

Tal Dekel

Transnational Identities:

Women, Art and Migration in Contemporary Israel

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reviewed by Nehama Grenimann Bauch

In *Transnational Identities: Women, Art and Migration in Contemporary Israel*, Tal Dekel explores the multifaceted and multicultural identities of women artists who, for various reasons (discussed in the book), migrated to Israel either as young teenagers or as young women. Dekel focuses on three specific populations: women immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), women immigrants from Ethiopia, and women migrant workers from the Philippines. Apart from the latter, they belong to a specific age group, referred to as the 1.5 generation—immigrants who arrived in the destination country between early childhood and late adolescence. In this case, it refers primarily to women from the FSU and Ethiopia who are today in their 30s and 40s and arrived in Israel in the early 1990s. Dekel explains her choice to focus on this generation as related to the unique experiences these women embody, as a liminal group that neither grew up in their country of origin nor were born in their new host country. She analyzes their works and experiences using a field-based methodology, including interviews and correspondence with the artists as well as a visual analysis of their works, integrated with a sociopolitical feminist analysis.

This fascinating endeavor adds depth to the study of immigrants by focusing specifically on the intersections between migration experiences, gender issues and art expression. Dekel gives voice to these women artists, who selected for her the works they viewed as most significant and described their creative processes, the messages they wish to convey and their personal stories, as these relate to their immigration experiences. The artists' perspectives are combined with Dekel's own socially and culturally contextualized examination of the visual messages arising from specific works, accompanied by color images of them. This examination is based on a qualitative feminist research method, integrating different streams of knowledge and reflexive examination. Dekel applies Ephrat Huss's approach to art-based research, which puts the artist's own explanation at the center of understanding their artwork.¹ In addition to this blended visual-verbal analysis, Dekel adds important background

information about historical and sociopolitical phenomena relating to the artists' personal migration stories and their artworks, while also connecting it to relevant feminist theory. She thus encourages a rich and multilayered understanding of the women's individual and collective migration experiences.

The result is a colorful, thought-provoking account of the complex and intense migration experiences that the women embody and their consequent multilayered, *transnational* identities, as they are sensitively conveyed in different forms of art expression, such as photography, video installations, paintings and sculptures. Dekel uses the term *the age of transnationalism* to refer to the specific phenomenon, embedded in a specific period of time, that led to the migration of the artists chosen to appear in the book and influenced their experiences. She describes it as emerging around the time of the collapse of the communist Soviet Union, explaining: "Because many actual borders have changed or disappeared since the 1990s, migration laws have also been altered, so that the movement from one country to another is now considered easier than ever before, although voluntary and forced migrants are facing new challenges and obstructions on their path" (p. 5).

In this context, the *transnational identities* of the women artists described in the book relate to the influence on their lives of historical events and geopolitical changes, such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the change of regimes in Ethiopia in the 1980s and 1990s. However, these identities are also linked to a larger-scale transnational discourse of bidirectional influences between global processes, nation states (and their national borders) and individuals. Linked to more than one geopolitical space, immigrants influence both their country of origin and their host country. These influences, in turn, inform the notion of *hybridity*—a theoretical conceptualization of communities and individuals who develop a fused, multi- or bicultural identity that combines elements from their countries of origin and their host countries.

It is these bicultural and bidirectional sociological influences and their personal marks that Dekel seeks to explore, with a specific focus on the gendered aspects of these experiences and their expression in works of art. In doing so, she successfully unfolds a tapestry of ways to view and explore women's transnational identity. After a short introduction about the book's theoretical and sociological perspectives, including details about the author's methodology and personal story and the hybrid identity underlying her interest in the topic, the first chapter delves into women migrant artists from the FSU. The large range of cultural and religious diversity within this population is reflected in the chapter, whose subjects range from artist Yasna Goldschmidt from Moldova, whose mother is not Jewish, to Rimma Arslanov from Uzbekistan. Dekel endeavors to tackle this diversity by giving detailed background information, from historical, political and sociological perspectives. The second chapter, focused on Ethiopian women, also gives background information, but, as might be expected, it puts a larger emphasis on topics of skin color, race and institutional discrimination.

The third chapter focuses on the Filipina community of women migrant workers, referred to as a somewhat distinct phenomenon, on account of their citizenship, residency and religious statuses, as well as to their motives and goals in coming to Israel: They are not Jewish and receive temporary work permits rather than becoming Israeli citizens, and their stated goal is to send money back to their families in the Philippines and eventually to return there. This chapter shifts the focus once more, from skin color and race to migrant workers' employment conditions, class and sexual harassment, and the deportation of children back to the Philippines. It also grapples with a "unique and added dimension in Israel" (p. 4), linked to the state's definition as the ancestral homeland of the Jews. The book's conclusion attempts the difficult task of putting all these diverse backgrounds and experiences together and exploring commonalities as they relate to a general "contemporary social moment" (p. 137) that is influenced by international political-economic contexts.

As an art therapist, I believe that the analyses and discussion of the artworks could have been enriched further by using interdisciplinary lenses incorporating the three different stances suggested by Huss: the fine art stance, the psychological (art therapy) stance and the social stance (the main perspective taken in Dekel's book).² At times, when the artist was not directly quoted, it was difficult to tell when an interpretation originated from a conscious choice by the artist and her explicitly declared messages and aims, or from the author's own theoretical, external viewpoint. While the writer does reflect on her own subjectivity in both the introduction and the conclusion, this distinction could have been elucidated more clearly in the chapters dealing with the artists and their works.

I found the discussion of the disparagement of feminine work, and specifically of traditional craftwork, especially eye-opening—for example, in relation to Tigest Yosef-Ron's series of embroidered images of a girl relating to her mother's Ethiopian traditional craft style (pp. 82–84). I would have enjoyed reading even more about this, especially since it seems to bring together aspects of gender oppression, race, social status and different cultural understandings of art.

Susan Hogan emphasizes the importance of "creating a deep understanding of women's conditions and women's experiences."³ In foregrounding these artists' voices and visual messages, Dekel's book is a brave attempt to deepen the understanding of transnational women in Israel, respect their diversity and celebrate their manifestations of resilience and empowerment, as these emerge through their reflective, original works of art.

Nehama Grenimann Bauch holds an M.A. in Art Therapy from the University of Haifa, Israel, and a B.F.A. from the Academy of Fine Arts, Florence, Italy. Her M.A. thesis focused on fathers, clay, paternal representations and mentalization. She has worked over the years with diverse populations in different settings and countries, including Ethiopia, Armenia and Israel. For the past five years she has been working

Nehama Grenimann Bauch

in Berlin, Germany, with at-risk children from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and their parents. She is currently pursuing research in the field of art therapy with refugees in Germany. *nammyg@gmail.com*

Notes:

1. Ephrat Huss, "Using Art-Based Research: A Critical Perspective" (Shimush bemeḥkar mevusas yetzirah miperspektivah bikortit), in L. Kasan and M. Kromer-Nevo (eds.), *The Analysis of Data in Qualitative Research* (Nituah netunim bemeḥkar eikhuti; Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010).
2. Ephrat Huss and Maor Haim, "Toward an Integrative Theory for Understanding Art Discourses," *Visual Arts Research*, 40/2 (2014), pp. 44–56.
3. Susan Hogan, Foreword to eadem (ed.), *Revisiting Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy* (revised edition; New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), p. xx.

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