



Ilit Azoulay

الاکوت مَلِکوت Queendom مِرْمِدِدَا

Curated by Shelley Harten

Pre-opening: April 20–22 Exhibition: April 23—November 27, 2022

The Israel Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia features the internationally acclaimed artist Ilit Azoulay. Her work minutely scrutinizes how visual information is processed, by means of a unique photographic and interrogative method that disassembles and reassembles previously unexamined elements. Through a prism of knowledge production and the imagination, Azoulay changes how the world is perceived. Within the context of the Biennale Arte 2022, she addresses intersectional questions of cultural appropriation, shared histories, and the sovereignty of art.

Azoulay's project, Queendom, comprises large-scale panoramic photomontages, a sound installation produced in collaboration with light-language channeler Maisoun Karaman, and architectural interventions. The Queendom is governed by art, and its story is one of female and cultural empowerment. It is compiled from data that arises from a comprehensive system crash, following a malfunction of existing power structures, and pours out of the digital realm into the physical realm of the Giardini della Biennale. Beneath an ultramarine canopy, the pavilion is transformed into the Queendom's palace, shifting from of its decades-long national and patriarchal programming into a trans-regional and re-gendered space. Azoulay also reconfigures its architectural orientation from West to East—away from a male-centered gaze to female empowerment, and from Eurocentric modernity to Middle Eastern contemporaneity.

Azoulay habitually composes images based equally on information gleaned from oral histories and storytelling, and rigorous research and investigation. Her point of departure for the current project is a nearly forgotten archive of obsessively photographed medieval metal vessels from the Islamic world, compiled by the Austro-Jewish-British art historian David Storm Rice (1913–1962) and bequeathed to the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem. These are precious objects that were produced in the Middle East, traded in the Levant, brought to Europe via Venice, and are now mostly held in Western museums.

Azoulay engages with these archival photographs by scanning, cropping, and changing them onto new data carriers, and the photomontaged images are then digitally "welded" onto scanned metal plates. She uses digital craftwork to visualize the afterlife of the images and their transformations, accentuating histories of appropriation and missing links in their geographies of knowledge. The resulting panoramic photomontages function as pathways to the imaginary expanse of the Queendom, from whence a universal language of healing transmitted by Maisoun Karaman projects out to the visitors and extends throughout the pavilion's premises.

Within the terra artis of Queendom, the migration of visual data can be explored. What do images that are twice removed from their source remember—and in a digitally connected world, can these be recontextualized? Is it possible for art to transition from its assigned identity? What at first appears to be an innocent foray into a realm of fantasy is, in fact, a call to take responsibility for one's imagination.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in English, Arabic, and Hebrew published by DISTANZ Verlag, with contributions by Naomi Alderman, Timo Feldhaus, Tehila Hakimi, Hanin Hannouch, Shelley Harten, Sheikha Helawy, Adi Keissar, Lali Tsipi Michaeli, Vicki Shiran, Anat Zecharia.

Queendom is also accompanied by a digital platform launching in May 2022 that features special programming including talks between the artist and curator and contextual materials and insights that delve into the artist's archive-based methodology.

Queendom (2022) is curated by Dr. Shelley Harten, Curator for Contemporary and Modern Art and History, Jewish Museum Berlin.

Artist I Ilit Azoulay

Ilit Azoulay (b. 1972 in Jaffa–Tel Aviv, Israel; lives and works in Berlin) has works held in numerous museum and private collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; LACMA, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Art Institute of Chicago; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; and Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.

Her work has been exhibited extensively around the world, including solo exhibitions at Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Herzliya, Israel (2014); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2014); The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2017); CCA – Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv (2019); and Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv (2021). She has also participated in group exhibitions at major international venues, including The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2011, 2017); Daimler Contemporary, Berlin (2012, 2020); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris (2015); Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2015); Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2016); Bauhaus Museum, Dessau (2019); and the Eretz-Israel Museum, Tel Aviv (2021).

Azoulay attended the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem. She is the recipient of several awards, including the Constantiner Photography Award for an Israeli Artist, Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011); the Israel Ministry of Culture and Sports Prize (2011, 2017); and the Rencontres d'Arles Discovery Award (2014); and was among the finalists for the Prix Pictet (2015).

Her recent publications include the artist-book Finally Without End (Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2014); Shifting Degrees of Certainty (Spector Books, Leipzig, 2014), which accompanied her exhibition at KW, Berlin; and the monograph No Thing Dies (Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2019), published following her eponymous exhibition at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Curator | Shelley Harten

Dr. Shelley Harten is an exhibition curator for contemporary and modern art and history at the Jewish Museum Berlin. Harten has written the award-winning doctoral thesis "The Hebrew Orient. Representations of the 'Orient' and the 'Arab' in Zionist and Israeli Fine Art from 1906-1957". Her last project was the large retrospective "Yael Bartana - Redemption Now" (2021) at the Jewish Museum Berlin, voted by a jury of art journalists in tip Berlin as the most important exhibition in the city in 2021. Harten's recent publications include "The Book of Malka Germania" (2021), and articles such as "Israeli Art History and Israel Studies" (2021), "Sun, we'll lock you up in a concrete house!" (2019) and "Le tissage: une voie d'accès à l'Orient" (2016). Her expertise lies in contemporary art, trans-, intercultural, and interconnected art histories and in the interdisciplinary field of history, cultural studies, and art history.

Ilit Azoulay in Conversation with Shelley Harten

Shelley Harten: To begin, how would you describe Queendom?

Ilit Azoulay: It is an accumulative and collaborative space ruled by art. It is a proposal to rethink how we pass on information and a way to reframe the way we tell stories.

SH: Stories and histories are ways of creating and cementing power structures. Collective and individual knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next—it is hereditary. While some of it seems to be set in stone, much of it is fluid.

IA: I am interested in the way histories and stories are told and information is transmitted. I wondered what would happen if we were to change the hereditary line—the structures through which we pass knowledge on—and dispense of dichotomies and really listen and look at all the data again. What occurs when we imagine a Queendom in which the information gains agency and demands our attention?

SH: From your description, Queendom is a network—a rhizomatic project that has many layers. There is the research base, which is the David Storm Rice archive, then the practical or methodological base, which is the way you approach the craft, and another more theoretical layer connected to Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag of Fiction." In light of its complexity, what was your entrance point to the world of Queendom? How did your journey begin?

IA: I think it began with the ruins of other worlds—maybe it was the patriarchal world, maybe the Eurocentric perspective. Those systems of knowledge transfer do not seem to work anymore—their stories lost power.

SH: Yes, at least in the arts, those systems have crashed. The Biennale attests to it in many ways by focusing on minority voices while keeping some of those hegemonical structures, such as the national pavilions, alive. Before you started to work in the Biennale context, you quite literally encountered some of the detritus the "old worlds" left behind in the form of the David Storm Rice archive at the Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem. It became the research base of the project.

IA: Yes, it was early 2020 when Na'ama Brosh, curator emeritus for Islamic art at the Israel Museum, heard that the David Storm Rice archive was in danger of being disposed of. It is a huge collection of research photographs and documents of the Austro-Jewish British art historian and archeologist specializing in medieval inlaid metal vessels of Islamic art. He was born in the early 20th century and had an interesting trans-regional, though understudied, biography.

SH: Such a discovery seems to be a pivotal point in all your projects! In the beginning, you often pay close attention to something that has been overlooked or even put away with an intention of not making it visible. You lay bare the information contained in the objects without offering any didactic explanations of its meaning.

IA: Yes, I work in line with Ursula K. Le Guin's theory that the first step towards human civilization was not a weapon, but a carrier bag that permitted gathering and sharing. It's not the vertical tones of history, it's the horizontal ones that I am interested in. I try, as a listener, not to get distracted by the big stories. It's more about collecting the seeds and leaving room for more. Sometimes what is not said is also information, and what is set in darkness needs a bit of patience to become visible.

SH: How would you describe the David Storm Rice archive that laid the foundation of the project?

IA: There were hundreds of archival boxes containing black and white silver prints and around ten thousand negatives in different formats, mainly large camera formats. Ninety percent of them are macro photographs of vessels and objects, and the rest document other material that connects to those vessels.

SH: Your description of this treasure trove shows that there are a lot of similarities between your work process and David Storm Rice's. You both share a researcher's imagination and the medium of photography to access information, but also the method of "scanning" objects piece by piece through macro-lens photography.

IA: I feel that I am very much in conversation with Rice, though not an expert in his field. What drove my first curiosity was not the vessels themselves, but it was more the way he looked at the vessels. I was amazed by the number of macrophotographs he took of each object. You can feel his body moving around it as he's coming closer, even too close for what the lens allows. You could see that he was completely impassioned and possessed, as if his camera could record the stories coded in those vessels and he didn't want to miss a word of it.

SH: He was possessed, and it seems he also wanted to be in possession of knowledge.

IA: There is something possessive in photography in general. I could sense a yearning to have more of the vessels than his retina allowed him to see. He seems to have worked intuitively—another approach we share. We both rely on testimonies, oral histories, contextual information and follow where they might lead us. Usually, I gather all this material before I even start to touch the camera, and I create an archive that is based on this initial research phase. I go in with a macro lens only and I scan the objects through my camera. I don't see myself as a photographer that strives for the decisive moment. I see my work as—some would say fiction—but I think it's documentary work.

SH: Archives grow out of people's cultural anticipations, memories, scenarios,

and rules, so imagination is already a major participant in the archival process. I would describe your work as docu-imaginary or docu-fictional. Although archives are central to all your works, in Queendom the archival element seems to be on steroids: you take a meta-look at what archives stand for, whilst going deeper into detail and creating an archive out of an archive, finally culminating in a release of information that does not seem to adhere to any known systems of knowledge structure.

IA: I imagine this release came out of a crack in the wall, and that Queendom was so bright and powerful that only the crack was needed for it to appear out of the archive of David Storm Rice.

SH: Let's discuss the next stage of your process, when all the initial material is laid out and the craftwork begins.

IA: It is all about zooming in and out of data. I go even more macro than David Storm Rice and I break, cut, crop, or reframe his original archival material. In the end traces of the documents remain, meaning the inventory number of the original photograph in the David Storm Rice archive, and the documentation of the vessel's data, where it originated and where it is exhibited in the world today.

SH: You take a lot of care in extracting all the information. So how do you reassemble the resulting fragments?

IA: I repeat the steps of craft-making that were used to make the vessels in medieval times, after researching the way it was done. I choose and physically work on plates of brass, copper, and other metal surfaces. Then, with a macro lens, I again zoom in and photograph the metal surfaces inch by inch with my camera, combining these fragments of the metal plates to create a sort of digital canvas. Once I have those panel surfaces, I compose the "scrolls" by welding the puzzle pieces that I cropped out of the David Storm Rice archive onto the panels.

SH: The way you describe your work process feels like manual labor, even though it's happening on the computer screen as a form of digital craftwork. The end products are large-scale paper works, rather than an installation of metal sheets as it might appear by looking at reproductions.

IA: Through the very detailed, patient work of collecting one seed and another seed and another seed, the picture is built from many tiny points of view. And yet, these are only parts of the bigger picture of Queendom. Because we used so many different angles and points of view, it's not photography anymore; it becomes a cartography of information.

SH: A cartography that also traces the way the medieval inlaid metal vessels of Islamic art contained and disseminated information, which Rice was so interested in. Those vessels were produced by and for people of economic and political power, celebrating and commemorating victories, weddings, hunting scenes, folklore...

IA: ...but mainly from a male perspective...

SH: Yes, within a patriarchal system of power that still dominates our world today. The vessels were passed on through history and are now exhibited mainly in Western national museum collections, where their craftsmanship and beauty are appreciated and the information they contain is investigated and researched. All this knowledge has been gathered and distributed through certain power structures. Though now, through your work, it gains an alternative interpretation. Do you feel that the digital space allows for a new contextualization?

IA: I think it's a multi-dimensional space of all possibilities. By placing different elements in juxtaposition on the panels, it's an alternative way of writing code. The writings of Ursula K. Le Guin have been very inspirational to me, as she redefines structures that we deem as set. She, for example, envisions gender to be cyclical and fluid. It is very liberating. In my work, I attempt to create an open space to let the Queendom show itself: the information that wants to rise will appear. Those entering the Queendom bring a whole set of new information with them to start new seeds of knowledge and conversation. How did you find Queendom resonating with your research?

SH: Each of us contributes to the Queendom's network and I am curious to see how it will be discovered. I usually work on the fine and sometimes nonexistent line between art and history. I am interested in what can be described as a terra artis—a multifocal space of artistic imagination that can have very real consequences in our political, social, and cultural surroundings. As a cartography of knowledge, to me Queendom addresses the question of how we can structure information in a way that gives us access to unexpected, marginalized, uncategorized points of view, while raising awareness to all the filters we receive information through. We tend to frame things and pass them on from our perspectives. In the way that Queendom talks about appropriation, you ask the public to take responsibility for the way we see and teach the world today. At the same time, I noticed that there are parts on the panels that you have left blank. For me, they are allegories of forgotten or suppressed knowledge, similarly to the way that negatives play a role in photography—room for more.

IA: Definitely, I like to go back to this photo taken of Boulevard de Temps by Louis Daguerre. It shows the Boulevard empty in the middle of the day, which is not at all possible—it's constantly packed with people. The negative, back then, needed a long exposure time, so the only people that made the step into the realm of the photograph were a man having his shoes shined and the person that shined his shoes on the bottom left of the photo. They stayed long enough for the chemical solution to write them into history. All the rest strolling in the Boulevard vanished. I like this analogy to talk about the fact that I'm looking for those missing voices, or those silver halides that were washed away with the chemical solution. At the same time, the Queendom is also only a very limited selection of transmitted data. It's as if the panels arrived in a very certain moment through a crack in the wall to

our world and revealed themselves in the pavilion as Queendom. Maybe if they revealed themselves in a different museum and a different country, in a different context, then it would all look and be perceived differently.

SH: The way that you have decided to portray the panels in the Israeli Pavilion within the Biennale context is a very specific one, which is countering the dominant narratives of that place that were, for a very long time, a male dominated, European, modernistic, national place of representation. Now, you are looking at Venice as a hub of cultural exchange and shared histories, not as a place of national competition.

IA: I'm questioning those structures. By turning the pavilion's architectural outlook from a Western to an Eastern perspective, I'm literally opening a gateway to the East and adding a beautiful garden entrance to the rather forgotten backyard of the structure. The Queendom appears in the building with some of its elements, such as the blue ceiling and columns, finding manifestation in the pavilion's reality.

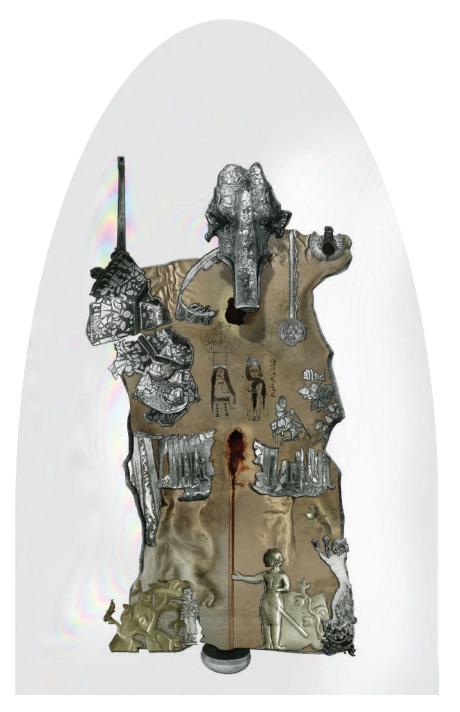
SH: This transformation is felt throughout the pavilion. When visitors enter the exhibition space, they will hear the voice of Maisoun Karaman, the light language channeler you have collaborated with. Much like the panels, her transmissions seem cryptic and of a language that does not obey conventional structures.

IA: There is a shared coded element in my work and Maisoun's transmissions. When we were working on the project and she was stepping into the Queendom sphere, the terra artis, she delivered her messages in a fluent stream, but I didn't ask her to translate them for me. I made some of the works while listening to her transmissions, resulting in panels that took shape as the creatures from Queendom, rather than its cartographies. In any case, it feels to me as if the Queendom gains agency and wants to be seen and heard.

SH: Queendom is ruled by art, and by detaching the visual content from its context, you combine imaginary with fact-led information. What prevents the realm of Queendom to be a display of the Orientalist gaze, ameliorating Western stereotypes of an imagined East?

IA: I'm pointing to a certain gaze. When I'm talking about David Storm Rice as a white, Western man looking at art from the Middle East, it's a snapshot of a specific time and place—a way of seeing the world. I hope that through the shared histories of the vessels, produced, traded, and displayed trans-regionally, through the interconnected paths of the David Storm Rice archive and my own as an Israeli artist of Moroccan origins and based in Berlin, it becomes apparent that information travels and we can be made aware of it, with all its complicated instrumentalizations and its beauty. At the same time, it is not a kingdom, but a queendom. A place to rethink, regroup, reimagine.

The kingdom has crashed. Long live the Queendom!



Queendom, Panel 3, 2022 Inkjet print, 215x135 cm

Featuring

Homberg Ewer, Mosul, Jazira (present-day northern Iraq), 640 AH / AD 1242, brass with silver inlay, The Keir Collection of Islamic Art on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas, USA < Baptistère de Saint Louis, Syria or Egypt, 13th–14th century, hammered brass with silver and gold inlay, and niello, The Louvre, Paris, France < Bowl, Iraq, 9th–11th century, copper or bronze, formerly Collection R. Ettinghausen, USA, present whereabouts unknown < Ewer, Herat, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), late 12th century, bronze with copper and silver inlay, Galleria Estense, Modena, Italy < Ewer, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), first half of 12th century, hammered brass sheet with silver inlay, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA < Bobrinsky Bucket, Herat, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), 559 AH / AD 1163, bronze with copper and silver inlay, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia < Mirror, Iran or Rum (present-day Turkey), 12th–13th century, bronze, Max von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne, Germany < Nisan Taşi, Mongol-Iranian, Iran or Syria, first half of 14th century, cast brass with silver and gold inlay, Mevlana Museum, Konya, Turkey < Plate, Iran or Central Asia, 4th century, gilded silver, The British Museum, London, UK

 ${\it Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. @ Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem Artist; Braverman Gallery. }$



Ilit Azoulay, Detail from Queendom, Panel 3, 2022, Inkjet print, 215x135 cm. Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem



Ilit Azoulay, Detail from Queendom, Panel 3, 2022, Inkjet print, 215x135 cm. Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem



Queendom, Panel 2, 2022 Inkjet print, 395x150 cm

Featuring:

Baptistère de Saint Louis, Syria or Egypt, 13th-14th century, hammered brass with silver and gold inlay, and niello, The Louvre, Paris, France < Plate, Iran or Central Asia, 4th century, gilded silver, The British Museum, London, UK < Fould Bucket, signed Muhammad Ibn Nasir Ibn Muhammad al-Harawi, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan) or Rum (present-day Turkey), late 12th-mid-13th century, cast brass/bronze with copper and silver inlay, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia < Tray, belonging to Badr al-Din Lu'lu', Atabeg of Mosul, hammered brass with silver inlay, Mosul, Jazira (present-day northern Iraq), 1233-59, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK < Pen box, Syria or Egypt, 704 AH / AD 1304–5, brass with silver and gold inlay, and niello, The Louvre, Paris, France < Ewer, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), first half of 12th century, hammered brass sheet with silver inlay, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA < Holmes Ewer, western Iran, ca. 1220–30, brass with silver, gold, and copper inlay, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA < Ewer, signed by Ibrahim ibn Mawaliya, Mosul, Jazira (present-day northern Iraq), first half of 13th century, cast copper with silver and copper inlay, The Louvre, Paris, France < D'Arenberg Basin, made for the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, Syria, 1247-9, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, USA < Fano Cup, Syria or Egypt, 13th-14th century, cast bronze and beaten copper with gold and silver inlay, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris, France < Basin, possibly northwestern Iran, 1384, copper or bronze, probably at Türk ve Islam Eserleri Muzesi, Istanbul, Turkey < Candlestick with Ducks, Khorasan (?) (presentday Afghanistan), second half of 12th century, copper alloy with silver and red-copper inlay, formerly Harari Collection, The Louvre, Paris, France < Incense Burner with Christian Priests, Syria, first half of 13th century, brass with silver inlay, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA < Tray with Nestorian Priests, Syria, mid-13th century, brass/bronze with fine silver inlay, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia < Homberg Ewer, Mosul, Jazira (present-day northern Iraq), 640 AH / AD 1242, brass with silver inlay, The Keir Collection of Islamic Art on loan to the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas, USA < Lock, Iran, date, material, and technique unknown, probably at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK < Ewer, signed by Iyas, apprentice of 'Abd al-Karim Ibn al-Turabi, Mosul, Jazira (present-day northern Iraq), 627 AH / AD 1229, cast brass with red-copper and silver inlay, Türk ve Islam Eserleri Muzesi, Istanbul, Turkey < Nisan Ta**ş**i, Mongol-Iranian, Iran or Syria, first half of 14th century, cast brass with silver and gold inlay, Mevlana Museum, Konya, Turkey < Tray, Syria, 1240s, sheet brass with silver inlay, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, USA < Florence Cup, Iran (?), late 13th-early 14th century, engraved brass, probably at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy < Vaso Vescovali, Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), ca. 1200, high-tin bronze with silver inlay, British Museum, London, UK < Jug, Iran, late 15th century, gilded bronze with silver inlay, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem



Ilit Azoulay, Detail from Queendom, Panel 2, 2022, Inkjet print, 395x150 cm. Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem



Ilit Azoulay, Detail from Queendom, Panel 2, 2022, Inkjet print, 395x150 cm. Courtesy the Artist; Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay; L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem



Ilit Azoulay, the artist's studio, Berlin. Courtesy the artist_Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay



Ilit Azoulay, the artist's studio, Berlin. Courtesy the artist_Braverman Gallery. @ Ilit Azoulay



Ilit Azoulay, Mousework, 2020, installation view, Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel. Courtesy the Artist_Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay



Ilit Azoulay, Regarding Silences, 2019, installation view, Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel. Courtesy the Artist_Braverman Gallery. © Ilit Azoulay



Ilit Azoulay, Shifting Degrees of Certainty, 2016, installation view, Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Victoria, Australia. Courtesy the Artist_Braverman Gallery. @ Ilit Azoulay



Ilit Azoulay. © Ilit Azoulay



Shelley Harten. Photo: Yael Bartana

Information

Artist: Ilit Azoulay

Curator: Shelley Harten

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Pavilion of Israel 2022

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