



## ALONA RODEH

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**YOU CURRENTLY HAVE A SELECTION OF DIFFERENT WORKS IN YOUR STUDIO, INCLUDING SCULPTURES, PAINTINGS, AND COLLAGES. IN ADDITION, YOU ALSO HAVE AN ELABORATE BRAINSTORM WALL. YES, THESE ARE ALL REFERENCING IDEAS THAT ARE CURRENTLY COOKING. MY MAIN FOCUS, WHICH CONNECTS ALL OF THESE WORKS, IS A PROJECT THAT I'M DOING WITH THE BERLINER FEUERWEHR [BERLIN FIRE BRIGADE]. I'M CURRENTLY JOINING THEM FOR NINE MONTHS, TWICE A WEEK. ONCE A WEEK I DO A WHOLE SHIFT OF 24 HOURS AT THE LOCAL STATION IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD IN WEDDING. ON THE OTHER DAY, I WILL CHECK OUT OTHER THINGS IN THE ORGANIZATION, VISIT OTHER STATIONS, THEIR ACADEMY, AND MEET WITH PEOPLE.**

**HOW DID YOU APPROACH AND CONVINCED THE FIRE BRIGADE TO TAKE YOU ON AS AN ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE?**

There's a place called ZK/U [Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik] in Berlin and they are doing a project that is called Artist Displacement. They have a residency program based on the legacy of the Artist Placement Group (APG), which emerged in London in the 1960s and encouraged artists to join non-cultural

institutions and work in a wider social context. ZK/U is doing the same now with a few artists, providing a scholarship as well. I was snooping around the Fire Brigade before I heard about this program, but when a good friend of mine, who has relationships with both the city and the board of ZK/U, told me about it, it was a perfect fit. The Fire Brigade is quite amazing as they are responsible for all of the rescue and ambulance services in Berlin. They are the first to be called when there are accidents or fires and they do have an ambulance service. So by joining them, I really get to feel urban tourism double and triple. We get into so many different people's homes and many difficult situations of various kinds.

**DO YOU GET TO VISIT NEIGHBORHOODS OUTSIDE OF WEDDING?**

The fire station is located in Wedding, but they get calls from all around the area. I also just joined a station in Friedrichshain, which is right in front of the club Berghain. Especially on weekends, the station has a lot to deal with in the clubs and the safety in clubs is something that I am interested in. My recent artist publication, *Safe & Sound (Deluxe Edition)* [The Green Box, 2015] focused on architecture and visual aspects of safety. I'm interested in getting a different perspective. I'm about four months in and I'm still in the research phase.

**WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH PHASE ENTAIL IN REGARD TO COLLECTING VISUALS? DO YOU TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS, MAKE DRAWINGS, AND WRITE DOWN NOTES, FOR EXAMPLE?**

I take photographs and I write, because I talk to the firemen a lot. Perhaps it would be and feel different, if I knew German perfectly or if I wasn't a woman. I know German, but they talk fast and all the time; I can't always follow.

**ARE THERE ANY FEMALE FIREFIGHTERS?**

Very few. For the past twenty years however, Germany has really tried to have more female firefighters. Before that it wasn't possible at all. Now they want them, especially for the ambulance

service. In fact, they need women on board for treatment and it helps especially when dealing with Muslim women in difficult situations. But there's still just a few. It's a tough job. Twice a week you have 24-hour shifts when you don't sleep at home and not every woman, if she has a family, can deal with that. However, in my station in Wedding there is one and she's really a part of the team. It doesn't feel strange at all.

**DO YOU ALREADY HAVE A SPECIFIC PROJECT IN MIND THAT WILL SPRING FROM THIS RESEARCH OR ARE YOU SOAKING UP THE EXPERIENCE, SEEING IN WHAT DIRECTION IT WILL NATURALLY EVOLVE?**

I usually work extremely focused and know exactly what I'm doing. This time, it is different. Of course, things change in the process, but my natural choice would be to work inside a certain situation. In this case, the situation is that the residency format is not based on presenting something in the end. Then again, because I am who I am, I have to do something. But it looks like it's going to be a few different things. For one, I would like to do a publication on the subject of fire that would resemble my previous publication. For the latter I had invited three authors to write articles about something I'm interested in (rather than about my own work). That book further contained six double-sided posters with twelve of my images. It's not a monograph or catalog, but rather an artist publication. I would imagine something similar for this project as well. In addition, I will most likely produce a new video work based on the footage that I shoot during my shifts at the stations. I also might get to do a mural on the wall of a fire station in Kreuzberg, which is a project currently in discussion.

**DO YOU HAVE A BACKGROUND IN GRAFFITI AND STREET ART?**

No, I don't, even though I've done a lot of works outdoors. I was making art at a young age and I grew up in a rural area so street art was not part of my culture.

**I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THE PAINTINGS YOU HAVE UP ON THE STUDIO WALL. WHILE ABSTRACTED, THEY ARE STILL CLEARLY INSPIRED BY FIREMEN'S UNIFORMS, FEATURING A COMBINATION OF EMERGENCY COLORS, ESPECIALLY BLACK AND NEON YELLOW.**

These hand-painted graphic works are part of a bigger series, which is comprised of twenty-one works. The group was shown at ABC Berlin as one big installation. However, not all of these compositions are based on the clothes of firefighters. Both work wear and high-visibility gear are the inspiration. All the public service workers, such as street cleaners are forced to wear high visibility gear so that they can be seen. However, the reality is that those who wear this kind of apparel are usually not seen; instead, they are seemingly transparent and unimportant. That contradiction is the heart of this project. Despite their abstraction, all these paintings are based on actual designs.

**EVEN THOUGH YOUR FORMS ARE STYLIZED IN THAT THEY ARE PERFECTLY GEOMETRIC AND FLAT, THEY STILL SUCCEED IN PROVIDING YOUR COMPOSITIONS WITH A FAINT FIGURATIVE QUALITY. ONE CAN EASILY FIND THE SUGGESTION OF PANTS, FOR EXAMPLE.**

It's true that when you dive in, you can start seeing things. They are derived from my ongoing growing collection of safety gear, which is a booming industry.

**MEANWHILE, YOU USED THE SAME MEDIUM FORMAT FOR EACH PAINTING.**

I think of this format as being related to the body, especially the torso. I painted all of them on an aluminum surface, which I thought fits the content very well. I wanted the group to read like a lexicon or collection. I actually never make paintings and the base of my work is sculpture and installation, although there are always exceptions. For example, I just did this really big site-specific floor piece in Dizengoff Square in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv is where I'm from and I still go back frequently. The installation

was temporary and involved a square that was slotted for demolition. In fact, it was just destroyed yesterday. I made this work in collaboration with the department that is responsible for street markings and painting. It involved a pattern that was based on the original structure that was already there, in which lines seemed to trace how people walked inside the square.

**HOW LONG WAS THIS SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION ON DISPLAY?**

It was up for about a week. More than anything it was meant as a gesture to encourage the contemplation of this particular place before it was going to be destroyed. It was about doing something new to it so that one could look at it fresh. That's one example for a lot of the works I'm doing outside the studio, which cannot be seen here.

**IN OTHER WORDS, SITE-SPECIFIC WORKS ARE PART OF YOUR REGULAR PRACTICE.**

Yes. I also work in different places: in the studio, in both sculpture and printing workshops, and other facilities, where they have the equipment I need. Berlin has so many of these resources, which you can use for a very small fee and I definitely take advantage of that.

**WHEN YOU WORK IN LARGER FACILITIES OR JOIN ENTITIES LIKE THE FIRE BRIGADE, YOU ARE USUALLY SURROUNDED BY AND AT TIMES COLLABORATE WITH OTHER PEOPLE. IS COMMUNITY IMPORTANT TO YOUR PROCESS?**

Yes, I love working with people. I also make designs for the theater, which is even more collaborative, and I like to involve others in my works, such as musicians. In addition, components of many of my works are produced by others, on whose technical ability I rely. People who have different skills and mindsets than I do can add so much value. Nevertheless, I still need my time alone and in regard to my works, to have the last word.

**WHEN DID YOU MOVE TO BERLIN?**

I came here in September 2013 for an artist residency at

Künstlerhaus Bethanien, but I knew in advance that I would stay and I'm happy about this decision.

**BY JOINING THE FIRE DEPARTMENT IN A CITY THAT IS FAIRLY NEW TO YOU, YOU RIGHT AWAY GET A GLIMPSE OF ITS UNDERBELLY; YOU GET TO SEE VARIOUS HOMES, PEOPLE, AND CIRCUMSTANCES. IS PART OF YOUR INSPIRATION THE EXPLORATION OF UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENTS?**

It's actually the opposite. Before I came to Berlin, I had been working for many years in Tel Aviv. It was very hard for me to do new work in a place I was less familiar with. In fact, I have to know a place very well in order to do something in it. When you are in a new environment, you are usually focused on obvious differences. You have to get over that stage; you have to pass through these layers, which for the locals are very obvious, in order to get to the interesting stuff. I feel that when you know a place well, it is the little details that really make a difference and these are some of the things that I work with. So the reason for joining the Fire Brigade was to get through these layers of being a foreigner. It's really local, the fire fighters are mainly German, and most of the situations are specifically related to this city. I'm not a "laptop artist" and I would not move again anytime soon. It's too much work to peel off these layers and to find your network. I need to spend most of my time in either Berlin or Tel Aviv. I need stability to work.

**DOES POP CULTURE IMPACT YOUR WORK?**

Sure. I think I was always fascinated with art that can talk on all levels and also reach a non-art audience. It was one of the challenges that I set for myself after leaving art school: that my work would interest people who are not necessarily interested in art.

**YOUR AMBITION IS TO COMMUNICATE WITH ANYONE THROUGH YOUR WORK.**

Yes and I think that that's very important in general. I feel alienated by art that talks only about art or itself. I believe that there

are too many things happening in the world for you to have the privilege to discuss art that is discussing art. I feel that I take part in the world and therefore the world comes into my work as well. That's pop in a way. My favorite music to listen to is hip-hop of all kinds and one of my hobbies is gossip news. There are specific people I follow, such as the Kardashians. I'm interested in their tactics and how they communicate through visuals rather than speech. "What is the information that you choose to put out there?" is one of the questions I'm interested in.

**YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU WRITE A LOT AND THAT YOU ESPECIALLY LIKE HIP-HOP. TEXT MUST BE VERY IMPORTANT TO YOU.**

Yeah, I use it a lot. My sketchbook is mostly filled with words and notes to myself rather than drawings. There's something about writing with a pencil on paper that quite often can get my brain and creativity working. In general, I am very sensitive to text, especially texts about art. It also happened to me several times that I was disappointed in how my works were described by others.

**DO YOU MEAN THAT YOU WERE DISAPPOINTED BY HOW OTHERS INTERPRETED YOUR VISION OR HOW THEY DESCRIBED IT?**

It was more that I didn't see the point of having a descriptive text accompany the work. I think my works are quite easy to digest and to understand on a superficial level. So I wasn't interested in having them explained or unfolded. It's not that I want to stay ambiguous or obscure; I just think that it's quite clear in many cases. A few years ago, I had a solo show at CCA Tel Aviv, for example. I made a site-specific work of cardboard that measured about seven meters high. It was called "Above and Beyond" (2013) and it looked like a wall and there was natural vegetation integrated, while light penetrated the piece in synchronicity with music that was especially composed for it. Most people, at least in Israel, would recognize the obvious reference to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Instead of an analytical essay, I asked whether

we could bring back a text by philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994). The Western Wall, also known as The Wailing Wall and The Kotel in Hebrew, was conquered by Israel in the war of 1967, along with east Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and what is known today as “The Territories”. In his text, which was written right after the war, Leibowitz – an orthodox intellectual – criticizes what he perceived as the pagan behavior of the Israeli people. Israeli Jews were extremely enthusiastic about reaching the wall, which is in fact only the outer wall of the ancient temple, not even the temple itself. He argued that they should also construct Israel’s biggest discotheque in the newly built square, which should be called “Disco-Kotel”, a place where all the different micro-societies of Israel could come together. So Leibowitz’s text was the one I chose to use; it was directly related to the subject, but it wasn’t about my work at all.

**WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR WORK HAS A POLITICAL COMPONENT TO IT?**

As I said earlier, my work comes from the world and the world has an impact on my work. That is naturally political, because the streets are filled with politics. However, my work does not point out what’s good or bad, right or wrong. Having been born and raised in Israel, I know how extremely complicated things are, and there’s no simple answer to what’s right or wrong. I constantly experience this complexity and try to see things from different perspectives, as well as the consequences that stem from years of bad communication. I don’t feel the need to push any opinion to the front, but I do have interest in shedding light on situations, which is a different approach.

**WOULD YOU SAY THAT IT IS THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST TO EXAMINE A SUBJECT FROM ALL SIDES?**

I don’t have any idea of what an artist should or should not do, but for me, it is about the ability to see things from above. It’s about staying somewhat remote. In the case of the Fire Brigade

for example, I watch and accompany the firefighters, who are the ones on the ground and who have to get involved on a very immediate level. I’ve only joined them for the past four months and I have already seen so much death. Still, it’s not me who touches them. You can imagine what the firefighters must see and have to be in real friction with. As an artist you’re definitely a part of things, but you also often remain on the outside. That’s the quality that can make you see things, which someone inside couldn’t.

**AS AN OBSERVER AND INVESTIGATOR OF PLACE, WHAT STANDS OUT FOR YOU IN BERLIN? DID YOU HAVE ANY PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE WHEN YOU CAME HERE?**

I visited Berlin many times before I moved here, so it wasn’t unfamiliar. What and who keep surprising me the most are the Germans. I had a preconceived idea of their cultural behavior, for example, but it proved to be completely diverse. It’s interesting to see how Germans treat each other; there’s a distance, but they are also extremely helpful and reliable. There are many different layers and also many contradictions to how Germans behave. I’m interested in seeing the various angles of what Germany and Germans are like in 2017.

**DO YOU SEE YOUR WORK IN THE TRADITION OF CERTAIN OTHER ARTISTS, WHO CAME BEFORE YOU?**

Certainly, but I don’t have a role model or someone I follow. I actually take more from music than visual art. Recently, I learned to play the drums a bit, because I wanted to find out how that feels.

**WHEN ARE YOU THE MOST SATISFIED WITH YOUR WORK AND COULD YOU PERHAPS DESCRIBE A PROJECT THAT WAS ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL TO YOU?**

My work is complete when an audience is in it. I am the most satisfied when I see reactions that I didn’t expect, when the work becomes something I could not have predicted. Meanwhile,

## Berlin Studio Conversations

predicting how things will evolve is a tool for me; I use 3D models and renderings, various tests and frequent visits to the places I will be showing in; I try to have a good sense of what the work will be like when finally installed. Over time, I have developed this into a skill. Having said that, there is always a gap between what I imagine and the actual outcome. I'm most satisfied when these surprises succeed in making me happy. One project that I found especially meaningful was a work I did for the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion in the Tel Aviv Museum in 2013. Entitled "Neither Day Nor Night", it was a large monumental work in a spacious hall, but also very fragile due to its simplicity and the fact that it had no center. It almost functioned as an atmosphere, made of space. The beautiful thing was that the entrance to the pavilion was free, and there was no museum guard on my floor. At first, I thought it was not the best idea, but then I realized it was perfect. People stayed there for long periods of time and some even came back more than once to see it, dance on its dance floor, or to meditate on it. The installation already dates back four years and when I meet people, some of whom I know and others whom I don't, they remind me of it.