

Tree For Too One

The objects that populate this piece come from the walls of a building that was being demolished in south Tel Aviv. This area, since the founding of the state of Israel, has been home to waves of immigrants from around the world. To accommodate a surge of newcomers in the late 1940s, housing was constructed at a breakneck pace. When concrete supplies ran low, resourceful builders sought materials anywhere they could, filling walls with cast-off objects such as belt buckles and clothing.

Tree For Too One arranges these artifacts within a domestic space, creating the sense of a comfortable and familiar environment. However, numerous small ruptures—of scale, time, and context—are detectable. A seashell, which appears at bottom right, looks larger than the bag of apples that hangs nearby. Black-and-white photographs show the empty interior of a house. Other small objects, such as washers and pebbles, are arranged on rows of shelves, which resemble both lines of text and a cityscape seen from a distance.

Optical devices punctuate the work, including a magnifying glass, a frosted windowpane, and an ultraviolet-light shade for a rearview mirror. Though photography may serve as a “window” onto reality, it is also a mechanism of distortion. Azoulay seizes on this capacity by deploying the medium to peer into history while asserting multiple and often seemingly contradictory perspectives.

The adjacent case contains a selection of the objects that appear in *Tree For Too One*, accompanied by texts written by the artist.

Unity Totem

This work is inspired by the Jewish Museum's collection. The word "totem," borrowed from the Ojibwe language, denotes an object, often taking the form of an animal, that serves as an emblem for a clan. Passed down from generation to generation, the totem can serve as a point of connection with ancestors as well as with forces of nature. To make *Unity Totem*, Azoulay sifted through the collections of the Jewish Museum and identified roughly twenty objects. Most were created by Jewish communities living throughout the Arab world, including in her ancestral homeland of Morocco. She then researched and incorporated these ritual items and amulets into this imagined composite. Suspended from a green hat that smokes like a cone of incense, they are seemingly flung outward by centrifugal force, as if spinning. The inscription at the top of the work was derived from Azoulay's interactions with two master healers, Homaya Amar and Kida Noyman, who were each asked to meditate on the work and the objects it contains to activate its spiritual energy.

A manifesto by Noyman is displayed nearby. In the text, Noyman urges, "Let us leave behind the ancient narratives that have enabled violence and instead embark on a process of personal and collective transformation."

Queendom

In *Queendom* Azoulay draws on a study collection of photographs from the L. A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem. Deemed superfluous due to the widespread availability of digital images, this archive was about to be discarded when the artist intervened. The collection was created by David Storm Rice (1913–1962), an Austrian, British, and Jewish art historian and archaeologist. Traveling widely, Rice amassed ten thousand photographs that document in exhaustive detail vessels from across the medieval Islamic world. Rice’s obsessive attention stemmed, perhaps, from his understanding that these vessels were meant not only to be seen but to be read. Teeming with inscriptions and visual narrative, in addition to abstract decoration, they tell of hunts, battles, courtly pleasures, saints, and fantastic beasts.

Azoulay draws freedom from Rice’s translation of objects into photographs. The vessels are physically weighty; figuratively, they are laden with historical and cultural import. While Rice’s photographs made them both multiple and portable, Azoulay’s digital interventions allow her to splice them into startling new forms. These configurations are a feminist incursion into the male-dominated iconography of their historical sources. By regendering existing figures and creating new composites, Azoulay invites the viewer to imagine a future matriarchy with deep roots in the past.

In the present moment, conversations around repatriation—particularly of objects taken under colonial regimes—are shifting our understanding of cultural heritage. Azoulay’s use of these images suggests that these objects can be seen as both universally meaningful and uniquely significant to the times, places, and cultures in which they were made.

This work is accompanied by texts drawn from poems by the Chilean Jewish filmmaker and writer Alejandro Jodorowsky and inspired by images and inscriptions found on the vessels. Additionally, “transmissions” recorded by Maisoun Karaman, a Palestinian healer, use singular, untranslatable language that the artist describes as “codes from the future.” Through looking and listening, Azoulay and Karaman hope to activate “seeds of transformation and healing” nestled within both these artworks and their sources.

No Thing Dies

Ilit Azoulay produced the works for *No Thing Dies* as part of a project for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem from 2014 to 2017. Founded in 1965, the Israel Museum presents distinctively Israeli stories within a kaleidoscopic view of world culture throughout time. These stories have shifted in tandem with the Jewish state's evolving relationships to its founding narratives and to the diverse constituents—Jewish and non-Jewish—who make up its population. As part of her engagement with the institution, the artist gathered images of hundreds of objects from its collections. These were supplemented by her own photographs of the museum's back of house: dusty storage rooms, bulging file folders, and HVAC units. She also interviewed the staff of various departments, including curators, archivists, and guards. Often featuring collection objects that had not been shown in years, Azoulay unravels tightly woven institutional histories to recast objects in new roles.

No Thing Dies adopts a technique similar to a style of manuscript illustration that developed at the Persian court starting in the thirteenth century. (*Vitrine No. 17*, seen here, depicts one such illustration.) The painters of this style, known as “Persian miniature” in the West, made ingenious use of visual storytelling as they played against the limits imposed by format. For example, walls and trees were used to subdivide the space of the page, allowing for multiple perspectives and scenes within a single composition. In most of the works from *No Thing Dies*, multiple adjoining spaces—each with its own perspectival coherence—are simultaneously visible to the viewer. The effect resembles looking inside an open dollhouse. Such a view is both privileged and impoverished: we can understand how a building is put together, but we are relegated to seeing it from the outside. Azoulay also references the space of the stage, which functions as both an imitation and a distillation of reality, extending the reach of our gaze.