

## Dafna Kaffeman and Silvia Levenson

"Without Camouflage"

David Owsley Museum of Art,  
Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana  
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Themes of displacement are common in the work of artists Dafna Kaffeman and Silvia Levenson. Certainly, the diasporic aspects of Jewish identity anchor this exhibition, which lays bare the psychological toll of dislocation and conflict. Both artists use glass as a representational medium that can express exact details, but in transforming likeness into the unreal, the medium alludes to dreams and other psychological processes.

The glass botanical forms that Dafna Kaffeman uses in her "Invasive Plants" series are metaphors for the flux of populations and identities informing modern Israeli history. In biology, invasive species adversely affect the environments in which they grow and reduce biodiversity. While the title might seem critical of the *Aliyah* (the immigration of Jewish peoples to Israel) and Zionist politics, her frameworked glass plants, often with brightly colored flowers, are beautiful and compelling. While her plants call to mind the Blaschkas' botanical specimens, Kaffeman chooses to make plants with deviations from anatomical accuracy, which suggest the changes to identity that come from displacement and assimilation.

Her glass specimens are juxtaposed with embroidered Hebrew or Arabic words that address social turmoil. *Untitled (Moshe Silman)* (2014) speaks to the Kafkaesque injustices perpetrated by the Israeli insurance and welfare bureaucracies upon an Israeli citizen who committed spectacular, if tragic, suicide by immolation. Another title, *Usually healthy. Today he was beaten* (2012), signifies, through textile work and glass flowers, the violence characteristic of life in Jerusalem. Juxtaposed with the embroidery, Kaffeman's specimens evoke domestic vernacular scrapbooks in which objects such as dried flowers are kept as keepsakes. Refusing to relinquish her empathy, the artist transforms the traumas of public headlines into personal remembrances.

Silvia Levenson's figures are also characterized by displacement, notably the heads of children replaced by those of animals. These figures could be read as metaphors for the universal awkwardness of childhood, but they are also



Dafna Kaffeman, *Usually Healthy. Today he was beaten* (from the "Invasive Plants" series), 2012. Frameworked glass, felt, rice paper, thread. H 27 ½, W 27 ½, D 6 ¾ in.

PHOTO: ERIC TSCHERNOW

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psychological portraits of herself as a child. A child with a gray glass lamb's head, an awkward (if endearing) pigeon-toed stance, and the words "strange little girl" embroidered on her black dress, suggests that *Baby Sheep* (2011) is a "black sheep," not quite fitting into her social group. In another "Strange Little Girl" installation, *The Chosen* (2011–2012), a child clothed in white with the head of a (sacrificial) lamb contemplates an enlarged 1892 photographic image of Levinson's grandfather as a child among other male family members—all Russian Jews newly living in Argentina. *Strange Little Girl No. 5 (Fox)* stands with her back turned to a print of constellations—an astrological commentary on fate, but also an existential statement about a child before a vast and indifferent universe.

In her recent work, Levinson's iconic dangling knives and dangerous "pincushion" furniture have given way to more ambivalent animal imagery. Accompanying the "Strange Little Girls," Levinson's installation *Where are you*

*going?* (2011) juxtaposes 14 fused glass plates. All show Levinson's sketches of children's bodies conflated with rabbit, fox or flower heads. The animal-children are innocent but also amoral. This brightly colored whimsy is fraught with anatomical skeletons that loom as both adults and specters of death. These uneasy childhoods are informed by the Argentine politics of Levinson's youth, which were characterized by instability, military coups, guerrilla groups, and extrajudicial jailings and killings. She and her family ultimately had to flee Argentina.

Despite the melancholic themes, all the works are informed by the artists' resistance, perseverance, and leveraging of beauty—the psychological strategies by which they assert their humanity to counter brutal and indifferent histories.

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