



EXCAVATING LANGUAGE: AVITAL SHEFFER

BEAUX ARTS, BATH

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Avital Sheffer's pots leave you thirsting for cool fresh water, so dry and encrusted are their surfaces. Like weatherbeaten skin or salt-permeated sails, they tell their stories as much through touch as through appearance or even through the layers of language impressed onto their surfaces. One can admire and love their graceful forms, their carefully traced lines and arabesques, or one can frown and delve assiduously into the palimpsest they present and discern any number of narratives, any amount of meaning.

These creatures of the desert are, of course, pure artifice, the results of painstaking research and hours of studio-making in the humid environment of North West Australia. They are also the result of Sheffer's early life and young adulthood in Israel, where as a peace activist, she encountered disillusion and decided to emigrate. These vessels, then, contain lived experience combined with rigorously honed knowledge, and abundant, urgent memories of Israel, Palestine, and the wider Middle East – collected, stored, and analysed.

Erog 1 is a fine, swelling bottle form based on the shape of the citrus fruit used in the Jewish festival of Sukkot. The surface of the pot is printed with excerpts from a Spanish manuscript, a study of the *Book of Proverbs*, written in 1460 in Judeo-Arabic, which is Hebrew written in Arabic script. This alone suggests a vast migratory history of people, language, and cultures. It is a record of the Spanish Sephardi Jews and of their Hebrew dialect. It records the dormant state of the Hebrew language, spoken and used in religious

contexts, but written in the dominant language of Arabic. The delicately twirling arabesques surrounding the text are familiar from tiles and textiles across the region under Arab rule, which at that time included Spain. In the present geo-political context, the notion that Hebrew might have been written in Arabic script, that these languages and cultures, their religious practices, and everyday lives were so intertwined is like a silent, underground explosion; at once barely discernible but devastating in its meaning.

Sheffer excavates language relentlessly, disorganising and complicating the constructed and reconstructed 'memory' of nationhood. A rich terracotta, double spouted bottle, printed in the ancient Samaritan language and surrounded with a carpet-like design, retrieves an almost forgotten history from the sanitising effects of stubborn political binaries. Love letters from a thirteenth-century merchant to his wife – promising to come home and failing consistently – surrounded by the tragically optimistic pomegranate designs, brings a note of intimacy to the vast historical and political terrain that this exhibition treads. Deeply intellectual, passionate, and elegant, Sheffer's pots glow like fine wine or sumptuous carpets. Their startlingly original eloquence has produced probably the most subversive exhibition I have ever seen.

Claudia Clare

Claudia Clare is a potter, writer, and human-rights activist. She is currently researching the concept of the political martyr for an exhibition at Francis Kyle Gallery in Autumn 2012