

How can you feel something that you cannot see?

An interview with Yehudit Sasportas on the blind spots in our system

BY GESINE BORCHERDT



The Swamp (Dreesberg Bog), 2007. Photo by the artist. All images copyright Yehudit Sasportas / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy the artist.

You often speak of the “blind spot” or the “locked power” that you investigate in your work—an energy that is hidden, not being discussed in our society or among individuals. Where does this idea come from?

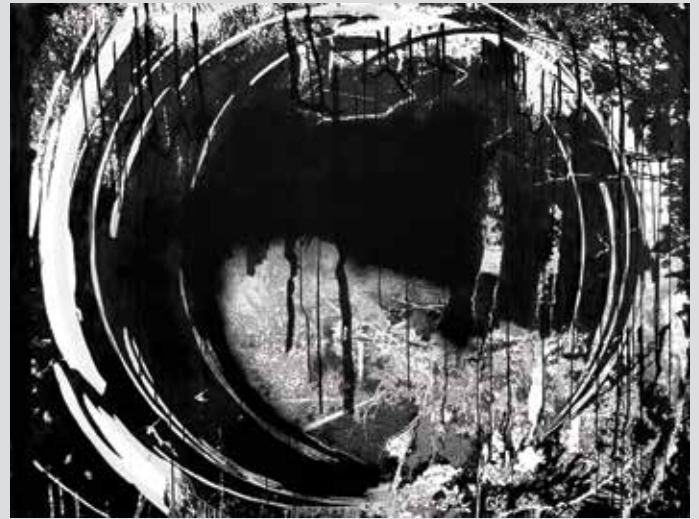
I have always been interested in the areas in our bodies and minds that are in full flow, as well as those that are in tension, resistance, and conflict. The latter contains an energy that we have no access to. We can feel that something is locked. But if we want to touch this power, certain feelings of fear or hesitation come along with it, as if something is forbidden. My journey started with my self-reflection as a young woman. Later on, my sculptures and drawings went in the same direction. I wanted to explore those areas that contain this overcharged energy in a deeper way, so the idea of the “locked power” or the “blind spot” came into focus, together with the question: How can you feel something that you cannot see? My very early sculptures have a domestic appearance. They are related to my home and family, and the subconscious part of furniture. I was sculpturing around a space that locked this power within, and I realized that I could give this space a form. I could communicate this energy through mute objects.

All of your works, including your sculptures, drawings, photographs, films, sound works, and installations, deliver this weird feeling that something is happening underneath the surface. You can't point it out, but you can feel it, as if something is hidden but still pulsing and whispering. What is this focus on the invisible about?

My focus is on things in life that happen against our will. What is happening to us when we are forced to do something, maybe



YEHUDIT SASPORTAS, *The Witness Drawing no. 15* (2020), from *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013–, graphite drawing on paper, 61 × 45.7 cm.



YEHUDIT SASPORTAS, *Shichecha 35* (2013), from *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013–, ink drawing on paper, 150 × 200 cm. Photo by Uwe Walter.

because of our age or due to political context? We can't fully metabolize it, and there is a kind of unspoken “no.” An outspoken “no” would have been much more in life—when you are active, fighting against something and screaming. But when you can't do that, you feel that something is wrong. As a child, it inspired me to feel the empty room in our house after school. I could sense that my parents had an argument there in the morning. The space was still charged. I looked for traces of the fight, such as how things were left there. It was like an early training to feel this mute information that is still active in the system. Later on, I drew on 1,200 notebooks seismographic lines that indicate the emotional data at home. It was a way for me to cope with tension and remain active, even when nothing dramatic was going on. As a result, these drawings—and my drawings today—record the information in our system, including things that cannot be verbalized.

This seems to be the core idea of your work, not just your drawings, but especially your long-term projects of different landscapes, which brings me to the swamp in northwest Germany. You have been visiting that swamp for 13 years to record sounds and take pictures, and it took you eight years to learn that there was a bunker from World War II underneath the lake. Obviously, you have a sensitivity, as at first you had no idea what and where it was, but you intuitively felt its energy when you saw its picture in a magazine.

I really had no idea about it, not even about the area. What I felt was a contradictory combination of extreme attraction and extreme fear. But I had to go, because I felt that there was something to explore. You know, when something attracts you outside, something also crystallizes inside you. And until today I've never gotten tired of it! I still go there regularly.

What is the main sensation when you're there?

I think it is equal to the feeling of the end, but out of this moment of hopelessness, there is a turning point, a chance to survive. The place also became a platform for me to practice meditation on things that are extremely tough and uncomfortable.

There is something uncomfortable and uncanny about swamps. They have a power you cannot control. You walk, then all of a sudden you sink and there is no way out. In the past, the swamp would sometimes bring out a dead body. The earth devoured



people and later spat them out as mummies. It's like an evil creature that swallows sounds, light, and life, and freezes time and space.

Indeed, the energy of the place is so strong that it has the power to literally shut down a part of your brain. You enter a very strange physical experience and your mind becomes less active. This is a very healthy thing. Of course, this can also happen in beautiful parts of nature. But I felt the presence of absence, a locked power, near the swamp. Just by being there, recording, and filming, something was happening. I felt like I was an active witness, but I didn't know of what. So realizing that there is a hidden bunker under the swamp was such a strong moment! It gave me confirmation that there is so much more information out there for us. The swamp became a very nourishing place for me. The shock of the bunker humbled me, along with the understanding that my feelings about the locked power of this place had been right. This was very healing. Every time I go there, I am extremely sharp afterward, also because I don't speak. It always takes me some days to reconnect with the outside world afterward.

The swamp also led to a performative work, which you captured in a film. You dump the mines from Israel into the water—well, not real mines, but copies of them made of clay. They slowly sink and land on top of the invisible bunker. Do you feel that the drawings, sound works, and other films you made there were leading to this important moment?

That's an interesting question. For many years, I would come back to my studio, always with films of the same area, and project them on the wall for six hours, which makes me feel relaxed. In the end, three important films came out of the swamp before the bunker appeared: *The Lightworkers* (2010), which is made of 158 drawings; *GHardy Local Voices* (2009), which comprises six big video screens, each based on huge drawings, carrying the names of my siblings in connection with the anatomy of my own family; and *The Magnetic Shaky Table* (2013), which features organic matter from the swamp that I was drying on a heater and filming for seven hours every night. [For *The Magnetic Shaky Table*,] I edited the film in a way that the objects look like they are moving. Then my latest major work, *Liquid Desert Project* (2013-), goes back to the bunker. Basically, the physical underground bunker in the swamp was a great inspiration for my metaphysical bunker, which deals with the mapping of the unconscious. *Liquid Desert Project* is an ideal architecture with 49 rooms that is virtually located in the Negev Desert in southern Israel, one hour from my home city. It is about the emergence and reflection of our collective unconscious in the reality of our physical existence. In effect, the site acts as an allegory to the three-dimensional sculptural diagram of our psyche. So I'm obviously still on fire about the topic of the bunker!

To me, your obsession with the swamp seems almost like a different type of landscape painting or even land art. Going into nature and feeling it, without overinterpreting it or illustrating certain ideas or feelings. The landscape acts as a mirror of the soul.

Interestingly, my experience never felt like a romantic joy but was always a bit strange. I didn't know why I was going and doing something there, but I did it seriously. Also, you have to know



Top: YEHUDIT SASPORTAS, *Lake of Void: Silent Letters / Still Mine no. 3/6* (2021) from *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013- , clay, ink drawing, sound work (tree's recording), rolled soundtrack drawing, black metal box, dimensions variable.

Bottom: Installation view of YEHUDIT SASPORTAS's *The Light Workers*, 2010, two films simultaneously projected onto matt gray surface, looped: 10 min, at "HASIPUR - The Story," Herbert Gerisch-Stiftung, Neumünster, 2010. Photo by Uwe Walter.



Top: The Negev Desert in the south of Israel and site of *Liquid Desert Project*. Photo by the artist. Bottom: Installation view of YEHUDIT SASPORTAS's "The Archeology of the Unseen" from the *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013- , at Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, 2020-21. Photo by Lars Wohnick.



YEHUDIT SASPORTAS, *Room no. 17* (2020) from *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013–, graphite drawing on paper, 59×83cm. Photo by Elad Sarig.

that when I was living in Berlin, I felt a constant lack of light. Tel Aviv is almost too bright, but in Germany the darkness was extreme. Instead of going into the light—as many landscape artists did—exploring this uncomfortable feeling was important for me. When I went to the swamp, I could handle the complexity of living in Berlin in winter. I had much more oxygen to understand this darkness that is not fully integrated in the system.

You almost make it sound like this place is a source of life. In fact, a swamp is full of life. It is a weird organism, full of animals and bacteria, but it is also a dangerous, deadly landscape.

I can feel that this is not my landscape. I am a guest there. And because of that, there is an advantage. I worked with this advantage, like what Walter Benjamin told us: Go to places that you don't belong; stay in places where you don't speak the language; and work with the gap that comes from the misunderstanding because it can change your own vision and keep you fresh. I think the fact that I am not German, the swamp is not my landscape, and it doesn't contain my personal history, makes me feel like an alien, but going there helps me connect to Germany in a much deeper sense.

Like an exercise.

I practice a very intense type of meditation from Judaism there. We have 73 types of meditation. The most difficult one is called "Meditation in Hell." You are supposed to meditate with the most complex, uncomfortable issues, which, of course, make you restless and give you the opposite of harmony. But it also gives you the information on how to sit with these unpleasant, intense feelings. The idea is to feel and stay present with it until it starts melting.

I would like to have a closer look at your drawings, which are very much related to nature. The expressive, abstract gestures stem from your experience of landscapes, whereas the straight lines come from images of your audio recordings of the swamp. It feels like two completely different sensations coming together.

I don't know if I can generalize here, but I would say that we, as artists, are people who often feel at a certain phase in our lives that we have been cut from the whole. I remember the phase when I realized that I am not like my friends. A part of me was participating in their play, but the other part was participating in a film that I saw myself in, so I was cut off from reality. I think this is the phase that created the rift. There was something shocking, overwhelming, or uncomfortable in this experience. Maybe these are the codes that I am drawn to, not to fight against them, but to handle the complexity of this information in a mute way, through my drawings and my films. Then I'm out of the business—they do the work without me.

You come from a generation of research artists, whose works often look like archives or documentaries. Your work does not convey this dry, conceptual approach. Instead of just activating the intellectual capacity of the viewer, you activate the heart and body of the viewer. To me, you turn research into something mysterious instead of clarifying what is going on.

I'm very happy that you see it that way. In the beginning, I didn't talk too much about the swamp. At a certain point though, I started describing it as a mental map, connected to the drawing. But today, I really feel like I've found my place with it; in a way, it is the inner landscape of my entire work. The landscape there is confusing. You don't know if your perception is just a reflection on the water or a physical menace, a hole that you might fall into. Is

it a real danger? Or is it a reflection of your unintegrated issues? In a culture or a society, when things are unspoken, denied, and pushed away, where do they go and stay? For me, sculpture, photography, and drawing are fantastic ways to bring them back as beautiful objects, but inside they carry this explosive poetry, a deep-time quality. It is clear that they carry an active substance, not just an image.

You spoke of the energy of the swamps. The fact that swamps are vanishing due to climate change seems parallel to the disappearance of these inner qualities.

Those inner qualities will move to somewhere else, that's for sure! At the end of the day, everyone starts their journey with their own personal swamp. This is my question for my students: What is your swamp? What is the area that you are most afraid of mentioning or being known without your control? This locked room is like Pandora's box and you'd better not open it. But for me, this is an active power. I am fascinated by how it works in a human being, and also in our society. How is this mute power active between us, not in an obvious, but in a sensual way? This is what keeps me going.



Yehudit Sasportas is one of Israel's most acclaimed artists. Her dark, intense films, photos, and drawings are derived from her long-term projects exploring mysterious places that carry a hidden energy from the past. By transforming them into visual poetry, the artist helps reveal the blind spots in our system. In 2007, Sasportas represented Israel at the Venice Biennale. Last year, she held a show at Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven in Germany about the swamp that became her place to be. Her exhibition "Solos Locus" is currently on view at Arter, Istanbul, until December 31. Born in 1969 in Ashdod, Israel, Sasportas currently lives in Tel Aviv and has a studio in Berlin.

YEHUDIT SASPORTAS, *The Magnetic Shaky Tables*, 2013, stills from film in loop with sound: 16 min 9 sec.

Gesine Borcherdt is an art critic and curator based in Berlin. She writes for *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *BLAU International*, *ART*, *Aperture Magazine*, *Ursula*, and other major art publications. For four years, she was the artistic director of Capri in Düsseldorf. One of her latest exhibitions, "Dream Baby Dream," was exhibited at Haus Mödrath nearby Cologne. She is currently working on her book about the childhoods of artists, *Dream on, Baby*, which will be published by Starfruit Publications in 2023. Next year, she will also co-curate the first institutional posthumous exhibition on Sibylle Ruppert at Kunsthalle Gießen.



Installation view of **YEHUDIT SASPORTAS's** "The Archeology of the Unseen" from *Liquid Desert Project*, 2013- , at Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, 2020-21. Photo by Lars Wohlneck.