Introduction

When Esther Vainstein speaks of context, it is the allure of the land, its spaciousness, its aridity, the cycles of death and rebirth evident in rocks and sand, covered and uncovered, by the winds off the Pacific. Esther Vainstein b. 1947 is a multilingual cosmopolitan first- generation Jewish Peruvian artist. She is the age of the modern state of Israel and can been seen as a cultural agent, trained as a draftsperson and painter, embracing post modern globalism. In a section of Lima, at times in San Isidro and other times in Barranco, Esther Vainstein has matured into adulthood, married, raised her two daughters, separated from her husband, and has continued to hold a pivotal role in the cultural life of the city. She is represented currently by the Galeria Lucia de la Puente in Lima.

Esther Vainstein, like Austrian-born Jewish artist Anna Ticho (1894-1980), sees the reflective gaze of the barrenness of the land steeped in history, both political and personal. Boris Schatz founded the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem in 1906. Bezalel became known for its mediated images of iconographic representations of local indigenous cultures and the utopian pioneering vision of Eastern European Jewish émigrés for the newly forming state of Israel. During the twentieth century, issues of Jewish nationalism, ethnic identity and religious practice have focused on the matrix of Israel and the Diaspora. Cultural and artistic practices have also been keenly a part of the center/periphery continuum. In the last decade of the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century, conceptualizing Jewish life in cities around the world – Berlin, Moscow, Cape Town, Melbourne, New York, Sao Paolo - as well as in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem creates an invisible web in a post-Zionist context where there is no center or periphery. Responding to political, economic and aesthetic issues, contemporary Jewish Latin American artists, through international travel and often temporary European or North American residencies, have a global perspective. Being an artist and living, in what has been called the Diaspora – any country/city outside of the state of Israel, now speaks to a vital extension, diffusion not a disappearance, of Jewish culture in various locales around the world. The proliferation of residencies of Jewish artists creates a borderless dialogue encouraging inventive approaches to making works of art.

Adobes are the building blocks of most urban and rural buildings in Peru. When painted white or other colors, the mud bricks are disguised but still the shell of buildings that have no heat or electricity embedded within their walls. The adobes speak of the
spirit of the country but also its ingenuity of surviving the Latin American wet and dry seasons and the accompanying winds and fog. Esther Vainstein’s adobes form a type of artistic signature for her where the mud bricks laced with straw and small stones form the building blocks of her installations. In her work over the last twenty-five years, colored sand, thread, stones, wire, and natural materials such as coffee grinds, honey, butterflies, and red chilies infuse her painterly and sculptural work.

On even the shortest trip to Peru, one recognizes the combative history of colonialism. The economic and military strength of mid sixteenth century Inca culture is evident from present-day Colombia to northern Chile. Inca archaeological history is being retold thru new discoveries of fifteen and sixteen century artistic production and architectural accomplishments. It is an endless historical unraveling that is interwoven into Esther Vainstein’s own work. In the layering of pre-Inca Andean cultures, Inca and colonialist archaeological history throughout Peru, one can also recognize the endemic model for a hybridity of cultures in the artist’s work. The following interview with Esther Vainstein reveals a latitudinal parallelism between North and South American Jewish artists’ journeys in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Divergence, based on discrete locales and individual proclivities is paired with a convergence centering on the circuitry of ‘otherness’ in contemporary work by Jewish artists. It is, however, Esther Vainstein’s endless creativity and persistent engagement in global artistic practice that constitutes the significance of her work.

Interview

Fattal: A visitor to Peru, even in the large city of Lima, recognizes that many of the buildings are constructed with mud brick. The mud brick is taken straight from the earth, mixed with straw and stacked on top of each other. The mud bricks harden and inhabitants of the houses paint the dried mud bricks red, white, blue, and other colors. There are no electrical wires, nor any indication of plumbing in these mud walls of the houses. You use these mud bricks as an essential medium for your current installations. What do they represent to you, and why do you use the land itself as your medium?

Vainstein: A conical form which I use comes from the huge adobones that were employed in Chan Chan, a site north a Lima, a whole city, in Trujillo. They measure up to two meters in height and weigh 100 kilos each. In my 1986 installation, I first used these large adobes in the form of a tomb/womb at the same time. It represented life and death. Duality was a very important issue for Pre-Colombian and then Inca thought. In 1987, I made a smaller version 30 centimeters in height of the same conical abodes, using them in the form of dunes in the desert. This version of the adobes is the one I currently use in installations. For the September 2007 show in Lima, I have remade the bigger adobones. My use of earth and sand in my work has to do both with the Pachamama
(Mother Earth) religious meaning in Peru and the fact that I was looking for roots in a country that I was in, as a first generation Peruvian.

**Fattal:** The large abstract paintings you are working on dissolve the gray of the sky and vast expanse of the sea. You are moving beyond paint to include the stain of coffee and other indigenous plants in your work for their translucency and extension to the locale. Has this attachment to place been an ongoing theme in your work?

**Vainstein:** Yes. Attachment to place and especially the desert and the sea which are present in my everyday life are very important to my work. Pre-Colombian sites such as Nazca, Chan Chan, Paracas, and Chancay are present in my work as are their surroundings. The Llama Cemetery in Paracas, Tambo Colorado in Pisco and other places which strike my eye become inspirational for me; I then follow-up by studying the places in books and other archaeological sources.

**Fattal:** The Andean and then Inca peoples were masters at shaping the clay of the earth into vessels; distinctive to the region are the varied positions of the clay copulating figures that are integral parts of the vessels themselves. Do you see the concave and convex patterning in your installations of the mud bricks adroitly referencing these vessels in the intimacy of their subject?

**Vainstein:** I do not necessarily see the compositional patterning of abodes in my installations as referencing artifacts from Andean and Inca civilizations. I have worked with shapes from textiles and buildings but also bones and dunes in the desert. The concave and convex shapes in the adobe installations relate more to being protective. The copulating clay figurines known as huacos are not reflected in my work.

**Fattal:** The fiction of the acceptance of Christianity by the Incas and pre-Inca people, perhaps, underscores the ongoing tension between what is overt and covert in visual images. The embedding of mountains and local animals into historical religious paintings of the countries (from southern Colombia, to Ecuador, to Peru, to a small western part of Brazil, to northern Chile) making up the Inca empire acquiesces to the Conquistadors’ demands, while concurrently establishes a mode of protest. Has revolt and rebellion been canonized into contemporary artistic expression?

**Vainstein:** Revolt and rebellion have always been present in Peruvian art, since the Spaniards and the Conquest (1532) up to the horrors of The Shining Path in the late 1980s and 1990s. There is a group of young artists now who follow this path and represent all kinds of local and world events about war and terror as a symbol of eternal struggle to free the country of external turmoil. The War of Independence (1866) and the war with Chile (1879-83) are often depicted in these paintings.
Fattal: Growing up in Lima, your parents were first generation Jews from Poland and Romania who spoke Yiddish at home and maintained Friday Shabbat dinners. Though your mother was trained as a physician, she never worked as a doctor. Your father worked very hard in the textile industry and managed factories employing many people. Do you think your long standing relationship with factory workers, in your husband’s textile mill, instilled a deep understanding of the tenacity, strength and precision needed to create artifacts? This is particularly relevant since you have a need for assistants in forming the mud bricks and in transporting the mud and molds to make the bricks for your works of art.

Vainstein: My parents came from Europe, my mother at age thirteen from Poland and my father at age twelve from Romania. My father had an import and distribution textile business where I worked for about six years. My husband owned a big textile mill with hundreds of workers and I worked with him for several years and then used and still use the premises to do my installations. I had a lot of help from the workers during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s for my installations. The factory closed after that and now it is no longer a textile mill but is rented to different groups of people. I am one of these people and have a large space to keep the big pieces and a small piece of land to do the adobe pieces. The workers I have now are people who have worked making adobe bricks all their lives, most of them come from the north of Peru. My headworker used to be the carpenter in the mill but now at age eighty is retired. Precision in making art has always been important for me. My drawings, paintings, and other installations all use the same method or approach. I spend a large amount of time studying, reading, travelling, and learning about the themes that interest me. Concept and form go together in my work.

Fattal: Some of your paintings have incorporated sewn designs onto the canvas. Archaeology in Peru is ongoing and revealing highly valued textiles found on mummies and in grave sites from the Nazca and Inca peoples. Have you taken the extraordinary history of textiles produced by the Andean people, reinforced by your own families’ daily oversight of a textile mill and woven linear patterns into your work?

Vainstein: I have used textile designs, mostly from Chancay and Paracas, on my sand carpet installations. For the show I had in 1987 in New York at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MOCHA), I did a three-color sand carpet, with a Chancay design that represents a stairway, uniting earth and sky. Again, a duality appears in my work, as in the sand carpet I did for the 1987 Sao Paolo Bienal which was a Nazca Pre-Colombian design of a bat or a spider, red on black/black on red. I do not think that my parents’ and husband’s textile business and mill had anything to do with my work at the time nor do I see them as related to the entrepreneurial work surrounding textiles. Regarding my latest drawings that include sewn designs, I see the sewn designs as reinforcing, drawing and not particularly related to stitching or constructing garments from fabrics or textiles.
Fattal: You represented Peru in 1983 and in 1987 at the Sao Paolo Bienale. In the Bienale in 1987, your space was adjacent to that of Anselm Kiefer. Why do you think he befriended you after learning of your Jewish background? Why do you think that was important to him?

Vainstein: The Jewish issue was immediately apparent when he heard my first and last names when we were introduced to each other. Anselm Kiefer was very helpful with managing my assigned space and in meeting new people. We had a good friendship and he was very good with my daughters who helped me assemble the sand carpet that was part of the Sao Paolo Bienal installation. Because the sand carpet took several days to complete, we got to know each other over a period of time. Both he and his curator liked the installation. He was the most important artist present and he took me with him everywhere he went so that my circle of acquaintances widened during the opening of the Bienal. I think being Jewish was important to him; he told me, how he had to grow up in a farm during World War II keeping a low profile. He is a reserved person, not at all an open person, and does not like to have his picture taken. We travelled a bit together but we have lost contact over the years.

Fattal: The seashore town of Paracas, with its inland Llama cemetery, has been an area of particular interest to you. The Llama cemetery is not well known but when one sees the animals white bones strewn out across the dry land, you can see a design of death. What have you taken from this locale for your work?

Vainstein: I first saw the Llama cemetery in Paracas ten years before I did my first installation using it as a subject. I kept going to Paracas almost once a month for a long time. I still find the color of the desert and the surroundings fascinating. The arid expanse of land in approaching the cemetery and the cemetery itself was then the theme I chose for the long drawing I did for the 1983 Sao Paolo Bienal installation. Very strong winds called Paracas, change the desert and cover and uncover archaeological sites in this area. In the last few years, the gas company has been putting ducts very close to the Natural Reserve which has changed the landscape. But the Llama cemetery with the mystery surrounding it and the sound of the wind or lack of sound, depending on the day, is a place that I will always remember as the first element in Pre-Colombian culture that directed my artistic vision.

Fattal: Your drawings on large, at times, horizontal canvases recall the emerging and distinct outlines of the stones and earth apparent in Paracas and in parts of the desert that extends for a great distance paralleling the Pacific Ocean in Peru. The subtle appearance and then disappearance of the outlines of rocks in the windswept desolate landscape are embedded in your work. The desert has a monumental barrenness that
alludes to past history. How should one interpret your depictions of fleeting, yet, vast vistas of desert sands and rocks?

**Vainstein:** If I am working near or on an archaeological site, I will then study and investigate what has been written about it and visit it as many times as I can. In regard to the materials I use in my installations, I would like to reiterate that modern Peruvian people still participate in rituals of offerings to Pachamama/Mother Earth. For instance, I make an offering to Mother Earth before I pick up bones in the Llama cemetery and/or if I climb a hill, I take a stone from the bottom of the hill and leave it on top. These offerings are a symbolic way of acknowledging adoration and asking permission to visit the land with its innumerable stones and exceedingly tall mountains and receive an acceptance from Mother Earth.

**Fattal:** You were a translator for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in Peru for their coverage of important historical and naturalistic sites/events. The BBC had to leave Peru in the 1980s due to the activities of The Shining Path, a rebel Maoist insurgency, who occupied the central part of the country. The Shining Path controlled the roads thereby terrorizing travelers, Peruvians and tourists, stifling economic revival. Where were the sympathies of the art community during this time? Can you explain from your memories of this time, how terror had instilled itself in Peruvian life?

**Vainstein:** At the beginning of The Shining Path movement, when it was only an ideology, there were many artists and intellectuals who had sympathy for the movement. As soon as it became a violent movement and hidden ideas started to appear, the public’s sympathies dissipated. In the beginning, I can’t remember if there was an artistic movement aligned with/or against The Shining Path. It was after ten years of internal terror and war, when the movement was thought to be over, as Abimael Guzman, the founder and leader of the movement was arrested, that a group of marginal artists took the theme of terror for their work. I think that photography was the art form that created the most important documentation of The Shining Path.

The ideology of The Shining Path took a far back seat to the reality of living with terror every day. Though everyone tried to behave normally, I remember not letting my children go to the movies on Sundays to keep them away from being a possible target. I was in Miraflores when a bomb in Tarata went off and I was quite shaken as all the windows broke in the café I was sitting in. We all lived in terror and only when we travelled outside of the country did we feel safe. I think it is the other way around now. I worry about my daughter in New York and, of course, in Miami when these cities are listed as potential terrorist targets. Blackouts and a military presence in the streets were very common during the late 1980s and early 1990s during the reign of The Shining Path. On a personal level, after the period of The Shining Path, I never returned to my carefree
travels throughout the country of Peru, where I had frequently hiked in various parts of
the mountains, and took extended trips to the jungle.

**Fattal:** Your photo has been a part of the Style/Art sections of Peruvian newspapers and
magazines for many years. Do you feel there is a tight knit group of Peruvian writers,
playwrights, artists, and musicians who reinforce each other’s production? How severely
do the political and economic cycles in Peru affect the working conditions of artists in
Peru?

**Vainstein:** I am very much a part of artistic circles in Lima. Artists are mainly in Lima
with small groups in Trujillo in the northern section of Peru and Arequipa in the central
coastal area of Peru and Iquitos, inland at the headwaters of the Amazon River, in the
jungle. Cusco, the city that was an Inca stronghold and the doorway to Macchu Picchu
high in the Andean mountains has a small art movement within the city. The cultural
circle of artists and writers in Lima do group together and reinforce each other. The
fortunes of the art community are related to the political and economic cycles of the
country. The theatrical scene is very vibrant now in Lima and many writers are working
and producing work. There has been little governmental support for the arts which is,
perhaps, the reason that it is still impossible to have a Museum of Modern or
Contemporary Art in Lima.

**Fattal:** You have two daughters and you were very close to both of your parents. You
have lived in San Isidro, a lovely section of Lima with parks and gardens. It is also where
there is a Jewish school and where most of the Jewish community lives. You travel freely
all over the city and, at another point in your life, you traveled internationally. Your
present home is in a nearby section to San Isidro, called Barranco, which has also been
the location of your studio for twenty years. You made mention that if the main art school
in Peru did not produce artists for another 20 years, there still would be an overabundance
of artists in Peru. Is there a next generation of Jewish artists in Peru or does the global
community now require itinerancy and/or more than one residence?

**Vainstein:** I do not see a next generation of Jewish artists in Lima. There are only a few
of us here in Lima. It is, however, to our credit that artists like Moico Yaker, a Jewish
Peruvian artist (from Arequipa) is representing Peru at the 2007 Venice Biennale.
Therefore, it is very important to be able to travel and participate internationally in big
global and Latin American art exhibitions. Peruvian artists, in general, however are often
not included in large travelling art exhibitions limiting our exposure to global art circuits.
There is no contact between the Peruvian art communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish,
and those in Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia.

**Fattal:** On the day your mother died seven years ago, you remember clearly her calling
you on the phone telling you of her whereabouts. She would say I am going to a friend’s

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house, I am now going shopping, and I am now taking a nap. She died peacefully at
the Friday night dinner table that night with her family around her. In a university
partnership with architectural students, you created a series of floor lamps, perhaps, as
eternal lights. What is your interpretation of the gallery-sized installations of floor lamps
created immediately after your mother’s death?

Vainstein: Jews do not put lamps on the floor except during mourning. With this fact,
and that I put nine lamps on the floor, and that they were all connected and forming a
kind of serpent shape, was a direct reference to the fact that I was in mourning. The
number and name of the piece, nine in the evening (9:00 pm) was the hour she died.

Fattal: Many Jewish Latin American artists have been representatives in the Sao Paolo
Bienal – Paolo Bruscky, Nelson Leirner, Abraham Palatnick, Guillermo Kuitca, Mira
Schendel, etc. Could you explain to readers ‘north of the border’ how the seemingly
seamless integration of artists from diverse backgrounds has proven to be a continual
source of visual innovation in countries where Catholicism is the state religion and
church bells call out the time of day?

Vainstein: Although Catholicism is a part of our daily life in Peru and Jewish artists
from Latin America are not united, I think that so many of us have been a part of the Sao
Paolo Bienal, is pure coincidence tinged with talent. I was selected to represent Peru
twice to the Sao Paolo Beinal and Moico Yaker once. I think this is due to the fact that
both of us are respected artists in Peru. Our Jewish background does make our work
different from the rest of Peruvian artists suggesting the elusive ‘otherness.’ The same
might be said for Jewish artists in other Latin American countries.

Fattal: The shape, weight and translucency of the stones found in Peru have been a
source for jewelry of numerous civilizations for centuries. You own some magnificent
antique jewelry that you recognize is unique and priceless. Is part of the way of
understanding ‘cosmopolitanism’ to see modernity in antiquity, and more specifically
third world antiquity?

Vainstein: The issue of Pre-Colombian artifacts and all antiquities being sold all over the
world today is an issue of great concern and artistic and historical debate. I and many of
my friends used to buy from huaqueros, people who profane tombs, to acquire ancient
textiles and jewelry. Since my eldest daughter began studying archaeology, I stopped
collecting antiquities and even stopped wearing the pieces I own. Possessing and
displaying these antiquities and rethinking their origins and original purposes, has made
me reevaluate my unknowing encouragement of wrongful activities.

Fattal: Meredith Monk, the musician, composer and vocalist is a Peruvian Jew born five
years before you. Ms. Monk’s unending energy and willingness to reexamine sounds and

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movements radiates from her work. (Ms. Monk has worked closely with the visual artist, Ann Hamilton, someone who you admire.) You, too, have an unceasing sense of vitality and originality in approaching the visual landscape. Do you see any connections between your way of working and the use of ensembles and multivariate voices in Monk’s work that is similar or distinctively different?

Vainstein: I do not know the work of Meredith Monk. I will try to find out about her through internet research.

Fattal: Spirituality entices tourists to the city of Cuzco, the Sacred Valley and Macchu Picchu. Young Israeli tourists have left their mark on Cuzco’s hostels and pizzerias. Handwritten Hebrew signs caution and/or encourage compatriots to sleep or eat in these places. The orthodox community has a Passover Seder on top of Macchu Picchu. As a lifelong resident of Lima, Peru and a knowledgeable traveler within the country, does this marketed spirituality affect your work?

Vainstein: No, it does not. I have no contact with the young Israelis who travel in Peru. I have seen Hebrew signs even in small fishermen’s restaurants in Paracas and found some of the Israelis there. However, these Israelis do have a marked spirituality about them. I have not attended a Passover Seder on Macchu Picchu, though I know it exists.

Fattal: You have mentioned that there is a Jewish high school in Lima, a kosher butcher and bakery. Jewish organizations have arranged for Israeli youth to come to Lima and for Peruvian teenagers to visit Israel. What mechanisms has the Peruvian Jewish community used to maintain its cordial relationship with its fellow Arab citizens in Lima and elsewhere in Peru? Has the Israeli/Palestinian conflict been a source for artistic expression in your work?

Vainstein: We have a very cordial relationship with Palestinians in Peru and Arabs in general. The Jewish people who arrived when my father did, for example, went into the textile business. The Arabs, who arrived in the early part of the twentieth century, from the Mid East also went into businesses that were involved in textiles. As newcomers to Peru, both communities became friends and this has lasted until today. I have never used the conflicts of the Mid East between Israel and the surrounding Arab states as sources for my art.

Conclusion

Esther Vainstein’s life and art is not dissimilar to many other Jewish Latin American artists who work in semi-isolation from other Jewish Latin American artists like: Gabriel Valanssi in Argentina, Nancy Gewolb in Chile, Jaime Permuth in Guatemala, Marcelo Adrian Tolces Asrilevish in Paraguay, Franz Krajeberg and Ruben Gerchman in Brazil.
as well as Raquel Paiewonsky and Ben Fernandez in the Dominican Republic, Lilie Talmor in Venezuela, Daniel Scheimberg in Costa Rica, Lydia Azout in Colombia, and Laurie Litowitz and Saul Castro in Mexico. Numerous other professional Jewish Latin American artists, who infuse issues of ethnic identity into their work, can be added to this substantive list.

Though research on Jewish writers in Latin America is a burgeoning field, scant research has been done to interpret the work of Jewish Latin American artists. The waves of academic and critical research reflect trends in the United States, where Jewish writers then visual artists became subjects of in-depth study. Art reviews by critics such as Marta Traba, to date, are unfortunately not translated from Spanish to English making Latin American art less accessible to the northern part of the hemisphere. Nevertheless, Latin American artists’ families’ stories of immigration, settlement, assimilation, language adoption, refuge from the Holocaust, connection to Israel, and intermarriage have great resonance for North American Jewry. Globalism, as evidenced by the increased traffic of art fairs/bienals has provided a platform for recognizing Latin American artists, many of whom are Jewish. The bienals, thereby, reinforce the need for translation of Spanish and Portuguese texts into English.

During the last century, conceptualizing Diaspora, as mentioned earlier, revolves around various axes: Jewish culture and community, artistic vitality, religious practice, and accommodating economic cycles and political regimes. Esther Vainstein, like many Jewish Latin American artists, weaves new relationships among elements of art, everyday artifacts, and the natural surroundings evoking a resistance to established ways of seeing one’s surroundings. A clandestine insistence on individual vision, perhaps, arises from Jews living in countries, where Catholicism is the state religion. Self-reliance and independent thinking became necessary traits for the Jews who escaped czarist Russia or German Fascism and who then found themselves living through military coups and dictatorships in Latin America.

Well traveled in and outside of Peru, the country’s landscape of rocky high altitude mountains, desert and the dense fauna of the jungle form important visual backdrops for the artist. However, it is Vainstein’s present geographical separation from her daughters, son-in-law, grandchildren, sister, nieces and nephews that also are explored in the artist’s work. Poignancy and imagination are partners in Esther Vainstein’s subtle lamp installation, acting as illuminated funerary markers, created immediately after her mother’s death. Through reflective isolation, one can see the artist revisiting many psychological, historical and geographic sites/episodes.
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Esther Vainstein conversation with Laura Fattal - January 13, 2007/Lima, Peru

Esther Vainstein answered interview questions April 27 and 30, 2007

Works by Esther Vainstein:
Textual Tethering, Muddy Meanderings:
A Conversation with the Peruvian Jewish Artist Esther Vainstein

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