

A Tale of Two Sisters

Ofri Cnaani mines the Talmud

BY RACHEL WOLFF



Ofri Cnaani

IT'S NOT EXACTLY a well-known parable—along the lines of Athena cracking fully formed from Zeus's head, Eve's temptation of Adam, or any of the various tales proliferated by Aesop. Nevertheless, says Israeli artist Ofri Cnaani prior to recounting it: Boy meets girl; boy marries girl; boy accuses girl of infidelity and implores that she travel to Jerusalem to see a high priest who will ask her to strip down and sip from a bitter serum to determine her guilt. If she is indeed unfaithful, she will explode (bursting at the womb, if ancient texts are to be believed). If she's not, she will survive and bear her husband's child.

There is, of course, a twist. Frantic, she confides in her sister who offers to swap identities with her, and sip the serum in her place. The sister goes, sips, survives, and travels home to share the good news. The sisters greet with a kiss but traces of the serum that remain on the sister's lips kill her sibling—the accused—instantly. The story comes from the Talmud, an ancient Jewish text that is designed to provoke discussion and debate, and that Cnaani argues is a criminally untapped resource for artists.

It's a dark, twisted, and beguiling tale (save for what seems to be a staunch anti-adultery stance, at least when it comes to women), though strange and open enough to interpretation that Cnaani decided to tackle it in an ambitious recent work. *The Sota Project*, 2011, an immersive 22-minute video tapestry of sorts, is on view at the USC Fisher Museum of Art in Los Angeles from October 7 through December 1. In it, Cnaani does her best to turn the story's original sexual politics on its head. "I wanted to leave the shell of the story but to tell it differently," she says, "to change the dynamic."

The Sota Project's composite setting was stitched together in postproduction (though shot primarily outside Tel Aviv). It is stretched throughout a four-walled space, anchored and narrated in

Hebrew by a bubbly-like Greek chorus wading in an indoor lap pool. Cnaani takes the mistaken identity plot one step further in her staged telling: The woman in disguise lays sexual claim to her sister's husband after passing his humiliating test, thus activating the fertility promised to her by the priest as a reward. In the end, the sisters seal their transgressions, their ruse, their bond with a long and passionate kiss. No one dies—at least not on screen.

"To me it's a story about sisterhood," Cnaani says. "It's about two young women who understand the system, and by understanding the system, they make the system work against itself."

When we meet, the 37-year-old Brooklyn-based artist is sitting on a somewhat precarious chair in her shared Bushwick studio, surrounded by many of the tools she needs to make her hyper-interdisciplinary work. The inks, chemical baths, and shoeboxes full of chains, wind-up toys, and broken glass serve her eerie, camera-free "cyanotypes"; the rows of clunky, relic-like overhead projectors facilitate her "live cinema performances"—experimental lectures on subjects ranging from the Kibbutz Movement to treason and its effects; and she uses the MacBook Pro resting on a nearby drafting table to edit her films.

For Cnaani, *The Sota Project* is something of a *pièce de résistance*—at least thus far. It is the culmination of five years of research, writing, fundraising, shooting, editing, and postproduction. But Cnaani's path to Talmudic scholarship started a bit later than her Israeli heritage might suggest.

Though Cnaani has lived in New York for about a decade now, having come in the early aughts to earn her MFA at Hunter College, she was raised on a kibbutz in northern Israel, not far from the Lebanese border (and thus has many childhood memories of bunking in the collective's protective shelters). "I grew up in a tradition that was almost anti-Jewish—very secular



Israel, very Socialist,” she says. “But later, when I was in high school, I started to study ancient classic texts.”

Her Talmud teacher asked her early on if she ever intended to blend her interest in these texts with her longtime inclination toward art. But Cnaani didn’t want simply to depict. She wanted to interpret, to analyze, to bend, much like Talmudic scholars do themselves. These stories “were so loaded,” Cnaani adds. “What kind of [visual] interpretation can there be that is not an illustration of the story?” It took her a while, she says, to figure that out. And what she came up with hinges not only on a new progressive telling of the story itself (and one that takes place in an ambiguously modern setting) but on the viewer’s participation as well.

Though she grew up surrounded by more traditional methods of art-making—her maternal grandfather, Yehiel Shemi, was a prominent abstract sculptor—Cnaani always gravitated toward video. “It’s the most realistic medium,” she says, “but it also has the fourth dimension”—moving and changing in a given space, while extending over a period of time.

Early in her career, Cnaani staged several site-specific video installations, including *Dungeon*, 2003–04, in which an X-ray-like video of the contents of a woman’s prison cell was projected onto the ceiling of an exhibition space—which also happened to be a former Jerusalem prison. She liked the element of control and the ability to tease access and draw people in using movie magic.

The Sota Project functions similarly, inserting her viewers into the middle of the action, as the story plays out continuously on all four walls around them. “I wanted to tell the story not only in time, but also in space,” she says. “It’s an active reading” inspired by the discipline of Talmudic study itself, wherein peers bounce ideas back and forth and, she adds, “everything is an interpretation.” MP



Three stills from *The Sota Project*, 2011. Video installation, 22 min.