

*Dionysian Life in a Bacchanalian Space: A Multifaceted  
Dialogue in Old Jaffa*

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This study stems from an exhibition presented in November 2018 at the Ilana Goor Museum in Old Jaffa.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition, entitled “Dionysian Life,” takes on a unique significance in this museum, which is located in an ancient building in Old Jaffa facing the sea. The museum also exhibits, in addition to the works by the artist Ilana Goor herself, collections of contemporary and ethnic art. This unique museum is characterized by an abundance and sensuality that is Dionysian in nature (Fig.1).<sup>2</sup> One example of a distinct Dionysian work by Ilana Goor is that of the phallic coat hanger rack in a corner of the museum (Fig. 2) which reflects, although in a humorous way, the phallic image in the Classical world (Fig. 3), a salient Dionysian motif that represented fertility and served as an apotropaic symbol.<sup>3</sup>

Another example is the bronze table on the first floor; also a work by Ilana Goor, entitled “The Morning After” (Fig. 4), and covered with a variety of insects. Due to its abundance, this work is of a Dionysian nature, and from another point of view also recalls the Roman sensual, profligate, unbridled consumption, in the spirit of Panem et Circenses.<sup>4</sup> In this way,

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<sup>1</sup> “Dionysian Life”, Ilana Goor Museum, November-December 2018, curator – Nava Sevilla-Sadeh.

<sup>2</sup>On the artist Ilana Goor and the museum, see: Dekel-Caspi, S., ed. (2017). *Ilana Goor: Hybrids*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2006; Dekel-Caspi, S., ed. (2017). *Ilana Goor and the Story of Her Private Museum*. Jaffa: Ilana Goor Museum.

<sup>3</sup>Jones, C. (1982). *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 57-76.

<sup>4</sup>The term panem et circences – Bread and Circuses, embodies the policy that was the core factor of Roman

a unique and extraordinary dialogue of sorts exists between the permanent exhibition of the museum and the temporary exhibition “Dionysian Life”, and between ancient classical culture and the contemporary.

The Dionysian ritual was one of the ancient world’s most significant experiences. Rituals to honor the god Dionysus were carried out for a variety of reasons: to celebrate the harvest and the coming of spring; to celebrate the ripening of the grapes; as a fertility supplication; as a rite of passage from youth to maturity; as temporary release from the burdens of everyday life, enabling the participant to achieve catharsis and enter a state of euphoria; to create the illusion of merging with the divine; and to ensure eternal life in the afterworld.

During the Bacchanalia, in the frenetic ambience of the Dionysian ritual, the participants – aspiring to achieve spiritual purification – whipped themselves into a state of frenzied ecstasy and release of inhibitions, temporarily erasing the social barriers. The height of the ritual was called *pandemonium* – ear-shattering noise and turmoil. At this stage of the ritual dedicated to the god, religious ecstasy reached a climax, leading the celebrant to purification. The torments too, endured during the rite of passage, were an integral part of the Dionysian experience, as represented for example on friezes depicting scenes of flagellation at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii.<sup>5</sup>

The Dionysian experience of joy and delight is also related to *Hedonism* - a world view formulated in the fourth century BCE by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, and which posited that the satisfaction of one’s desires is the highest good and proper aim of human life. While Epicurean hedonism was kept in bounds by very clear restrictions, hedonism in the Roman world underwent transformation to decadence.<sup>6</sup>

Dionysian images and motifs associated with the ritual, the rite of passage, together with

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decadence, of supplying cheap or free food as well as spectacles such as theatre, games, races, musical contests, and bloodthirsty combats for the amusement of the population, in order to distract them from any involvement in state affairs. As a consequence, Roman society became dominated by a class of rich idlers who passed their lives in eating and drinking. The Roman wealthy spent vast amounts of money on lengthy and grandiose feasts, and gluttony became associated with the Roman life of debauchery. See: Juvenal, *Satire*, X, 72; Carcopino, J. (1956). *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Book, 202-211; Paglia, C. (1990). *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 37, 131-139; Kiefer, O. (1941). *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 5.

<sup>5</sup>Otto, W. F. (1965). *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Nilsson, M. P. (1975). *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age*. New York: Arno Press; Bianchi, U. (1976). *The Greek Mysteries*. Leiden: E. J. Brill; Burkert, W. (1987). *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; Bowden, H. (2010). *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Bremmer, J. N. (2014). *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

<sup>6</sup>Hicks, R. D. (1962). *Stoic and Epicurean*. New York: Russell & Russell; Long 1974, 153-202; Rist, J. M. (1977). *Epicurus: an Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 157-163.

its ordeals, purification, and catharsis, whether overtly or concealed, consciously or unconsciously, can be found too in the creative work of Israeli artists. The exhibition “Dionysian Life” seems to be asking a question: What is the nature of life in today’s Israel? Is it controlled or unbridled?

Each of the artists selected for this exhibition presented a specific aspect of life in Israel today, relating to the question of the essence of a seemingly Bacchanalian life in our contemporary times.

Visitors are welcomed by Sigalit Landau’s image of a skinless papier-mâché acrobat performing a back flip on a piano (Figs. 5, 6). Placing the statue on the piano was a curatorial decision aimed at enhancing the significance of the work in the context of this exhibition. The skinless body represents an extreme condition of vulnerability and corporeality. This representation evokes the myth of the satyr Marsyas, who dared to compete with Apollo in playing the flute, and for his hubris was condemned to the punishment of being flayed alive.<sup>7</sup> The artist, hence, has adopted the god’s position and flayed her human image. The link between the skinless figure, the acrobatic action, and the piano is a kind of *Dance Macabre*, and of a decadent nature, with decadence being defined as perversion, weirdness, decay and, mostly, as degeneration resulting from abundance and excess.<sup>8</sup> This figure may refer metaphorically to the Israeli who, on the one hand, bears the scars of the Holocaust and the trauma of wars, but at the same time is immersed in abundance and hedonism.

Exposed blood and flesh are closely connected to the myth of Dionysus. At the ritual’s climax, the *Bacchanalia*, female Bacchantes, in their adoration of Dionysus and driven by a sense of spiritual elevation, madness, and a loss of all senses, would tear apart live rabbit kits and fawns.

The *Bacchanalia* finds expression in a huge oil painting by the artist Netta Lieber Sheffer, hung adjacent to Sigalit Landau’s work and titled “Bacchanalian Hora” (Fig. 7). The artist has transformed the traditional Israeli hora dance into a frenetic pagan dance. This, together with the acrobatic backflip in Landau’s work, raises two questions: Is it possible, in Israel of today, to dance in a state resembling inebriation of the senses and forgetfulness of the self; and, what place might paganism have in today’s Israel?

Both these questions find expression in the photographs by the Arab-Israeli performance artist Anisa Ashkar (Figs. 8, 9). Her photos present a dancer representing a horse being washed vigorously with milk by the artist herself.<sup>9</sup> Milk is a prominent Dionysian image,

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<sup>7</sup>Ovid (1985). *Metamorphoses*. Translated by D. E. Hill (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips), 6. 382-300.

<sup>8</sup>Gilman, R. (1979). *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 11, 15, 24, 22, 36.

<sup>9</sup>This work was thoroughly analysed in the study: Sevilla-Sadeh, N. (2018).”Les rites de Passage: Ritual ,

and at the climax of the ritual described in Euripides' play "The Bacchae," milk, crystal clear water, wine, and flowing honey spurt from the ground, to the sound of a great tumult. In Classical Athens, the centaur, a mythical beast with a horse's body and a man's head and torso, symbolized the exclusion of foreigners, the Others, devoid of any rights and lacking in status. In Ashkar's performance photos the horse symbolizes the Other, while the action of washing with milk is of a pagan nature and an expression of the relationship between the one in control and the one being controlled. This representation would seem to allude to problems of identity, nationality, religion, and conquest in the newborn State.

The flutist shepherdess image in Menashe Kadishman's bronze statue (Fig. 10)<sup>10</sup> also calls to mind an animalistic Dionysian creature – that of Pan, god of the forests. Pan, who symbolized animalism and was identified with nature, belonged to Dionysus' retinue. Kadishman's shepherdess statue raises questions regarding land and rootedness in connection with the Israeli experience.

Secularism and religiosity are issues that arise from Gad Apotecker's oil painting depicting Dionysus (Fig. 11), following a statue by Michelangelo.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the pure white marble of Michelangelo's statue, Apotecker's image is rich in thick brownish-red color, as though referencing coagulated blood. This bleeding Dionysus would seem to manifest the conflict between secularism and religiosity that has caused bloodshed throughout history and still does so in the present-day State of Israel.

Questions regarding secularism, religiosity, and the role of the past in the present era arise from Dorit Feldman's works "Archive-ology" and "Catharsis" (Figs. 12, 13). The image of the "Mona Lisa of the Galilee" from the Dionysian mosaic at Sepphoris quoted in both Feldman's works suggests the paganism of the distant past, as well as sanctification in the Dionysian religion – a human need from the dawn of civilization.<sup>12</sup> The remains of an ancient temple feature alongside the Mona Lisa figure, set within a Dead Sea landscape illuminated by an intense light, completing the sense of sanctification. In the work titled "Catharsis," the Mona Lisa image appears alongside Classical architecture depicted in an ethereal, brilliant blue, together with an open book and a shell. A sense arises of the integration of the Israeli experience: ancient history unceasingly reiterated in contemporary life; and the combination of past and present, secular and sanctified, as an expression of the need for pluralism, tolerance,

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Initiation and the State in Works by Sigalit Landau and Anisa Ashkar", *Visual Resources*, 34, 395-419.

<sup>10</sup>Courtesy of Forte Gallery, Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv.

<sup>11</sup>Michelangelo, Bacchus (Dionysus), marble, 203 cm, 1496-1497, Museo del Bargello, Florence. The image is accessed here: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo\\_Bacchus.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo_Bacchus.jpg)

<sup>12</sup>A comprehensive article on Dorit Feldman's work, see: Sevilla-Sadeh, N. (2019). "A Secular Holy Land: Pagan Images, Jewish Motifs and National Identity - Reflections on Dorit Feldman's Artwork", *Israel Affairs*, 24, 1-31.

and acceptance.

Dionysian creatures such as satyrs and maenads in a state of constant dance, catharsis, and explosive sexuality populate the medallion-like paintings by Jossef Krispel, inspired by paintings of Classical vases (Figs.14, 15). In the Dionysian rituals in the ancient world, satyrs and maenads symbolized a release that led to spiritual elevation and catharsis. Quoting these images in Krispel's paintings raises issues concerning the effectiveness of religious ritual in achieving spiritual elevation in the contemporary era. This also finds expression in two works by Mira Maylor – a glass image of a bent back partially swathed in fabric and projecting from a rough wooden box, and glass wings draped over a wooden stand (Figs. 16, 17, 18). These fragile images would seem to reflect the absolute faith and fragility of humankind in the face of the Divine.

This aspiration to sanctify and experience sanctification has always been a dominant passion among humankind. This finds expression too in two works by Dor Confino (Figs.19, 20) that seem to open the way into a hallowed golden domain of intense light, and thus offer the illusion of exaltation, sacredness, and a hope and desire to achieve divine transcendence.



Figure 1. Ilana Goor Museum, Old Jaffa. Photo: Shuki Kook. Courtesy of Ilana Goor Museum.



Figure 2. Ilana Goor Coat Rack (The Turkish Fertility God), 1985, bronze, 25x24x14 cm.  
Photo: Shuki Kook. Courtesy of Ilana Goor Museum



Figure 3. Tintinnabulum - Roman bronze amulet, Found in Pompeii, now on display in the Secret Cabinet of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 27839). 1st century AD, bronze. Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY 2.5 Public Domain <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/deed.en>  
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Figure 4. Ilana Goor, *The Morning After*, 2006, Wood, bronze, leather, 330x90x80 cm.  
Author: Dror Levi. Public Domain <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>





Figure 5. Sigalit Landau, *East as Much as you can't 1*, metal armature, papier-mâché, mixed media, 180x60x50 cm, 2007 and view of the exhibition space. Photo: Adi Shraga



Figure 6 Sigalit Landau, Eat as much as you can't 1, metal armature, papier-mache, mixed media, 180x60x50 cm, 2007 and view of the exhibition space Photo: Yoel Levy



Figure 7. Netta Lieber Sheffer, Hora Bacchanalia, oil on canvas, 275x135 cm, 2011  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Anisa Ashkar, photos from the performance *Al'adham*, 33x50 cm, 2008 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 9. ANisa Ashkar, photos from the performance Al'adham, 33x50 cm, 2008 Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Menashe Kadishman, flutist, iron, 35x43 cm, 1984



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**Figure 11:** Gad Apotecker, Bacchus (Dionysus), mixed technique, on linen, 100x150 cm,  
**Citation:** Sevilla Sadeh, N. (2021). Dionysian Life in a Bacchanalian Space: A Multifaceted Dialogue in Old Jaffa. *Academia Letters*, Article 347. 2002 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 12. Dorit Feldman, *Archive-ology*, painting and photography in a mixed media, 56x76 cm, 2015 Photo: Sigal Kolton Courtesy of the artist's family





Figure 13. Dorit Feldman, *Catharsis*, mixed technique, 50x40x40 cm, 2018 Courtesy of the artist's family

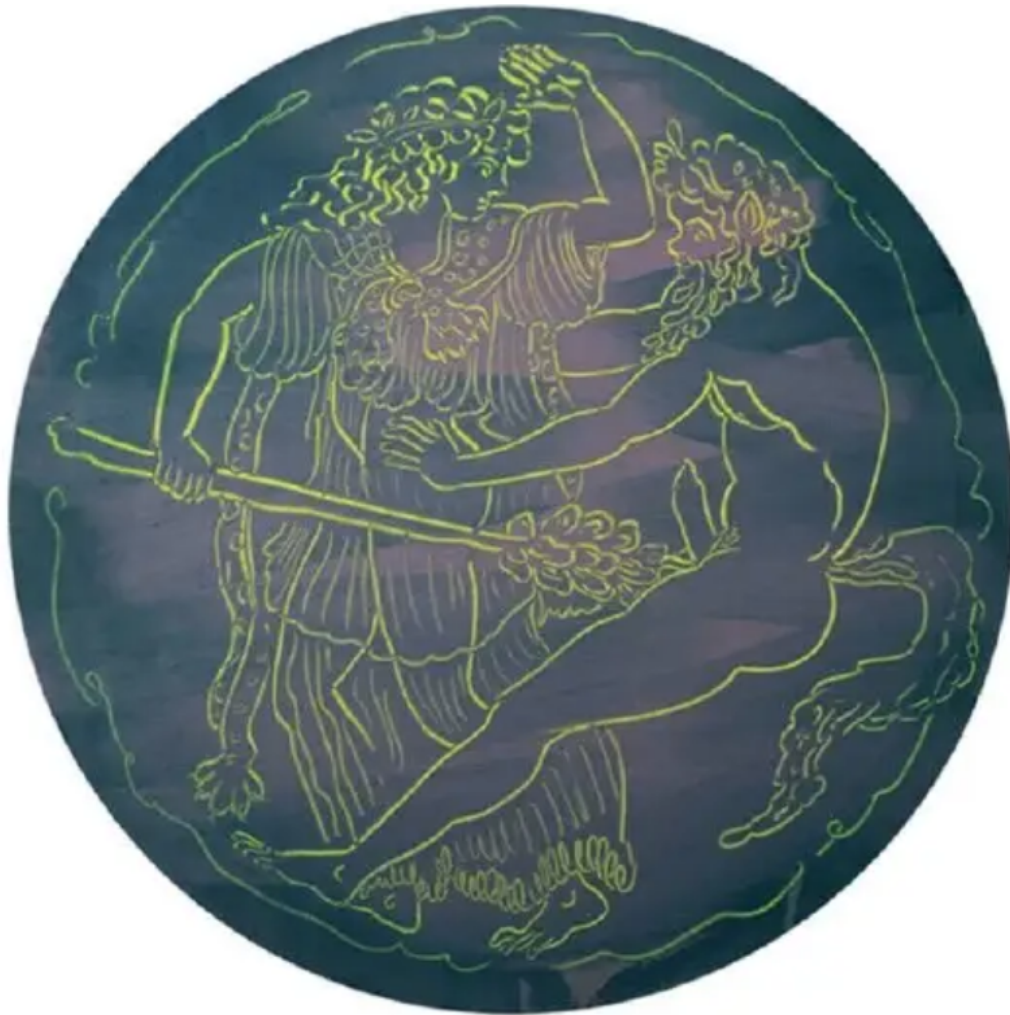


Figure 14. Joseph Krispel Maenad and Satyr (following a vase painting from the 5th Century BC), acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 cm diameter, 2014 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 15. Joeseph Krispel, Bacchanalica, oil on canvas, 65x54 cm, 2013 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 16. Mira Maylor, *Ritual and Flight*, mixed technique, 2010 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 17. Mira Maylor, *Ritual and Flight*, mixed technique, 120x80x25 cm, 2010 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 18. Mira Maylor, *Ritual*, mixed technique, 70x60x40 cm, 2010 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 19. Dor Confino, Sun, filler, plaster, glue, gold leaf, golden threads, acrylic on canvas, 50x50 cm, 2016 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 20. Dor Confino, Vernissage, plaster, glue, gold wires, metals, gold leaf, oil, acrylic on canvas, 160x180cm, 2013 Courtesy of the artist