



**Women in Art Now // Jackie Sleper**





Noa Yekutieli, *A Constellation of Echoes*, 2013, manual paper cutting, collection of the artist; photo: Barak Brinker  
נעה יקוטיאלי, מבנה ההדים, 2013, חיתוך נייר ידני, אוסף האמנית; תצלום: ברק ברינקר

# Noa Yekutieli: Memory, Home, and What Lies Between Them

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*A man's real possession is his memory. In nothing else is he rich, in nothing else is he poor.*

— Alexander Smith<sup>1</sup>

In her recent works Noa Yekutieli continues to focus on the notions of home and memory and the way in which they change according to our emotional and social needs. Yekutieli does not use her personal, immediate memory, but rather the memories of other people who experienced irreversible, dramatic moments. She presents a series of natural disasters which took place in the past century (collapsing houses, earthquake, landslide, tsunami, flood, drowning, tornadoes, etc.): sudden, powerful disasters which spread destruction and ruin in the environment and cannot be anticipated. She selects images of disasters from around the world, in different places and times. In each of these instances, the physical, national, economic, or social disaster becomes personal, and its consequences change the individual's fate abruptly and forever. Nevertheless, despite being local, the disaster generates a universal experience, a common denominator and a collective memory for people from different physical, emotional, and historical places.

The disaster, and the consequent physical and emotional trauma, increase our need to preserve memories, "because that's all that's left," says Yekutieli, and adds: "When a disaster occurs, reality changes. The geographical environment and human nature can rebuild themselves and turn over a new leaf intended to make you forget the pain of the tragedy and loss that one feels. We make an effort to preserve whatever is possible; memories made up of many pictures are reduced

over time to single pictures."<sup>2</sup> A single image encapsulates situations packed with sights, sensations, and emotions. Memory is a subjective and personal process, influenced by the importance that a person attaches to things, and it has many roles in building and structuring the self. "Memory has crucial importance regarding virtually all cognitive activity, and it is essential to one's ability to survive. It is vital to the ability to learn since it enables us to accumulate experience and knowledge from past experiences. In this way it enables us to understand and interpret new experiences."<sup>3</sup> Yekutieli chooses the scenes before, during, and after the disaster carefully, so that they will preserve and illustrate the experience and the fragments of life's memories. Through them she examines the line that divides reality from memory, an existing moment from a passing one, and the gaps and transformation that lie between them. In her novel *I Loved So Much*, Judith Rotem writes about memory: "Memories know how to be cunning, to flee when you want to touch them. Like little fish, like curling waves near the beach that tickle your feet and melt into foam. Often, memory is an abstract knowledge of what once existed. Memory is piled on memory, shadow on shadow, until you cannot tell what is pure memory and what is the memory of a memory."<sup>4</sup>

The works were inspired by photographic images from the local and international media. The use of newspaper photographs validates the depicted events, but at the same time





Noa Yekutieli, *The Unbearable Suddenness*, 2013, manual paper cutting, collection of the artist; photo: Barak Brinker  
 נעה יקותיילי, ופכתאום, 2013, חיתוך נייר ידני, אוסף האמנית; תצלום: ברק ברינקר

points at the act of testimony itself (reality is presented from a subjective viewpoint). Yekutieli sharpens our understanding that no testimony is objective. The artist is not directly present in the events described but rather experiences them through a mediator—the photographer and the photograph. The photograph forms a point of departure and an infrastructure for the works in terms of content and in visual terms. "Once the photograph is selected, a process is set in motion wherein I decide how to respond to the photographic text: which part of the photograph to use, what the scale will be, and how to crop it," adding that, "My eye translates the human space in which the future story takes place to the instant flash of the camera." Sometimes Yekutieli translates the entire scene; at others she severs figures from their context and creates a new context for them. In this way the "information" changes its meaning and place.

The works present situations of environmental and human suffering and destruction; to borrow Richter's words, "Death and suffering have always been an artistic theme."<sup>5</sup> Each picture features the human element in a person's chance encounter with an inhuman reality. The artist portrays the figures with restrained precision, with emphasis not on facial features or a specific likeness, but on their body gestures, which express differing degrees of torture and heart-breaking restraint, such as holding hands, etc. Most of the figures do not directly face the viewer, but are occupied with the space around them, which is mostly piles of rubble and waste. The pile becomes a silent testimony, a trace of trauma, such as war, an act of terror, an earthquake, or houses which once existed. The pile is a neglected still life, in-between life and

death, between plant and stone. The works move on the axis between life and death to talk about life.

Yekutieli's works succinctly capture the body language of human pain with its universal aspects. Thus, for instance, the comforting, strong, and protective embrace becomes a physical act with universal significance beyond the actual moment; a sign of brotherhood, help, compassion, and identification mixed with great pain, intended to demonstrate warmth and affection for the other. The people holding hands create a human chain, which enables closeness, identification, and sharing, a strong sense of community and togetherness. The means of coping with disaster at the national and personal levels, as through customs and expressions of mourning or affection, is culturally dependent. "I bring together different people, with different reactions, and create contact and discourse that seldom happens in reality." In the new series, each work is composed of numerous images, gathered together in a shared, asymmetric composition. Each work surrenders a nonsequential, non-didactic series of events and images of the moment of the disaster and the moment of healing and human compassion. Horror and beauty meet in each work. Yekutieli avoids any expressive dimension by using a precise compositional cut. The distinctly non-modern character of the technique emphasizes its content.

The works, constructed using a strong contrast of black and white, employ a manual papercutting technique, carried out with a utility knife, which requires precision and accuracy. The technique of papercutting has a long history, apparently originating in China and the Far East, through Jewish folk art (paper-cuts were popular among the Jews of Eastern Europe





in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), and is frequently referenced in postmodern art.<sup>6</sup> Yekutieli uses the aesthetics and the harmony of the technique to transmit the difficult, complex themes of destruction, trauma, and memory. This duality generates a tension in the works, which is enhanced by the choice of a simple, uniform, black paper surface, rather than a possible variety of colors; by choosing a cutting knife rather than a paintbrush or a sculpting chisel; and the decision to remove and subtract from the whole sheet, as a means of creating a picture. The artist opens holes and cracks, and turns the black paper into an expressive platform. "What I like about this technique is the existence of the concept of 'temporality.' As in life, you make a decision and there's no turning back. You can only subtract, and it's hard to add. The absence, the nothingness, the holes in the story and in memory, create existence, the story, and that which remains [...] When there are holes in the story and not everything is systematic, we remember forgotten things," says Yekutieli. The cut paper is akin to the traces of memory that we have chosen to retain.

Natural disasters, because of their strength, often erase the physical and mental home that carries memories of place and time. People want to preserve what no longer exists; life's memory is composed of thousands of moments which fall apart and are reassembled simultaneously. This is comparable to the paper-cutting technique in which lines join and separate to form scenes which, the longer you look at them, the clearer they become. The physical landscape shatters into thousands of pieces which are rearranged in a new order and form the landscape inside us—memory. The paper preserves personal and collective memory. "My works in recent years have focused on the memory that exists in life. I examine its validity, what

we can preserve and contain, and what we can't." The title of the exhibition staged at Dwek Gallery, Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem, in 2014, "Among All of Our Intentions," touches upon the gap between reality, the event that has happened, and the intention. "Our lives often 'go' in directions we don't intend, they fall between intentions, neither here nor there, in-between." This gap is comparable, in Yekutieli's view, to the gap between memory and "reality," between the subjective and the objective, between the moment before and the moment after. The large-scale works show compressed environments, which create a sense of suffocation and crowding, where the local and the universal, the realistic and the fictive, are intertwined with an invisible thread. ♦

[English translation: PAT-TRANCE]

1. Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country* [1863] (Edinburgh: Mitchell & Co., 1881), pp. 60-61.
2. All the quotations were taken from a conversation with the artist in her Tel Aviv studio, January 2014.
3. From the entry "Memory," Wikipedia, retrieved 30 April 2014 [Hebrew].
4. Judith Rotem, *I Loved So Much* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonoth/Hemed, 2000) [Hebrew].
5. Gerhard Richter, *Text: Writings, Interviews, and Letters, 1961–2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), p. 227.
6. See, for example, works by Kara Walker, who examines problems of gender and sex through this technique, or the decorative and naïve works of Beth White, or the political works of Roe Rosen, Larry Abramson, and others.

Noa Yekutieli's exhibition "Through the Fog, the Distance," is currently on view at the Wilfrid Israel Museum, Kibbutz Hazorea, Israel; curators: Shir Meller-Yamaguchi, Anat Turbowicz