



Esther Naor, *There Wasn't a Man, Woman, or Child I Could Lift a Finger For*, 2014, acrylic plaster and ready-made life buoy. 90-1/2" x 31" x 25"

A Sudden Dark Breeze

Esther Naor at BOSI Contemporary in the Lower East Side, NYC

by Robert Curcio

I don't remember exactly how, who or when (I think it was in 2008, possibly 2007) Esther Naor and I came to know each other. I think the "why" was because like most artists, especially foreign artists, they tend to see exhibiting in a New York City gallery as a major success; all the clichés that you can think of making it in the big city add here. It's just that sometimes those clichés actually turn into reality – I am writing this piece on Naor as she prepares for her first solo exhibit in a New York City gallery.

Having had some success promoting artists to galleries in New York City and through various mutual connections, Naor contacted me seeing if I could assist in bringing her work to the city. During the financial crisis of 2008-09 it was extremely difficult to get anything done in the city, let alone connect an unknown Israeli artist at the beginning of her career with even a small gallery focusing on emerging artists. To make things even more difficult, Naor was using an interesting choice of a delicate material, rice.

Rice, cooked and uncooked, has been used in art before and the association with nourishment and survival is quickly recognized. She constructed *Home*, 2004 and *Shelter*, 2009, very basic structures of cooked rice that seemed to offer little protection from the world or the elements. A group of very intriguing and emotional paintings were made on a small sections of brick walls built of rice, one a soldier standing guard, another a group of rioters or onlookers with a stain of blood and other scenes from the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Naor pushed all the associations to create very intelligent work, but not sellable enough to capture the attention of gallery owners.

Things seemed to have cooled off for a while between us, maybe an exhibition announcement or an image every now and again. Then in the winter of 2013, Naor sent me the catalog to her *Side Effects* exhibition. The cover had a yellow head on it, the first images in the catalog were of melted wax heads, there was a video installation with a head, a circular group of yellow heads with a rifle pointed at them, two bear skin rugs with huge claws and heads that almost looked identical to Naor. This was perfect timing for all these head works, because I was co-curator of an exhibit we were simply calling *HEAD* at BOSI Contemporary, NYC, for that coming summer. Without hesitation I wanted all these pieces to be included, realistically, we had only two pieces: *Be a Good Girl*, the installation with the rifle and *Queen Esther 1 & 2*, the bear skins with a human head, both from 2012. Reading the catalog, I learned that the heads and faces were of Naor or a stylized version of her and I came away realizing that with this new group of works she truly had command of being an accomplished artist.

HEAD did very well with *Art in America* selecting the exhibit as one of its *Picks of the Week*, some other very good press and a good sale. What made me even more happier was that Sandro Bosi, the gallery owner, was interested in giving Naor a solo

exhibition. At this writing, it's the winter of 2015 with Naor's solo exhibition scheduled for May.

Meeting one damn, windy and freezing February early morning to discuss the works to be exhibited, Naor brought up an insight into the trajectory of her work – the earlier works explore how someone locates themselves in the world, the mid point being an exploration of their escape from that world and that person, to a going beyond the physical person to a deeper search and apprehension of their identity. The earlier pieces were visceral with blood and organs (sometimes real, sometimes not), and a hand-made quality as she molded the rice that searched a person's presence in a society and culture. They spoke of basic needs for shelter, food, a belief. Then a middle group of works that are very polished with a machined finish to them, where your presence has been exchanged for a self-medicating existence forever lost in an amusement park. *Be a Good Girl* exemplifies this stage, as it is reminiscent of the amusement park game where you take a pellet or water gun to knock over ducks-in-a-row to win some happy prize. In Naor's version, however, the ducks-in-a-row are multiple copies of her own head placed in a circle on a slow spinning table, the gun filled instead with pretty, brightly colored

prescription medications. What's the happy prize now?

To the current body of work where there is soul searching, a reaching out to grasp the meaning of what is happening to one's self in the world. *There Wasn't a Man, Woman, or Child I Could Lift A Finger for*, 2014, is a work that I find myself completely drawn to, even though I have only seen images and not the real work. There is something in the pose or maybe the expression on the face, is that Naor again, or the starkness of the figure or everything about this singular work that captures and holds your attention. Floating before you is a life-sized, all-white plaster female, nude with the exception of a long conical hat and a bright red/orange life preserver. There is something uneasy about it all. You want to reach out and offer some sort of support or assistance, only to hesitate. The expression on her face seems blank, perhaps from shock, since she is holding a life preserver. As you stand there, you wonder if she needs to be rescued or is she rescuing someone as she just hangs in space and time? Maybe you are just there to witness, but what?

Throughout her work, Naor projects a psycho-social state of in-between, or a sense of floating between worlds. To Naor, the space that surrounds and informs us, has

turned into a puzzle with pieces that never seem to fit smoothly together. She speaks of a fluctuating perception of the self as it relates to her own life and family of Iraqi Jews. Having emigrated from their homeland to Israel, the traditional family of the "old world" is contrasted with contemporary society, where pastoral beauty may be torn apart in an instant. Likewise, her career began in civil engineering and the computer sciences, only later to pivot into the visual arts. Whether photographs, sculptures, installations, videos, or paintings, Naor's work is a glimpse into a distinct identity, at once sophisticated and contemporary, encompassing a profound awareness of history.

Naor's work is informed by a unique identity, bringing into the world at large pieces that resonate with universal appeal, bringing together and connecting various experiences that unite us all. Naor displays a strange but beautiful moment of respite in her work, communicating a sense that all is not lost, and that any effort or attempt is an assured achievement, as well as exemplifying that old cliché about making it in New York City.

Esther Naor: *A Sudden Dark Breeze Over My Uncovered Skin*, curated by Lilly Wei, April 29 to May 30, at BOSI Contemporary, 48 Orchard Street.



Esther Naor, *Be a Good Girl*, 2012, mixed media installation, variable dimensions



Esther Naor, *Untitled (Shelter)*, 2009, cooked rice on metal frame and home gadgets, 46" x 67" x 51"