

The ^{NEW YORK} Jewish Week

Merwin, Ted. "A Transgender Yarn."
The New York Jewish Week,
February 21, 2017.
<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/a-transgender-yarn/>

A Transgender Yarn

Gil Yefman's arresting art knits together issues of gender, Judaism, sexuality.

BY [TED MERWIN](#) February 21, 2017, 11:51 am



One of Gil Yefman's works using yarn. Yefman's upcoming show in NY will feature some of these works. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman fine art NYC

Tel Aviv's labyrinthine, dilapidated Central Bus Station, which sprawls over 2.5 million square feet, houses a bizarre assortment of stands selling cheap clothing and cell phones, a Yiddish library, two synagogues and tattoo parlors catering to Eritrean and Sudanese refugees. But when I visited the M.C. Escher-like building last summer, along with a group of American rabbis who were studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, nothing could have prepared us for the space occupied by transgender artist Gil Yefman, whose tiny studio is tucked away on an upper floor of the station.

Walk into Yefman's studio and you will encounter colorful doll-like figures composed of yarn that hang from the ceiling, dripping bulbs of various bodily fluids (also made of yarn) from every orifice. One wall features a still of an actor playing a prostitute (of ambiguous gender), I later learned, whose breasts and legs are covered with tefillin boxes and straps; the figure's very short skirt is made from a tallit. On one table lies elegant French fabric that, upon closer inspection, is patterned with kaleidoscopic images of Holocaust victims in mass graves. On another table, a collection of knitted yarmulkes includes a pink one that looks like a breast with an erect nipple. As the self-effacing, soft-spoken artist fielded questions from the group, it was clear that we were all disturbed, fascinated and intrigued by his work.

After coming home from Israel, I studied up on Yefman. I learned that he spent several adolescent years living as a woman before returning to life as a man; these transformations are documented in "Let it Bleed" (Little Big Man, 2016), a book by his sister, New York-based photographer Rona Yefman, that is jam-packed with eye-opening pictures, including some nude ones, of the two siblings experimenting with their gender identities. I found out about Yefman's struggle to be accepted into the Israeli army, which was not sympathetic to his refusal to conform to gender norms. In sum, I discovered how much Yefman values what he calls "basic chaos," which is the result of "breaking apart everything you've been raised on" to achieve the state of "not knowing anything, even who you are."

I caught up with Yefman last week while he was in New York, preparing for an upcoming show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in Soho. He told me that he is drawn to yarn because of its association with craftswomen and "tactility that you cannot refuse — we either play with it or wear it." Yet not all of his yarn is made of wool. For a recent work, "Valley of Wet Bones" (a take-off on Ezekiel's surrealistic prophecy about the resurrection of the dry bones), Yefman sliced plastic bags into strips and turned them into yarn, from which he crocheted massive bones that he filled with real soil and plants and hung from the ceiling, thus highlighting the environmental degradation caused by plastic. For his Holocaust-themed textile art, Yefman takes Jacquard fabric, typically used for curtains and upholstery, weaving onto it what he calls "repressed and saturated Holocaust imagery," as if intended for home décor. (He also embeds swastikas into colorful organic glycerin soap bars.) These grotesque images, which resist domestication, relate, Yefman said, to the "patterns of behavior" that have become ingrained in the ways in which we commemorate the Holocaust.

"transgenderism cannot be defied and negated. It's deep and humane. It gives freedom to the human spirit."

Finally, the stabbings at the 2005 Gay Parade in Jerusalem moved Yefman to create the video project "[One Summer Evening](#)," for which he dressed the aforementioned performer as a sacred prostitute clad in ritual objects. The work is inspired by an early 20th-century poem of the same title by Israeli poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, who satirized observant Jewish men who waited until the end of the Sabbath to seek extramarital liaisons. His intention, Yefman explained, was to "lower the sanctity of these objects and raise the status of the people whose lives were degraded, so that they would be on the same level."



Scene from "One Summer Evening," by Gil Yefman. Screenshot/Youtube

Heady stuff, but Yefman, whose work is regularly on display at major museums — the nipple yarmulke is also on sale at museum stores in New York, Tel Aviv and Herzliya — is becoming a force in the global art world. And transgender people are becoming increasingly visible in Israel. Just a few weeks ago, iconic transgender artist Gila Goldstein passed away; her death was covered extensively in the Israeli press.

"People underestimate confusion," Yefman reflected. "When you allow yourself to be confused, you raise yourself to a higher consciousness." While his art may be discombombulating for those who are still grappling to understand what being transgender means, Yefman insisted that "transgenderism cannot be defied and negated. It's deep and humane. It gives freedom to the human spirit."

Ted Merwin teaches religion and Judaic studies at Dickinson College. He writes about theater for the paper.

Art that Slows Down How We Assess Gender

by **Zachary Small** on April 4, 2016



Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, scene from 'She Gone Rogue' (image courtesy Smack Mellon)

At the center of **Smack Mellon**'s Dumbo gallery, **Gil Yefman**'s knitted wrecking ball of genitalia and bodily fluids hangs from the ceiling. The eerily supple and so pliant-to-the-touch installation is titled "Tutum," which, when translated into Jewish law and modern Hebrew, means "unclean" or "stupid." More literally, the word refers to a person whose sex is unknown or hidden. Adorned with woolen eyes looking outwards, the work reflects the onus of androgyny — the humiliation of "searching" for someone's gender — back onto society. The cultural code has been effectively switched.

Like the other 10 artists featured in curator Alexis Heller's exhibition, **(SIGNAL)**, Yefman attempts to free queerness from social codes. And, as with the majority of contemporary art, subversion and appropriation are the de facto tools for dismantling hierarchy. In this media-diverse exhibition, artists unite in their desire to slow down judgment and avert the quick visual assessments of gender discrimination. Counterintuitively, technology is often used as an intermediary of this slowdown — a hack for queer resistance.

zsmall93 • 1 month ago

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Everybody wants a tug @smackmellon #queer and #knitted

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Chelsea Thompto's "Trans Effigy" is a clever play on code switching, whereby we must decipher the meaning of her work from one of our earliest computational languages: binary code. (Thompto used this code for the exhibition's title, **SIGNAL**, which translates to "SIGNAL.") In her piece, she provides us with a decoder key to translate the binary system back to English; in exchange, we are asked to meditate on technology as a risk-and-reward system. Although the internet is based on a binary language, it has ironically carved a path for gender queerness. Blogs, forums, and social media outlets have become arenas of queer power and agency — for better or worse. "Trans Effigy" asks us to contemplate how our digital infrastructure has created a space for all, even if at the risk of exposure and violence.

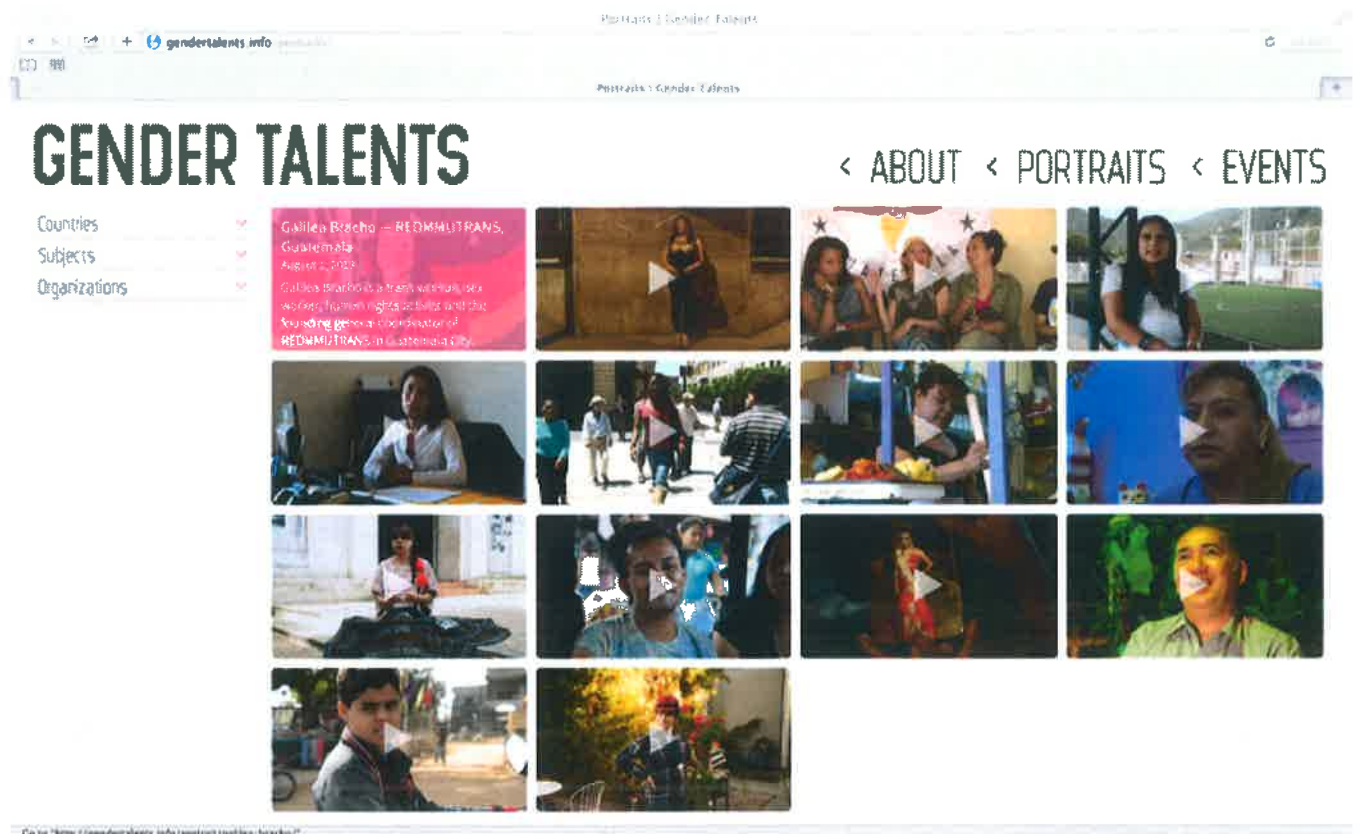


Chelsea Thompso installation view (image courtesy of Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard) ([click to enlarge](#))

Less subtle but equally powerful are [Carlos Motta](#)'s video portraits of transgender and intersex activists, called *Gender Talents*. Motta's profiles from around the world emphasize that gender self-determination isn't a Western phenomenon at all. By exhibiting these short documentaries together, Heller prompts a discussion of international intervention and the quest for genderqueer security and acceptance that can reach across borders and lift an impoverished population.

If Motta looks across borders, then [Rhys Ernst](#) and [Zackary Drucker](#) reach across time. Their fictional film, *She Gone Rogue*, explores transfeminine archetypes to tell ancestral (or trans-cesnal, rather) lessons about creating one's own chosen family. Although *She Gone Rogue* can be a disorienting watch, it reflects the winding path of self-identification, creating a multiverse instead of a single universe for the complex narratives of queerness.

[Cobi Moules](#)'s figurative paintings are another alluring fixture of Heller's exhibition. His series, *Boys Just Wanna Have Fun*, beautifully renders the artist's trans identity through a multitude of bodies. Dressed as Boy Scouts, Moules's many selves wander through idyllic landscapes ripped from the Hudson River School. Until recently, the Boy Scouts excluded gay children and adults from their ranks; [the group still discriminates](#) against transgender members. Reacting against his conservative Christian upbringing, Moules portrays himself as infinite and accepted. The verdant tranquility of his paintings subverts the notion that transgenderism is unnatural, integrating Moules into the sublime landscapes of nature.




Carlos Motta, "Gender Talents" (2015) (image courtesy Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard)

The artists of *SIGNAL* make the case that gender can be the site of resistance rather than the site of discrimination. What becomes foggier is the way technology — a force for activism as much as oppression — might improve the lives of genderqueer people. **Young Joon Kwak's** "Excreted Venus" represents the bifurcated havoc and opportunity that digital architectures create. Her Venus looks as if it were ripped through digital time and space, emerging as a metallic Pompeian fossil. The figure's formlessness suggests the ability to remold our classic conceptions of femininity and beauty. The question remains: Who gets to do the original molding?



Cobi Moules, "Untitled (Lake McDonald)" (2012), oil on canvas, 21" x41" (image courtesy Smack Mellon, photo by Etienne Frossard)

 (SIGNAL) continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth St, Dumbo, Brooklyn) through April 17.

Alexis Heller**Carlos Motta****Chelsea Thompto****Cobi Moules****Gil Yefman****Joon Kwak****Rhys Ernst****Smack Mellon****Zackary Drucker**



KNITTING AS A STATEMENT

Author: Yanir Dekel

Published: April 8, 2016



Tumtum is a premedical biblical term, referring to a human being with ambiguous genitalia. On Monday, the term will be translated into art as part of an [Art/Gender/Judaism](#) discussion. Israeli artist [Gil Yefman](#), who will perform and take part in the discussion, opens up about his exploration of gender through the years.

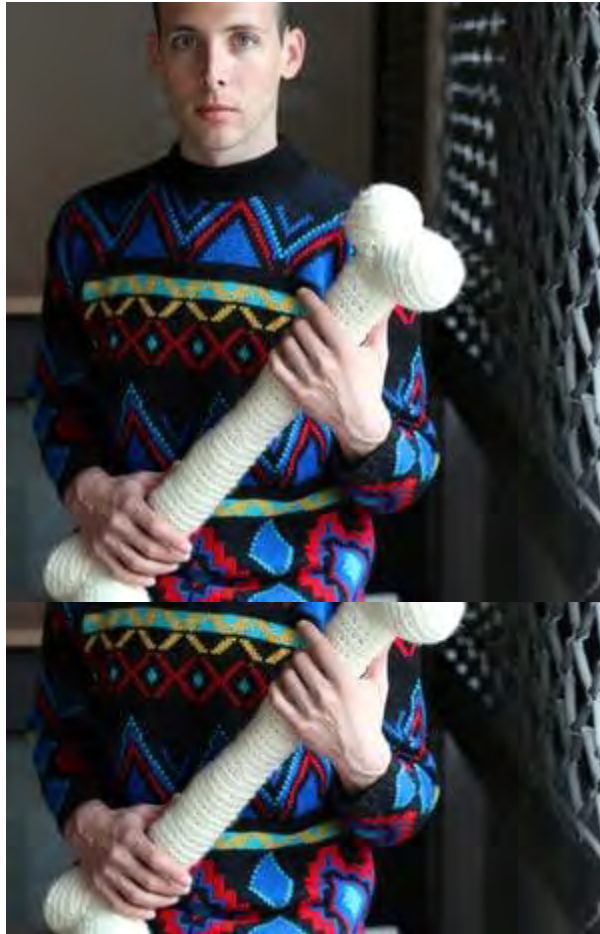
Gil Yefman's art deconstructs and transforms canonized and familiar myths from varied beliefs and traditions, and his personal life story, being born and raised in Israel, makes it no surprise: "When I was a teen I suffered from gender dysphoria, which had first manifested as anorexia nervosa," Gil says. "I tried to gain control over my body and stop its 'natural' development which seemed so awkward to me. In my days of adolescence the use of hormone blocking was impossible under the age of 18, so the anorexia helped me to avoid social interaction in that sense as well."

As a kid, Gil couldn't express his wish to become a woman. "My parents didn't know anything about it," he says, "and then witnessed my anorexia and tried to understand better what I was going through. They

supported me the best they could."

Finally, when he turned 18, Gil started taking hormones in order to begin gender transition. "My older sister Rona, who is an amazing artist and photographer documented this sex change process as well as documenting our close relationship. But after two years of living as a woman 24\7 I came to realize how limiting this man\woman binary division is," he says, "so I started to rebel against it. This is also true for any kind of Either\Or division. In any case, I didn't want my happiness to be dependent on medications and hormones produced out of horse urine, so I stopped taking them."

Another struggle for Gil was joining the Israeli army, which back then had less experience with transgender, genderqueer and non-binary people. "I remember my psychotherapist wrote me a recommendation letter when I tried to enlist in the army, but the army couldn't accept it and I was released from service on a mental status," Gil says. According to him, having the 'mental' status on your army-release form was not acceptable in Israeli society. "I suffered from discrimination because people wouldn't hire me," he recalls. "Nowadays it seems better, but still, Israel has a long way to go in regards to equality, and not only in gender and sexual orientation, but equality for all minorities."



In his art, Yefman embraced the art of knitting, which is not only unique, but also he's so good at it that he will astonish you doing it on stage. "My grandma used to knit for us as kids, but I put it in my art only later on," Gil says. "The knitting has many added values to it. Some of the objects/subjects are tough but the softness of the wool allows it. As viewers, the connection to the object is deep and inevitable, because most of us wear it and play with knitted dolls in our childhood. So there's a transgenerational energy to it.

"There are also therapeutic qualities and it is used in occupational therapy. It's a great tool for reflection and it resembles writing: small monotonous movements which create the text and textures, the object."

His latest performance is called 'TUMTUM,' borrowing that genderqueer biblical term. "In modern Hebrew Tumtum means only 'Stupid' and is used as a common curse," Gil says. "This etymological evolution caught my attention and led me to create this gender monstrosity, which is super tactile and also makes pre-language sounds. An integral part of Tumtum is my knitting performance that goes along with it."

Art-wise, for Gil, gender identity encompasses a whole spectrum of social and political aspects. "It reveals patterns of behavior and false authenticity," he says. "We are all performers the minute we open our eyes and then our closets, literally. My art is all about finding new ways of freedom and self expression, and I'm glad I went through some gender troubles in Israel which is a very patriarchal macho-type environment. In recent years I also connect gender with collective trauma and other topics where it plays important roles."

Gil Yefman perform with Tumtum on Thursday evening as part of "Signal" exhibition at Smack Mellon in Dumbo, Brooklyn, and will show it on the panel discussion at JTS on April 11th.

היה ערב הקיץ

ובנות ליליות זכות שמורות מחזרות בלבנה
חוטי קסם מהירים.
והן ארזות כסות אחת לכהנים גדולים
ולמדלי חזירים.

היה ערב הקיץ. כל הכתים נחרקו
ונתמלאו הגנים:
צא אדם, כדרכו. במאניו הגדולים
לחטאיו הקטנים.

קצרה רוח האדם, כלו עיני מנחל –
ותמלתי האחת:
"הכוכבים הצנועים, מהרו צאתכם מלמעלה,
והקדשות מתחת!"

ובגן זה החלה נגינה קלה, הוללה –
והגן כלו ננער.
ומכין האילות הנה השחיר זנב צעף
והלבנה כנף סגר.

וכסודורי עברה קורצים, רומזים כוכבים.
ועיניהם פי תכעו:
צור רוח הזונים גם את-עשבות השדה
ואת-אבני החרבות.

ומאמצע הנקר וממרומי הגזזות
ומאחרי הגדות
בא הצחוק – ובסלונות מורדים וילונות
וכבים הגרות.

הס, השאר נתן ריחו, זולל סוכא העולם,
יו צנבים עברו,
והוא יוצא מדעתו ומתגולל בקיאו
ומתבוסס בכשרו.

ובנות ליליות זכות שמורות מחזרות בלבנה
חוטי קסם מהירים.
והן ארזות כסות אחת לכהנים גדולים
ולמדלי חזירים.

תשס"ח.



June 3, 2014, 12:30pm

Strauss, Elissa. "Gil Yefman Crochets About Rape."

The Sisterhood, June 3, 2014.

<http://blogs.forward.com/sisterhood-blog/199393/gil-yefman-crochets-about-rape/>

Gil Yefman Crochets About Rape

By **Elissa Strauss**



Gil Yefman's TumTum

For nearly six months last year, Dr. Rochelle Saidel, founder and executive director of Remember the Women Institute, and artist Gil Yefman met weekly to talk about a topic deemed untouchable by many in their respective communities of academia and art: rape during the Holocaust. Saidel, who along with Dr. Sonja Hedgepeth, edited a [book](#) on the topic, initially met Yefman at a panel discussion on forced prostitution at Auschwitz. "I wondered why there was a young man in the front row who was crocheting as he sat and listened," Saidel said.

The weekly meetings eventually fed into the work Yefman created for his new show "TO ME YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL {BAY MIR BISTU SHEYN}," now at [Ronald Feldman Gallery](#) in New York City. His first solo exhibition in New York, the show takes a sharp look at gender identity, sexuality and violence through the soft touch of traditionally feminine formats methods like crochet, soap-making and glamour shots. While walking through the exhibit I found myself seduced into believing I was safe amidst these mediums often associated with domestic crafts, and then would soon feel ripped open by the subject matter of rape, trans-identity, and prostitution. To Yefman's credit, the power of pieces lies in their intimate, rather than political, approach to the subject matter.

The Sisterhood spoke with Yefman about the new exhibit, which is up through June 14.



A Gil Yefman piece entitled 'Organic Soap Bars'

Elissa Strauss: Tell me a little bit about how you came to creating this show.

Gil Yefman: "Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn," which its title is a well known Yiddish *schlager* from the '30s, is part of an ongoing project which examines the interconnections between infancy, Holocaust, economy and sexual violence. There are various ways in which our daily life is ingrained and saturated with these repressed traumatic remnants, and I find it necessary to emphasize on these aspects.

The exhibition comprised of organic swastikas soaps, hand painted shower ceramic tiles decorated with elements of human decompositions, large knitted objects, videos, neon lamps, a silkscreen printed pinup calendar of SS female guards, performances with SexSlaves crocheted dolls, and more...

These artifacts are drawn from our day lives, and here appear as consumeristic Holocaust pop-culture merchandise.

What drew you to the topic of sexual violence in the Holocaust?

I often use gender and sexuality to examine various aspects and reflect upon recurrent obsessive patterns in society. I find great interest in what I consider to be suppressed, unheard or neglected. The issue of sexual violence against women during the Holocaust, and in general, is very much obscured and even worst, is often taken for granted. Oddly enough the novel "[House of Dolls](#)" by K. Tzetnik [which is about women who were kept for sexual pleasure by the Nazis] was taught in high school [in Israel], and left its mark on me.

Of course, there is a taboo against Holocaust art among hip young artists these days for the reason that it is seen as a tired topic. Did you have any resistance to this topic for this reason?

I did had some resistance first — but then realized I actually have new and concrete approach to deal with the dogmatic ways of representing and misusing the Holocaust. It's common to see politicians use it for propaganda while too many of the Holocaust survivors in Israel are struggling for food.

You also did an exhibit in Japan exploring the comfort women. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

My solo exhibition "H" (which is pronounced "etchi" and means "degraded sexuality") at the [Container](#) in Tokyo, had indirectly dealt with the suppressed phenomena of the comfort women which was parallel to the brothels in the

camps, but on a much greater scale. Basically, I turned an old American shipping container inside a hair salon in Tokyo to a copulation cell inspired by Block 24 in Auschwitz, so that the borders between beauty and horror, vanity, life and historical traumas got completely mixed up.

What kind of response have you gotten to your new show?

The responses are always varied — from anger to praising, laughing and crying. It really depends on each person's personal experience and instinctive reaction to it. Often the knitted objects draw people to engage with what later turns out to be more challenging and thought provoking.

Sadly, sexual violence is still a widespread issue, in the context of war and in regular life. Do you think you will continue to explore this topic in your work?

Violence is part of the human experience. Every society and culture throughout history has its skeletons, and the only way to understand this part of ourselves is to acknowledge it. Only then can healing really begin. The act of knitting resembles writing, with its rapid, calculated, and monotonous movements. I try to rewrite the history of both personal and collective traumas, and deal with suppressed topics that greatly need and deserve to become center of affection.

Sexual Violence, Art And The Shoah

05/30/2014 - 01:29

Gloria Kestenbaum

Israeli artist [Gil Yefman](#) takes on the subject of sexual violence and the forced prostitution of women during the Shoah, a focus not often presented in Holocaust history, and he does so through a literal hook, the crochet hook.

"Tumtum" (2012), a huge, crocheted sculptural orb, overwhelms you as you enter the exhibit, "To Me You are Beautiful "Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn) " at [Ronald Feldman Fine Arts](#). A biblical term referring to a hermaphrodite, "Tumtum" at first view, presents as a happy, childlike cacophony of circular chunks of crocheted wool, conjuring up the large crocheted kipot worn by would-be holy men in Jerusalem. On closer inspection, however, the orb proved to be a mass of oozing orifices, bulging eyeballs, swollen genitalia, maimed body parts and drippings of blood, all crocheted in bright, primary colors.



Gil Yefman. Tumtum, 2012. Knitting and other materials, including sound and performance art. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

The artist spent two years as a woman and is quite open about his gender dysphoria and many of the pieces seem more autobiographical than Shoah-related. Certainly outsidership is part of the Holocaust's horror, and one of its multitudinous causes, but comparing the search for one's self with the dreadfulness of the Shoah seems, at least to me, a bit trivializing.

During the opening night panel discussion, "House of Dolls" was cited as a reference source. The 1955 novel, which is part of the Israeli high school curriculum, describes in diary format the "Joy Division," the Nazi concentration camp brothels in which Jewish women were forced to act as sex slaves.

Which leads us to "Sex Slave" (2008). Feeling disturbed is an appropriate response to such painful subject matter but it wasn't the subject but its exploitation that I found troubling. A crocheted

female doll, with Yefman's signature decorative genitalia and bulging eyeballs, is anchored by woolen chains, a victim of impending, horrific rape. On opening night, the artist, puppeteer and actor, placed himself inside the work, only his eyes visible, and brought the doll to life. The crocheted doll watches idyllic scenes of Ravensbruck, which is where many of the sex slaves came from; Hitler's mother's kindly portrait hangs nearby.

Many of Yefman's works were certainly disturbing but also thought-provoking and challenging, such as the crocheted "Baby Blanket" (2011) made of colorful Swastika squares. In his "Decomposition" series, Yefman creates hand-painted ceramic shower tiles in different formations, some shelves, some actual shower stalls, but all evocative, painful and oddly beautiful. "Time Table," a group of screen prints featuring key Nazi female figures dressed as pornographic pin-ups felt oddly and vengefully satisfying in this setting.

Yefman's series "Organic Soap Bars" (2012-2014) -- bars of soap emblazoned with black swastikas and made of glycerin, fragrance, pigments and hair, ash and fingernails -- were certainly difficult to view, as so many of his works are, but does conjure up the horror and insanity of those years better than words can do.

"To Me You are Beautiful (Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn)" is on view through June 14, 2014 at [Ronald Feldman Fine Arts](#), 31 Mercer Street, New York.



Zarrow, Sarah. "Crocheting Holocaust Rape Into Disturbing Art." *Jewniverse*, June 24, 2014.

<http://thejewniverse.com/2014/crocheting-holocaust-rape-into-disturbing-art/>

Crocheting Holocaust Rape Into Disturbing Art

June 24, 2014 | By *Sarah Zarrow*

Israeli artist **Gil Yefman** doesn't hesitate to shock.

His **most recent show**, "Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn (To Me You Are Beautiful)," focused on the Holocaust, and on the juxtaposition of everyday objects and beautiful scenery with the horrors of violence—particularly sexual violence. A crocheted "Sex Slave Doll," whose gaze rests on a monitor playing scenes of the serene lake at the **Ravensbrück concentration camp**, invites visitors to interact, and therefore participate, in her oppression and exploitation. Another work, "Time Table," presents prominent Nazi women in a lurid pin-up-style calendar, including **Eva Braun** with tattoos of logos of companies that profited during the **Holocaust**.

Rather than depicting death directly, Yefman uses domestic materials like wool yarn to look at "the hardship of everyday life." He has worked with the **Remember the Women Institute**, dedicated to investigating **sexual violence against women during the Holocaust**.

Yefman's largest sculpture, "**Tumtum**," literally knits together various representations of human genitalia, divorced from the rest of the body. ("**Tumtum**" is a rabbinic term for people of indeterminate sex.) As visitors confront it, and the other works in the show, they recognize the familiar alongside with the grotesque—a disturbing, thought-provoking combination.

Check out this video from Yefman's Tokyo show:

<http://vimeo.com/74370972>



Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NY

Gender identity and the Holocaust

A young Israeli artist looks at the Shoah from a transgender perspective, bringing a startling 'eye' to a topic many have been blinded to.

By Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua | 00:40 23.05.14 | 0

Gil Yefman didn't need #BringBackOurGirls to become outraged about violence against women around the world – though it does make his first New York solo exhibit, "Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn" (To Me You Are Beautiful) seem all the more relevant. An Israeli native whose grandmother left Transylvania well before the outbreak of World War II, he became attuned to the particular plight of female Shoah victims through a series of unusual circumstances that make his exhibit at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in Soho such a bracing departure from most Holocaust-themed art.

"A dear friend handed me his deceased mother's yellow wool and I started crocheting," says the 35 year old, who was born and raised on kibbutz Ramat Yohanan and whose work is collected by the Rubbell Family Foundation and the Jewish Museum of New York. "I just naturally started knitting gold stars and it freaked me out because the whole topic is so taboo for a young artist in Israel. It's become a cliché and often examined in a non-interesting way."

But after getting an encouraging nod, he persisted, finding the mechanics of the craft a metaphor for what he was doing – spinning yarns.

"When you crochet you see every loop, which is called an eye," says Yefman. "To me each eye has its own narrative, there are shifting points of view. I never rely on status quo but am curious about the other side, the otherness."

To Yefman, who has examined issues of gender identity through his work and in life, by taking hormones, that otherness became the female viewpoint.

"Most Holocaust education is based on the deaths, the aftermath, but not everyday life, which is much harder to look at," he says. "The hardship of everyday life has been repressed, particularly as it relates to women."

As Yefman began to research stories of Jewish sexual slavery, which ironically he first encountered in school through the required book "House of Dolls" by Ka-tzetnik 135633, he found himself relating more than most. "Before I realized I was a woman inside a man's body, I became anorexic and felt betrayed by nature, ashamed of my body," he says. "Then as I grew to become a woman, I began to accept myself more, but I also felt very vulnerable, suddenly with breasts, my femaleness, all of which had been inside of me and was now on the exterior, as if I were turned inside out."

That quality informs the first piece you notice upon entering Feldman Gallery, which is "Tumtum," a giant, colorful crocheted ball of orifices, breasts, genitals, eyeballs and tongues that sways and sounds off in a manner both playful and obscene. The piece was created for the "About Stupidity" exhibition at the Petah Tikva Museum but also was displayed as part of "Otherness – I is Somebody Else" at L'Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in Paris last year.

"Tumtum is slang for 'stupid,'" says Yefman, "but it also is a Biblical pre-medical term that refers to ambiguous genitalia, people who are considered freaks, pushed to the margins of society the way Holocaust survivors have been."

Viewers are encouraged to touch, pull and push this mass of protruding organs and appendages that at times belches, at others lets out loud heart beats or deep breaths, giving off the sense of a body raw, exposed, violated, defiled and bleeding, hanging by a thread, or in this case yarn. It's also as striking metaphor for rape in an exhibit with an ironic name and dedicated to the topic of sexual violence against women during the Holocaust.

But irony, shocking contrast and the juxtaposition of beauty and horror is at the core of Yefman's striking show, whose esthetically pleasing quality is also one of its most confounding ones. Jewish tour groups like March of the Living, for example, are often seen walking through Auschwitz with Israeli flags held aloft as shields, symbols of nationalist pride and reclamation. But to cloak oneself in Yefman's "Baby Blanket," which looks like an afghan any grandmother might have knit, except for its swastika pattern, would be to allow the horrors of the Holocaust to penetrate, to get a little too close for comfort. And isn't that the ultimate taboo?

"As an artist I feel the urge to seduce," says Yefman. "To make you want to approach the work and feel that it's OK to explore this topic, and once you're already in, then you have to confront all these unresolved questions and issues, and hopefully you'll walk away haunted enough to engage in further dialogue. The point is to not be afraid to open up, to allow for freedom of expression."

One of the ways Yefman entices you to interact is by relying on craft, employing domestic materials that are handled intimately, like soap, a loaded metaphor regarding the Holocaust. "The survivors were called 'sabonim,' or soap by the Zionist settlers who made them feel ashamed for so willingly going to the camps and to their deaths," says Yefman. "And that lack of compassion is something that can't be forgiven and should be part of the Holocaust narrative and how we treated survivors. But there's another interesting aspect about soap: You use it to cleanse, to wash away dirt, you put it close to your skin."

In this case, his brightly colored bars, embellished with swastikas, gruesomely accented with human hair and fragments of nails, made in an alluring array of scents with "only the finest organic ingredients," get under your skin.

There is also the matter of appropriating Nazi symbols for contemporary consumption (last week's arrest of a Holocaust-denying, swastika-clad New York cabbie notwithstanding). "When you take a symbol like that and use it in a modern merchandising way and incorporate it into daily life, you bring something from the past to the present. It's no longer somewhere back there. You're forced to touch it, and figure out how it makes you feel" Yefman says.

His ceramics, too, don't offer the usual distance of black-and-white archival images of atrocity. They draw you in because the materials are familiar and the abstracted patterns on them are esthetically alluring. Then upon closer inspection you realize that the images are made of piles of bones, the very ones associated with death camps. But these are tiles – meant for a shower or kitchen – and that's what makes them all the more impactful. He takes them out of the vaults and into the home.

"Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn" also includes video, silkscreen prints and a performance piece in which Yefman lies inside one of his crocheted Sex Slave crocheted dolls, his eyes popping out lifelessly from a disattached body shown on her back, legs bound up like one of the victims of Block 24, the brothel of Auschwitz, a place that gets ignored on tours of the death camp.

"The Holocaust is a topic that gets trotted out every year for Yom Hashoah then returned neatly to its safe box," says Rochelle Saidel, founder along with Sonja Hedgepeth of Remember the Women Foundation, which partly sponsored Yefman's show. "But you never hear of women's experiences other than Anne Frank or Hannah Senesh."

She and Hedgepeth, who are also editors of the ground-breaking book "Sexual Violence Against Women in the Holocaust," met Yefman during a conference in Israel last spring and struck up an immediate friendship.

"I saw this guy knitting in the front row of one of my panels and had to know who he was," she says. "He told us of his unique and innovative work on the same subject, and we fell in love."

Saidel and Hedgepeth wrote the introduction to the catalogue for his Tokyo show last year, an exhibit that garnered a warmer reception than he anticipates this work might have back at home.

"I've had people in Israel cry or shout at me that my work is perverse," says Yefman. "But then a woman survivor came to one of my shows and she told me how moved she was. And that validated me more than anything. She told me it should tour around the world."

The next stop is an exhibition at the Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv. Yefman is not sure how his fellow Israelis will view his work, the antithesis of all those atrocity photos, which he says constitute a sort of Holocaust porn.

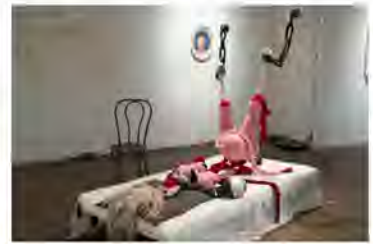
Ironically, it's actual pornography that he uses in "Time Table," a series of silkscreen portraits of real Nazi women posed like X-rated calendar girls, researched over the course of years, sourced from archives at Ravensbruck, the predominantly female concentration camp, as well as books like "Hitler's Furies," about women in the S.S.

"I wanted to understand how women who had been nurses, wives, teachers, ordinary women, could become these sadists. And in some cases, there were reasons. But really, the land was fertile for breeding that level of sadism," says Yefman, who offers text accompanying each portrait, each telling its own narrative.

"Of course, one of the points in turning these perpetrators into victims was to degrade them sexually," says Yefman of the images which picture Eva Braun, her back tattooed with the symbols of the companies that fueled the Nazi war machinery, from Bayer to Knorr to Kodak and Volkswagen in one, and a notorious S.S. guard with her legs spread-eagle with the gates of Birkenau behind her in another. You'll never look at "Schindler's List" the same way again. But you also just might take a closer look at the images of women on billboards and on packages.

"The pornography I used is stuff I found on the Internet today," says Yefman. "So in one case I superimpose an anorexic body dressed in lingerie with a Nazi woman and suddenly she fits right in with the images next to her. She's that thin."

And that's the other shocking question the show raises. By ignoring the sexploitation of women during the Shoah have we, as a society, failed to condemn sex crimes the way we condemned war crimes through the Nuremberg trials? Why didn't we ever bring back our girls?



Gopnick, Blake. "Daily Pic: Gil Yefman's Crafted Horror." *Blouin Artinfo*, June 12, 2014. http://blogs.artinfo.com/the-daily-pic/2014/06/12/daily-pic-gil-yefmans-crafted-horror/?utm_source=BLOUIN+ARTINFO+Newsletters&utm_campaign=37c68bcebd-Daily+Digest+6+12+146+12+2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_df23dbd3c6-37c68bcebd-83487073

Daily Pic: Gil Yefman's Crafted Horror



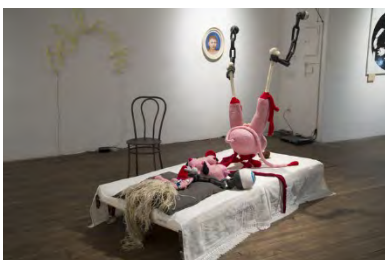
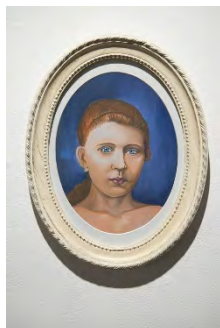
A few days ago, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York, the Israeli artist Gil Yefman donned this costume, which he himself had crocheted, as part of his installation called **"To Me You Are Beautiful (Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn)."** The installation was all about the Holocaust, in general, and also the use of female prisoners as Nazi sex slaves. This object/outfit is a distillation of the incomprehensible horrors involved in **Yefman's subject** — a mix of lust and violence and blood and nightmares. **But there's also a subtext of play and craft and classic women's work, as though even Hitler couldn't cancel those out.** As a devout atheist, I also see it as a larger declaration of the fundamental incoherence of the universe we live in, which is as full of joys as of horrors, with no way to untangle the two. *(Photo by Lucy Hogg)*

Artist Gil Yefman's practice is multifarious and surprising. A walk through his newest show reveals glycerin soap bars embedded with swastikas, a neon sign spelling out a pejorative term for women, a portrait painting of Hitler's mother, and knitted sculptures—confounding works that exude themes of gender and violence. Now celebrating his first New York solo exhibition, "To Me You Are Beautiful (Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn)," at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, the Israeli artist holds nothing back, in a presentation that weaves together issues of gender, sexuality, trauma, and otherness. He explains: "My work is aimed at inspiring all peoples; it is meant to transcend differences among human beings and encourage all of us to cherish and explore the intrinsic potential of the world we live in."

An exhibition highlight is the monumental sculpture *Tumtum* (2012), a giant knitted globe that hangs from the ceiling, comprised of numerous smaller knitted parts, mainly male and female genitalia, eyeballs, other body parts, and drops of blood. With its title referring to the Hebrew word to describe an individual with unknown or ambiguous sexuality, the work delves into a dialogue on societal norms of beauty and gender, and essentially, the idea that everyone possesses a certain degree of otherness. Visually and conceptually astounding, the work confronts and challenges its viewer, with imagery and allusions to ideology that together form a disquieting narrative that is both intriguing—the craftsmanship alone is stunning—and impossible to overlook.

This message is even more arresting in a key installation titled *H*—which stands for the Holocaust, Hitler, and other high-ranking Nazi officials Himmler and Heydrich—described in the show's press release as "a copulation chamber in a concentration camp brothel." At the center is a knitted "sex slave," which introduces a performative and participatory element to the exhibition, where visitors are encouraged to interact with the doll, assuming the role of "the aggressor." Confronting trauma head on, and wielding knitting needles as his unlikely weapons, Yefman delivers a message intended to incite conversation and ultimately encourage healing.

"To Me You Are Beautiful (Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn)" is on view at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, May 10th–June 14th, 2014.



THE THREAD THAT TIED TRANSGENDERISM TO JUDAISM

Interview by Alexandra Birchall-White

Gil Yefman is a young, prolific, proactive, prominent Jewish artist questioning diverse topics such as sex and the Holocaust through a skill that western society assigns to women – knitting. Gil is a vivifying slap in the face for his art and a conscious, changing few preconceived notions of how we should embrace gender evolution.

ALEXANDRA BIRCHALL-WHITE: I met you at l'Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in June 2013. How is 2014 looking? I didn't get a chance to ask you where you came from then... ♠ **GIL YEFMAN:** Growing up was never my strongest side or desire in life. And I also wonder how come we never seem to belong to where we long to be. But sticking to the facts, I was born in a Kibbutz (Israel) and grew up in a small conservative town, where you were never supposed to express who you really were, but had to conform to what was expected of you. 2013 was intense. I was in Japan for my solo exhibition in Tokyo named *H*, where I turned a shipping container inside a hair salon in Naka Meguro, to a copulation cell inspired by Block 24 in Auschwitz. I'm having my first solo exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York City, followed by an artist residency at the Fountainhead Foundation in Miami.

ABW: I find knitting stuck in a prejudice of innocence. Is knitting linked to family

heritage or a desire of escapism and social interrogation for you? ♠ **GY:** I believe the innocence so strongly connected to knitting derives from our familiarity with wool as infants. Our grandmother's cuddly knitted toys, clothing and blankets. However familial and cultural heritage often conceal historical traumas intertwined within.

ABW: Wool doesn't go hand-in-hand with club dancing and sexually orientated performances. Do you see a fetish in wool, like others see with latex? ♠ **GY:** To me wool is a crafty material and there are unlimited ways with which to use and explore it. The more I take the liberty to get experimental; any situation can turn into a party, enjoying an anthropological orgy of synergistic benefits and medias. Moreover, I discovered the strong subconscious influence wool has on people; it is often a passive aggressive one. I realized this after a guest punched one of my sculptures. My first reaction was panic and anger, but I quickly regained my senses and embraced her act. This special tactile characteristic helps me to attract people to reflect upon harsh matters such as sexual violence, holocaust, human coldness and pain.

ABW: Some people make love in fully kitted alpaca wool outfits they handcraft. They must sweat like hell. Do you dress up sometimes for your partner? Or for yourself?





GY: I'm fine with that fetish, as long as the Alpacas are left untouched. Although I sweat a lot in these knitted costumes, I use them in a more poetic than sexual way. It feels like I'm wearing a second skin, which enables me to expose and express my inner state of emotion. I'm interested in the constant tension and the gap between the inner and the outer state of existence.

ABW: *You embrace politics, religion and sex through sculptures and installations. Are you criticising the system or releasing a statement through performances?*

GY: I get satisfaction from challenging what is considered to be the canonised and respectable moral judgments of society, often inflicted by religion and state nationalism. My own experience as a transgender in a patriarchal masochist country such as Israel, clearly showed me that gender itself is performance, and that each of us is entangled within a structured system of symbolic gestures, busy translating ourselves as either men or women from the moment we are born. Most languages also differentiate between the sexes and leave no multi sexual and gender identity representations. This reality of separation should come to an end with an anti-violence revolution of cultural integrity and respect.

ABW: *Knitting seems to be a way of meditation for you. How did you interact with your public, with the H performance and the Sex Doll, Sex Slave in Tokyo?*

GY: I definitely use the therapeutic nature of knitting to reflect upon recurrent obsessive patterns in mankind's societies. I find that knitting resemble writing, where texts that I read along the way become a textural adventure. For example the *H* exhibition was conceived while reading the novel *House Of Dolls* by the Israeli Holocaust survivor author K. Zetnik. The novel tells the story of his sister who was

coerced into sex slavery at Block 24 in Auschwitz. The psychological value added through the public's interaction with the sex dolls at the *H* performances was fascinating.

ABW: *You're also an illustrator, is it a tool that leads you to fabricate the knitted sculptures?*

GY: I often use drawings to realize what would later become knitted objects and surroundings, but sometimes the knitting evolves organically. These days I'm painting on ceramic shower tiles decorative compositions taken from duplicated mass graves. I also make special organic soaps for soul and conscience cleansing. I'm also working on a calendar of twelve pin-up girls that are portraits of SS female guards.

ABW: *The State of Israel is an intense religious state. Has your work suffered censorship there?*

GY: Generally the reactions to my work are ambivalent and diverse which I find a good thing. I want to believe that undermining censorship pressure clears way to creating even more accurate and valuable work. Whenever I'm censored, I know there's a potential for personal and social growth and development. Last year a museum erected a wall to hide my sculpture, and wrote: "This work may hurt the public's feelings and is not meant for children". I felt sorry for the director, who had to do it, since this particular museum is economically dependent on the religious municipality. Funnily enough, my work took a biblical pre-medical term as inspiration. That's also its title: *Tumtum*. In Modern Hebrew, *Tumtum* means silly, stupid. I honestly feel there is a need for freedom of religion in Israel and I am happy to contribute to this cause, anytime. The Jewish Museum in New York City was embracing enough to buy my queer set of Kippas to their collection, so there's still hope.

ABW: Can you recount why sexuality is present in your work. Penis, masturbation, vaginas, breasts and body fluids are a recurrent theme in your installations.

GY: Sex is used and misused in every aspect of our existence, in consumerism and marketing, religion and culture. Totalitarian regimes used sexual behaviourism as a central key to control, repress and exploit the people. Of course Freud would be a good example for a scholar who claimed that sexuality is a powerful creative/destructive force.

ABW: Your sculptures embrace cross-gender and transsexuals, and effeminate portraits of you are oriented towards sexual questioning. Would you look into becoming a woman?

GY: I lived as what is defined as a woman for some years, and my personal experience as a transgender led me to use sexuality as a prism for observing and suggesting alternative ways to approach dogmatic myths and traditions. Questioning, doubting and defying definitions is much more important than giving answers on demand.

ABW: There is the bleaker side of your work. War, bones, chains, prisoners, tears... What nourishes this? ♠ GY: My dolls are often caught in extreme positions. They have no arms to wipe their excrements and shame, and they're deformed in various

ways. I think it helps to create a sense of pity, compassion and affection towards them. I turn these misshapen figures into gods and goddesses, putting them on pedestals, turning them into giants surrounded by adoring worshippers, or depending upon the viewer's perspective, entrapped by threatening masses. Beauty lies in whatever is considered to be grotesque. Beauty IS the beast and vice versa.

ABW: You explore political incorrectness in knitting a baby blanket with Swastikas. What is the parallel in the blanket, between infancy and the Holocaust? ♠ GY: The political incorrectness is used to reflect on the incorrect use of politics in society. A child is born to serve a country and the mother state and the army replace the biological mother. Generations are being fed with black milk. This installation is called In Return and is crocheted with texts by Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva and others to connect this ethos of Holocaust with Sexuality and infancy.

Images courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery.

A: Swastika soap bars by Gil Yefman.

B: *Untitled*, self portrait of Gil Yefman.

Still life by Ines Dieleman.

C: *Post-Op*, Knitted sculpture by Gil Yefman.





Seeing things differently: Part of Gil Yefman's 'H' exhibition at The Container. | © VANESSA FRANKLIN

Complex issues knitted into the fabric of art

BY [DAVID LABI](#)

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

OCT 9, 2013

It's difficult to say something new about the Holocaust in face of an immense body of work produced over seven decades. Consequently more outlandish forms of expression are often required to inspire a fresh reaction.

Israeli artist Gil Yefman works with text, textures and textiles, weaving works that present a colorful version of sexuality and human identity. In the apt prisonlike setting of The Container (a shipping container inside a Daikanyama hair salon), the topic of an Auschwitz sex slave is treated with originality and creeping power for the exhibition "H." The title is a play on the Japanese "*ecchi*" — a slang term to describe sexual fantasy, roughly translated as "dirty" or "naughty."

The centerpiece is a knitted sculpture of a dismembered person manacled on a bed. Viewers are invited to touch — and the fact it is knitted from brightly colored fabric gives it a tactile, friendly appearance, arousing conflicted reactions. It seems to be mostly a woman, but an erect phallus protrudes from its head questioning its gender and ejaculating squishy knitted drops of blood. A vaginal-like orifice meanwhile gapes like a flower inviting a willing hand. The body is studded with watchful

eyes, organs roll about, intestines dangle. Even the chains binding its legs, which appear worn down to cartoonlike bones, seem cuddly and cute.

One of Yefman's inspirations is the novel "House of Dolls" by Ka-Tzetnik 135633, an Auschwitz survivor who wrote under his prisoner name. The book deals with "Joy Divisions," — groups of female prisoners forced into sex slavery. The book has been criticized for blurring fact and fiction, but such ambiguity translates well into an art installation where an immersive experience brings history experientially to life. On a personal, emotive level, history is subjective; facts blend with memory and impression.

Yefman spent years researching his topic, and his dedication shows in the work's richness. An Auschwitz prisoner card sits under glass. Hanging on the wall is a haunting portrait of Hitler's mother, contrasting with the subhuman monstrosity that the prisoner is now. A TV shows a placid pastoral scene, and a soundtrack of tweeting birds communicates nature's beauty that lives on stubbornly in peace. The footage is in fact the view of the SS residence outside Ravensbrück concentration camp. A CCTV camera points at viewers, echoing peep holes in the doors through which SS officers would monitor the goings on inside. The camera also brings new technology into juxtaposition with traditional craftwork — while exacerbating the viewer's role as both voyeur and exhibitionist.

Visitors to opening night would have been lucky enough to view a performance by Yefman. He lay under the bed of the centerpiece, with his head inside that of his knitted creation — a **detachment of head and body, evoking a rape victim's** emotional reaction to the abuse. It was shocking to pick up the distended parts of the victim, fighting back childlike **enjoyment, while witnessing silent communication from the artist's eyes peering out** through holes in the fabric.

Yefman lived for two years as a woman and has spoken about the prison that expectations of each gender has trapped us in. His self-objectification of stepping into the piece forced viewers to interact with his exploration.

Duality in various forms runs through "H." The person on the bed is both man and woman. It's sexual, like an adult's toy, and sexless like a child's. The traumatic subject matter does battle with the playfulness of the form. But perhaps the most unsettling conflict is how the viewer becomes both torturer and victim — opening a new perspective on a horrendous chapter of history that is not easily shaken off.

Q&A with Gil Yefman

Knitting Towards a Therapeutic Interpretation of Art

July 24, 2013

Text by Amandas Ong

Gil Yefman's work deconstructs canonised, familiar myths from varied beliefs and traditions, confronting the conformative structures that limit our ways of seeing. In his words: "I indulge in the therapeutic virtues of knitting as means to dwell on personal and collective traumas, as well as to reflect upon recurrent obsessive patterns in mankind's societies. I try not to limit myself to certain medium or practice. The style or the medium is chosen in relation to the concept and subject matter and should generate attraction for creating a radical cultural chain reaction." In today's Q&A, we ask him about his latest work, *Tumtum*.

Why knitting?

I have a strong predilection for the "craftwomanship" of crochet knitting which I find resembles writing - long, rapid, carefully calculated and monotonous movements. It is very much like a collection of syllables that create a narrative - the object. The texts and contexts become textures that suggest an alternative interpretation to dogmatic translations.

Tell us about your most recent project.

My recent projects are currently shown in the "Otherness - I Is Somebody Else" exhibition at the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton in Paris. The exhibition consists of a large knitted sculpture with a built-in sound system, an additional performance entitled "TUMTUM". It also includes a 2-channel video installation entitled "In-Between", which was co-produced by LV especially for this exhibition. "Tumtum" is a biblical pre-medical term referring to a the hermaphroditic identity, while in modern Hebrew it simply means 'stupid' and is a common curse. I was intrigued by the etymological evolution of this term, and by the intolerance of modern society towards what is considered to be different to the norm.

Louise Bourgeois said "art is a guarantee to sanity" and I firmly believe in that dictum. My work is aimed at inspiring all peoples; it is meant to transcend differences among human beings and encourage all of us to cherish and explore the intrinsic potential of the world we live in. My work embodies the transformation of poison into medicine, and hopefully those who visit the exhibition will also be motivated to stand up for freedom of thought and expression.



Gil Yefman's Sex Slave Doll at The Container



Courtesy the artist and The Container
by Darryl Jingwen Wee

Published: August 19, 2013

TOKYO — Israeli artist **Gil Yefman** opens a mixed media installation entitled “H” — the artist’s first solo exhibition in Japan — at [The Container](#) in Nakameguro on August 19.

In a dramatic tour-de-force of working with a tricky, constrained space, Yefman has transformed the gallery (an actual shipping container measuring slightly less than five meters long) into a mockup of a sex slave’s residence based on actual fieldwork he conducted at “Block 24” in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz.

Block 24 was the term used to refer to a functioning brothel that satisfied the sexual needs of **concentration camp officials, in addition to serving as a “reward” for camp workers that performed exceptionally well in their duties.** At the height of the Nazi empire, it is estimated that around 5,000 of these “joy divisions” functioned to service military men, foreign workers, and even the general German male population.

Yefman’s dry, dolorous recreation of the personal quarters of one of these sex slaves strikes a delicate balance between poignant elegy and bawdy irony. Although the drab confines of the cell are painstakingly fabricated to evoke the manifold indignities suffered by these women, the gaudy pink knitted doll — which

resembles something that **Mike Kelley** and **Antonin Artaud** might have produced if they'd run a sock puppet workshop together — is a ridiculous and uncomfortably camp gesture that brings down the serious tone of the work.

Which may be precisely the point. According to the artist, the intentional choice of this homely knitted figure was a way of embodying violent, contradictory sentiments and avoiding an overly didactic or moral **approach to his subject**. “**In my work, I tend** to indulge in the therapeutic virtues of knitting as a means of dwelling on personal and collective traumas. The doll here has lots of ambivalent features — it is roughly deformed, but also soft and tactile. Its features could have been taken from *hentai* (perverted) animation **films, but knitted while watching hundreds of Holocaust documentaries.**”

Even though the expected audience for this exhibition would naturally be largely Japanese, Yefman was also careful not to confront the touchy historical issue of **Japan's own comfort women during World War II**. Rather, the work seems to be a more universal memorial that remembers all the women who were the victims of sexual crimes regardless of nationality, as well as an oblique reference to sexual obsessions that **still crop up in the midst of contemporary, “civilized” societies.**

Gil Yefman's “H” runs from August 19 until October 28 at The Container (1F Hills Daikanyama, 1-8-30 Kamimeguro, Meguro-ku, Tokyo).

ART Death Fugue

A pacifier, **amulets** against the evil eye, breasts, a baby crib, yellow David's Star and swastikas - create a strong bond between infancy and holocaust.

Gil Yefman has knitted an exhibition// Galia Yahav



Caption: Like a teddy bear, but sophisticated. From the exhibition

Exhibition of the week

In Return

Dvir Gallery until May 7

One could mistakenly overlook the complexity and morbidity to be found at the core of Gil Yefman's exhibition due to its childish appearance. It seems that Yefman holds to the belief that in order for his audience to warm up to his work, it must first be gently stroked and enveloped in a comforting atmosphere. This could be construed as means of sweetening the bitter medicine, but also as venomous means for dulling the watchers' senses, moments before the arrival of pain.

Yefman knits his sculptures. With the amassing of more and more knitted sculptures, stitch after stitch, colorful and soft, Dvir gallery turns into a blown up playground, a childish playroom. The warm, fuzzy look is seemingly complemented by the thematic - a baby crib, pacifiers, a woman's breast, a baby's blanket, a hanging mobile. At first glance, nothing is directly at odds with the viewer and there is absolutely no threat. However, after only a few seconds from entering, the smile withers: the sweet baby's blanket spread out on the floor is made up of knitted swastikas. From the pink and black breast-pacifier hangs a black drop. Not just any poisoned mother's milk but Paul Celan's own black milk creeps into this seemingly innocent picture ("Black milk of daybreak"). The

breast displays a coarse scar, in what comes out as yarn animation. The scar reappears on the Jewish phallus (Jewish not only for it being circumcised, but also for being knitted in blue and white stripes), hanging from the mobile like a punching bag, over which hangs a glowing star that comes out as a Jewish ghetto yellow David's Star patch. The mobile itself consists of bones, its parts balanced by two skeletal arms, from which hang dismembered organs dripping blood and poison. Another big black phallus, like a long snake stuffed toy a la Mike Kelley, rests upon the floor in the corner, and from its tip too, grows a final, golden drop.

The overall toy-like and animated look gives the semen and milk drops the look of comics speech bubbles, of bloated empty words, an almost plumber-like effort to cause water to gush in arid conditions, an effort to fertilize and nurture in the midst of slaughter.

The exhibition is comprised in its entirety of dismembered, displaced body parts, stumps that display their former, never-to-return ability to bear fruit. The frozen drop at the tips of the parts hanging or lying about is post-mortem rather than a dying moan, a pitiful testimony to misplaced potential.

Like Thomas zipp's anonymous heroes symbolizing speech as a hollow bubble, so do Yefman's limp penis and lone breast symbolize inability, shutting off of supply, black void, poisoning. The extrovert display of intimate body parts and their secretions symbolizes the disruption of order, reversal of fortunes, an industry whose produce is death. The effect is particularly striking in the sculpture liking a baby crib to a concentration camp. The color - dark grey. The playpen's bars made to look like barbwire. Inside this oh-so-personal structure is a large golden tooth replacing the baby. The precise positioning of the tooth like a statue on a pedestal creates a strong effect, not unlike Zbigniew Libera's 1996 lego concentration camp, and undoes any possible innocent interpretation, naive childish labor style usually associated with works making use of the tools and implements and language of crafts. All of the elements are also objects one would hang on the car rear view mirror or on key chains, against the evil eye. The mobile itself, the pacifier, the hanging star and the myriad of eyeballs resembling glass talismans, for "death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue", all are luck charms or ornaments that have been blown up to artistic, sculptural, space-consuming dimensions.

What is this "In Return" to which Yefman takes us? To the pre-language and the site of the disease, identified as contaminated parts, infected from infancy in frustrating objectifying relations, trapped within duplicities and non processable divisions. It is also the "return" to childish revenge, it, too, trapped within the bleeding impasse, destructive and poisonous. More than the work itself, obsession is the heart of the matter. It is an obsession that repeats weave after weave, one knitted line after another, searching for therapeutic relief to the trauma.



Gil Yefman

32 years old, combines a variety of techniques such as knitting, painting, etching, sketching, printing, video and performance

works:

Yefman graduated from Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 2003 and has been exhibiting ever since (and earlier as well). Last year he won the Ministry of Culture Young Artist Award and has exhibited a much praised solo exhibition at the Dvir Gallery called 'In Return'. "In my work, I try to suggest different interpretations to various recurring aspects of contemporary culture, from the point of view of the 'other', and bridge between center and margins, private and public, known and foreign, high and low. I frequently use canonic symbols and myths in order to represent the 'different' in a subversive manner and create a fantastical and strange world in which characters with elusive sexual, gender and political identities serve as alternative culture heroes."

In the exhibition at the Dvir Gallery you presented knitted works dealing with infancy, sexuality and the Holocaust. How does the subject relate with the technique?

"The name of the exhibition, 'In return', has to do with going back in time, to infancy and throughout history. In the manner of speech of children, the term 'in return' is used in reference to avenging one's honor, thus restoring status quo. In psychoanalysis, the term 'return to', or 'reliving trauma', refers to a process of mourning and overcoming loss. Knitting is associated with both old age and infancy, a grandmother knitting a baby a garment or blanket, a warm and protective object that is passed down from generation to generation. Thus, as well, do the collective traumas passing through, from parents to their offsprings and so on, in a closed circle of anxiety and fear. The repetitiveness is also expressed in the ongoing, monotonous state of being that exudes from the action of repetitive knitting, an act holding therapeutic values. The softness, warmth and innocence of the wool have, in effect, beckoned me to directly address these issues. Furthermore, in

the process of knitting, stitches (in Hebrew: 'eyes') are added and then taken off the knitting needle and these stitches, or eyes, are in essence testimonies that make up the whole ethos. While working on the exhibition I felt that the knitting needle has become a pen and that I am actually editing text. Text that is texture".

Hand in hand with the forlornness , traumas and pain, your work also has a lot of humor and banter. Do you feel that humor magnifies the dramatic effect or is it comic relief that helps keep the bitter medicine down?

"Both. Humor is indeed very helpful for expressing and healing pain. Sometimes it is black and cynical and sometimes colorful and innocent. Woody Allen said one should take serious things humorously and humorous things seriously, and Fellini said that the only way to survive is to be a mad clown. I identify with these sayings very much."

"The reactions, when touching, range from laughter to shock, compassion to anger - it has happened that someone actually punched one of my works..."

Studio:

"I started using this studio in the central bus station building in the beginning of this year and I am very happy with it. The central station is, for me, a colorful and inspiring environment. My studio is my own private room, a space where everything is neatly messy. I try not to create work methods that are too organized and restricting. I draw a lot and I sketch for my sculptures or video projects. It always helps me to form and develop ideas. Knitting is an endeavor that consumes a lot of time and frequently books and articles I read end up woven into the object itself".

Plans for the weekend:

"I love company when I work. Friends and guests help a lot and inspire creativity and productivity and this is probably what will happen during the Open Studio. I've noticed that most people simply have to touch the works. Yarn in everyday life usually appears as clothing or play dolls and any barrier between it and one's private space instantly dissolves. The bond with the object, even if not always pleasant, is inevitable. As if childhood memories are interwoven within the yarn itself. The reactions when touching range from laughter to shock, compassion to anger - it has happened that someone actually punched one of my works. It both amuses and frightens me. Apart from the studio, I am exhibiting on Thursday evening at Albert Square, a knitted installation as part of the exhibition 'Shibushim' (disruptions) curated by Sally Heftel Naveh. The name of the work is 'Circulation' and it deals with the cycle of creation and destruction, with reality on the verge of ecological crisis. Out of barrels and trash bags grows human vegetation made entirely from plastic bags. In the manner that atomic energy can help mankind but can also destroy it, I tried to turn 'poison' into 'medicine' and create an urban-organic alternative through reassessment of our consumerist patterns".

Closing one eye/Uzi Zur

Sexuality in a radioactive age

Gil Yefman - "In Return", Dvir Gallery, Nitzana St., Jaffa



I've been Looking Forward to Gil Yefman's solo exhibition for a long time. And now that it's here Yefman does not disappoint and his art emerges in all its funny, biting, caressing beauty. The adjectives I could use are endless, but the main thing are the works themselves and the interaction with them. It warms the heart to see how Yefman has evolved and matured since his Bezalel BFA final exhibition. He succeeds in integrating the male with pornographic motifs from his adolescence and with the holocaust which is engrained in the communal memory - all of this with hand knitted sculptures made from colorful yarn. The text accompanying the exhibition talks of the connections to female craft and occupational therapy, and to me it seems that Yefman's knitting goes way beyond the female and male; there is, in his soft sculpting, an act of continuous healing of the internal rift. Yefman's works inspire covetousness. Any such knitted sculpture stands alone, but together they intertwine into a sort of a surrealistic soft world. The works lay stressfully between difficult and "hard" subjects and the warmth and security of the yarn from which they have been knitted.

"Pacifier (Male)" is a penis, thick as a Boa snake, twisting on the floor and ejaculating a drop of yellowish semen from its blind head, while its body is restrained with a collar on which a blue eye is knitted, and the whole body is encircled with a dance dress. "Pacifier (Female)" shows a female breast, heavy with milk, attached to a purple and olive-green knitted pacifier, from which's other end the pacifier's handle dangles out of a rounded orifice from which grow shorn suckling shoots. The breast is adorned on its side with stitches (from a cancer operation?), and from the damaged breast drips a heavy drop of black milk - the milk suckled by second and third generation holocaust survivors. Among the "pacifiers" a "baby blanket" is spread on the floor, knitted from squares onto every which one a colorful and childish swastika is knitted. In the intersections between the squared are staring knitted eyeballs, and so the blanket is teeming with life - as if Paul Celan's poem has been reincarnated in order to frighten a little Jewish child. In the opposite corner a baby crib turns into a little concentration camp, knitted from grey yarn up the barb wire surrounding it (in the previous exhibition a blowup of Miroslav Balka was hanging on the top of a rusting pole from the Warsaw ghetto in this same spot). The crib encloses a creature which is all bloated breasts, a sort of cub or baby of some extinct species, innocent and erotic, soft and pleasant.

"Mobile" is the central piece in the exhibition, and it is filled with different motifs from

Yefman's world. The skeleton on which everything hangs is made from knitted bones in different sizes, huge and delicate bones, upon one of which walks like a tight rope walker that curvaceous creature from the fuzzy concentration camp, and an eyeball, a yellow David Star patch and a cute pink penis, dripping blood red semen, a breast dripping black milk, a breast or penis turned punch bag - from which peeps a finger. The bag itself is knitted from blue and white stripes, reminiscent of prisoners' uniforms, and dripping black oil.

This is only one aspect of Yefman's art; there is also his graphic art, etchings, which are, of themselves, a whole world of changing sexuality in a radioactive age.



One-on-one with Gil Yefman

By findigart

Photo credits – Rona Yefman

Gil Yefman's knitted dolls weave into their very being a thick fabric of conflict, both personal and collective which are essentially our own. The dolls radicalize the difference to a point where it is difficult to repress the reaction.

"In my work, the grotesque is elusive and bidirectional," Yefman says. "The figures disrupt the acceptable perceptions of gender and beauty, and at the same time critically stare at the observer, forcing him to ask himself whether it isn't him who is really the 'freak'."

Yet the dolls also soften the misery of inner conflict, even by the mere fact that they're made of soft wool. It's evident when speaking with Yefman that the softness and understanding the wool shows towards the deformed figures of the dolls covers those very conflicting qualities of the artist himself.

Yefman, born in '79 just north of Haifa is a graduate of the fine art department at the Bezalel Academy. He has meteorically gained a reputation as a controversial visual artist who extensively deals with the human aspects of duality.

"It's like when the purest lotus flower ironically grows in the murkiest swamps," he says, indicating his own attempt to cultivate beauty out of disgust.

"The art canon needs a grotesque just as the mainstream needs margins. An opposite mirror which will define it in a positive and just manner. So for me, art is a kind of instrument, a test lab for experimenting and improving the human texture of myself and of others."

Yefman is currently exhibiting at the Dvir, Dresner and Halalit galleries in Tel-Aviv. More of his work can be viewed at www.gilyefman.com