



Art in America

MAGAZINE NOV. 01, 2013

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In the Studio: Ilit Azoulay

by Suzanne Landau

Ilit Azoulay in her Jaffa studio.
 Photo Shiraz Grinbaum.



Ilit Azoulay is best known for panoramic photomontages such as *The Keys* (2010) and *Room #8* (2011), which depict arrangements of materials she has collected from demolished buildings around south Tel Aviv. These buildings were constructed as housing for immigrants who flooded the area in the 1940s and '50s. Azoulay first visited the buildings before demolition, exploring their rooms and examining their walls; after demolition, she returned, searching through the remains and gathering bits and pieces of them. In her studio, she carefully sorted and catalogued her findings. She then photographed the various items separately, under uniform lighting conditions and from the same head-on vantage point, using a digital camera with a macro lens (designed for close-ups).

To create each photomontage, Azoulay carried out a long, labor-intensive process of digital assembly. She first patched together numerous photographs of wall textures to create an expansive wall image that would serve as a background—and, in a sense, a tabula rasa—for her photographed objects. She then arranged her image—objects against this fabricated wall in playful compositions inspired by museum and archival displays. These panoramic tableaux present objects without hierarchy and offer a new world that is as realistic as it is abstract. The objects, which suggest historical relics, do not appear in realistic scale to one another, and clear links between them seem always to elude us; they exist in a kind of poetic syntax.

In Azoulay's more recent photomontages, such as *Panic in Lack of an Event* (2013), meticulous order has given way to almost apocalyptic chaos. The objects shown in these works are of a different character from their

predecessors, and include items from the artist's studio, photographs from her personal collection and images from art books and journals. The format is now sometimes vertical rather than horizontal, and the background is a screen-type surface or a curtain instead of a wall. But Azoulay still performs her special brand of alchemy, transforming common materials into precious ones.

Born in Jaffa, Israel, in 1972, Azoulay received her BFA from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and her MFA through the Bezalel graduate program in Tel Aviv. She has had two solo exhibitions at New York's Andrea Meislin Gallery, in 2011 and 2013; has participated in numerous group shows around the world; and is currently a resident at the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, where she will have an exhibition in September 2014. Her pieces are in museums and private collections in Israel and abroad. She lives and works in Jaffa.

SUZANNE LANDAU Can you tell me about the process behind works like *The Keys*?

ILIT AZOULAY I was roaming buildings slated for demolition in south Tel Aviv. This was a hobby of mine; I didn't know how I'd connect it with photography. I would look at the walls, peel their surfaces with a knife and try to find out more about their layers.

LANDAU A kind of archeological digging.

AZOULAY I was enchanted by the traces that pictures or pieces of furniture had left behind. The walls looked like photographic negatives—they were darker wherever objects had once covered them, the sun having faded the surrounding areas. It was a lot of fun to be in these buildings alone.

LANDAU Were any actual furnishings left in them?

AZOULAY No. Only traces of them, since the spaces had been cleared for demolition. One time I took a piece of a broken wall and asked a construction contractor to tell me more about the house. He said that it was made of very cheap materials and cement used in the 1940s and '50s. It led me to realize that, from the beginning, Israeli construction hasn't had a strong sense of tomorrow, so to speak.

LANDAU These were wartime constructions.

AZOULAY Yes. And then I came across a building in Jaffa where I found a very weird wall made of two steel plates encasing a layer of cement, in which a lot of junk—seashells; pieces of plastic, iron and glass; even clothes—had been embedded. It turns out that contractors, whenever they had run out of cement, blocks and money, had simply improvised such walls, using waste materials from the area. I call these "fake walls."

by 34 inches.



LANDAU Did you take them to the studio?

AZOULAY I brought chunks of them to the studio. I broke open the pieces gently so that the objects inside wouldn't be harmed. It was like retrieving treasure. There was a lot of information inside the walls, so I would archive the objects on shelves or inside boxes. I have tremendous respect for these lost-and-found items.

LANDAU So you were acting not only like an archeologist but also like an archivist, organizing your discoveries in boxes labeled according to when and where you found the items.

AZOULAY And then when the objects were used in a photomontage, I'd place them together in a box labeled with the details of the work. I went to museums to study how they store, preserve and exhibit objects. Some of these methods—such as arranging small items in little boxes, as seen in archeological displays—found their way into the compositions themselves.

LANDAU Until 2008, you worked with a 4 x 5 technical camera and were devoted to the analog process. How did shifting to digital techniques change your work methods?

AZOULAY Well, in the past, I had all these objects in my studio, all cleaned, oiled and archived. I would arrange them on a table like a small installation, and then photograph the results with my 4-by-5 camera. I would create shadows with lights and little mirrors and make the arrangements look like architectural spaces, as in the works *A Suggestion for a Backyard with a View* and *A Proposal for an Unoccupied Space* [both 2009]. My budget was small, and the plates for the camera were very expensive and hard to find.

So I did a test in digital. I found myself shooting an installation from different angles, focusing on different parts, and then stitching the images together into one large file. Eventually I came up with a process in which I drew a grid on a piece of glass, stood the glass in front of the installation, "scanned" the installation by photographing each of the squares and then assembled the digital frames together on the computer. The result I got was better than with

the 4-by-5 camera and was somewhat Cubist-like. I then took photographs of 1.5-centimeter portions of the "fake walls," and combined them to construct my first "wall" in Photoshop. This test made me realize that the wall is like a canvas, a surface on which to construct.

LANDAU There is no perspective in these compositions.

AZOULAY That's right. Everything was photographed head-on. For the shooting I needed northern light from my window, so I photographed only between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

LANDAU Mostly you focus on objects. There is one human figure in *The Keys*, though.

AZOULAY I wanted to include a "gaze" in that work, and so there is an image of a man turning his head toward the title set of keys. He is presented in the same direct format as the objects, so he, too, becomes an object of sorts.

LANDAU His shirt is covered in paint spots. It's as though you are referring to the accumulative process of painting, and not the immediacy of photography.

AZOULAY The work does have a lot to do with accumulation. The keys were the last object I put on the "wall." As keys, they suggest that there are different codes for the work that could be unlocked. The spaces initially seem to behave like an archive, but the rules keep changing as the objects reject the narratives that the brain tries to impose on them. They are also like a form of theater, but one in which the elements are hyperreal. It was freeing but also heartbreaking to realize that I didn't need the "decisive moment" anymore, that I didn't need the "event," or the perspective. There is no up and down, no hierarchy.

LANDAU Certain objects are repeated, although in different variations, in *The Keys* and in *Tree for Too One* [2010]. For example, a plastic bag of construction materials in the former work becomes a plastic bag of apples in the latter. Also, recalling the man gazing at the keys in the first work, in *Tree for Too One* an origami swan looks toward a woman in a framed photo from a 19th-century medical book.

AZOULAY Yes. And I drew a yellow line between the swan and the woman, physically connecting their eyes. I embedded another gaze in this work by adding an image of a book cover featuring a portrait of Francis Bacon. I am very much influenced by Bacon and his way of presenting his subjects as though on a stage.

View of *Panic in Lack of an Event*,
2013, inkjet print, 214 by 59 inches;
at Braverman Gallery.



LANDAU It seems you were discovering the endless possibilities of digital manipulation.

AZOULAY However, I don't distort the images. Though the scale of the objects might change.

LANDAU Your work reads like a kind of poetry.

AZOULAY It is very much like a language. The walls and the shelves are the platforms on which I can pursue a kind of writing. Haim Steinbach uses the shelf as a platform, Joseph Cornell uses boxes—I continue this line of practice. The objects I show are no longer connected to their original sources; they are somewhat anonymous, and I wish to free the viewer from the need to know what and where the items are. Although the objects have a very realistic appearance, I urge the viewer to discover a new retinal pleasure in their combination.

LANDAU You mentioned that you previously used light from your window during specific hours. Later, however, you started to photograph under various lighting conditions. Also, the window itself became an image in your work.

AZOULAY Yes. The work titled *Window* [2010] is connected to *The Keys* and *Tree for Too One*. When I finished those two panoramas I felt they were missing a connection. I looked at the window that had served me so well in photographing the objects, and I realized I wanted to use it as an icon for the very process of seeing. We know that the eye deconstructs an object and that the brain then reconstructs it. I tried to do the same—taking many photographs of the window's different parts and combining them into a unified image on the computer. I then enclosed this image in an oval frame, and suddenly it seemed to light up the other two works. Now, I usually exhibit the three works together as an installation.

LANDAU What was the next work you did?

AZOULAY *Room #8*. This was shown in my recent solo exhibition at Andrea Meislin Gallery in New York. I went back to the objects from my archive, but

I wanted to move away from the domestic.

LANDAU You continued the same line of thought, but added more layers.

AZOULAY The issue of background and foreground entered, as in painting. I realized that in order to create an image of a glass plate I needed only an outline and a sheen, so I examined the way glass behaves under different lights. This helped me to incorporate a figure from Duane Hanson's sculpture *The Tourists* as a reflection in a glass plate; it looks as though the character is reflected in *Room #8* as he views it. For me, the photographer acts as a kind of tourist, so that is why I included this figure here.

LANDAU The original version of *Room #8* was a panorama [roughly 5 by 33 feet] that resembled a model of a room that had been flattened to become one long wall. The composition has also been exhibited in divided form, as an installation comprising four separate works. How long did you work on the initial version?

AZOULAY Seven months. It is made out of 3,500 macro photographs. All the items were photographed on the floor. The composition contains eight potential entrances or exits to other external or internal spaces. That's one of the reasons the work is called *Room #8*. Another is that the title plays on the word "roommate."

LANDAU Does every object in it have a story?

First Option, 2012, inkjet print, 72½ by 59 inches.



AZOULAY Some of the objects just ended up there. Others I knew I would include, such as the infrared lamp, which in the past I had used in the darkroom. The lamp serves as a lament for the end of my "dark era," since now I work in the light of the studio. *Room #8* reveals itself slowly: whether it's shown as one continuous composition or as four discrete parts, the work requires the viewer to physically move around to take everything in. It unfolds in an almost cinematic way.

LANDAU Certain items, like plants, appear in almost all of your photomontages.

AZOULAY A few items have become motifs in my work. For example, I always have a column, or a doorpost. And I have this thing for plastic bags, since they have an interesting weight and interesting colors. And yes, I need a plant or other living thing in every piece. I might also include something for which I had to carry out an action. For *Room #8*, I took a wood plank from the street, burned it and added feathers, and then included an image of the resultant object.

By the time I made *Telegram 24* [2010], I was getting used to the fact that the works take their own time. When making the pieces for my recent exhibition at Braverman Gallery in Tel Aviv, called "Linguistic Turn," I'd felt that the process was going out of my control. Usually I have a strong degree of control, but here it was different. For one of the works, *Panic in Lack of an Event*, I took a wooden eagle and burned it, created the upper portion of the composition, and made a yellow line—but I didn't understand what was going on, and nothing felt connected. I was in a panic. Finally, though, I realized that this lack of event was actually the subject of the work. This emotional process then found its way to the title.

LANDAU The composition is vertical, which somehow enhances the sense of panic. Also, it seems divided into two distinct sections: the upper one contains more recognizable objects, and the bottom area is more abstract.

AZOULAY There are many links between those two sections: for example, the sculpture of the naked figure at the bottom gazes upward, directing the viewer to look to the top. Further, the eagle in this work relates to the fragment of a horse statue seen in *First Option* [2012], another photomontage exhibited in the Braverman show. Both the eagle and the horse are imperial icons that here speak to defeat rather than victory.

LANDAU Can you talk about the horse statue?

AZOULAY It's from a monument in Germany. The original monument was destroyed in the First World War. Then it was remade, and the replica was ruined in the Second World War. Now there is a second replica. They can't seem to let this symbol go. It's important to me to use objects that represent a deterioration of the monument—usually these are symbols of power, victory and beauty. Also, by photographing such monuments, I try to ask questions about the status of the image—about the ways in which powerful symbols find their way into popular circulation—and about the erosion of memory.

LANDAU There is a magic to your works. When one sees the objects in your boxes they look arbitrary and almost banal, but you turn them into something unique. You bring overlooked objects to life.

AZOULAY My imagination is ignited by the most ordinary things. These objects once belonged to the everyday world; every fragment of the walls, for instance, was once a part of a home. In preserving something, you stop the

natural process of decay, but at the same time, by doing so, you reflect back on decay, much as every act of remembrance reflects back on the act of forgetting.

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