

Dafna Kaffeman

Since 2002, Kaffeman's increasingly transparent statements, first on politics and now on social issues, have taken two distinct directions. The plant and animal forms that comprise such series as "Tactual Stimulation" (see fig. 1) and "Wolves" are fabricated primarily from flame-worked glass. Kaffeman maintains that her subjects provided her a means to explore human behavior; but even early on her references to nature—a recurring metaphor used by many young Israeli artists—demonstrate her deep kinship with her homeland.³

The "Tactual Stimulation" series are colorful, rotund forms that juxtapose pulled, lamp-worked elements (see fig. 2), sometimes with materials such as clay and sponge. Evoking sea urchins or cacti, they allude to Israel's geographic location between two bodies of water as well as to the prickly pear plants grown in Israel called *sabra* that have thick skins and soft, sweet interiors. The term *sabra* also refers to Israeli-born Jews such as Kaffeman, who are said to be tough on the exterior, but personally warm and welcoming.

"Wolves" evoke, for the artist, the schism that exists in every individual between inner darkness and the rational (see fig. 3). The wolf, a motif for Kaffeman since 2003, is also a metaphor for the violence in her world. At one point, the press used the term frequently to describe various players in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Since 2006, Kaffeman has also made mini-environments that consist of embroidered handkerchiefs or felt to which she affixes flame-worked glass plants, sometimes insects, and, more recently, rice paper. She is among a rapidly growing number of contemporary artists such as Egyptian-born Ghada Amer, who, despite their diverse backgrounds, are now incorporating fiber and its techniques into their art. At the core of Kaffeman's work, however, is her interest in word as image. The interaction of the linear, often spidery, hand-embroidered Arabic and Hebrew texts with the spare, flame-worked forms and rice paper produce highly lyrical visual feasts.

These carefully considered micro-environments present the disparity between beautiful crafted surfaces and disturbing text about aggressors and victims. Exquisitely wrought glass flora and insects—precisely catalogued in the accompanying identification, but not always anatomically correct—are intended to augment the texts iconographically. For example, in *Invasive Plants* ("I count to one and fall asleep"), which makes reference to the highly controversial issue of the demographics of Jerusalem, Kaffeman chose flora not found in Israel to underscore that Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, whose quotation is the focus of the work, is an émigré (fig. 4).

Finding an article in the press about a Palestinian woman's tearful response to an act of carnage that had occurred almost fifty years earlier prompted Kaffeman to use old handkerchiefs as backgrounds for the first few series. Realizing, however, that they limited the scale of her work, she began with the "Invasive Plants" series to use felt, a material she associates with the German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys. Felt has significance for Kaffeman: like the conflict that surrounds her, it has existed since biblical times.

Kaffeman selects texts from the Israeli press or flyers distributed at public demonstrations that deal with the complexities of life in her homeland experienced by Arabs and Israelis alike. When she first started this body of work around 2007, she had others embroider the texts—for example, six Jewish men from Israel who served in its army embroidered the "Mantis Religiosa" series (fig. 5). Such an approach emphasized the actual act of making and placed Kaffeman squarely in the midst of the DIY (Do It Yourself) movement—gaining momentum at the time—in which artists involved hobbyists in their politically or socially charged statements. She saw it as a way to reignite others' interest in Israeli policies. At the same time, she was able to avoid any advocacy of one side or another. More recently, in the "Invasive Plants" series and *Untitled (Moshe Silman)* (figs. 6 and 7)—the latter, strongly reminiscent of a gravestone—she did the embroidery herself, becoming more involved in the making in order to personalize the work with her own sentiments. Kaffeman reinforces the importance of process in these more recent works by the inclusion of rice paper (fig. 8)—a highly fragile material that she uses to transfer her pencil drawings of nature (plate 1) onto the cloth (fig. 7). That it will deteriorate over time adds another layer of poignancy.

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