

# Divine Love: The Reception of Leda and the Swan Myth in Works by Jewish and Arab Israeli Artists - Contexts and Meanings

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## ABSTRACT

The motif of the abduction of a woman is one of the most frequent in Ancient Greek and Roman art. Abductions in mythology are generally portrayed as carried out by a god disguised as a human or an animal, such as Zeus who, in the form of a bull, golden rain or a swan, seduces a beautiful young maiden. These myths have been interpreted from different viewpoints, such as gender, social, political and philosophical. One of the most frequent myths of abduction is that of Leda and the Swan, which appears in both Greek and Roman painting and sculpture. This theme has found many echoes in contemporary Israeli art, and constitutes the case study for this discussion, which belongs to the field of Classical Reception studies. The interpretations of this myth are diverse, ranging from a socio-gender context, to post-colonialism and its relevance to the local situation; to subversives, concerning traditional versus contemporary culture; to emotionality and romantic suffering; and to love as phantasmagoria. These varied interpretations will be examined in the following analysis in light of both ancient concepts and contemporary outlooks, based on literary and philosophical sources.

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The motif of the abduction of a woman is one of the most frequent in ancient Greek and Roman art. Abductions in mythology are generally portrayed as carried out by a god disguised as a human or an animal, such as Zeus who, in the form of a bull, golden rain, or a swan, seduces a beautiful young maiden. The consequence of this mating is the birth of a heroic offspring, such as Heracles, Achilles, Perseus and others. Abductions of women have been interpreted on several levels, as social, political or spiritual metaphors.<sup>3</sup> From a socio-gender perspective, such abductions were variously interpreted as reflecting the status of women as subordinate to men in the Classical world;<sup>4</sup> of their conception as wild beings who must be tamed by marriage;<sup>5</sup> and as an expression of the longing for a romantic hero.<sup>6</sup> Abductions featuring on vase paintings have also been interpreted as metaphors for colonialism and occupation.<sup>7</sup> From a religious-spiritual perspective, abductions symbolized the superiority of god over man and, in Platonic terms, the individual's desire to merge with the god, attain release from the physical world and gain apotheosis. In this respect, eroticism in its philosophical sense was intended to symbolize the unity between god and mortal. The abducted woman, thus, is not perceived as a woman in the ordinary sense, but metaphorically, as symbolizing the human condition. The abduction is thereby connected with the human desire to sanctify, merge with a divinity and become an *entheos* – one with the god.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of a larger study on the reception of Classical culture in contemporary art.

I wish to thank Naomi Paz for editing this paper.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive analysis of the subject see: Stewart, A. (1995). Rape?. In E. D. Reeder (Ed.), *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece* (pp. 74-90). Baltimore, Md: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery in association with Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J.

Cohen, A. (1996). Portrayals of Abduction in Greek Art: Rape or Metaphor? In N. Boymel Kampen (Ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art* (pp. 117-135). Cambridge: University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Keuls, E. (1993). *The Reign of the Phallus - Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 51; Stewart, A. (1997). *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: University Press, 1997, 156, 174-177.

<sup>5</sup> Sourvinue - Inwood, C. (1987). A Series of Erotic Pursuits: Images and Meanings. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 107, 138-140, 145, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Sutton, R. F. (1992). Pornography and Persuasion on Attic Pottery. In *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*. New York: Oxford University Press, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart, "Rape?", 80.

<sup>8</sup> The Pythia enters into an ecstatic state while filled with divine inspiration and becomes an *entheos*. See: Ovid (1985-2999). *Metamorphoses*. D. E. Hill (Trans.). Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 14.101-137; Plotinus (1969). *The Enneads*. S. Mackenna (Trans.). London: Faber and Faber, V. 8. 10, 11; VI. 9. 4; VI. 7. 34-35; VI. 9. 9-11.

One of the most frequent myths of abduction is that of Leda and the Swan, which appears in both Greek and Roman painting and sculpture. This motif, because of its frequency in contemporary Israeli art, will constitute the case study for this discussion. According to the ancient myth the innocent Leda, wife of King Tindareus of Sparta, had been seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan. The resulting offspring, born of two eggs, were Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra (Agamemnon's wife), and the Dioscuri – Castor and Pollux (light and darkness). The swan has royal attributes and masculine traits, reflecting the nature of Zeus, father of the gods, such as the long arching neck, which also has phallic connotations; and its occasionally aggressive behavior is contrasted to its seductive softness and pure majestic whiteness. One of the fundamental meanings of this myth is expressed in two ancient works: a Classical sculpture from the fourth century BCE and a Roman relief from the first century CE.<sup>9</sup> The composition of the Classical sculpture is vertical and inclined upward in a manner that refines the situation and eliminates any violent aspect of the myth. This depiction is of a spiritual nature, connected to the principle of merging with the divine. This approach was formulated in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, in the discussion on the origin of the soul. Accordingly, before the soul was incarnated in a corporeal body she had dwelt among the divinities and witnessed their sublime beauty. However, when the soul entered the physical world and was incarnated, she forgot those glorious sights. Nonetheless, whenever she finds beauty in another being, she senses a dim memory of the sights that she had once seen, and this fills her with great emotion and passionate love for that being. This love stems from the longing for divine beauty and the wish to merge with it. *Eros* is the embodiment of the passion that urges the soul. This parable explains the Classical way of thinking, which saw erotica as a means to spiritual transcendence.<sup>10</sup> Although the Roman relief focuses on the physical act itself, in being part of a Roman sarcophagus it therefore also lies on a spiritual-religious plane.

The Leda and the Swan myth has found many echoes in works by Israeli contemporary artists. The interpretations of this myth are diverse, ranging from a social or gender context, through the post-colonial and up to the spiritual. These interpretations will be examined in the following analysis in light of both ancient concepts and contemporary outlooks.

### Alienation

Dvora Morag's image of Leda is that of a plastic doll standing on two old books that refer to the ancient culture upon which the theme is based (fig. 1). The inspiration for this image came from a pornographic booklet left near the artist's studio entrance. The doll's head and face are completely covered with a newspaper cone, with holes for the eyes. The figure holds her breasts as if offering them in both hands, while a white swan approaches her genitalia, and another swan follows it. Leda is being attacked here by two swans, not just one. The manner in which the figure holds her breasts calls to mind Bronze Age figures of Semitic fertility goddesses, such as the figure from Tell el-Ajjul who is portrayed with her hands on her breasts.<sup>11</sup> This gesture could be interpreted as an expression of eroticism or as a symbol of fertility. The figure wears a tall headdress flanked by two horns. Other figures, from Megiddo, are dated to the later phases of the Middle Bronze Age IIB (1700-1500). These are metal figures of naked goddesses wearing a tall headdress and holding both breasts with their hands.<sup>12</sup> From a feminist outlook the reference to ancient pagan goddesses by women artists endows them with inspiration and energy.<sup>13</sup> The headdress of Morag's Leda, moreover, is ridiculous, in contrast to that of the Semitic goddess, hiding Leda's face and thus blurring her identity and, necessarily, her emotions. This headdress calls to mind that favored by the extremist right-wing organization in the United-States, the Ku Klux Klan. The manner in which the figure presents her breasts makes her seem submissive, obedient and - mostly - available. Morag's Leda seems detached and

Stewart, "Rape?", 78; Kaempf-Dimitriadou, S. (1979). *Die Liebe der Gotter in der attischen Kunst des 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* Bern: Francke Verlag, 5, 43-58.

<sup>9</sup> Leda and the Swan, Roman copy, marble from original by the sculpture Timotheos, 360 BC, 132 cm, Musei Capitolini. See in: Boardman, J. (1995). *Greek sculpture: the late classical period.* London: Thames and Hudson, Fig. 91. Musei Capitolini website: <http://capitolini.info/scu00302/>. Leda and the Swan, Roman relief, marble, 50 - 100 AD, 52 cm, British Museum. See in: Stuart Jones, H., (1969). *A catalogue of the ancient sculptures preserved in the municipal collections of Rome: the sculptures of the Museo capitolino.* Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, Fig. 45. The British Museum website: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=406238&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=406238&partId=1)

<sup>10</sup> Plato (2011). *Phaedrus.* H. Yunis (Ed.). Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 251. Plato (1951). *The symposium.* W. Hamilton (Trans.). Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 203a. Hadot, P. (2002). *What is ancient philosophy?* M. Chase (Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 42-50.

<sup>11</sup> Keel, O. and Uehlinger, C. (1998). *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Ill. 25b. Pinterest website: <http://www.pinterest.com/godswifeasherah/gods-wife-asherah/>

<sup>12</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, 1998, 35, 37, Ills. 25b, 27a, 27b.

<sup>13</sup> Dekel, T. (2011). *Gendered: Art and Feminist theory.* Hakibbutz Hameuchad: Tel-Aviv (Hebrew), 64-65.

alienated from any emotion or will. These characteristics emphasize the unequal balance of power between the god and the mortal woman, and convey a critical message that refers to the violent aspect of the myth. The Roman sarcophagus relief in the British museum mentioned earlier is also blunt in nature, but its funerary context differentiates the two images. While the image of Leda in the Roman relief is a metaphor for the aspired-to afterlife union between the human and the divine in connection to its funerary context, Morag's Leda is a corporeal being, with a crudely emphasize sexuality of the womanly image. By covering Leda's face, Morag creates an alienation between a possible identity of this womanly image and its sexuality, and thus intensifies the pornographic nature of the situation. This Leda seems sexually obedient, unaware of the nature of her attacker, who is Zeus himself. Morag's work emphasizes the alienation that takes place between the woman's body and her soul in a situation of rape. However this use of the myth and Morag's reduction of the situation to the sexual contact itself, with the woman seemingly cooperating, also alludes to cases in which women enter into an inappropriate intimate relationship that may lead them to feelings of alienation and a disconnection between body and soul. As the sociologist Eva Illouz puts it, the release from moral-sexual restrictions following the second wave of feminism from the 1960s onwards, and the view of sexual freedom as being on the same level as the legitimate demands for social, political, legal, and economic equality, became a trap for women, and blurred the boundaries between private-emotional and commercialized public sex.<sup>14</sup> As Illouz notes, women have adopted a kind of sequential sexual strategy by imitating men and become, as she defines it "sexual capitalists".<sup>15</sup> The cost of this sexual liberation, as Illouz explains, is an emotional suffering, confusion, and feelings of hopelessness, since there is a difference between political or institutional liberty and sexual liberty.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, according to some studies, women need an emotional involvement in sex more than men, and the way that women and man experience intimacy is different.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, free sexual behavior and the sexual and emotional availability of women eventually impacted women, who subsequently denied their feelings and suppressed the relations between emotion and sex, which has resulted, according to Illouz, in the emergence of a new form of emotional control of men over women.<sup>18</sup> The denial of feelings as an integral part of intimacy has made love impossible, and sex has become a substitute for love. The resemblance of Leda's headdress to that of the Ku Klux Klan raises connotations of racism, and thus increases the sense of alienation arising from this work.

This alienation becomes concrete in another image of Leda and the Swan by Morag (fig. 2), in which Leda is positioned upside down, while the Swan's appearance is mighty and noble. The meeting point between them is at their heads, while a small space still separates them and prevents total unity. This female image represents vulnerability and suffering, while still yearning for intimacy. This representation of the balance of power between male and female is subversive and raises a new analogy between the position of women in the contemporary world and their position in the Ancient world regarding the relations between the sexes.

The differences between men and women experiencing the same activity are expressed metaphorically in two video works by the artist Sigalit Landau: "Barbed Hula" (2000) and "Three men Hula" (1999):<sup>19</sup> The woman, who is the artist herself, is naked and spinning a hula hoop of barbed wire on the beach. This appearance and act make her physically and emotionally totally vulnerable, and her body is actually wounded. In the second piece, the act of spinning is done by three men, who are three actors who have known each other since childhood.<sup>20</sup> They do not seem to be suffering but, rather, express joy and cheerfulness as a fellowship of men during this activity. This accords with Illouz's observation on sex and the female body as an arena for male solidarity.<sup>21</sup> Landau herself characterizes her art as relating to a loss of orientation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Illouz, E. (2013). *Why Love Hurts – A Sociological Explanation*. Jerusalem: Keter (Hebrew), 56, 64; Attwood, F. (2009). *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

<sup>15</sup> Illouz, 2013, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Illouz, 2013, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Illouz, 2013, 116; Cubbins, L. and Tanfer, K. (2000). The Influence of Gender on Sex: A Study of Men's and Women's Self-Reported High-Risk Sex Behavior. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 29(3). 229-55#

<sup>18</sup> Illouz, 2013, 119.

<sup>19</sup> The original meaning of the work "Barbed Hula" is senso-political, as the artist herself interpreted; See video work on Sigalit Landau's website: <http://www.sigalitlandau.com/>

<sup>20</sup> See text in Sigalit Landau's website: <http://www.sigalitlandau.com/>

<sup>21</sup> Illouz, 2013, 85.

<sup>22</sup> See in the paragraph concerning the Barbed Hula work in Sigalit Landau's website: <http://www.sigalitlandau.com/>

Such loss is made visible in an inverse image which reflects an extreme dichotomy between male and female sexual relations, by the artist Dorit Feldman (fig. 3). In this work, a womanly image, Leda, who is represented by the artist herself, becomes a dominant figure in the composition. She is holding tightly onto what seems to be the head and beak of a bird, while her own head is missing, replaced by an image resembling a vagina and above it a swimming duck. Leda, as a "sexual capitalist" in Illouz's words, is dominated by her vagina; Zeus has become a duck, and the metaphor is literal. Illouz argues that middle-class heterosexual women experience a very odd situation: they have never been so sovereign over their bodies and feelings, yet, they are emotionally controlled by men in new and unprecedented ways.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, every revolution demands victims; and the victims are both women and men, who are unable to constitute a truly significant relationship.

In yet another image by Morag (fig. 4), in which the figures are positioned on a book, Leda is black and the Swan is pink. This radical change of colors gives the characters a new perspective arising from the meanings attached to those colors throughout history, as symbolized by the book. The shocking pink of the Swan would seem to allude to its artificial, ostensible softness, and enhances the absurdity of Zeus' appearance; while Leda's black color may relate to a social context, and specifically regarding black feminism. Leda offers her breasts submissively and thus radicalizes the symbolism of her condition: naked and submissive as a sexual device; and black, as a symbol of an uttermost abject sector.

If the socio-gender context of this myth in Antiquity expressed colonialism and patriarchal values, it now expresses black feminism. The appearance of the black woman as an obedient object in front of the pink swan brings to mind Bell Hooks's critique of hierarchical interracial relationships, and the dual suppression of black women by sexism and racism. Morag's image also brings to mind Hooks's critique of the overlooking and dispossession of black women from the general discourse of sexual repression in the 1980s. The pink swan could also symbolize Hooks's strong argument according to which men are not women's enemy; but, rather, sexism and patriarchy. Likewise, it may be interpreted as a metaphor for women's solidarity and the struggle against sexism and for the liberation of all women of all classes and races, in accordance with the visionary feminism of Bell Hooks.<sup>24</sup> The subordination of Morag's woman to the pink swan could also be conceived as an expression of protest against oppression and discrimination of women in the Third World. Another interpretation may conceive the woman attacked by the swan in Morag's work as symbolizing the symbiotic colonialist relationship between occupier and occupied, with the woman constituting a metaphor for the subordinate, as will be shown in the following section.

## Colonialism

Anisa Ashkar's performance - installation *Mashkhara* (figs. 5, 6) was inspired by the myth of Leda and the Swan and exhibited at an art event in Tel Aviv in 2009.<sup>25</sup> Ashkar is a performance artist who frequently engages with the dichotomy between black and white. In this performance she appears wearing facial make-up with an Arabic inscription and performs together with a male dancer in front of a large image of a swan and eggs scattered around. The symbiotic relationship is expressed in the performance itself: during the performance, as in other performances by Ashkar, a kind of struggle or power relations takes place between her and the male dancer. The artist herself has stated that she perceives the myth of Leda and the Swan as a metaphor for colonialism. *Mashkhara* in Arabic is a traditional profession of charcoal-making using slow combustion. For Ashkar, black, which is the root of the word *Mashkhara*, means blackness and otherness, while white is the color of the foreign neighbor beyond the fence, both seducer and suppressor. Ashkar was born and raised in the slum tin-shack neighborhood of Barbur in the industrial zone of Acre<sup>26</sup>. The name Barbur, which means a swan in Hebrew, was also the name of a ceramics and porcelain factory near the neighborhood. The neighborhood bordered on the cotton fields on the outskirts of Kibbutz Ein Hamifratz, which symbolized for Ashkar a world of plenty and a comfortable "white life".<sup>27</sup> Ashkar's

<sup>23</sup> Illouz, 2013, 262.

<sup>24</sup> Those are the main ideas of Bell Hooks, demonstrated in her publications: Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman - Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press; Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press; Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

<sup>25</sup> The performance was held in the event of Fresh Paint 2 - Contemporary Art Fair, Tel Aviv, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> A few years ago, and after a protracted legal struggle, the houses in the Barbur neighborhood were finally connected to the main power supply. See: Aviv, N. (2012). Tsumud: On Anisa Ashkar and the Exhibition "Zift", held at N&N Aman Gallery in 2010. In *Zift, an exhibition catalogue*. Tel Aviv: N&N Aman Gallery, 147.

<sup>27</sup> Aviv, 2012, 141. The information is based also upon conversations with the artist.

adoption of the myth of Leda and the Swan introduces a play on the word *Barbur* and the ancient myth, which is intended to accentuate the severe class differences that the artist experienced in her childhood.

Ashkar's performance could be deciphered in light of post-colonial thought. According to Homi Bhabha, the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer is characterized by hybridity, which is expressed in cultural exchanges. The colonizer, although exploiting the colonized, also influenced them and was influenced by them.<sup>28</sup> This principle is reflected in the choice of a Classical myth as a subject for the performance. Alber Memmi discusses the phenomenon of the bilingual culture that is characteristic of colonization, in which authors or poets write in the language of the Other in order to gain attention.<sup>29</sup> Ashkar uses a myth of conquest and domination that belongs to another culture, in order to express her feelings as belonging to a minority. She expresses what Memmi defines as the willingness to resemble and assimilate the dominant.<sup>30</sup> However, and in accordance with Memmi, Ashkar uses her native language in the performance. Memmi notes that the colonized sometimes return enthusiastically to their original language after having had to use the colonizers' language in order to survive.<sup>31</sup> This use of the language became a habit for Ashkar, who has been making-up her face daily for more than a decade with Arabic calligraphy in mirror-writing.<sup>32</sup> By this subversive act Ashkar makes herself present and challenges both of the cultures in which she lives: few Jewish people are able to read Arabic, while even Arabs will have difficulty in reading the mirror-calligraphy.<sup>33</sup> By this act Ashkar confronts the public with their ignorance considering the Other inserted in their land. Vice versa, she confronts her community with her independence as an assertive opinionated woman, who turns the act of putting on make-up, as the curator Naomi Aviv has interpreted, into a statement that connects beauty, erotica, femininity, gender, religion, culture, and politics.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as the Islamic culture researcher Housni Alkhateeb Shehada notes, in the history of Arab art we know of no other woman who has worked in calligraphy; Ashkar has thereby created a new history.<sup>35</sup> The inscriptions in the performance-installation read:

**Written on Anisa's body and face**

*The Mashkhara is for the One with the Black Neck,  
Farakh (joy) is waiting for Me in the Manshiye train station at five o'clock.*

**Written on Gil's (the dancer) body and face**

*You cannot tell the Rain to come down/fall slowly  
Red drops, white drops,  
And for the Sun to shine more/to be stronger  
Farakh (joy) to the Hearts of the People  
You are Zeus  
You are always, always, a Swan that is waiting for me,  
in the Manshiye station and in the Orchards.<sup>36</sup>*

**The Swan's inscription**

*Remember me when you try someone else  
And you will realize that I have been a treasure to you  
Always weep over the land because of me.*

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<sup>28</sup> Bhabha, H. K. (1994). Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. In *The Location of Culture* (pp. 125-133). London: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> Memmi, A. (2005). *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. A. Lahav (Trans.). Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute (Hebrew), 106-114. It should be noted that in the introduction to the Hebrew edition, Memmi explicitly states that Israel shouldn't be considered as a colonial entity, and does not fit any of the criteria of colonialism. Memmi, 2005, 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Memmi, 2005, 121-131.

<sup>31</sup> Memmi, 2005, 129-130.

<sup>32</sup> The daily inscriptions in the artist's temples contain poetry, epigrams or greetings.

<sup>33</sup> Dekel, 2011, 203.

<sup>34</sup> Aviv, 2012, 152, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Alkhateeb Shehada, H. (2012). And Acre will remain in this consciousness forever... Anisa Ashkar and the language of the search for the subjective: A critical reading of the work of the artist Anisa Ashkar Zift and other installations. In *Zift, an exhibition catalogue*. Tel Aviv: N&N Aman Gallery, 128.

<sup>36</sup> The Arabic word 'Farakh' means 'Joy', and is a direct reference to the dancer's first name - Gil - which in Hebrew also translates the same meaning.

### Wall's (tree) inscription

*And when she wept her tears came down and fell to the ground, and in their place sprouted and flourished the Henna plants; And the tears that fell into the sea had turned into pearls.*

As reflected by the inscriptions, the relation between Ashkar and the dancer indeed seems to be that of lovemaking. Memmi describes the symbiotic relationships between the colonized and the colonizer as such: The colonized is concomitantly fascinated by and also disapproving of the colonizer, while the colonizer sometimes becomes human and decides to act on the colonized's behalf.<sup>37</sup> However, unlike the passive mythical Leda, Ashkar is active, while the dancer, disguised as Zeus, lies asleep in her lap. According to Memmi the occupiers establish the occupied as lazy, while considering themselves as diligent and vigorous.<sup>38</sup> Ashkar turns the tables in a way similar to David LaChapelle's "Rape of Africa", in which the land of Africa is symbolized by the model Naomi Campbell dressed and posed as Botticelli's Venus; the satisfied Mars, symbolizing the West, is falling asleep; and children, as Cupids, are trying to awaken him, while the land behind is being conquered.<sup>39</sup> Ashkar's statement, in accordance with Memmi's assertion, becomes cynical and emphasizes the colonizers' obtuseness regarding the colonized's activities. The image of the swan as a symbol of the god Zeus has a slightly ridiculous appearance, diminishing his grace. The performance might thus metaphorically symbolize a struggle on several levels: between god and mortal, told in the myth; between the sexes; between classes; and between cultures. The large ceramic eggs scattered around are defined by Ashkar as "eggs of freedom", alluding to an ecological awareness. This term amuses Ashkar, in that for her, in the neighborhood where she grew up, all the chickens ran free and every egg was a free-range one.<sup>40</sup> However, in relation to the myth, those eggs possibly symbolize the products and results of the struggle: disproportional fragile objects as mutations that could crack at any moment, and whose content is unknown.

### Subversion

Colonialism and other aspects characterize the work of the painter Assad Azi. In one of his paintings of this subject (fig. 7),<sup>41</sup> Leda and the Swan appear in the midst of a desolate landscape flanked by two black masses, probably symbolizing forests. This Leda is active, clasping the neck of the swan, which is leaning on her. She observes a lustful creature, watching her from a distance. The creature recalls a Minotaur in its appearance, and a satyr in its behavior. However, the hybrid peering at Leda mating with Zeus disguised as a swan in Azi's painting could also be interpreted as a post-colonial metaphor. As immoderate and savage creatures, hybrids such as centaurs, satyrs, and Minotaur were connected in Antiquity with Otherness, in a world that emphasized the importance of race and ethnicity.<sup>42</sup> Hybrid creatures, half-human and half-bestial, fill Assad Azi's canvases in a body of works inspired by the Dionysian *Bacchanalia*.<sup>43</sup> Those hybrids dance in a deep forest; climb trees and peek at the couples enjoying themselves, dancing and making love in nature, and have been interpreted as symbols of Otherness in the Israeli socio-political context.<sup>44</sup> Hybridity is a prominent feature of the mixed identity of Assad Azi himself, who was born in Shfaram, a Druze village in the Galilee, obtained his education in Haifa and Tel Aviv, lives and works in Jaffa, and identifies with the Druze and Palestinian societies. The hybrid peering at Leda mating with Zeus disguised as a swan, following

<sup>37</sup> Memmi, 2005, 15, 47, 96.

<sup>38</sup> Memmi, 2005, 89 - 91.

<sup>39</sup> See in David LaChapelle's website: <http://www.davidlachapelle.com/series/rape-of-africa/>

<sup>40</sup> Aviv, 2012, 141.

<sup>41</sup> Assad Azi, Leda and the Swan, Oil on Canvas, 2002, 74X50cm. in: *Assad Azi: My Father is a Soldier, An exhibition catalogue* (2009). M. Ahronson (Curator). Ramat Gan: The Museum of Israeli Art, fig. 121.

<sup>42</sup> See: Lissarrague, F. (1992). *The Aesthetics of the Greek Banquet: Images of Wine and Ritual*. A. Szegedy-Maszak (Trans.). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 66; Cherry, J. (1995). *Mythical Beasts*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks in association with The British Library, 139-140; Stewart, 1997, 191-199; Hedreen, G. M. (2006). I Let Go My Force Just Touching Her Hair: Male Sexuality in Athenian Vase-Paintings of Silens in Iambic Poetry. *Classical Antiquity*, 25, 281-282. Durand, J. L., Frontisi-Ducroux, F., Lissarrague, F. (1989). Wine: Human and Divine. In C. Berard (Ed.), *A city of Images: Iconography and Society in Ancient Greece*. Princeton J.: Princeton University Press, 128, Figs. 172, 173. Lissarrague, F. (1990). The Sexual Life of Satyrs. In D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, and F. I. Zeitlin (Eds.), *Before Sexuality: the Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (pp. 53-82). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. On the principle of *autochthon*, see Loraux, N. (1986). *The Invention of Athens - The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 148-150; Herodotus (1987) *The History*. David Grene (Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Book I, a56.

<sup>43</sup> This body of works was shown at the exhibition *Bacchanalia* exhibited in N&N Aman gallery, Tel Aviv, May-June 2013, curated by Nava Sevilla Sadeh.

<sup>44</sup> Sevilla Sadeh, N. (2013). *Bacchanalia: Dionysian Aspects as symbols of Otherness in the Artwork of the Painter Assad Azi*. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 2, 46-57, accessed August 2013, <http://www.theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/view/171>

the interpretation of Ashkar's work, can now be conceived as a metaphor of the other who is observing the hedonism of his master. This is an active sober-minded Leda, as an active and aware other.

A similar image of Leda is shown in Azi's work *Untitled* (fig.8) that displays a collage constructed on several planes, with the Leda myth located as a painting in the upper section.<sup>45</sup> The image of Leda is Classical in nature and resembles Michelangelo's composition.<sup>46</sup> Leda is active here. She is tightly clasping the swan's neck and even raises her leg. There is a strong contact between the bird's beak and Leda's mouth. The pink background with the azure stains confers a dreamlike atmosphere upon the scene. This erotic scene is in contrast with the image beneath, which is a blueprint document. Below the document appear three ornamental images taken from a catalogue of ornaments owned by the artist, as symbols of traditional culture, and an inscription. The inscription reads - "Artist makes art", perhaps indicating that anyone who wants to understand art must first learn its language, just as anyone who wants to understand blueprints must study their symbols and signs. The artistic language of the whole composition is bilingual: Leda's scene is traditional whilst the document is a readymade. Indeed, in order to understand Azi's work one has to be familiar with several kinds of artistic languages and cultural backgrounds, whose interconnection might be considered subversive.

Painting in the twentieth century became anachronistic after the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the exploitation of the Third World by colonialism and imperialism, and the ecological failure of technology, as Thomas McEvilley puts it: "[...] to live with the fiction that all was well with the world and that history was taking us where we wanted to go". Thus, painting entered into a kind of disgraced exile.<sup>47</sup> McEvilley argues that painting returned from exile in the 1980s with a self-critical manner and self-mockery "in a costume of rags collected from everywhere".<sup>48</sup> Azi's work reflects this kind of self-criticism that arises from the equation between a ready-made and a western-origin myth carried out in a traditional manner. He elicits a discussion on the nature of painting and ornamental art against a ready-made, and thus the contrast between the traditional and the contemporary. The question is not whether painterly skills are measured against what is required for a ready-made, but what is immanent in a painting that is absent in a ready-made.

According to the Roman text *On the Sublime* by the Roman writer known as Longinus, art and literature have the ability to lock the sublime within a finite object or text.<sup>49</sup> In other words, visual and poetic art could be a channel leading from the mundane to the spiritual. Thus, the Leda and the Swan myth, in which a woman merges with a divine being, could be conceived as a union of the earthly human with the sublime, and thus as a metaphor for this concept. The ready-made in Azi's work may symbolize worldliness by its content, while the myth may embody the concept of the sublime, which was conceived in western thought as vast, untamed and overpowering.<sup>50</sup> *Pathos*, by Longinus, presents a major characteristic of the Sublime, of that which abounds with power and energy, and was perceived as a heavenly substance that amazed the onlooker.<sup>51</sup> *Pathos*, which is an emotional experience,<sup>52</sup> is one of the prominent qualities of painting. The emotional aspect is embodied by the unique and individual human touch immanent in the brush strokes and the drawing. The myth itself is based upon emotional aspects, being a story of temptation and unification. However, the portrayed women reveal no emotion in Classical art, even when they are attacked.<sup>53</sup> Azi's Leda is a typical image of Greek and Roman art, being constructed of conventional signifiers that function as an abstraction of emotionality. Olympia Bobou notes three features with which one should be familiar in order to understand the language of representing emotions in Greek art: knowledge of the text, knowledge of the symbolism of gestures and of the symbolism of facial expressions, which are minimalistic and reduced to

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<sup>45</sup> Assad Azi, *Untitled*, Acrylic on Paper, 1998, 35X25cm. Courtesy of the artist. In: *Assad Azi: Journey to the Chronicles, an exhibition catalogue* (1999). Meir Ahronson (Curator). Ramat Gan: The Museum of Israeli Art, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Michelangelo's Leda and the Swan commissioned for Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara, is known through an engraving by Cornelius Bos and a painting by Rosso Fiorentino. See: Liebert, R. S. (1983). *Michelangelo: a psychoanalytic study of his life and images*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 247-261, figs. 15-17, 15-18.

<sup>47</sup> McEvilley, T. (1993). *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 4, 6.

<sup>48</sup> McEvilley, 1993, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Longinus (1964). *On the Sublime*. D. A. Russell (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1; McEvilley, 1993, 10.

<sup>50</sup> McEvilley, 1993, 10-11.

<sup>51</sup> Longinus, 1964, 1, 29, I.

<sup>52</sup> See Aristotle's discussion on emotions: Aristotle (1991). *The Art of Rhetoric*. H.C. Lawson-Tancred (Trans.). New York: Penguin Books, book 2.

<sup>53</sup> Bubou, O. (2012). Emotions in Greek Art. In A. Chaniotis and P. Ducrey (Eds.). *Unveiling Emotions: Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*. Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag, 295.

their essential features.<sup>54</sup> The gestures and body language of Leda in Azi's work are also relatively moderate, as she clasps the swan's neck and raises her leg. These gestures and the strong contact between the bird's beak and her mouth signify her devotion to a great divinity, as a symbol of the human submission to the sublime that lies beyond. To use Fredric Jameson's perception, the worldliness of the sexual act of the myth is converted into the materiality of the brush strokes and the canvas.<sup>55</sup> This new corporeality possesses a metaphysical substance, as a signifier or a symptom of a wider existence that is beyond human perception.

Jameson however, notes the disharmony between the artistic language of the post-modern "nostalgia" and real historicism.<sup>56</sup> This disharmony is embodied by the ready-made, which is a simulacrum detached from any source, as a disconnected signifier.<sup>57</sup> Technology, which is symbolized by the blueprint, is by Marxism, a development of the Capital. Most of the contemporary technology is in effect merely a result of reproduction processes that produce more simulacra.<sup>58</sup> Jameson perceives architecture as the most salient feature of technological and aesthetic post-modern changes.<sup>59</sup> Thus, this ready-made blueprint may symbolize the dominance of capitalistic organizations over contemporary culture, and the alienation between individuals and the culture in which they dwell.

The Leda and the Swan myth, painted in a traditional technique, is thus associated with Azi's painting style, while the blueprint is a ready-made that embodies the contemporary culture that Azi grudgingly accepts. The message is thus subversive: on the one hand, his necessity, as belonging to a minority and being another, to accept the dominant culture in which he lives; and as an artist, to accept artistic attitudes that dismiss the importance of traditional techniques.

### **Emotion and Suffering**

The emotional aspect discussed in connection with Asad Azi's work was to become the main issue in an oil on canvas work by the artist Gad Apotecker (fig. 9).<sup>60</sup> The composition is based upon a fresco by Michelangelo.<sup>61</sup> In both works the meeting point is between the bird's beak and Leda's mouth, as a kiss, while the swan lies between Leda's legs. This position is reminiscent of a Roman mosaic and a wall painting from Pompeii,<sup>62</sup> in the sense that Leda is a participant in the sexual act, as opposed to the passive image of Dvora Morag's Leda. Leda's uplifted face, directed slightly to the side, provides a sense of emotion to the scene in Apotecker's work. The artistic language enhances the emotional aspect through the expressive brush strokes and the liquidity of the color work, which resembles bleeding, as if the figure of Leda is washed in blood. The color work process is evident in the pink-reddish color splashes in the preparatory sketch (fig. 10). This bleeding Leda reflects the threat of extinction existing in an encounter between a mortal and a god, like Semele who was consumed by the awful radiance of Zeus. Likewise, this image relocates the discussion to the meanings of the individual's emotions; and, particularly, the meanings of the emotions of love. In Classical thought love had a double meaning. The duality of love is discussed in the *Symposium* dialogue by Plato, in which the first aspect of love derives from *Aphrodite Ourania* and causes an experience of exultation, while the second derives from *Aphrodite Pandemos*, and causes mortals to become attracted to physical pleasures.<sup>63</sup> The wise woman Diotima, to whom Socrates ascribes his words, emphasizes the dire straits of those who are subjugated to desire.<sup>64</sup> In the *Laws*, the sickness of love is one of the corporeal desires and endless pleasures that never satisfy.<sup>65</sup> Socrates defines the influence of *Eros* in

<sup>54</sup> Bubou, 2012, 273-278.

<sup>55</sup> Fredric Jameson refers to Van Gogh's oil on canvas – the peasant's shoes, as a manifestation to the compensation of one physical appearance, which is the earth and material objects, by another kind of corporeality – oil colors. See: Jameson, F. (1992). *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 7-8.

<sup>56</sup> Jameson, 1992, 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> Jameson, 1992, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Jameson, 1992, 35-37.

<sup>59</sup> Jameson, 1992, 38-45.

<sup>60</sup> Apotecker's work was exhibited in Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Palazzo Pitti in an exhibition held in 5-11 May 2003. See: *Gad Apotecker, Per Cio Che e – Interpretazione della scultura, an exhibition catalogue* (2003). Firenze: Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

<sup>61</sup> See note 43.

<sup>62</sup> The Leda and the Swan scene is a fragment from a large mosaic carpet of Ganymede and the Seasons from El Jem, 476CMX370CM, 2nd Century AD, El Jem museum. See in: Blanchard-Lemee, M., Ennaifer, M., Slim, H., Slim, L. (1995). *Sols de L'Afrique Romaine: mosaïques de Tunisie*. Paris: Impr. nationale, Fig. 196.

<sup>63</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 180-181; Thornton, B. S. (1997). *Eros: the Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 55-56#

<sup>64</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 207.

<sup>65</sup> Plato (1963). *Laws*. In E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Eds.), *the Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 714 a#



the words: "We are slaves to its service".<sup>66</sup> The violent influence of *Eros* is expressed in his arrow, and is described by Sappho: "Eros makes me shiver again, strengthless in the knees, Eros gall and honey, Snake-sly, invincible."<sup>67</sup> *Eros* is identified with fire by his epithet – *Thermos Eros*, because, like fire, he too can become very dangerous and out of control.<sup>68</sup> Sappho made use of this metaphor in the poetic phrase: "Thin fire spreads beneath my skin".<sup>69</sup> The influence of *Eros* is also described, as Thornton has noted, in a metaphor of melting that characterizes the way passion melts rationality and self-control.<sup>70</sup> Medea's mind, for example, was melted by Jason's striking beauty.<sup>71</sup> The unexpected outburst of love at first sight would seem to be reflected in the expressiveness of Apoteker's work. The mysterious and magical appeal of this kind of love gives way at times to a cynical approach, as described by Eva Illouz, who asks: Why has love lost its ability to be a magical experience? The answer to this question lies, as Illouz argues, in the rationality of life and the fact that life has become increasingly methodical and controlled by reason. Love has been analyzed by science in disciplines such as psychoanalysis, psychology, biology, and neuroscience. This rationality has reduced the magic and the spontaneity of love at first sight, depriving it of its mysterious charm, invalidating the affinity of love with the transcendental, and challenging the notion whereby love is an unspeakable experience. The romantic suffering has become unjustified, a kind of "mistake"; the impulsive emotions have been replaced by calculations of self-interest; the longing to merge with the object of love has become a symptom of undeveloped personality; and love and self-satisfaction have become objects of utopic fantasy.<sup>72</sup> The pink and azure background of Apoteker's painting, and especially that of the sketch, together with a feeling of free hand-work, locate it within the realm of fantasy and imagination, which Illouz conceives as the most dominant aspect of love, and a highly influential emotional aspect.<sup>73</sup> She cites the way Madam Bovary imagines her lover, who becomes so genuine and achievable that she trembles with excitement, but the lover immediately becomes indistinct.<sup>74</sup> Unrealized love is made up of passion and fantasy; and it seems that it is the passion for passion that has become the main goal. The fantasy is for itself, and a source of pleasure in a world dominated by technological devices that can make the absent present, and make love a delightful fiction.<sup>75</sup> Thus, love no longer hurts, but causes continual moments of anticipation, and intermittent imaginary and realistic fulfillments.

### Phantasmagoria

The images of Leda and the Swan by the painter Joshua Borkovsky suggest an embodiment of the elusive aspects of love, characteristic to post-modernism. In a series of works of inject print pigment on paper Leda appears in different positions, holding the Swan's neck as it approaches her (fig. 11). The pointillist technique creates an obscure image, like a hallucination or a dream. The fragmented frame bestows a kind of intimacy, drawing in the spectator like a voyeur. In another work, made as a tribute to Tintoretto (fig. 12),<sup>76</sup> Borkovsky adopted the Venetian Renaissance painter's composition that emphasizes Leda's hesitance against the Swan's lust.<sup>77</sup> As opposed to the naturalistic style of Tintoretto, Borkovsky's brushwork is pointillist: the figures and the background are composed of negative or positive dots, in accordance with the clarity or darkness of the images. The effect of the scene is dreamlike and hallucinatory and emphasizes a sense of delay, both in the encounter between Leda and the Swan, and in the encounter between the spectator and the scene. In another work (fig. 13),<sup>78</sup> the image almost completely disappears, in a way reminiscent of Malevich's "White on White".<sup>79</sup> The spectator is invited to linger and contemplate the painting. The questions that arise are: what is the meaning of this contemplation, and how is it connected to the Leda and the Swan myth?

<sup>66</sup> Plato (1982). *Phaidon*. In H. N. Fowler (Trans.). *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, V. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 66#

<sup>67</sup> *Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman – Three Lyric Poets of the Late Greek Bronze Age* (1980). G. Davenport (Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 65, ll. Thornton, 1997, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Thornton, 1997, 31#

<sup>69</sup> Sappho, 20.10.

<sup>70</sup> Thornton, 1997, 31.

<sup>71</sup> Thornton, 1997, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Illouz, 2013, 179-188, 224.

<sup>73</sup> Illouz, 2013, 220-230.

<sup>74</sup> Flaubert, G. (1993). *Madame Bovary*. Paris: Booking International, 245; Illouz, 2013, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Illouz, 2013, 257.

<sup>76</sup> Borkovsky's work was exhibited in the exhibition *Vera Icon* in Noga gallery, Tel Aviv, October 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Tintoretto, Leda and the Swan, oil on canvas, 167cmX 221cm, 1550/5, Uffizi, Florence. In: Nickols, T. (1999). *Tintoretto: tradition and Identity*. London: Reaktion Books, Fig.72.

<sup>78</sup> The work was exhibited in the exhibition *Vera Icon* in Noga gallery, Tel Aviv, October 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition – White on White*, oil on canvas, 170.4cmX75.4cm, 1918, MOMA. In: Drutt, M. (2003). *Kazimir Malevich – Suprematism*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 201.

The exhibition *Vera Icon* (Noga gallery, Tel Aviv, October 2008) which means "true image", posed questions of the possibility and veracity of representation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty relates to this concept: "The imaginary is much closer to the real and much farther away".<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the imaginary is close to the real because it derives its appearance from it; while on the other hand, the imaginary is farther away because it is only an analogy of it. Merleau-Ponty adds that our corporeal eyes are much more than receptors of light, colors, and lines,<sup>81</sup> indicating that contemplation varies and differs. Merleau-Ponty notes that the ability of the artist to observe and contemplate is acquired by a process and practice in order to attend to the enigma of visibility.<sup>82</sup> He also argues that painting gives existence to what the secular perception conceives as invisible,<sup>83</sup> and that the painter's vision is a prolonged birth.<sup>84</sup> Merleau-Ponty discerns a kind of "active contemplation",<sup>85</sup> which seems to be very suitable concerning Borkovsky's works; and he concludes his essay by asserting that interpretation of a work of art is infinite and lies in the mind of the beholder.<sup>86</sup>

Following Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher Hagi Kenaan contends that Borkovsky's painting is in a state of active being, and of constant becoming. The painting is an occurrence and its inner form is an event: "For Borkovsky the image is never something that is simply there before the eye; rather, it is present as a constant process of striving *toward* and of negotiating *with*, the eye".<sup>87</sup> Kenaan argues that Borkovsky's painting recalls an ability that has been almost entirely lost – the ability to look, and presents a visual dimension that is essential to painting.<sup>88</sup> He contends that Borkovsky's painting is philosophical, not because it presents philosophical contents, but, quite the contrary, because of its ability to show, to bring to presence, what contents generally conceal.<sup>89</sup>

The contemplative effect of the scene, and its clarity and essential quality, are Classical in nature and allude to a certain longing for a Classical aesthetic. In this context we should note the concept posited by Pierre Hadot, who suggests that the main difference between Ancient and contemporary philosophy is that the Ancient one was a way of life, and interwoven tightly into every aspect of life, in contrast to the alienated and purely academic character of modern-day philosophy. According to Hadot, the act of contemplation played an active part in the Ancient thinkers' life. Borkovsky's work requires a contemplative observation and an active involvement by the spectator in the visual experience, in seeking to capture the illusive image. This illusive image is the embodiment of phantasmagoria in Borkovsky's work. Kenaan notes in this context terms inherent in Classical thought: *eikon*, which refers to phenomena such as shadows, reflections, and paintings; and *eidolon*, which refers to dreams, visions, divine messages, and appearances of the dead to the living – phantoms.<sup>90</sup> When Odysseus descends to Hades, the *eidolon* of his dead mother appears to him. This appearance is so substantial that the hero speaks with the *eidolon* as if it was a human being. However, when the conversation ends, and Odysseus tries to embrace his mother, the *eidolon* slips away from his hands three times, like a shadow or a dream.<sup>91</sup>

The aspect of phantasmagoria in relation to the subject of Leda and the Swan has possible connections with questions concerning the veracity of the scene and, therefore, the veracity of the encounter with the god. As discussed at the beginning of this article, a sacred union with the divine was the most desired aspiration in Antiquity. An illusion of merging with the divine, or what was defined by Plotinus as "the One" (Hen), was attained only by entering into a state of ecstasy in a cultic ritual in which the participants became one with the god (*entheos*, *enthusiasmus*).<sup>92</sup> Borkovsky's union between Leda and the god disguised as a swan seems to display an elusive and hallucinatory nature, as a phantasy that can never really happen, in a world in which love has become elusive, like a slippery deceitful god disguised as a bull, a golden rain or a white swan.

<sup>80</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004). *L'oeil et l'esprit*. E. Dorfman (Trans.). Tel Aviv: Resling, 39.

<sup>81</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 39.

<sup>82</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 39.

<sup>83</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 41.

<sup>84</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 44.

<sup>85</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 58.

<sup>86</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2004, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Kenaan, H. (2013). Joshua Borkovsky: Painting as a Meta-Optics. In *Veronese Green - Joshua Borkovsky: Paintings, 1987-2012, an exhibition catalogue*, December 2012 – April 2013. Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 157, 158.

<sup>88</sup> Kenaan, 2013, 159.

<sup>89</sup> Kenaan, 2013, 158.

<sup>90</sup> Kenaan, 2013, 155-156. See: Vernant, J. P. (1991). The Birth of Images. In J. P. Vernant and F. I. Zeitlin (Eds.), *Mortals and immortals: collected essays*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 164-185.

<sup>91</sup> Homer (1961). *The Odyssey* (1961). R. Fitzgerald (Trans.). Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 206-208. Kenaan, 2013, 155.

<sup>92</sup> See note 7.

## Conclusions

The motif of the abduction of women in Classical Antiquity is loaded with meanings pertaining to social, gender, spiritual and religious contexts. The subject of Leda and the Swan is frequent in the work of Jewish and Arab Israeli artists. However, while the original Classical implication of these works remains immanent, they also enhance and even sharpen the here-and-now issues, with the contemporary images obtaining additional meanings related to actual contexts, summarized as follows.

The gender aspect in abduction myths, in this case Leda and the Swan, and its artistic manifestations in Antiquity, implies the inferiority of women in comparison to men. However, in Dvora Morag's images of Leda and the Swan, the imbalance between the submissive, obedient and available womanly image and the dominant swan(s) becomes extreme and enhances its violent aspect. Morag's Leda seems detached and alienated from her emotions and will. Ostensibly, these images are not feminist ones at all. However, the messages they transmit relate to the post-feminist phenomenon based on the sociologist Eva Illouz's analysis of the new situation ensuing from the liberal sexual behavior that arose following the second wave of feminism. The cost of this sexual liberation, as Illouz explains, is that of emotional suffering, confusion, and a sense of hopelessness, deriving from the difference between political or institutional liberty and sexual liberty, and because the way that women and men experience intimacy is different. This new freedom of sexual behavior, according to Illouz, resulted in the emergence of a new form of emotional control of men over women, which is reflected in Morag's work. The socio-gender aspect becomes even more extreme in another image by Morag, in which Leda becomes a black woman, while Zeus in the guise of a swan becomes pink. This image matches Bell Hook's critique of hierarchical interracial relationships and the dual suppression of black women, by sexism and by racism.

The colonial metaphor of abduction scenes in Antiquity has metamorphosed into a post-colonial statement in the performance-installation *Mashkhara* by the artist Anisa Ashkar. Ashkar's performance can be deciphered in light of post-colonial thought by such thinkers as Homi Bhabha and Alber Memmi, in considering the relationship between colonized and colonizer. This is particularly apparent in regard to Memmi's apprehension of the colonized returning to their original language and Ashkar's subversive use of the written word. The performance thus seems metaphorically to symbolize a struggle on several levels: between god and mortal, as told in the myth; between the sexes; between classes; and between cultures.

Asad Azi's work is characterized by several aspects of subversion. As a socio-political artist, Azi's Leda and the Swan could be interpreted as a manifestation of the colonizers' hedonism, watched from behind by a hybrid creature that is a symbol of otherness. Another subversive message can be found in a work by Azi composed of acrylic paint on paper together with a readymade blueprint. This raises questions concerning the qualities of painting in comparison to the qualities of a readymade; and, in a broader sense, the conflict between the traditional and the contemporary that occupies Azi's artistic work. The uniqueness of painting lies in the individual touch immanent in the brushstrokes.

The artistic language of Gad Apotecker's oil on canvas work enhances the emotional aspect through the expressive brush strokes and the liquidity of the color work, which resembles bleeding, as if the figure of Leda is washed in blood. This bleeding Leda reflects the threat of extinction that exists in an encounter between a mortal and a god. This image relocates the discussion to the meanings of the individual's emotions and the sickness of love, which was a subject of significance in Classical literature and philosophy. The mysterious and magical appeal of love has given way in the contemporary world to a cynical approach, as described by Eva Illouz, with the impulsive emotions having been replaced by calculations of self-interest. Love has become a utopic fantasy, as reflected in the pink and azure background of Apotecker's painting, and even more intensely in the free-hand work of the sketch.

Love as a utopic phantasmagoria is the concern of the artist Joshua Borkovsky, who poses in his works questions of the very possibility and veracity of representation. This accords with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's apprehension of the imaginary as both close to and, at the same time, farther away from the real, and his discernment of a kind of "active contemplation". This is a very salient character of Borkovsky's work and is reflected in Hagi Kanaan's argument in regard to Borkovsky's painting as recalling an ability that has been almost entirely lost in contemporary art - the ability to contemplate. Borkovsky's work requires a contemplative observation and an active involvement by the observer in the visual experience, in an effort to capture the illusive image, which offers a metaphor of the lost hallucinatory divine love.

Love becomes so illusory, elusive, and unobtainable that everything turns upside-down; and although we have ostensibly disconnected from the Classical world, love in fact returns to being something abstract and mythological, and thereby powerfully returns us back to that world.



Fig. 1 Dvora Morag, Leda and the Swan, Polyurethane, 2008, 28X45X40cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 2 Dvora Morag, Leda and the Swan, Polyurethane, 2008, 17X35X28cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 3 Dorit Feldman, from the series "Body Art", 1980s, Digital print (restored) and clay object, 60X40X3cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 4 Dvora Morag, Leda and the Swan, Polyurethane, 2008, 17X48X25cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 5 Anisa Ashkar, Mashkhara, Performance-installation, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, 2009  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 6 Anisa Ashkar, Mashkhara, Performance-installation, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, 2009  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 7 Assad Azi, Leda and the Swan, Oil on Canvas, 2002, 74X50cm  
Courtesy of the artist Source: see footnote 40



Fig. 9 Gad Apotecker, Leda e il cigno, Oil and ink on linen, 2002, 80X110cm  
Courtesy of the artist

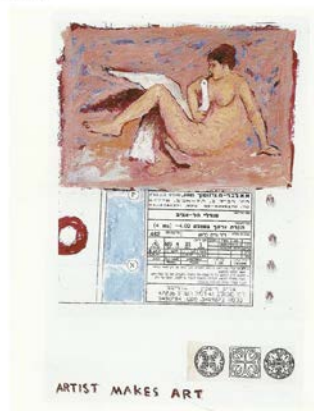


Fig. 8 Assad Azi, Untitled, Acrylic on Paper, 1998, 35X25cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 10 Gad Apotecker, *Leda e il cigno*, Oil and ink on paper (sketch), 2002, 29.7X42cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 11 Joshua Borkovsky, *Leda and the Swan*, Inject printing on archival paper, 2007, each one 90X90cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 12 Joshua Borkovsky, *Leda and the Swan*, Oil on Canvas, 2008, 140X140cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 13 Joshua Borkovsky, *Leda and the Swan*, Oil on Canvas, 2008, 45X40cm  
Courtesy of the artist