A Tourist in Your Own Home: a Conversation with Shasha Dothan

The artist Shasha Dothan has recently curated a virtual show of works addressing the sense of alienation experienced by immigrants, of which she is one. Hagai Ulrich spoke with her about the show and her works, in which she rows a canoe across her living room, invites a male stripper to an apartment, and erects a tent-installation where she hosts works by immigrant women.

Conversation / Hagai Ulrich March 16, 2022

I met Shasha Dothan for a brief conversation following a video exhibition she had curated and participated in, titled "A Tourist in Your Own Home." The exhibition was presented on the website of the University of Massachusetts (MCLA), and at the MCLA Gallery 51 between February and August 2021.

Hagai Ulrich: The five works in the virtual exhibition you have curated address immigration and identity issues. But I noticed that they have another common denominator – in many, the body is not present physically, but either disjointed or imprisoned, set away from other bodies. In Jisoo Chung's video, for example, feet are marching on the ground upon which are projected abstract images that look like textures of the body or cartography. In another moment, you see the artist's torso as she paints a map on it, looking in a mirror. The work by Shirin Bolourchi and Ali Azhari is a montage of disassembled body parts, landscapes, and words. In Marton Robinson's work, a man is walking in a jungle, but his face is hidden, and in a video by Tania Zaidi, the body is there, but the camera angle and her point of view are distant, from a high-rise hotel down to the pool. Also, you can see a box that sort of moves on its own, or maybe by a ghost.

Deliberate Marking, Oblivious To Itself, But To Sing, To Sing, Very Softly_Jisoo Chung

Video of Deliberate Marking, Oblivious To Itself, But To Sing, To Sing, Very Softly_Jisoo Chung
Jisoo Chung, Deliberate marking, oblivious to itself, but to sing, to sing very softly. 2020. Video, 6:31 min.

14 Days (Screening) **[1]**

Video of 14 Days (Screening)
Shasha Dothan, 14 Days, 2020, video, 4:50 min

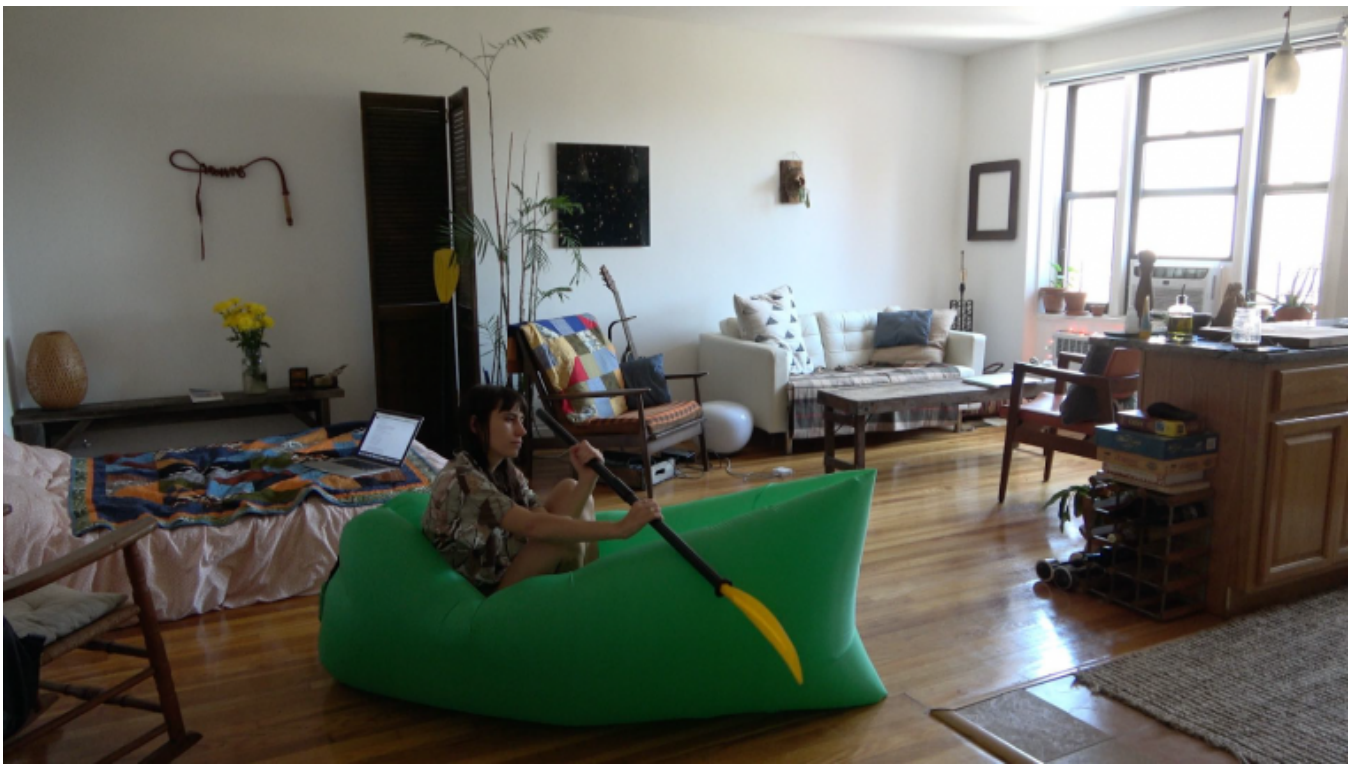
Shasha Dothan: I was invited to teach at a college in Massachusetts and stay there, but because of the coronavirus, the plans changed, and an offer came up to create an online exhibition instead. It was important for me to have all kinds of voices and I chose the artists who talked about their sense

of foreignness in the United States. Jisoo Chung's work is both about trying to assimilate into the society you're in and about wanting to resist and bring something of your own that's different from whatever is going on. The work is about her home and the place she has emigrated to, Los Angeles, which map she paints on her body. Jisoo talks about the desire to become an abstraction, which is evident also in the work of Shirin Bolourchi. In Marton Robinson's work, in which he marches through the woods, he does use his body but he covers himself in a white work suit and hides his face. In many works he paints himself white or spills milk on himself.

H.U.: In your work *14 days* [2] (2020), you record moments from your quarantine experience in your childhood bedroom at your parents' house in Tel Aviv, when you and your partner were visiting from New York. You're talking in the video about the experience of introducing the new partner to your family and wondering (in voiceover), along with other reflections, about the possibility that you might have had inner homophobia. The two of you are in bed, staring at your cell phones, playing card games, and you are drawing images that look like children's drawings of figures in closed spaces, maybe a prison.

In earlier video works you've also recorded interim moments from moving among countries and the accompanying thoughts and feelings, as in *The Wandering Israeli* (2019), which documents travel between Israel, Germany, and Los Angeles. In a more particular look at the works, one after the other, I think that aside from the documentation of very complex events associated with immigration, you also document processes for getting to know yourself. And that always happens through the physical presence of the body. In many of your video works, the body is at the center of the frame, where you place yourself in different situations with respect to the background. For example, you sit still on a street corner, or stand and look at the camera, or make some bodily gesture that is dissociated from the background and context. In *The Wandering Israeli*, at one moment you're rowing a canoe in a Los Angeles apartment's living room, and the next you're performing a dance on a street in Tel-Aviv, slowly moving toward the camera, looking at the lens.

image7.png **[3]**



[4]Shasha Dothan, still from The Wandering Israeli, 2019, video, 18:22 min
Courtesy of the artist

I want to say that these kinds of bodily gestures look like a halting to me—whether it's a transition from one moment to another or discontinuing the drama of everything that's going on around you. It's a focus on your own self, its isolation, and therefore it always stands in opposition to the backdrop behind you.

And this thing about the freezing, like in a still photograph, emphasizes the background for me. The background in your works is a particular, physical place, with a particular architecture, but it's also some connection that you make—a historical, political, or biographical context. In *The Wandering Israeli*, for instance, the video interweaves interviews with family members and shows your background through the presentation of a general narrative about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Archival footage reminds viewers again of the political situation—where they are right now in the video's drama. There's a lot of emotion as well. You focus on your mother's tears and in the end, we see your father crying too. In between, there is a voiceover with statements that sound a little like poetry or commemorative speeches.

The backstory looks to me like *studium*—Roland Barthes's concept that describes the context—everything you can know when looking at a photograph through experience. Context that is not just subjective,[1] and seemingly normative. The body's gesture, the freezing, emphasize the *studium*, the background, and architecture, that regulate the physical body in space and put it into a certain flow, or to a comprehensible, normalized context -- they generate the ability to understand a subjective detail within a wider context that is ostensibly objective.

S.D.: Yeah, it's to contain inside me the location, I think, as a person and as a body. I also make room for a viewer or whoever is inside or outside the video to see where I'm coming from or the right to be angry about it. The ability to be complexed about it and let other people do it.

H.U.: But the stopping of the movement, the stilling of the body, seems to me to be in opposition to the drama around, and against the background. Or is it apathy? Or dissociation? And maybe I'm

projecting, but to me, it looks like what happens to a person who's in an abusive experience. The first work of yours I saw was *Bachelorette Party* (2012), at the Gabirol Gallery in Tel Aviv. In that work, you invited a stripper to an apartment and photographed him. And there, too, there is a kind of freezing of your body, or apathy.

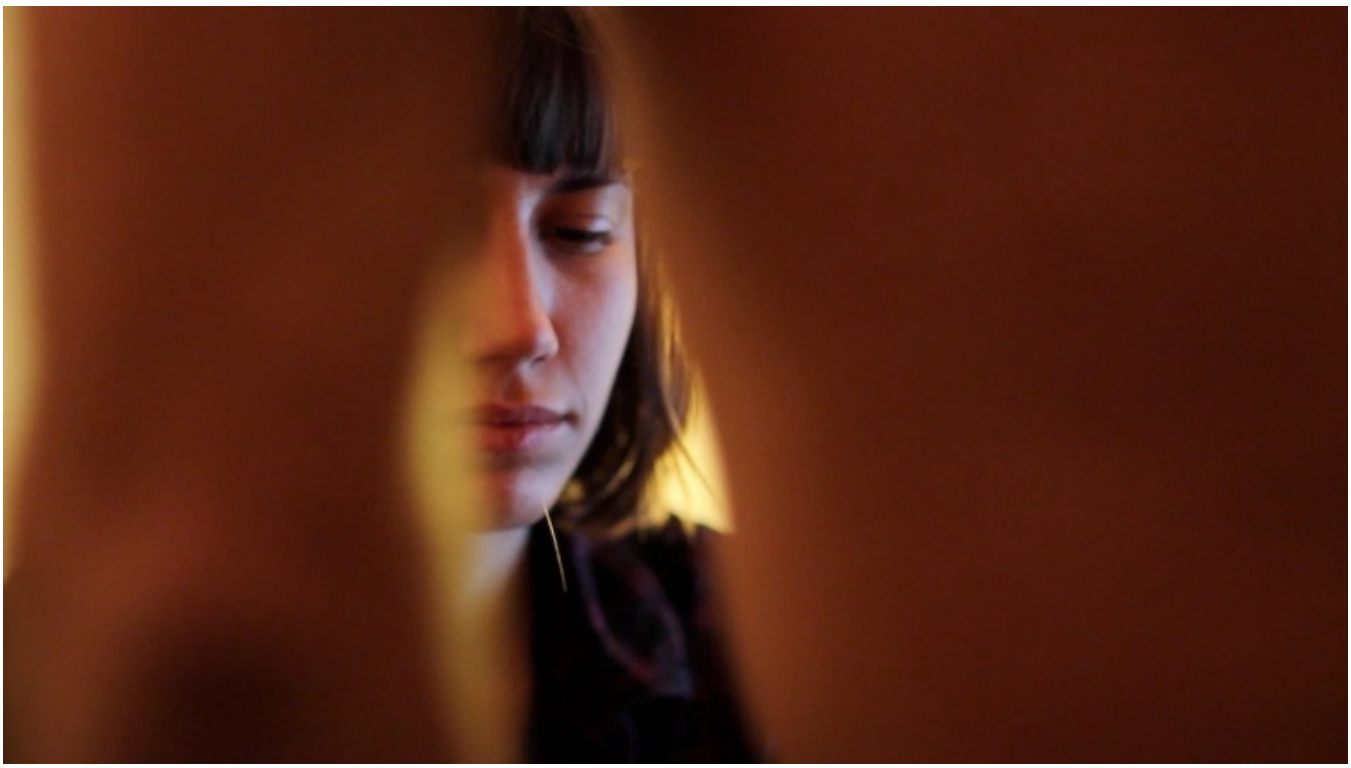
S.D.: In my work, I often put myself in places I wouldn't want to be in, where I don't know how to behave. When I got to Los Angeles, I did a video called *I Never Felt So Apathetic* (2016), about how I moved there from Israel, and the intensity of it all. Suddenly I arrived at this sunny place in Los Angeles, and I'm standing at locations and I don't know what to say. In another work, *Jerusalem Day* (2015), I'm standing in the middle of a procession and people pass over me with the flags. It seems to me like resistance to something that is happening, even if I'm the one who has instigated it. So even in *Bachelorette Party*, at the Gabirol Gallery, in the exhibition "Wedding," curated by Omer Goldman and Tamar Katz, it was an attempt to come out of myself and look at something differently, and just lie down. As if someone else is controlling me, but actually I control the situation. Around me in the video, all are men. So what does it mean, as a woman, to be in a situation that you bring upon yourself?

I never felt so apathetic Video segment **[5]**

Video of I never felt so apathetic Video segment
Shasha Dothan, segment from I Never Felt So Apathetic, 2016, video, 04:00 min.

Bachelorette Party is related to a later work titled *Robert* (2018), which was part of my graduation project for the MFA program at UCLA. I put an ad in the paper and invited people to preach to me, and Robert was one of them. He asked to be filmed naked as he lectured me on nudism. In my head, I wondered what would happen and what he would do. I set up another camera, to show both of us. When he started talking, he started to touch himself and preach to me about the MeToo movement, about conservatism, about how a man talks to a woman. As a woman, I'm standing there and I don't really know what to say or what I have gotten myself into. It's not just about that specific person. It's exactly this complex place that is interesting for me in my encounter with reality. What I'm responsible for and what not.

מסיבת רווקות שאשא דותן.jpg **[6]**



[7]Shasha Dothan, still from Bachelorette Party, 2012, video, 5:36 min
Courtesy of the artist. Photography: Ziv Berkovitz

מסיבת רווקות שאשא דותן 3.jpg **[8]**



[9]Shasha Dothan, still from Bachelorette Party, 2012, video, 5:36 min
Courtesy of the artist. Photography: Ziv Berkovitz

image3.png **[10]**



[11]
Shasha Dothan, installation view, I'd Rather Escape to American Escapism, 2018, installation, UCLA
In the installation: still from Robert, 2018, video, 12:58 min.
Courtesy of the artist

H.U.: I think about the background in your video works in the primary sense of the space, as architecture, as I mentioned earlier -- the location where you invite the stripper, in this case, but also as institutions of society and state: the institution of bachelorhood, or of marriage, among others. You can think of the architecture as structures and organizations, the physical entry into which causes the implementation of certain ways of behaving and thinking that the place generates in us, in the sense of submission. On *Jerusalem Day*, you are standing in the middle of a parade. There are lots of people and noise. A stream of people carrying Israeli flags and you stand still, look at the camera. Similarly, in *I Never Felt So Apathetic*, you stand and look at the audience and there is a large shopping center in the background. In both cases, my sense is that there are systems that are beyond your control, affecting you. In one it is perhaps the state and national ceremonies, and in the other, it seemed to me like corporatism and consumerism. People internalize behaviors, or maybe they're just paralyzed. These are not the kind of structures that people construct for themselves to their own scale, or things that people do with each other.

In the video *Another Day: Camouflage Chaos* (2017) as well, you are in a domestic space, made up in camouflage colors like a commando soldier in the jungle, looking at the camera as if you were under hypnosis, and paging through a book without looking at it, but toward the end there are images of bombings, which might be indicating the background again: military, politics, identity, the state.

Jerusalem Day Video segment **[12]**

Video of Jerusalem Day Video segment
Shasha Dothan, segment from Jerusalem Day ,2015, video, 0:48 min

Another Day: Camouflage chaos Video segment **[13]**

Video of Another Day: Camouflage chaos Video segment
Shasha Dothan, segment from Another Day: Camouflage Chaos, 2017, video, 10:45 min

S.D.: The older I get, the more I think about power structures that, when I was young, I didn't think I had been a part of or that they affected my life that much, and I gradually understand that they do; in my perception of myself and how I'm supposed to be doing and what's going on around me. It starts with the language I speak, with being a woman, being a foreigner today in America. And I'm inside a language that requires me to become a part of it. And as a woman, even if there are more and more women in power positions, still your perception is largely structured by men. So what is your place when you're entering a world that's already constructed, and being and built? Or, what is the possibility of painting a different world, if it exists, and how can you really create a different world?

H.U.: The word "stillness" appears in Jisoo Chung's work. For the spiritual thinker Eckhart Tolle, stillness is a secession of movement and a tool for reaching a deeper level of consciousness and self-knowledge. Knowledge without narrative, which is a way of focusing on the here and now - here and now that is supposedly separated from past and future and everything that happens externally.[2] These ideas, of course, appear in Zen philosophies, yoga, mindfulness exercises, etc.

S.D.: Now that you mention mindfulness, I think about how non-spiritual a person I am in this regard. In *I Never Felt So Apathetic*, it is also in the sense of finding my place and where I can physically stand and whether people even notice me. At Costco, no one looks at me. The background is like a greenscreen. Even in *Jerusalem Day*, when people walk over me with the flag - what is my place, then, in the American or Israeli reality?

H.U.: That's the thing. Eckhart Tolle says that to break away from the past and the future and who am I and what is happening around me, to achieve peace and stillness, you can do exercises, like trying not to listen to words but pay attention to the gaps and breaks between the sounds, as a way to get there. To me, it seems like something that's happening in your works, if I take a broad look at some of your works one next to the other, and also at the video works. Both in *14 Days* and in the *Wandering Israeli*, the focus is on mundane and difficult to define moments, banal and boring (sitting on a bench, doing a strange dance for the camera, standing at attention, staring into the air, reading a book, checking the cell phone, playing cards). These moments are not conceptual or national narratives that place us under an identity -- it's kind of freezing, a stillness.

S.D.: I think it's totally part of my thinking. A few years ago, I wrote a text titled *Not Apologizing on Behalf of Video Art*, on the difference between video and film. It was in a magazine that was published by Dikla Sachs as part of the 2016 Cinematheque Student Film Festival. And I think video

is not about taking people to extreme feelings like in the movies or being manipulated into feeling things. I am interested in everyday things and not in creating this manipulation, even though sometimes it's there, but it's not just to display drama and high points and what's the impact and what it means. But I think you can grasp the drama without seeing it. I can also relate to what you've said earlier about poetry. My work does come from writing or thinking. I write things that are somewhere between poetry and texts that express the sense of the in-between. So, yeah, I think it's related, too. It's funny because, on the other hand, people often think that my work is very direct.

H.U.: About those moments when you look directly at the camera, at the viewers. I've asked myself if it is looking at the present, the future, or the past, or it really is a direct look.

And further, do you think your works, even the ones about immigration, are related to queer theory? In Heather Love's book from 2007, titled *Feeling Backward*,[3] she has written that there is something about queer and cultural and historical representations of queerness, especially in literature, that is related to feelings she calls "backward," which are allegedly "not positive" and are associated with loss and difficulty integrating. Expressions she describes as related to dodging the attempt to be calibrated within a system of progress or an image of success, establishing a home and a family, and being accepted in society, among other things. Expressions that are ostensibly perceived in the West as "negative", or stuck: not PC, unattractive, describing contradictions and conflicts, and sometimes having some kind of an internal homophobia experience, of resisting who you are, related to looking back and retreating to the past. But for Love, these expressions are meaningful in helping to understand what it means to be queer in the present, in the here and now.

S.D.: Yes, Sarah Schulman writes about this, that if you want to get married, you're part of the institution. It connects you to the family, because this way you're perceived as normal even though you're queer, because you're getting married. You see it happen in Israeli culture.

H.U.: I like these moments when you freeze in your work, whether it's meditation, apathy, or just being stuck. Because once I suspend the idea of being in a world of matter and identity and who am I and what am I, in past or future, what am I doing, and where do I need to go and where am I progressing-- when I break away from all these, I quiet down. Not necessarily in terms of mindfulness, but in general -- I connect it to moving without knowing where to. And not always showing your beautiful and seemingly successful side, but being like children, or in a state of anarchism, of not being part of any institution, or not always being in a state of progress, part of the machine, or the resource that must always know something.

S.D.: But I am a very conflictual person and I love discussions, and I think that in my art it's a way to show the conflict and start a debate or a conversation that I want to have, without agitation, but rather suggest a place for talking. When I look at the viewers, it invites them to have a conversation and to open it to any topic I bring up, even if it's about Israel and the occupation, or being a woman, or a foreigner. That's why I prefer to build installations where people can sit and reflect and be a part of the debate. It matters to me. To turn myself into a place where women can talk about what's bothering them about any issue. I think immigrating to the United States had also turned it on because it made me ask who I was talking to or who I wanted to talk to.

H.U.: It's not about resisting an identity?

S.D.: My identity?

H.U.: Any identity. You're obviously including your biography and your emotional frequencies. And then, there's the focus on stopping. That's why I had mentioned both Eckhart Tolle and Heather Love – even though they are a contradiction in terms -- because they both attempt to disengage from a narrative of a very particular development, which everyone goes along with. And in your work it's just like that: everything around is in motion, and there is a big drama in the background, but also a halt, literally.

S.D.: That's interesting. And it's totally true. Because growing up inside the Israel-ness and the enveloping that we come from, all the things that are implanted in us as children, and then the desire to let go of those things. And what about today, and what now? There's an attempt to reject

identity. I agree that my work has always been moving backward and forward, and my life as well. It's funny, I was just talking to my girlfriend, and our question was, who am I? So maybe it is something that goes with me in the endless search. But really, to lower my expectations, maybe I (should) accept that this is an endless search for the place and for who I am. Maybe it's something that takes me back to what you said about being a child. I think many of my works are about girlhood and adolescence and family and home.

image5.png **[14]**



[15]Shasha Dotan, installation view, detail from Another Day: Camouflage Chaos, 2017, installation: seven video works, painted stones, drawings, paintings
Courtesy of the artist

H.U.: You also had a new installation in May 2021.

S.D.: Yeah, it was at *AiOP 2021: NORMAL:* Art in Odd Places *[16]*, created by Furusho von Puttkammer in Manhattan. I built a video installation in the form of a tent, and painted scenes from my realms of immigration. The work's title is *Patterns of the Heart: Immigration and the Longing for a Home*. In this work, I hosted the artworks of three women artists who had immigrated to the United States, a different artist each day. Two works were videos that we projected onto my installation,

one by Sarah Malik and the other by Angel Zinovieff. The third work was by the artist Jiwon Rhie, which we had built together that day. It was a floor installation, made entirely of rice. The idea was to create borders with rice, and have passersby erase them. I've always liked collaborations. It began in Israel when I started the "Anti Mahikon'' group, with fellow students at Shenkar's BFA program. It continues now with exhibitions I curate and dialogs with the people in my work. I like to give room to different voices in my work.

SD Art in Odd Places with video by Angel Zinovieff 02.jpg **[17]**



[18]
Shasha Dotan, Patterns of the Heart: Immigration and the Longing for a Home, installation view with video by Angel Zinovieff, 51 Tenth Street, Manhattan
From: NORMAL: AiOP, 2021, May 14-16, 2021. Curator: Furusho von Puttkammer
Photography: Patrick McNabb. Courtesy of the artist

- 1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- 2. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Vancouver & Novato: Namaste Publishing & New World Library, 2019
- 3. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

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