

## Ella Amitay Sadovsky: Setting the Stage

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Still in the formative phase of her aesthetic, kibbutz-born Ella Amitay Sadovsky is engaged with both materiality and the blurring of the boundaries in the arts – issues paramount among many of today’s artists. Her previous career as a recognized scientist and the methodology that she used for research, however, give a unique twist to her artistic endeavors: while not specifically addressing science and technology, her oeuvre nevertheless may be related to current discussions of the intersections between art and science. Also of note is that even though Amitay Sadovsky considers Israel her homeland, her monumental, narrative compositions feature swatches of patterned fabrics juxtaposed with flat areas of paint, and demonstrate a bias toward American art.

Amitay Sadovsky’s singular artistic perspective grew out of her intensive studies in chemical engineering and her research on the nature of synthetic materials as part of a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley. Making the decision to pursue art instead of continuing a career in science, she immersed herself in studies in both the United States, at Berkeley and at California College of the Arts (CCA) in Oakland, as well as at the Midrasha School of Art and the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Israel.

Amitay Sadovsky’s tenacity to thoroughly research a topic – a product of her scientific career – also informs her art. She taught herself art history, and readily cites numerous artists whose works have interested her, particularly collagists using labor-intensive processes. She is most engaged with the art of the twentieth century, when collage came to the fore, and with the world of contemporary art. Her sources of inspiration include the sixteenth-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo and the modern masters Henri Matisse and Richard Hamilton, yet most of the artists Amitay Sadovsky cites as inspiration are Americans such as Romare Bearden (1911–1988), who explored his African-American heritage primarily through brightly colored collages of family life.

Although she discounts her art studies at Berkeley, and had already been interested in the figure, her undergraduate year in 2003–2004 at CCA, which was a center for the Bay Area aesthetic with its concern with the human figure, played a role in Amitay Sadovsky’s development, reigniting her

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\* This essay is based upon conversations and email exchanges with Ella Amitay Sadovsky held in February–April 2014.

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interest in figuration as well as in the autobiographical. Sculptor Viola Frey, known internationally for her colorful, expressively glazed monumental ceramic men and women, which range upwards of six feet and deal with the autobiographical, had retired as full professor by 1999; however, Amitay Sadovsky still felt her presence on campus. In fact, Amitay Sadovsky's monumental canvases, begun around 2006/2007, may represent a response to Frey's gargantuan forms.

Today, Amitay Sadovsky recognizes the influence of CCA painting instructor Franklin Williams, whose early works combined canvas, thread, and paint – the components of her own work – and whose more recent oeuvre has placed flatly painted figures against highly patterned backgrounds. In the late twentieth century, CCA had built its reputation on promoting the dissolution of art-historical hierarchies and on the blurring of the boundaries between painting, sculpture, design, decorative arts, architecture, and performance and video art. The school's Visiting Artist program, which Amitay Sadovsky experienced firsthand, brought to the campus such rising stars as Philip Taaffe and Fred Tomaselli, both of whom were actively merging painting and collage.

As a curator trained in the 1970s to look at how women artists respond to living in lands marked by perpetual conflict, I find it interesting that Amitay Sadovsky, a highly educated, contemporary young woman, addresses the themes most basic to womanhood – being a woman, wife, and mother – in highly romanticized, idealized narratives. Living in a world where digital technology has made strong graphic imagery the norm, it is both startling and refreshing to see her scenes of courtship, dreams of marriage, wedding-day portraits, and depictions of household bliss, which are somewhat inspired by Victorian painting and the Pre-Raphaelites. Her themes evoke the sentimental European and American art prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century, while the intense patterning – which she attributes to a family member's interest in quilting – recalls the "crazy quilts" that first appeared in America during that period, and which were characterized by a patchwork devoid of repetitive motifs.

Interestingly, Amitay Sadovsky's scenes, meant to focus on her family's life in Israel, contain few references to the political and social upheavals underlying her narratives. More significantly, while her patterned backdrops are frequently floral – a recurring metaphor used by many young Israeli artists to demonstrate their deep kinship with their homeland,<sup>1</sup> the intense ornamentation of her settings provides a dramatic contrast to the modernist aesthetic typically associated with Tel Aviv and its architecture.

Amitay Sadovsky's juxtaposition of flatly painted areas with textile swatches places her squarely in the midst of today's dialogue about materiality, and situates her among the increasing number of artists with diverse backgrounds who combine fiber with other media as a vehicle

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1 For a discussion of the role of flowers in contemporary Israeli art, see Alex Ward, "Israeli Identity and Collective Memory," in Davira S. Taragin and Alex Ward with Helen W. Drutt English, *Women's Tales: Four Leading Israeli Jewelers* (Manchester, Vermont: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and the Racine Art Museum in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2006), p. 16.

of expression. In fact, the words recently used to describe the phenomenon of materiality in today's art – “corporeality, physicalness, substance, voluminosity, texture, tangibility, thingness, touchability”<sup>2</sup> – epitomize her aesthetic. The appropriation of printed, woven, and jacquard fabrics with traditional patterns is central to her approach. Each piece of cloth is carefully sought after and selected to make a particular statement, necessitating at times that the artist hand-print her own pieces. In some works, they literally form the structural framework within which the painted protagonists interact. In other instances, they complement the painted narrative, adding engaging bits of texture and dimensionality to produce a yin/yang effect. Above all, Amitay Sadosky always uses them to define spatial relationships, reflecting her knowledge of Renaissance perspective.

Seen up close, however, the patterned fabrics take on a completely different complexion. Whether they are jacquard fabrics decorated with kitschy eighteenth-century pastoral scenes or netting, these individual patterned areas, when seen in isolation, transform themselves into visions of cellular structures, reminding the viewer that the artist retains her passion for science.

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2 Michael Ann Holly, “Notes from the Field: Materiality,” *The Art Bulletin* 95, 1 (March 2013), p. 15.