *On the Night of All the Moons Ruth was Born* (2008) tying between the biblical scene in which Ruth appeared on the threshing floor in Boaz's field and the moment of the 're-birth' of Yaakoby's birthname Ruth.

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<sup>8</sup> The exhibition was held at the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses – part of the Vatican.

<sup>9</sup> Pedaya, Haviva, *Between The Sky and the Land*, Exhibiton Catalogue, Vatican, 2001





On the Night of All the Moons Ruth was Born, 2009-11, mixed media on wooden board, 250 x 100 cm.

*On the Night of All the Moons Ruth was Born* (2008) portrays a feminine figure on a red background, cradling a bird in her arms, adorned by plants. The painting is the full expression of Yaakoby's exploration into Judaism and Kabbalah through the specific current of feminism based on care and empathy.<sup>10</sup> By re-adding the name Ruth to her personal identity and incorporating her character into her art, Yaakoby cultivated a unique mixture between spirituality, religion and traditions based on the unraveling of religious myths and legends through a feminist perspective.

Yaakoby's exploration of religious and spiritual rituals is neither performed from a specific religious vantage point nor conducted as an empty act of post-modern appropriation of religious traditions. Rather she raises pertinent questions regarding the domination of the institutionalization of religion on female subjects.

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<sup>10</sup> Difference feminism vibrates female attributes such as care and empathy. Rising at about the same time as third wave feminism, difference feminism revalued qualities such as care, feeling, or empathy. The fact that difference feminism portrayed woman as caring mothers, may seem also essentialist due to its romanticizing of gender roles, subsequently reinforcing conventional stereotypes.



The Door to the Secret Garden, 180 x 122 cm. Year??

Although, at the time it was quite uncommon for Israeli secular women artists to deal with religious issues through a feminist perspective, another artist from the same generation as Yaaakoby, Michal Ne'eman (b.1951) raised the issue of Jewish religion from a feminist viewpoint in an installation and a series of paintings with the phrase 'Calf in his Mother's Milk', based on the biblical phrase "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk".<sup>11</sup>

By appropriating the biblical phrase that refers to the prohibition in Judaism to cook meat and milk, Ne'eman proposes a re-reading of religious texts in a feminist context. Exploring Ne'eman's use of the biblical phrase in her art, the author and lecturer of Israeli literature Yaara Shchori asserts that the phrase, first and foremost, reminds one of the interventions of the medical institutionalization of the female subject at childbirth<sup>12</sup>. Shchori asserts that by removing the negative connotation present in the biblical phrase, Ne'eman points to the pain of the separation between mother and child as the basis of the primal experience of motherhood.

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<sup>11</sup> The Nietzschean concept of Death of God is very well articulated by Neeman who declared: "I am not an insider to the bible... 'Calf in his Mother's Milk' is a phrase I use, but it is foreign to me".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Shchori, Yaara "Hour of the Wolves of Michal Na'aman," in" Michal Na'aman, "A Smile, A Cat, A Cut," (Tel Aviv, Gordon Gallery, 2010), pp. 141–190.



Title, year etc...???

Yaakoby's painting "The Empty Medicine Cabinet of Maria" (date?) references the institutionalization of the female subject in the context of religion – focusing on Christianity rather than Judaism. In contrast with Ne'eman's focus on the Jewish bible, Yaakoby's painting references the New Testament of the bible. Referring to Maria or Virgin Mary, believed to have been impregnated by the Holy Spirit conceiving Jesus without having sexual relations, Yaakoby raises presumptions and preconceptions dealing with womanhood, motherhood and childbearing in monotheistic religions.

In another series of paintings housed in shallow boxes a female figure appears in proceeding stages of disintegration. Blending with her background, smithereens of the silhouette are graced by desert debris such as stones, twigs and sand; clay burial candles and vessels remind one of the pagan rituals of the region adorning the bottom of the boxes. As if lifted from the depths of the desert, these three-dimensional works demonstrate Yaakoby's liberated exploration of death, burial and bereavement. Dealing with burial and bereavement rituals was very much alive for Yaakoby linking them to the everyday Israel reality. Incorporating into a large array of paintings attributes concerning militarism of Israeli society – she linked her specific existence as a mother and a wife to her male family members that were involved in

the army.<sup>13</sup> By combining religious and military iconography Yaakoby dealt with notions of life, death and eternity in Israeli society emphasizing the painful fact that death and bereavement is a major part of the collective amalgamation of life in Israel.



Title?, technique, Year?, 180 x 22 cm.

*The Woman of a Thousand Voices* is the title of a film created by Yaakoby's son that fleshes out his mother's unique combination of ancient rituals and traditions and their relevance to contemporary Israeli society. By focusing on the local substance of salt, Amram Yaakoby links between the substance's specific geographical, geological, environmental roots in the Dead Sea with motherhood, care and the holy scriptures of the Bible. By filming on the shores of the lowest dry place on earth, Yaakoby's son film touches on the biblical myth that tells of the wife of Lot (she is nameless in the Bible) that becomes a pillar of salt as a punishment for disobeying the angels' warning to look back at the evil cities of Sodom.<sup>14</sup> The biblical myth of Lot that demonstrates the punishment to a female who speaks truth in a patriarchal society present in the poetic filmic portrait of the cinematographer's mother.

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<sup>13</sup> Yaakoby in ?? "The stars. The targets (Crosses) started from the Gulf War. My son was in the army. Worry and anxiety for my son...Then the stars became blue and green."

<sup>14</sup> A pillar of salt that today stands on the shores of the Dead Sea, symbolizes this Biblical myth reminding one of a woman deemed unworthy to be saved by her husband and her community due to her dedication to her moral truths.

The crystalized lens of the substance of salt allows her son to portray his mother, the protagonist, with all her complexity. The disparity of the potentials of salt - both as a constituent of healing and preserving but also as an element that prevents life and growth - resonates through Yaakoby's presence in the film. She is portrayed by her son as a caring and empathetic female artist that is worried about her environment and its history and that through her art she preserves local traditions.

### *Loosening Language Links*



Title, medium, year, technique?

Yaakoby's text-works span a wide range of materials and periods of her creativity. The recurring action<sup>15</sup> of painting the same words, sentences, phrases includes her newly acquired name Ruth, the name of a museum (Moma) or the female Greek biologist and embryologist Pitias (Pythias),<sup>16</sup> loosely smeared and stained onto canvas, textile and wood, undermined the male domination of language constructions.

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<sup>15</sup> The repetitive act of writing of Yaakoby may be linked with Freud's notion of *wiederholungszwang*,

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle's first wife who worked with her husband on an encyclopedia of the material they gathered on their honeymoon that included a collection of specimens of living things.



Pitias, 180 x 120 cm. year?, technique?

Through the act of resignification of disembodied text components, Yaakoby created an affinity with Israeli artists from the first-generation who used the newly acquired Hebrew language to resonate notions of immigration and later to criticize the use of Hebrew in context to militarism<sup>17</sup> Recognizing the association of words as a key administrative issue in a patriarchal society, Yaakoby consciously destabilized the logic of traditional structures by creating her own poetic constructions.



Title?, technique?, year?, 49 x 19 cm.

In a series of large-scale text-based works, Yaakoby painted her own poems, many in red paint, upon white linen. Bleeding language constructions that remind one of the institutionalizations of the female body are explored through the work of feminist poets who reclaimed language from a feminist perspective. One example is the American poet, essayist and feminist Adrienne Rich who wrote in her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*<sup>18</sup> :

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<sup>17</sup> Her teacher Moshe Gershuni, for instance, painted letters and words through his exploration of spirituality in context of the commemoration of the Holocaust. But in contrast to Yaakoby, although Gershuni challenged the taboo of religious institutionalization of bereavement through homoerotic sexuality, as a male artist it seems he succeeded to maintain his status in the mainstream canon of Israeli art.

<sup>18</sup> ???1971

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.<sup>19</sup>

Although Yaakoby never clearly conveyed an ideological political feminist agenda<sup>20</sup>, like Rich she challenged male domination of culture through acts of re-vision of Hebrew language constructions. The Israeli feminist art historian Tal Dekel (b.1968) explains in *From First-Wave to Third-Wave Feminist Art in Israel: A Quantum Leap*<sup>21</sup> that in pre-statehood Israel (late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) Zionism promoted the idea of gender equality in the spirit of first-wave feminism. But in reality, Israeli first-wave feminism<sup>22</sup> was based on an essentialist approach. According to Dekel, one of the strengths of feminist thought is the opportunity to reevaluate, and even resituate events and periods of an accepted historical narrative by asking: in the name of what and whose interests do certain events become part of the collective experience? It seems that Yaakoby was not able to pay the price of publicly pronouncing questions of such in public.

The subtle tones of feminism in Yaakoby's art came quite in contrast with feminist artists that have clearly sacrificed their motherhood to be accepted into the masculine art canon. For example, Aviva Uri who proclaimed that: "If one wishes to create, one must firstly be an artist, and only then a woman".<sup>23</sup> The poet Yona

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.167

<sup>20</sup> In light of gender roles in the Israeli society of mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the fact that as a mother of four she pursued a career as an artist and later as a Kaballah scholar, one realizes that a so-called gender equality associated with the state of Israel was in reality based on a biological-essentialist approach with socially and culturally predefined differences between men and woman.

<sup>21</sup> Dekel, Tal, *From First-Wave to Third-Wave Feminist Art in Israel: A Quantum Leap*, Israel Studies, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2011, pp. 149-178, Indiana University Press

<sup>22</sup> First wave feminism in the British mandate of Palestine and later in the state of Israel.

<sup>23</sup> Dekel, Tal, *From First-Wave to Third-Wave Feminist Art in Israel: A Quantum Leap*, Israel Studies, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2011, pp. 149-178, Indiana University Press, p.154

Wallach (1944-1985) also compromised her motherhood for an art career. A revolutionary Israeli feminist and a post-modernist poet that experimented with art, womanhood and Jewish mysticism she dealt with the very nature of feminine creativity within the social construction of a woman artist in Israeli society.:

Bird what are you singing?  
someone else sings from your throat  
someone else made up your song sings at home through your throat.  
Bird, bird  
what are you singing?  
someone else sings through your throat.<sup>2425</sup>

Death, sex and femininity were major themes in both Yaakoby and Wallach's oeuvres. The female artists gave presence to womanhood in an era in which the national, collective voice was mainly male-dominated. Both artists attempted to fracture preconceived conventions in the historical canon.



Title, technique? year? 62 x 122 cm.

While Wallach is considered by many an overt and declared feminist, following an alternative path from both male and female Israeli artists of her time,

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<sup>24</sup> Zisquit, Linda. "Innovation and Tradition: Translating Yona Wallach & Rivka Miriam (And Me)." *Bridges*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2009, pp. 56–74. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/40358431](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40358431). Accessed 3 Jan. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> 'Identity Problems' is a poem in the tradition of Israeli 'ars poetica' - in line with American New Criticism poetry, a formalist movement of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that explored the work of poetry as a self-contained, self-referential object. Who is speaking through the artist's mouth? The bird representing the inner psyche of the artist and the fissure of the mouth is the space in which a shaft of male-dominated forced energy that make his way out of the artist mouth.



Yaakoby was never part of a feminist circle of Israeli female artists.<sup>26</sup> The intricate undertones of her work, subtly addressing questions dealing with patricidal orderings may also be found in a text-based series in which the repetition of the word "boy/child" is constructed from childish objects<sup>27</sup>. In this series of works, Yaakoby's use of letters, reveals how she playfully dealt with the masculine conditioning of language lightheartedly revealing how systems of logic are infected with patriarchal orderings.

### *The Journey to the Biennale of 2015*

In April 2014, one year before her death, Ruth Dorit Yaakoby submitted her application to represent Israel in the Venice Biennale of 2015. The 100- page document<sup>28</sup> serves as a testament of Yaakoby's persistence to become officially recognized by the Israeli institutional art system.

The extensive proposal included an elaborate description of the imagined exhibition, based on three overarching themes that populated her studio in the last

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<sup>26</sup> Yaakoby opted to create within a deep connection with her environment and local conditions rather than create an alliance with fellow women artists that were mainly located in the urban centre of Israel.

<sup>27</sup> 'Yeled' is translated in English to 'boy' but the same word in Hebrew also means 'son'.

<sup>28</sup> The documents that are included in the PDF include: a three-page submission form; 18 pages of her CV; two-page page literal description of the Biennale Project titled: "Ruth Dorit Yaakoby, The Biennale Project in Venice, The Happy Mother of the Sons, The Journey to the Land of the Living"; the overall layout of the exhibition that is described by her as a journey that takes place between three territories within the three spaces of the pavilion: "the land of the dead blankets of salt; the journey of the living heart and the land of the living journey of the body and the spirit."<sup>28</sup>; a five-page visualization of the exhibition inscribed upon the architectural layouts of the Israeli pavilion; detailed descriptions of each level incorporating her own poems and writings (thirty-two page description of the Land of the Dead, nineteen-page description of the Journey of Living Heart, twenty-four-page description of the Land of the Living); eleven scanned pages of newspaper articles on her art in English, Italian and Japanese; eight frames taken from a film that her son, Amram Yaakoby created, "The Woman of the Thousand Voices" and a one-page synopsis; twenty-five scanned pages from the exhibition catalogue of her solo show at the Vatican and fifty scanned pages from her solo exhibition in the Tel Aviv University Gallery,

decade of her life: *the land of the dead*<sup>29</sup>, *the journey of the living heart*<sup>30</sup> and *the land of life*<sup>31</sup>. Binding together artistic accomplishments, sketches, poems, images, stills from videos, links to videos, exhibition texts and newspaper articles – the proposal reflects Yaakoby's perseverance to utilize a poetic language that is quite foreign to contemporary exhibition proposals:

The creative work of the great mother's journey is rooted in the depths of a private psychic being, which understands suffering as an existential state of continuing antiquity...An existential experience similar to a mystical religious occurrence and as the world of the ancient myth, therefore it is interpreted as a journey: a transformative, conscious and spiritual journey of mythical heroes to the deep abyss and back to the world of life, or the journey of the soul to redemption and eternity, this journey takes place between the poles of birth, death and rebirth, in a circular motion that proclaims life from death.<sup>32</sup>

Aspects of competency around issues of class, gender and generation arise from the proposal hinting towards an (un)conscious critical reaction to cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Yaakoby described the *land of the dead* intended for the first floor of the pavilion of the biennale as such: the installation, the songs, the paintings, the film and the sound, unite to create one world (that consists of handwritten poems in color on white canvases, like ancient manuscripts of monks, scribes, stained curtains and sheets...

<sup>30</sup> *The journey of the living heart* that was intended to be exhibited on the middle floor of the pavilion. Yaakoby writes: Within the cracks between the worlds and in the transition between them, the heart is born; margins of the living and the dead; gripping the soul, the breath has movement from the ends of the world to the beating heart - a place of resuscitation...

<sup>31</sup> Yaakoby writes about the *land of life* that was intended for the second floor of the pavilion: The end point of the journey, it includes the whole. Cosmic Axis: the world axis that connects heaven and earth; between earth and infinity. It is the center from which everything springs, it is the beginning of existence, the starting point for life and its end. At the heart of the axis lies the great mother, the tree as a source of life, nourishment, protection and protection, the matrix that unites the whole of existence. ...

<sup>32</sup> Yaakoby, Dorit, Application to represent Israel in the 2015 Venice Biennale, PDF, 2014

capital and habitus. The embedded criticality in the proposal's lexicon, may have been targeted towards elite actors within the art field that have previously declined her proposals due to a male biased approach and ageism that have quite consistently marginalized her art.

In light of its style and volume, Yaakoby's proposal may be read as an act of subversion, challenging the very structure of the contemporary art world and its habitus. Through its own coded lexicon, Yaakoby's proposal questions inclusion and exclusion and inequalities experienced by woman artists in regards to the contemporary art world.

### *The Feminine Grid*



Probably the image that recurs most in Yaakoby's oeuvre is that of a silhouette of a female, airborne figure, arms-stretched out in a cross-like position - at times with a halo around her head that appears in a wide array of compositional and color variations. This image was discussed by art historians and curators who dealt with Yaakoby's work as a representation of a sensation of holiness.<sup>133</sup> An analysis of the airborne female figure in the overall composition of the canvas, is based not only in terms of its representation but considers it as an artistic technique splitting the canvas into sub-sections.

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Title?, year?, technique?, 180 x 122 cm.,

In contrast to the modernist compositional construction of the grid, the subdividing female figure serves Yaakoby as a subtle grid based on rhythm and dynamism. In her seminal essay *Grids*<sup>34</sup> the American art critic, art theorist and professor, Rosalind Krauss asserted that: "They..." (Mondrian and Malevich) "...are talking about Being or Mind or Spirit. From their point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal, and they are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete."<sup>35</sup> The female silhouette-grid of Yaakoby comes in contrast with grids of Mondrian and Malevich, utilized as a method to speak to the modern and the universal. In contrast to this, the grid system devised by Yaakoby expressed the fragmented and spread-out presence of the female in a male-dominated society; a subdivided existence of disparate territories based on the lives of (marginalized) female subjects.<sup>36</sup>

The flattened out female silhouette that embodies the fragmented existence of a woman, wife, artist and mother in a male-centered society may also be found<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Grids*, October, Vol. 9 (Summer 1979), pp. 50-64

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> According to the Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The curator Dr. Gabriela Uelsberg wrote about the appearance of a female silhouette in Yaakoby's oeuvre through its anti-matter: "...The figures look like ghosts about to dissolve, their rough, predominantly black signs turning into shadows."<sup>37</sup>

in the black silhouettes based on 18<sup>th</sup> century portraiture in African American tradition by artist Kara Walker. In a series of prints titled *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* (2005) Walker explored the disappearance of the female subject from the depiction of slavery and the representation of the Civil War in the US.<sup>38</sup>

Through the artistic gesture of flattening and de-personalization of the woman's silhouette, Walker resonates the disappearance of the female figure from the traumatic history of her nation's history. By adding a layer that depicts of female enslaved people on top of a series of illustrations, Walker 'writes into the flesh' of her artworks the traumatic layer that has been obliterated from the initial descriptions of the war. Similar to Walker, the female, flat silhouette of Yaakoby carries with it the traumatic layer of the social construction of gender and its cultural origins in Israeli society. Crossing the format this flattened out female figure embodies the inherited tensions of the female existence.



Title? year?, technique?, 77 x 47 cm.

### ***Infliction of the desert environment on the art and the artist***

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<sup>38</sup> The work was based on photographically enlarged plates of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Civil War illustrations from Harper's Magazine, displaying scenes from the war including battle scenes, troops on march and portraits of 'great' men.



Title, technique, year, 180 x 120 cm.

Similar to southern female artists' Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Khalo who lived and worked in the southern desert of US and Mexico, Yaakoby also drew inspiration for her art from the southern landscape and its natural world. The flora and fauna, the sand dunes and their biblical roots found their way into her work. Yaakoby included into her art the extreme climatic and terrestrial conditions of the desert and their affect on living creatures. According to the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, our modes of sensations are heightened in landscapes of the margins and extremities of the earth. Whether sand deserts, steppes, or ice deserts extreme landscape are sonorous and tactile, "with their creaking of ice and songs of sands"<sup>39</sup> The series of works that are impressions and reliefs of the imprints that the desert has left on Yaakoby are very much in tune with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the sonorous and tactile features of the extremes.

A series of works in white, rectangular boxes served as a simple architectural structure of containment and of shelter for her artwork. Their systematic box-shape form reflected the modernist cityscape of Arad echoing the modern style structures of Naqab brutalism built in the tradition of the 'raw' Modernist architecture style. These containers were subjected by Yaakoby to the forces of the desert climate, including sand storms, rain, high temperatures and the blazing sun.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Delueze and Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, MIT Press, 1986

<sup>40</sup> To use the American artist Robert Smithson's words, the desert tableaus may be considered "ruins in reverse." Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey", 1967. Reprinted *Artforum*, summer, 1998, p.4



Title, year, technique, 180 x 122 cm.

Yaakoby did not only expose her artwork to toxic and poisonous materials. She also inflicted upon herself the same destructive forces she administered on her art. Immersion of the body of the artist into the studio and its materials may be found in the biographies of a line of female artists that dealt with the body through concepts such as the abject.

One example is the American experimental artist Carolee Schneemann **who** **wrote:**

I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material-- a further dimension of the construction... I am both image maker and image. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.<sup>41</sup>



Title, year, technique, 122 x 62 cm.

Similar to Schneemann, Yaakoby frequently combined her body and her work together to become integral material. The totality and immersion between her body and her art brought Yaakoby to physically engage with her work. Bonding the forces

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of the desert to her body and her art, she created a sensual environment of experimental artistic endeavors.

## Conclusion

At the root of the current curatorial interpretation of Yaakoby's oeuvre, is the challenge to explore her art beyond previous interpretations; to carefully investigate personal motives that linked Yaakoby to the specific conditions in which she operated. The totality and intensity of her work, the toxic environment of the studio most likely leading to her untimely death – these were not stylistic decisions but rather artistic choices that reflected her state of existence. Her work is read as a testament to those aspects that caused her to encode her artistic lexicon. By tapping into the inner voice of the artist, delicate reverberations that have been obstructed by her own opaque language along with the patriarchal domination of the Israeli art discourse, arise.

*Don't Trip: Handle with Care* is a staging of Yaakoby's work administered through the combination of our female psyches. The meandering quality of the artistic persona of Yaakoby and her oeuvre, have been discussed by curators and historians of earlier exhibitions. In the catalog of Yaakoby's solo exhibition (?), Dr. Gabriela Uelsberg describes Yaakoby's artwork as<sup>42</sup>: "Formed out of the artist's obsessions, they (the artwork H.K.) offer an insight into her in her innermost experience."

What I find missing from Uelsberg's text along with many other analyses of Yaakoby's oeuvre is a question regarding the conditions that produced 'artist's

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<sup>42</sup> Name of exhibition??, The Ludwig Forum For International Art in Aachen, Germany, year?



obsessions' and the circumstances that eventually brought Yaakoby to construct a mysterious persona and an opaque body of works.

The exhibition creates a moment of recognition of the political subjectivation of a female, mature artist from the periphery of the country, who was many times marginalized by systems and techniques of patriarchal orderings. By interrogating alliances created within her close environment, a question arises regarding the personal conditions that caused Yaakoby to skew reality and to produce an artistic persona and oeuvre largely based on obscurity and opaqueness. At its culmination, the research has developed five cross-sectional themes based on the historical, geographical, sociological and psychological conditions that shaped Yaakoby's oeuvre.

### *1. Diversity of religious iconologies: a feminist perspective on belief systems*

Feminist theory has demonstrated how religion turned women's bodies into privileged sites for disciplining<sup>43</sup>. The presence of Jewish iconography brings with it a feminist perspective interrogating how certain events become part of a collective experience, and problematizes the domination of institutional systems of both life and death on Israeli female subjects.



Title, year, technique, 121 x 63 cm.

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<sup>43</sup> For example: the practice of *jus primae noctis* - the right of a local noble to deflower local peasant brides on their wedding night before their newlywed husbands.

**2. *Loosening Language Links: separating language from patriarchal systems of logic.***



Title, year, technique, 180 x 122 cm.

By repeatedly painting words, sentences, phrases and syllables in her artwork, Yaakoby acted upon the resignification of text components through a feminist prism. Focusing on the instrumentalization of the language of rituals and rites such as bereavement and commemoration, Yaakoby raises questions regarding systems of logic that are infected with patriarchal orderings. Layered, repetitive language fragments create a visual lexicon of letters, words and sentences.

**3. *Woman, Artist, Mother: the grid as a fragmentation device of the female subject in a male-centered society.***



Title, year, technique, 150 x 85 cm.

The recurring presence of a flattened-out female silhouette in a large number of Yaakoyb's artworks, creates, at times, an anamorphic grid. The subtle grid brings into the composition a rhythm of partialities that strengthens the notion that in a

patriarchal society, the female subject is divided through the social constructions of her as a woman, artist and mother.

#### 4. *Self-immersion and infliction of harsh environment on art and artist*



Title, year, technique, 105 x 75 cm.

Presence of a wide range of images of pain, suffering, anguish, self-infliction, disintegration of the body<sup>44</sup> are quite popular throughout her oeuvre. Marks of the infliction of the harsh desert environment upon her art include dust, sand, bright sunlight and high temperatures are apparent in a line of work. The use of toxic materials such as plastic in different forms on her art and on her body that had probably caused her to be ill and the appearance of abject including bodily fluids –usually hidden - are evident in various works. Organic objects such as twigs are bandaged and bonded together with inanimate objects such as a rocking horse or a baby’s cradle insinuate that Yaakoby was sensitive to wounds and blemishes of living a non-living entities alike.

#### 5. *Reclaiming her birthname Ruth: Feminist issues rooted in the Bible enter Yaakoby’s artwork.*

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<sup>44</sup> Yaakoby: “There is life in my death garment”.



Ruth is Holy, , year, technique, 47 x 24 cm.

By renaming herself Ruth at a mature age, Yaakoby recognized the significance of being a woman in her life. The book of Ruth centers on the alliance of two female protagonists raises questions regarding the social construct of womanhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society. Yaakoby introduced Ruth into her identity and to her artwork by entrusting herself to a female role model, Haviva Pedaya, opening up a new feminist prospect for her work.

#### **Afterthought:**

In order to develop intimacy and to deepen the experience of the encounter with Yaakoby's oeuvre, I have conceived the concept of the 'inhibition' in regards to the exhibition layout. The inhibition, opposed to exhibition, is an intimate format realized through the construction of situations that enable one-on-one engagement between the viewer and the artworks of Yaakoby. The inhibition opts for intimacy and partiality over objectivity and entirety.

Thus, Ariel Armoni, the exhibition's designer and I have developed a succession of architectural partialities creating a labyrinth of spaces. In them are installed a series of 'ensembles' or 'events' that resonate themes of her work as analyzed in my research. The space is designed to accommodate discursive formations and social constructions that invite the audience to relax and engage in an intimate engagement with the artworks.

Motivated by the notion of a collective emancipation of the female subject from patriarchal orderings, the inhibition is constructed with an inherent intimacy and introversion. I believe that through an encounter with the subtle tones of one of the most overlooked Israeli female artist's oeuvres, the inhibition allows one to explore and recognize Yaakoby as an important voice in the Israeli art discourse.