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### The King's Daughter

Reout Essiminy Feldman  
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**The King's Daughter**

by

Reout Essiminy Feldman

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

May 2017

Thesis Sponsor:

May 14, 2017

Date

Nari Ward

First Reader

May 14, 2017

Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas

Second Reader

## **Dedication and Thanks**

This thesis paper and project could not have come into being without the help and support of so many wonderful people. Unfortunately, due to space restrictions, I can't list all the people who supported me throughout this journey and who I cherish.

I feel fortunate to be part of a great community - the Hunter College community. Thank you for all the support and love throughout my time at Hunter.

To Howard Singerman: Thank you for your support and for keeping your door open.

To Paul Ramirez Jonas: Thank you for your insightful comments.

To my adviser, Nari Ward: Thank you for teaching me how to look and think about materials. Your passion to the physical objects is contagious. And thank you for pushing me to use my identity as a source. I'm grateful for all the studio visits and conversations.

To three incredible women, who I admire:

Mariah Loh: Thank you for taking me back in time to periods where an artistic practice was used to engage with emotions and ideas that are relevant today. And thank you for being a source of inspiration. Constance De Jong: Thank you for making me pay attention to words, sound and rhythm and for teaching us in class to not use the phrase "female artist" because "female" is not an adjective. Thank you for being a great source of light.

My big sister, Efrat: Thank you for playing along with my "artistic craziness" and letting me use your head for this art piece. I hope that this project will bring an end to the search; it is dedicated to you.

To my family, thank you for all your support and for tolerating me all these years. To my partner, Guy, thank you for believing in me when I didn't. And for being my ground base in my shaky life.

## Table of Contents

List of illustrations	p.3
Thesis	p.4 - 14
I. Prologue	p.4
II. Part I	p.5
III. Part II	p.9
IV. The King's Daughter	p.14
Bibliography	p. 15
Image list for Thesis Show images	p.16
Installation images	p.17-20
Link to video online	p.20

## List of Illustrations

<i>How to create a homemade rainbow on a tank top</i> , 2014, single channel video, 5:08 min. (video still)	p.10
<i>My Parents' living room</i> , 2017, photo	p.11
<i>To my father</i> , 2015, oil on canvas, 9"X12"	p.12
<i>My father's studio</i> , 2011, digital frame and photo, 40"X50"	p.12
<i>Baggage</i> , 2016, single channel video projection, 10 min loop. (video still)	p.13

## **Prologue**

One could wonder, who is the audience of this thesis? Is it for my own purposes? Is it just an academic assignment to ensure that the artist candidate can articulate her practice in words?

My intentions for this assignment are to use it to make some order in a process that usually does not start with words, but begins more as a light bulb moment or observation on life that leads me to create an image. I'm writing this text not in my first language; therefore the process of writing comes along with the process of translating and transforming ideas into another language. The transition to a different language holds a sense of loss, which is inevitable.

To my reader, whomever you might be, my identity and history will be exposed to you in this text, but I will never know who you are.

## Part I

### Thinking

*“He’s crying. [...] Then he’s living”*  
(*Endgame*, Samuel Beckett)

It is often argued that people learn to speak a language by using their mouth. The first language any newborn baby produces to communicate with the world is crying, which is characterized by tears that come out of one’s eyes. This first language is universal.

When the act of crying (tears coming out of your eyes) comes with the sound of crying, then crying becomes public. Two senses are involved so even if I don’t see you, I can still hear you cry, which sometimes can also be associated with grief. However, the experience of my own body has taught me that when crying is only visible and not audible, it is usually the result of an emotional and uncontrolled reaction of your body. I am fascinated by this occurrence, as it creates a trace on my face that comes from a place in my body, which I can’t see but only feel.

This uncontrolled internal experience is the result of an external experience that you can’t control or predict.

*The King’s Daughter* is a video installation that depicts an oversized projection of a woman’s head. Her eyes are closed, and there are necklaces with words coming out of them. The necklaces disappear into the black surface. In the first part of the video, the words coming out of her eyes are in English and they are an exposition of the first paragraph of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (2003). In the last part of the video, there are words in Hebrew that constitute the last line of *The Lost Princess*, a story by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (2004).

This video installation initially started with the attempt to find words to describe an external experience that affects an internal experience. I recall an art history professor that referred to the exposition of *The Divine Comedy* as the canonic beginning of every western story: “Midway in

our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood. How shall I say [...]” (Dante, 2003). I was struck by this exposition. It begins with the words “our life,” which don't let the reader escape from being part of the story. And then it becomes a singular voice of an individual who left the road and woke up alone in the dark wood. If the road is already known, there is no story. The story therefore begins when the character is having an external experience that is not known to him. The decision of Dante to begin in a plural voice can be analyzed in relation to Brecht and how he reflects on the role of the viewer in theater: “The theatre-goer in conventional dramatic theatre says: Yes, I've felt that way, too. That's the way I am. That's life. That's the way it will always be. The suffering of this or that person grips me because there is no escape for him. That's great art: Everything is self-evident. I am made to cry with those who cry, and laugh with those who laugh” (Brecht, 1964). The sense of engagement that Brecht and Dante is in my own work as I create images that are direct and frontal; and consider the viewer's gaze in the process of making the work.

However, this engagement is being interrupted in the video by a different language - Hebrew. Hebrew is my first language, as I was born in Israel. Over the past 6 years, English and Hebrew played an important role in my life. Six years ago, I moved to the US. To make a living, I started teaching Hebrew. I found myself speaking in both languages on a daily basis. And in doing so, holding my new identity as a foreigner in the US but at the same time holding my identity as an Israeli. Every time I speak, my accent signals to the listener that I am from a different place. Therefore, although I risk losing my viewer's attention, engaging with both languages in this installation was inevitable.

In my installation, following Dante's exposition, the last sentences in Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's (2004) story, *The Lost Princes*, appear:



“וחכמה להוציאה. ואיך שהוציאה לא סיפר. ובסוף הוציאה”

(It would require great wisdom and intelligence to take her out. How he freed her is not told, but in the end, he took her out).

The Lost Princess is a story about a search. The king’s advisor is sent along with his servant to find the king’s daughter. He is going on a journey to find her. The story ends with him eventually finding her, although we don’t know exactly how.

I was first introduced to this story by my cousin, who is a conservative Jew. For a long time, she was in search for a partner to whom she would get married. The sentence in the story, she noted, gave her hope. Even though she doesn’t know when or where she will find him, she realized that the journey she is going through is essential to this process.

This sentence shifts the engagement of the viewers, as this might not be a language that they can read. Dante’s paragraph that is used in the installation ends with the words: “How shall I say.”

Here, there is an expectation to get an answer, but then the next sentence is in Hebrew. The juxtaposition of the two languages creates a transition in the identities. It starts in English, which is one of the most spoken languages in the world and therefore it is commonplace, and then shifts to Hebrew, which is the language of the Jewish people, hence specific. Moreover, there is a play with the words themselves, as it starts with the English words “our” and then “I” but shifts to a different language and therefore a different identity.

The juxtaposition of the two texts, Dante’s exposition followed by Rabbi Nachman’s conclusion, echoes the structure of a whole story. Yet the body of the story is missing, and it gives the viewer the freedom to fill it in based on his or her own life experience.

## **Making**

In English, the word “bright” was first recorded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was used to depict the brilliance of the sun. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was used to describe highly intelligent children. A century later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word was a combination of these two meanings. When reports about Thomas Edison’s invention of the light bulb were published, many illustrations and photographs appeared, capturing Edison in his work space as he holds an electric light bulb. The light bulb has become an iconic symbol for having a “bright idea.”

My work depends on a light bulb as it being projected on a surface, in a dark room. Although a lightbulb doesn’t have content, it enables society to create spaces and environments that cannot exist in the darkness, as McLuhan notes in his book “Understanding Media.”

For me, video projection is a way to install meaning/content in the darkness, on the physical level, by lighting a place that was dark. But also on the consciousness level, by lighting and redefining ideas and concepts that might shape differently the viewer’s experience.

The King’s Daughter happens in a black room, where the viewer can only view the installation through a window. Light is being used in the projection, but it is also used to create a space within the black room. The figure’s head is being projected on the front wall. On the other walls, there are LED lights that create an illusion of a box underneath the head that can also be read as a pool, where all the necklaces are falling to the black pool.

## Part II

### **Inspiration and Life Background**

*“When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up” (Brecht on Theater, Bertolt Brecht)*

Early in my life I noticed that I’m extremely aware and interested in unusual decisions people make in their lives. I’m fascinated by how individuals create unintentional and unusual visual installation, for examples:

- Putting a watermelon in the bathroom because there was no room in the refrigerator.
- Putting a fruit in a plastic bag attached to a string and then putting it in the water to keep it cool during a family vacation.
- Our living room is lower than our kitchen, so while sitting in the living room, the kitchen floor is at your eye level. I used to love watching someone washing the floor, especially the moment when the water disappears.
- Carrying groceries bags and balancing your body with the number of bags each hand carries.

I’m also absorbed by the life experiences that my loved ones are going through in their lives and how they also affect my work.

#### **Dad**

##### *Performance*

Culture and food have always been related to identity and nostalgia in my family. My dad loves cinema. I remember listening to my dad’s laugh when he watched Charlie Chaplin, Louis de Funès, and Mr. Bean in their performances on TV. I didn’t quite understand the humor behind it,

but I was drawn to the use of illusion and materials and the idea that it is all based on body language.



*How to create a homemade rainbow on a tank top, 2014, single channel video, (video still)*

### *First Painting*

During the Lebanon War in 1982, my father's unit found shelter in an abandoned palace. My father was drawn to an oil painting that he saw in the castle that they invaded. It was a painting of a still life that depicted flowers and a big window. It was illegal during war time to take spoils of war, so he un-stretched the painting and wrapped it around his torso and then wrapped a bandage over it and hid it under his uniform shirt. The painting was too big for our living room so my mother cut it and kept only the part with the flower. That was the first painting that I saw in my life, and it still hangs in my parents' living room.



*My Parents' living room, 2017, photo*

*Forbidden Kisses*

My father's favorite movie is Cinema Paradiso. It is about the relationship between a man who operates the projector at the cinema, and a kid who finds a father figure in this man and falls in love with cinema. At the end of the movie, the kid, who is now a grown man, finds a film the man had left for him. It was a collage of all the forbidden kisses that as a child he wasn't allowed to watch. Until recently, I had no idea why my father likes this movie. I always thought that it was because it reminds him of his childhood. I wasn't wrong. As a child born and growing up in Morocco, he had a relative, Chaim, who had no kids and wasn't married. He loved my father. Every day after school my father went to his store, and drank tea and ate something sweet with him. He remembers how Chaim used to take him on his horse for a ride. By the age of 10, my father's family decided to move to France (and later to Israel). My father did everything to convince Chaim to join them, but he was old and didn't want to travel. That was the last time that he saw Chaim. A few years later, Chaim died. From the look in my father's eyes when he talks about Chaim, I can tell that he still misses him. He still drinks tea and must eat something

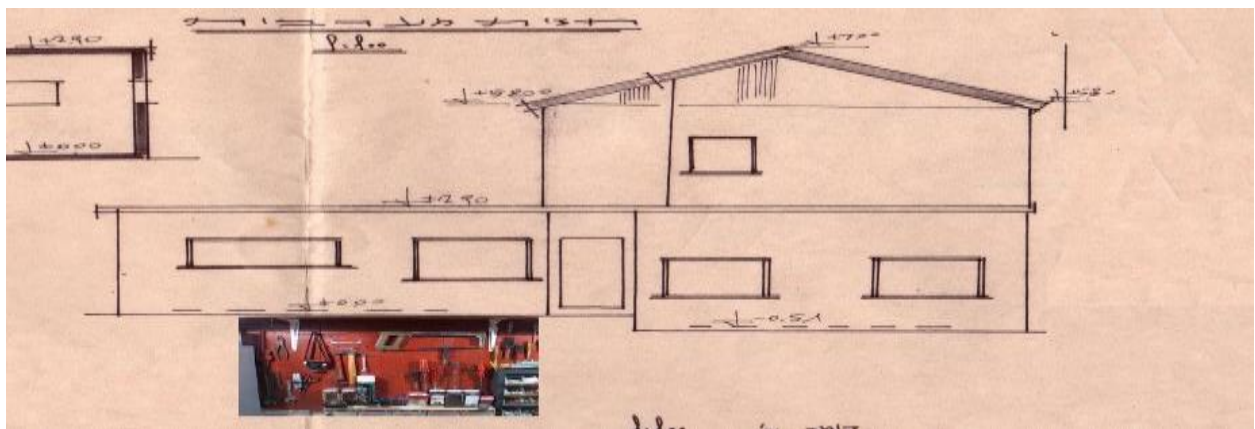
sweet with it.



*To my father, 2015, oil on canvas, 9”X12”*

### *Studio*

There was no room for my father to store his tools and to work on his home improvement projects. So, he eventually dug under our house. It took him a year to dig deep enough to be able to fully stand. I admired how passionate he was about it. Even after a long day at work, he would still dig for a few hours to make himself a studio.



*My father's studio, 2011, digital frame and photo, 40”X50”*

## Women

There are some 20 recipes that run in my family; they are passed down from generation to generation, from mothers to their daughters. These recipes and different types of food are linked to where my family came from, Morocco. The Moroccan folklore is centered around food, which women are required to make. These women are valued by others according to the amount of food they serve to their guests. I value this idea of hospitality and warmth. However, I can't help but see the labor involved in preparing the food and the sacrifices of these women make. Every time I ask my mother for a recipe, part of me is excited to see if my fingers inherited the skill to cook and to take part in preserving this tradition. Yet a different part of me is afraid to be trapped by this ability and cook only 20 recipes for the rest of my life.

Going back to Dante, his main character went astray from the straight road and woke up in a place he doesn't know. Where I come from, a woman is first a wife and then a mother. If something went wrong along the way and you didn't get married, it means that you failed as a woman and you are not on the straight road. The King's Daughter installation engages with this idea. Personally, I wanted to overthrow this expectation and see if I could break this pattern in my own life... but I got married.



*Baggage*, 2016, single channel video projection, 10 min loop. (video still)

### **The King's Daughter**

The oversized head in *The King's Daughter* belongs to my older sister. Her life experience has led her to be in search of love. This installation is dedicated to her. Whenever my loved ones appear in my work, I feel the need to use the artistic form to protect them or to stop their sorrow. There are gold necklaces coming out of my sister's eyes as if they were tears. Tears are usually not countable and they just appear and then disappear. But for me, my sister's tears are worth gold and each tear contains many words and has much weight, more than any spoken language. My sister is the hero of this tale. Any good story starts with a hero who went on a journey to find something she lost or wants to have.



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### **Image List: Thesis Show Installation Images**

Thesis exhibition installation view	p.17
Thesis exhibition installation view	p.18
Thesis exhibition installation view	p.19
Thesis exhibition installation view	p.20



Thesis exhibition (installation view)



Thesis exhibition (installation view)



Thesis exhibition (installation view)



Thesis exhibition (installation view)

To view the videos in the exhibition, please use the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/216923796>