

## Article

# A Natural-Worker Leaves the Colonial Visual Archive: The Art of Vered Nissim

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**Abstract:** The colonial visual archive has occupied in recent decades the work of scholars and artists from indigenous and racial minority communities, who revealed it as a major apparatus of historical meta-narratives. This article aims at pushing forward this preoccupation by revealing an additional scene: the art of Mizrahi women, descendants of Jewish communities of Arab and Muslim countries. Relying on a visual culture approach and focusing on an analysis of artworks by Mizrahi artist Vered Nissim, as well as on photographs of Mizrahi women, found in Zionist archives, I demonstrate how Nissim's work challenges the racial category of Mizrahi women as "natural workers," constructed in the Zionist historical meta-narrative. Nissim does so by re-enacting the category's paradigmatic visual image—the Mizrahi women cleaning worker—in a different way, visually and discursively. Body, voice, and visual image, three instances of the subjectivity of Mizrahi women cleaning workers that were separated, shaped, and mediated through Zionist colonial visual archives unite in Nissim's work when embodied by a real Mizrahi woman cleaning worker: her mother, Esther Nissim. By casting her mother to play herself over the past twenty years, Nissim creates political conditions for the appearance of her mother as the author of her own history as she orally, bodily, and visually writes it in front of her daughter's camera. Thus, Nissim joins a transnational phenomenon of global south artists who create political conditions enabling the self-imaging of colonized peoples, empowering the reading of colonial imagery and the historical meta-narratives attached to it through their situated knowledge and lived experience and, thus, constructing a counter history communicated visually.



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## 1. Introduction

The activity of making art, of participating in cultural production, came to be perceived in recent decades as a means of retrieving the truth of the past (Jones 2013, pp. 4–9). This notion was developed in the critical discourse of scholars, artists, and curators who questioned the relations between art and history and challenged the notion of a stable, reliable truth of historical meta-narratives and their political apparatuses.

In the Zionist context, a seminal artwork associated with the tensed relations between art, truth, and historical meta-narratives is *Nine out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest)* (Gal 1997), a self-portrait photograph where the artist, Meir Gal, is seen holding up nine out of the four hundred pages of the high school textbook, *History of Israel in Our Generation*, published in 1968. Gal's work refers to the erasure of Mizrahi (Oriental in Hebrew) Jews—the descendants of the Jewish communities of Arab and Muslim countries—from the Zionist historical meta-narrative. Pioneer Mizrahi scholar Ella Shohat, referred to this phenomenon as "the Eurocentric concept of a single 'Jewish History'", written by Ashkenazi Jews—the descendants of Jewish communities from Europe and North America (Shohat 1999). A decade later, in another photographed self-portrait titled *Six out of Over*

*Two Hundred: Mizrahi Artists According to Zalmona (Tribute to Meir Gal)*, Mizrahi feminist activist Ortal Ben Dayan called attention to Mizrahi exclusion in the book of Israeli art history, *One Hundred Years of Israeli Art* (Zalmona 2010). Ben Dayan's photograph was published alongside a review by art critic Yonatan Amir, who wrote that in Zalmona's volume, "mainly Ashkenazi men are shown. Women's place becomes more central over the years, but Mizrahis (...) remained underrepresented" (Amir 2010).

This article demonstrates how Mizrahi artist Vered Nissim challenges the Zionist meta-narrative of Mizrahi women. Nissim, I argue, re-enacts the paradigmatic image of the Zionist racial category of Mizrahi women as "natural workers"—the Mizrahi woman cleaning worker. In Nissim's work, the reproduction of this image through the mechanism of the Zionist colonial visual archive is interrupted. Nissim challenges the racialized image of the Mizrahi women cleaning worker by repeating it differently, both visually and discursively. Body, voice, and visual image, three instances of the subjectivity of the Mizrahi women cleaning worker, that were separated, shaped, and mediated through Zionist visual colonial archives unite in Nissim's work when embodied by a real Mizrahi woman cleaning worker: Vered Nissim's mother, Esther. By casting her mother to play herself throughout the last twenty years, Nissim joins a transnational phenomenon of global south artists who create political conditions enabling the self-imaging of colonized peoples and empowering the reading of colonial imagery and the historical meta-narratives attached to it through their situated knowledge and lived experience and, thus, constructing a counter history, communicated visually. In this sense, by casting her mother to play herself over the past twenty years, Nissim creates political conditions for the appearance of her mother as the author of her own history as she orally, bodily, and visually writes it in front of her daughter's camera.

Based on the approach of visual culture studies, in which art is considered a meaning production practice within a specific sociopolitical and historical context, the article draws on a close reading of images by Vered Nissim and archived Zionist photography of Mizrahi women as cleaning workers. This will allow me to contextualize Nissim's practice of re-enactment. Additionally, I contextualize Nissim's work within a specific practice of artistic intervening in colonial visual archives—a significant apparatus for constructing and reproducing historical meta-narratives. These practices developed in recent decades as a distinct artistic genre and as a part of a wider transnational phenomenon of global south women artists from indigenous communities and racial minorities who challenge historical colonial meta-narratives.

In my previous discussion on the politics of cleaning in Mizrahi women's art, I demonstrated how several artists, including Vered Nissim, navigate their "forced identity", by resisting the emotional politics in Mizrahi women's cleaning work. They employ artistic identity management strategies to achieve a sense of self-worth (Rajuan Shtang 2022a). Other studies have focused on the practice of subversive humor in Nissim's work (Dekel 2017).

The current article expands on my earlier analysis of the politics of cleaning, primarily by delving into Vered Nissim's artwork. Her work prominently addresses the subject of Mizrahi women's proletarianization, particularly in the context of cleaning labor. Additionally, I contextualize Nissim's art within the framework of re-enactment art, highlighting how her work challenges the Zionist racial categorization of Mizrahi women as "natural workers". This category appeared in the pre-1948 Zionist discourse (Shafir 1990). It marked Mizrahis as essentially nonrational and solely suited for menial, in contrast to "ideological workers", Ashkenazis, which were considered the enlightened, leading force of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine (ibid.). While I previously discussed this category in the context of Mizrahi men, here I will specify its meaning and implications in the context of Mizrahi women (Rajuan Shtang 2019). Finally, I explore the colonial visual archive as a framework for discussing Nissim's work and its implications. This dissection allows for a broader understanding of Mizrahi women's art and opens the door to further discussions about it in the context of the politics of the colonial archive.

In the following chapters I will unfold the theoretical and conceptual framework of the article. The second chapter presents the concepts of archival art and re-enactment art, both of which relate to the challenge which artists, curators, and scholars have raised in recent decades to the notion of history as an objective, solid truth. Then I will introduce the framework of visual culture studies as the general approach of the article. In the context this art can be conceived and analyzed as a meaning production practice within a broader sociopolitical context of visual culture and in a specific historical era. The third chapter presents the historiographic framework of my discussion through the lens of Mizrahi studies. I will review the main studies that created the foundations of Mizrahi studies and then elaborate on Mizrahi feminism and Mizrahi Visual Culture. The fourth chapter demonstrates Nissim's re-enactment of the racialized visual image of the Mizrahi women cleaning worker. To do so, I will start with a close reading of a photograph titled "At the housekeeper's market in Tel Aviv", (1945) by Ashkenazi photographer Yaakov Rosner, currently cataloged in the Jewish National Fund (JNF) archive. Using critical race studies and visual culture perspectives, I will demonstrate the way in which the photograph embodies the Zionist racial category of Mizrahi women as natural workers. Relying on Mizrahi historiography, I will outline the discursive conditions which enabled the emergence of what Noa Hazan (2022) called the "visual syntax of race" of the photograph. Based on feminist art history and theory, I will demonstrate the way in which this photograph is situated in the politics of the state's archive as a mechanism for taking control over the image and its meaning and mediating it through the Zionist racial perspective. In the second part of this chapter, I will move on to present a close reading of several video and photography artworks created by Vered Nissim over the past two decades. The reading will demonstrate how each work visually re-enacts the image of the Mizrahi woman cleaning worker and the Zionist discourse which marked her as a paradigmatic natural worker and, thus, creating new sources of a history situated in her standpoint and lived experience as a third generation Mizrahi woman artist.

## 2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. Archival Art

During the 1990s a so-called 'archival turn' in social studies, the humanities, and the arts involved a shift from the concept of the archive-as-source towards the archive-as-subject, a site of power relations. Within the field of art, the archival turn was defined as a phenomenon that encompassed both art production as well as curatorial activity, which included the increased appearance of historical and archival photographs and artifacts and the approximation of archival forms in the art and photographic practices of the 1990s (Simon 2002, p. 104). Gradually, a loose grouping of artworks and artistic practices were variously referred to as archive art. Hal Foster characterized artistic archive practices as an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history (Callahan 2022, pp. 1–2).

As Sara Callahan points out, while one could find a dual approach toward the archive within the wide range of work of scholars and artists, in the work of artists from indigenous communities and racial minorities, the archive is always associated with an oppressive system of knowledge, supporting existing power structures, and exclusionary patterns (Ibid.). Considerations of archival control and the development of new methods for reading the archive critically "against the grain" meant that archives came to be considered useful for uncovering various types of oppression and exclusions. Here, the archive is critically conceived as a site enabling the hegemonic power to take control of the past, deciding which voices will be heard, how, and for what purposes. Questions about who has access to the archive's sources and how and in what context should they be analyzed were raised by many, particularly those who brought postcolonial and feminist perspectives to the writing of history (Callahan 2022, p. 66). In this context, archival exclusions and omissions are deemed significant not only for what they could say about a particular archive but also for what they can tell us about oppression and injustice at the time of the archive's construction

and how these omissions continue to affect present and future sociopolitical structures and historical narratives (Callahan 2022, p. 188).

Archival art of indigenous artists and racial minorities particularly challenged the historical relations between settlers and natives, embodied in colonial archives is challenged (Jorgensen and McLean 2017). African artists' archival practice, for example, was described as a remaking of history through a lively engagement with a contested and controversial archive and a reimagination of the archive's "poetic and political dimensions, its diverse histories, and its changing meanings" (Dropbox 2013). They processed their country's racist history via archival interventions, referring to "the epistemic violence of anthropology, apartheid, and colonial rule" on the continent (Downey 2015; de Jong and Harney 2015). Similarly, queer artists used photographs and documents from historical archives to show the racist, misogynist, or homophobic structures that underpin them (Frantz and Locks 2011).

## 2.2. Re-Enactment Art

Art and visual culture scholar Amelia Jones points out that while the term "re-enactment" has received new meaning since the turn of the millennium, with new concerns about our relationship to history, it has been argued that history itself, all culture, even human experience in general, are necessarily based on a logic of re-enactment or redoing. Following theories and practices of performance specifically addressing temporality and repetition, this approach refers to the act as always already contingent on our experience of it and on the various modes through which we remember and historicize it. Yet, the idea of re-enactment has gradually gained additional meaning as a means of challenging historical meta-narratives and retrieving the truth of the past (Jones 2013, p. 5).

The use of re-enactment in art characterizes the work of artists from racial minorities and indigenous communities as means of decolonizing the oppressive historical meta-narratives underlying their racialized identity (See, for example, Neef 2020; Pedri-Spade 2017). This phenomenon relates to a major practice in multicultural and black feminism, which allows subjects of racial minorities to confront, retrospectively, colonial historical meta-narratives (Shohat 1991, 1998; Hooks 1986–1987). While decolonization is a social and cultural heterogeneous practice, in the visual context, as Anishinabe visual anthropologist and artist Celeste Pedri-Spade suggests, decolonization is about "looking back" or, in Lynne Bell's words, "looking from the other side of the photograph" (See Smith 1999; Laenui 2009; Sunseri 2007; Pedri-Spade 2017, p. 107; Bell 2011). This practice aims at disrupting dominant colonial historical narratives attached to colonial ways of looking and capturing the Other by empowering a counter history communicated visually by oppressed and colonized peoples (Pedri-Spade 2017).

## 2.3. Visual Culture

The development of critical theory in the context of art history can be traced back to John Berger's seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*, and W.J.T. Mitchell's conceptualization of the "Pictorial Turn". These studies registered a renewed interest in and prevalence of pictures and images in an age of increasingly extensive and diverse visual culture of mass media (Berger 1972; Mitchell 1992). Within the framework of visual culture studies, the artistic visual image is analyzed within the broader context of visual culture, with the specific historical contexts that construct their meanings; in relation to reproducibility, technological, historical, and institutional conditions that regulate their meaning; and to sociopolitical practices of showing and seeing (Mitchell 2002). The conceptual context allowed conceiving art as a practice of visual culture, which means describing and analyzing art practices as meaning-producing practices in specific historical eras. This approach to art research was developed also in the context of Israel and Zionism (Rajuan Shtang and Hazan 2017, pp. 8–21; Simhony 2017).

#### 2.4. Discussion: Archival Art, Re-Enactment Art, and Visual Culture: The Case of Vered Nissim

Israeli art scholars used the postcolonial paradigm to analyze archival art practices mainly in reference to artworks by Ashkenazi or Palestinian artists who return “to the silenced moments of Nakba and undermine systems that preserved prevalent narratives, such as institutional photographic archives” (Rozenal 2016). Yet, there is no equivalent discussion in the context of Mizrahi art. This might be related to the fact that the postcolonial context of the Mizrahi history is constantly marginalized in Israeli scholarly. Nevertheless, scholars demonstrated how the construction of the Mizrahi identity is rooted in the colonial history, and its settler-native discourse (Cohen and Evri 2017; Jacobson and Naor 2016). In visual culture Mizrahi scholarship, the oppressive aspects of the archive were explored by Hazan (2018), who analyzed the role of the Hadassah women’s organization in visualizing and spreading the Zionist prospect to international audiences. In practice, Mizrahi feminist artist Dafna Shalom’s project *Identity and Identification* (2012) was a social art project of creating Mizrahi bottom-up and inside-out historical narratives through the creation of a community archive as an alternative to the historical erasure that was part of Israel’s melting pot policies (The Israeli Center of Digital Art 2015). Additionally, as I recently demonstrated, between 2017 and 2022, four Mizrahi women artists, Tamar Nissim, Shaked Ozery, Keshet Cohen, and Rotem Shaul, created artworks referring directly to the politics of Israel’s state archives, in the context of the Yemenite, East, and Balkan children affair (Rajuan Shtang 2022b).

My aim in the current discussion, however, is not necessarily to categorize Nissim’s work as archival art. This is though artworks and artistic practices included in the category of archival art are not considered archival merely because they overtly use the terminology of archives, but because they are somehow seen to evoke archival concepts or themes (Callahan 2022, pp. 19–20). From my perspective as a visual culture scholar, my aim is to demonstrate how the Zionist visual archive, as a mechanism constructing and reproducing the historical meta-narrative of Mizrahi woman as a natural worker, is being contested through a bottom-up and inside-out perspective of Mizrahi women, in this case, Vered Nissim. While the context of Zionist visual archives provides the framework of what is being contested, the framework of re-enactment art provides the context of how it is contested. In this sense, situating Nissim’s images of her mother, Ester, a real Mizrahi cleaning worker, in the context of the Zionist visual archive’s archetypes of Mizrahi women cleaning workers as paradigmatic natural workers, reveals two things. First, the symbolic violence embodied in the state archive as a mechanism for constructing and reproducing colonialist historical meta-narratives. Second, the resistance embodied in Nissim’s practice of re-enactment, which cuts the process of reproducing the racialized image by repeating it in a different way, both visually and discursively.

### 3. Mizrahi Studies

#### 3.1. Mizrahi Studies

The relations between Ashkenazis and Mizrahis is one of the tense issues in the context of the clash between West and East in Israel/Palestine throughout the 20th century and one of the complex issues in Israel studies. In the academy, Mizrahi scholarship developed during the 1980s against the backdrop of the critical turn in the social sciences and the humanities. Mizrahi-pioneering scholars such as Ella Shohat conceptualized Zionism as a movement committed to colonialist, ethnonationalist, and democratic goals (Shohat 1988, 2006; Swirsky 1989, pp. 1–37). This contrasted with the functionalistic research approach, in which the Zionist ideology of the labor movement received the status of an objective description of reality and the modernization that accompanied it was described as a benevolent process and social sciences (Shafir and Peled 2002). According to Shohat, the Mizrahi identity was constructed mainly from the 1950s, during the mass immigration. “Mizrahi” gradually emerged as a new hybrid identity of the Arab Jew, a product both of Israel’s racist assimilationist policy and of resistance to it (Shohat 1999). The preoccupation with the politics of the Mizrahi identity gradually developed into a field



of research, Mizrahi Studies, where scholars from various disciplines demonstrated various manifestations of Zionist institutional and symbolic violence towards Mizrahis, including exclusion, marginalization, and institutional racism (See: [Hever et al. 2002](#); [Shohat 2006](#); [Shenhav 2006](#); [Chetrit 2010](#)). The phenomena of subordination of Mizrahis by the Zionist establishment were traced back as early as the first half of the twentieth century in Palestine, and more so from the 1950s onwards ([Shenhav and Yona 2008](#)).

### 3.2. Mizrahi Feminism

The development of Mizrahi feminist scholarship complicated the Mizrahi discourse, revealing the construction and reproduction of Mizrahi women's identity at the intersection of multiple marginalizations throughout the history of Zionism ([Dahan-Kalev 2021](#); [Shohat 1991](#); [Shiran 2002](#); [Lavie 2007](#), pp. 9–15). Mizrahi feminist-pioneer scholars Ella Shohat, Viki Shiran, Smadar Lavie, and Henriette Dahan Calev created a theoretical framework for the analysis of the patronizing and racist attitude of the Ashkenazi hegemony toward Mizrahi women. They criticized the color-blindness of Ashkenazi feminism and revealed the colonial conditions within which the Mizrahi feminine identity was constructed at the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and class.

The intersected identity of Mizrahi women was gradually constructed from the early 20th century, and more so from 1948. During the first half of the 20th century, on the backdrop of vibrant public discussions and scientific work by Zionist leaders concerning “the Jewish race”, a sociopolitical process of intranational division of labor and roles, was established ([Efron 1994](#); [Hart 1999](#)). The nature of this division was embodied in Zionist discourse in the racial categories natural workers, and ideological workers ([Shafir 1990](#)). This division gained specific meaning in the context of women's labor, when Ashkenazi women, who aspired to gender equality in the national division of labor, gradually assigned the work of cleaning, domestic cleaning in particular, to Mizrahi women. Eventually, from the 1930s and 1940s onwards, most women engaged in cleaning Jewish houses in Palestine were either Mizrahi or Arab ([Bernstein 1987a, 1998](#); [Lavie 2007](#), pp. 9–15). After 1948, during the mass immigration of the Jewish communities of Arab and Islam countries, Mizrahi women were settled, with their families, in the remote geographical peripheries of Israel, while being racially discriminated against in national land allocation. The education system tracked them to vocational training and, thus, to the blue-collar working class, with the work of cleaning still being a dominant source of income. Thus, they were prevented from integrating into power and influence centers in the state of Israel ([Benjamin et al. 2011](#)).

### 3.3. Mizrahi Visual Culture

The scholarly work embodying what I call “Mizrahi visual culture” was established during the 1980s, with Ella Shohat's pioneering studies on Zionist cinema ([Shohat 1989, 2006](#)). Since then, a very extensive engagement with issues related to Mizrahi has developed both in practice and in academic writing). For many reasons, referring to which would exceed the present discussion, in the context of the Israeli art field, the situation is complex and quite different. In the late 1990s, the work of visual culture scholar Sara Chinski pinpointed the Ashkenazi masculine dominance in the Israeli art field, and its racial divisions of roles, that took root at the turn of the 20th century during the establishment of the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem by the Ashkenazi Zionist artist Boris Shtz. According to Chinski, and the scholarly work that followed her, the logic of Bezale's division of labor, assigning Mizrahis to the workshops of folkloric art, and Ashkenazis to the prestigious studios of fine art, underlies the Israeli art field till now, which is characterized by a gender and racial imbalance amongst artists, curators, collectors, and audiences alike ([Chinski 1997](#)). [Hazan \(2022\)](#) studied the display practices applied in Israeli national museum exhibitions since 1948 and revealed the colonial context and naturalization mechanisms of the institutionalized racialization of Mizrahis. My own study on gender and race in pre-1948 Zionist visual culture demonstrated how the Zionist establishment's implantation of various colonial practices constructed a Zionist scopic regime, within which a racialized

image of Mizrahi women symbolically marked the entire Mizrahi group as Zionism's intranational racially based Others (Rajuan Shtang 2023). Yet, during the 1990s, and more so since the turn of the millennium, Mizrahi artists developed their own images and challenged the visualization of the Mizrahis in Zionist visual culture.

#### 4. Visual Colonial Archive Revised: Re-Enacting Mizrahi Women's Role as Natural Workers in Vered Nissim's Work

##### 4.1. The Mizrahi Women Cleaning Worker as a Paradigmatic Natural Worker in Zionist Visual Colonial Archives

A woman wearing a light fabric dress stands on a sidewalk at an urban intersection (Figure 1). A headkerchief covers her hair loosely, and her face is seen from the profile. Her gaze is lowered, directed downwards at something she is holding in her palms. At the top of the building behind her hangs an ad: "Learn Hebrew with the Berlitz method". Several women are standing behind her, also wearing light fabric dresses, worn-out shoes, or flip flops, and holding straw baskets. Their hair is also covered with headkerchiefs, though in a different style. The shooting angle prevents the viewer from seeing their faces. In the background are the Bauhaus buildings that were built in Tel Aviv during that time, which later gave Tel Aviv its Zionist nickname "The White City".



**Figure 1.** Yaakov Rosner, "At the housekeeper's market in Tel Aviv", 1945. (Courtesy of the Jewish National Fund).

The photograph, "At the housekeeper's market in Tel Aviv", is one of a series of photographs taken by Yaakov Rosner in 1945, currently cataloged at the Jewish National Fund (JNF) archive. Rosner, a Jewish-German photographer, was recruited by the propaganda wing of the JNF and was one of the most prominent and productive Zionist photographers of the time. While many of Rosner's photographs of women are sharp, frontal portraits, showing distinct, dramatic human actions, clearly associated with the main values of the Zionist ethos—redeeming the land of Palestine and its inhabitants. This convention was common in Zionist photography, as evident in the JNF's International Women's Day virtual exhibition in 2022, in which the JNF "reveals exclusive historical photographs of the powerful women from the early years of the country" (Jewish National Fund 2022). In Rosner's housekeeper series, however, most of the women's faces are not visible and any action that can be performed by them is put off or postponed. Moreover, all around the passers-by are seen in the distance, in motion, and right beside them on the road, a man on a bicycle rushing forward.

The appearance of the women in Rosner's photograph connotes what I have conceptualized as the double role of Mizrahi women in pre-1948 Zionist visual culture: as spectacles of "Imperialistic Nostalgia" or "Human Labor" ([Rajuan Shtang 2023](#)). Applying a critical race studies and visual culture analysis of the photograph's "visual syntax of race" ([Hazan 2022](#)), demonstrates how, using the racial marker of "perpetual past", the photograph reproduces the categorization of Mizrahi women as natural workers. Semiotically, the women's visual appearance is associated by Western viewers with a static, primitive, and indigenous past. They are framed as an ethnographic phenomenon and their static appearance is opposed to the normative flow of life seen around them. The contrast between the background, a dynamic modern city, in which men are publicly active, and the figures, an isolated group of women in traditional clothes, leads the Western viewer to associate them with passivity, neediness, and backwardness, earthliness, femininity, and the private sphere.

Rosner's photograph, therefore, joins the repertoire of Zionist photography, which encourages the Zionist public not only to learn to speak the Hebrew language, in the European way—as the ad at the top of the photograph declares—but also to "learn seeing race in Hebrew", as [Hazan \(2009\)](#) calls it. During the era under discussion, the "Jewish race" was still an active category within the discourse of Jewish scientists and Zionist leaders. At the same time, photography was used as an effective and powerful tool for inventing, constructing, and establishing social constructions of the Jewish race as an existing fact with material reality. Hazan demonstrated how the visual syntax of race, which was used in Zionist photography since 1948, served the violent demand for rigid appearance patterns that blocked diverse identity definitions ([Hazan 2022](#)). The signifier of "eternal past" is one of the characteristics of a practice that Etien Balibar called "racialization without race", in which racialization relies on the field of culture ([Balibar 1991](#)). In the visual domain, this practice is based on a linkage between visible physical facts, such as those of the women in Rosner's photograph, and other invisible features.

While observing the women in Rosner's photograph, thinking about the erasure of their identity, their names, and voices, I think back to the ways in which Israeli feminist artists have challenged the erasure of women's agency in the context of the modern visual archives. Ashkenazi feminist artist Michal Heiman addressed these issues in the context of patriarchal Western discourses of psychoanalysis in several series of artworks and specifically in a photography series of Ashkenazi/western women, to whom the question "what's on your mind?" is attached ([Heiman 2021](#); [Simhony 2017](#)). In the Mizrahi feminist context, Tamar Nissim's preoccupation with these issues recently reached a peak in the video *The Hygienic Project*, in which she made "the silence [of Mizrahi women] speak", to use Ella Shohat's words, while dramatizing archived testimonies of Mizrahi mothers whose children disappeared during the 1950s in Israel/Palestine ([Shohat 1991](#)). In the scene where the Mizrahi mothers sit silently, looking straight into the camera, while the narrator's voiceover asks, "Who are you?", Nissim refers directly to the eraser of Mizrahi women's agency and authority in the context of the construction of the historical meta-narrative of the affair through the state archive ([Jewish Film Festival 2021](#)). Relying on Shohat's formation of the feminist multicultural practice of extracting the silenced Mizrahi women's voice and perspective, which was silenced in Ashkenazi cinema, questions relating to the politics of photograph production and the discourse configuration which enabled its production and its contextualization as a historical state archival source.

The women in Rosner's photograph were photographed at a time when the early sociopolitical process of division of labor between Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Palestinian women in Palestine reached its peak. Deborah Bernstein's study showed how during pre-1948, Ashkenazi women, who aspired to gender equality in the national division of labor, gradually rejected the work of domestic cleaning which they considered a nonrational, survival, labor ([Bernstein 1987b](#), p. 9; [Lavie 2007](#), p. 11). And so, during the 1930s and 1940s, most of the women working in domestic cleaning were Mizrahi and Arab ([Bernstein 1995](#), pp. 96–97; [Bernstein 1987a](#), pp. 80–82; [Bernstein 1998](#), pp. 296–97; [Hirsch 2014](#), pp. 222–23.).



This division of labor reproduced itself also after 1948. Motzafi-Haller, Bernstein, and Benjamin demonstrated how, for racialized working-class minority women in Israel that historically were assigned to do the ‘dirty job’, domestic cleaning acts as a huge mechanism of exclusion, ghettoization, and racialization—ethnic/racial-based othering. Moreover, their experience is typically characterized by a structure of feelings that include insecurity, shame, degradation, and self-doubt (Benjamin et al. 2011).

#### 4.2. Re-Enacting Zionist Visual Colonial Archive: The Mizrahi Women Cleaning Worker in Vered Nissim's Art

The history of proletarianizing Mizrahi women, to cleaning work specifically, has come up more intensely in recent years in the fields of art and academic research (Shohat 1989; Bernstein 1995, 1987a, 1987b, 1998; Margalit Stern 2001, 2006; Lavie 2007, pp. 9–15; Benjamin et al. 2011; Haskin and Haruvi 2019). Vered Nissim's work embodies a decolonization of the Zionist archival image of Mizrahi women, through which body, voice, and visual image of the Mizrahi women cleaning worker—unite. This move can be tracked back in Nissim's work over the last twenty years when, already as an art student, she began visualizing the multiple marginalizations that intersect in Mizrahi women's identity, with the Mizrahi women cleaning worker being a central theme.

In *Venus Gaze (Self Portrait)* (2004) and *Venus Gaze (Mom)* (2004) (Figure 2) Nissim photographed herself and her mother in an “odalisque pose”. This composition echoes the 19th-century odalisque iconography of Orientalist painting and photography. According to Malek Alloula (1986, p. 78), “the odalisque became the target of Orientalist photography, the personification of the colonial fantasy”. The reason for this is that 19th-century European odalisque photography symbolically “removed the lot from the harem” (حريم harīm: a sacred site; a nickname for the women of the family) (ibid.), a room in the Muslim house reserved for women only. Using objectifying compositions of the woman's body and depicting appropriated ethnographic items as a setting, Orientalist photography of women in North Africa and the Middle East embodied a desecration and subjugation of the male power that blocked the entrance to the harem. This tradition was applied in Zionist art, yet in a different way (Rajuan Shtang 2023).



**Figure 2.** (Right): Vered Nissim, *Venus Gaze (Self Portrait)*, still photograph, 2004. (Left): Vered Nissim, *Venus Gaze (Mom)*, still photograph, 2004.

*Venus Gaze (Self Portrait)* (2004), and *Venus Gaze (Mom)* (2004) embody a re-enactment of the odalisque iconography when its conventional luxurious ethnographic clothing and settings are replaced with rags and rubber gloves. Vered and Esther are wearing long white dresses which recall a festive evening or wedding dress, yet they are made of old-fashioned cotton rags. The setting is a gray, gloomy building lobby, and the seductive, submissive glances of the odalisque are replaced by the posture of Esther's tired body, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Vered's upright, determined body posture, and her gaze line seems stretched like a bow arrow towards the camera. Vered appropriates both the position of the photographer and the position of the photographed and disturbs the possibility of seeing her and her mother as a passive, accessible object of Orientalist fantasy.

The photograph *Joint Forces* (2007) (Figure 3) embodies a visualization of the decolonization practice of “reading against the grain.” Nissim photographed three mops with old-fashioned cotton sponge rags, stained, this time, leaning overturned against a hewn brick wall. The absence of the subject who is associated with these cleaning tools, their exceptional setting, in a way that goes against their functional logic, the wall and floor stones that are used in public spaces, and the overturning of the mops, create a composition that recalls placards, working tools, or flags, raised during a demonstration or leaning against walls after it. This contrasts with the symbolic Zionist image of Mizrahi women in Zionist visual archives, in which she never leaves, challenges, or rebels against her racialized role in the Zionist enterprise as a spectacle of human labor or imperialistic nostalgia.



**Figure 3.** Vered Nissim, *Joint Forces*, still photograph, 2007.

An early image of Mizrahi woman cleaning workers is a 1934 photograph of Ashkenazi actresses Alina Starinzka, and Yehudit Frkl as the Yemenite cleaning women, singing *The Yemenite Women's Song* (Figure 4). The song was written by poet Nathan Alterman for HaMetateh Theater show *Everything is Alright* (See: [Wikipedia 2007](#)). Like Rozner's photograph, which I discussed earlier, this photo and song were created during the time when the social process of the proletarianization of Mizrahi women and assigning them to cleaning work reached its peak ([Bernstein 1987b](#), p. 9). Thus, the photo is a paradigmatic visualization of the Zionist naturalization of the linkage between Mizrahi women, rags, and mops. This linkage which was common in the period's Zionist literature ([Haskin and Haruvi 2019](#), pp. 325–75), is embodied in the lyrics of *The Yemenite Women's Song*: “In my left hand a rag and bucket, [...] in my right hand—a brush/when I get up for work, /my mother says to me, /my dear child, /take the rag, /the rag is Yemeni”.<sup>1</sup> Ashkenazi actresses Deborah Dotan, Hannah Laslau, and Sandra Sadehs' 1980 TV performance of *The Yemenite Women's Song* preserved the same composition and Laslau went on using the role of Mizrahi women cleaning worker for many years along with her career as a comedian.

In *Joint Forces* (Figure 3), two of the rags are worn on the wiper through a hole while the middle rag is placed on top of the wiper. Nissim refers to the proletarianization process that her parents went through in Israel, like the vast majority of the first- and second-generation Mizrahi immigrants,

My parents have already been professionally tracked. These holes, through which the rags are worn on the wipers, it's that the rag never leaves them. . . The third rag, the one in the center, can be considered as marking an unusual, changeable situation.<sup>2</sup>



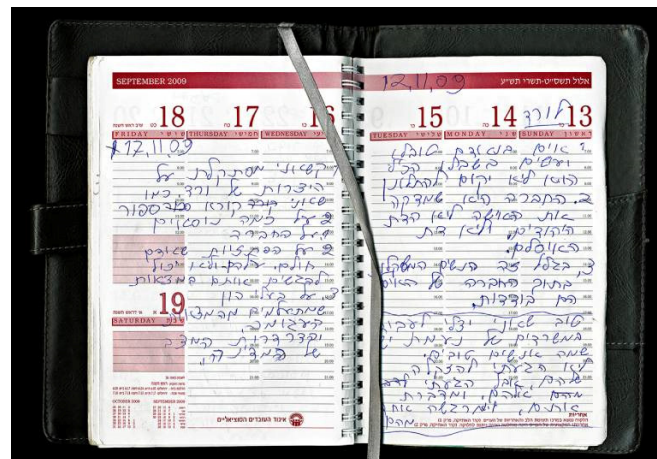
**Figure 4.** Photographer unknown, Alina Starinzka and Yehudit Frkl. Performing *The Yemenite Women's Song* in the theater show *Everything is All Right*, Tel Aviv, 1934.

The third wiper marks the third generation—of Vered herself. Against the backdrop of decades of reproduction of the Zionist racialized image of the Mizrahi cleaning worker, Nissim's *Joint Forces* can be perceived as a symbolic visualization of a call for an uprising, for joining the forces that were distanced from participating in “the event of photography” (Azoulay 2015), and for a political situated imagination of a future where the intergenerational reproduction of status stoops.

Yet, although the side rags are worn on the wiper, all the wipers are overturned, as in a work strike. The exceptional, third generation, grants force and recognition to the parents' generation. Esther's words in Nissim's video *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* (2015) indicate that she is full of pride in the face of her daughter's work, which, in turn, makes her proud of her own work. “Thanks to the rag”, Esther says; she gave her children an education and, therefore, she concludes, “for me, the rag is a flag”.

Similar to *Joint Forces* in the series *Untitled (The Diary)* (2008–2013) (Figure 5), Esther's figure is absent, but her voice is embodied in the photograph. In this series, Nissim photographed the diary her mother received from the Israeli Union of Social Workers when working as a cleaning worker at the Na'amat organization. In the catalog of the group exhibition *Accelerating in Neutral* (Rawart Gallery 2013), in which the series was displayed, curator Noga Davidson wrote that the way Esther's thoughts are organically scattered between the work arrangements and taking her medicines creates a text without hierarchies as if there's no barrier “between physical and spiritual survival.” (Rawart Gallery 2013). Indeed, the large prints of the photographed worksheets, which were hung on the gallery's walls, recalled a sketch of a mental map. In Julia Kristeva's terms, the power of the symbolic aspect of language, embodied in the formal, printed diary, loses its grip. Esther's handwriting is placed like a layer in a drawing on a ready-made substrate (Kristeva 1984). The form of this layer embodies the gap between the symbolic order and Esther's voice in the metaphorical, denotative, and corporeal-semiotic sense. The letters are drawn beyond the printed lines, their forms tend to abstraction and reflections concerning the causes of inequality, and the oppression of women is dated to a day in a week that has already passed (Figure 5). Esther's affective, corporeal presence, which exists below the radar of the symbolic order, not only gains visual embodiment through the form and content of her writing; the enlarged display format of the photographs blows up the gap and, thus, gives Esther's voice a dimension of defiance.





**Figure 5.** Vered Nissim, from the series *Untitled (The Diary)*, inkjet print, 2008–2013.

In the video, *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* (2015) (Figure 6), Nissim's re-enactment of the Zionist image of the Mizrahi cleaning worker reached a peak when the body, voice, and visual image of a real Mizrahi woman cleaning worker, her mother, Esther, unite. While both *Joint Forces* and *Untitled (The Diary)* embody only a metonymical presence of Esther, and in *Venus Gaze (Mom)* Esther is embodying herself, in the video *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes*, Esther is fully present. In the video, Nissim stands on a high ladder, looking down on her mother who is leaning on a Southern Tel Aviv sidewalk, talking continuously about her life in Israel and her hard work cleaning while repeatedly washing a round surface made of perfectly clean yellow cleaning gloves. The scene, therefore, becomes symbolic: Esther's performance of cleaning empties it of meaning and purpose only to charge it with a new one. The racially based Othering category of Mizrahi women as natural workers and its visualization—which was historically constructed without them, dispossessing them of ownership of their own image, appropriating this image, and mediating its meaning according to interests that do not serve them—collapses under the appearance of the resisting singular agency of Esther, the author of her story, and the owner of a unified body, image, voice, and sound.



**Figure 6.** Vered Nissim, *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* Video still, 2015.

Nissim's video critically re-enacts the racial signifier of the Mizrahi women housekeeper in Israeli cinema. Amalia Jones demonstrated how re-enactment art often suggests a critical perspective when activating "history from within the present, allowing us to move away from the sterile attempt to cut through the infinite mediations of the spectacle" (Jones 2013, p. 2). Nissim's video, in this sense, activates the image of the Mizrahi women housekeeper in Israeli cinema from within her Mizrahi feminist-situated knowledge, in

the present. According to Ella Shohat, in Israeli films, which traditionally reflected Zionism's intranational racial hierarchy, the role of the housekeeper was retained for a Mizrahi character (performed by an Ashkenazi actor) and was constructed in a patronizing way, through the point of view of the Ashkenazi directors and diegetic employers. This was the case in films like *999... Aliza Mizrahi* (1967); *I Like Mike, Two Heartbeats* (1972); or *A Thousand Little Kisses* (1981), where the appearance of the Mizrahi woman housekeeper was subordinated to her professional role in Ashkenazi spaces: a background character devoid of agency, an Oriental decoration in the Ashkenazi upper-class house, which recalled the figure of the black maid in Hollywood's cinema (Shohat 1989). In Nissim's work, the production of video moves from the Ashkenazi filmmakers' control to the Mizrahi women themselves—Vered and Esther. Thus, when she activates the historical convention of the Mizrahi housekeeper, the political conditions enabling its appearance change. The background character becomes the heroine, her silence breaks by a seemingly endless script, the signified figure merges with its signifier, the actor, and the Ashkenazi spaces dissolve in the harsh reality of the migrant workers and African refugees of South Tel Aviv. This transformation in the relation between the photographer, the photographed, and the camera creates, as Pedri-Spade suggests, a new context, which disrupts dominant colonial narratives attached to colonial ways of looking. The creation of political conditions enabling the self-imaging of oppressed and colonized peoples empowers the reading of colonial imagery and the historical meta-narratives attached to it through their situated knowledge and lived experience and, thus, also the construction of a counter history communicated visually (Pedri-Spade 2017, p. 2; Askren 2009).

The relations between the visual and the acoustic modes in *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* signify a shift also in the video's affinity to cinematic histories and discourses, from Israeli cinema to feminist international cinema. Throughout the video, Esther speaks to the physical and mental challenges of her life experience as a cleaning worker. All along she politicizes her position, pointing at the power relations underlying her disadvantaged status within the class inequality in Israel and her struggle against the barriers that these conditions created for her and her children. In doing so, she delivers a singular oral history from a perspective that has so far remained transparent. Yet, Nissim applies Ella Shohat's call to "make the silences speak" on another level. The long shots of Esther speaking while performing the work of cleaning not only bring her singular historical narrative to the surface of the symbolic language. Nissim's editing work in this video reveals an additional communicative aspect of language. The semiotic pole of language, according to Kristeva, is bodily manifested through the tone, rhythm, and other affective aspects of the "speaking subject". The heavy breaths accompanying the physical effort, the flow of words that melts into crying, the tone of her singing Mizrahi hits, and, most significantly, the gaps between one sequence of Esther's monologue to another, the Iraqi accent, which are not cut in the editing.

Nissim's neorealistic editing style in *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* evokes the feminist social and progressive realism found in Chantal Akerman's 'corporate cinema', particularly in her milestone film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), where, as Ivone Margulies aptly described it, 'nothing happens' during its three-hour runtime (Margulies 1996). Akerman's work contributed greatly to the 1970s feminist wave of rewriting women's history. In the early short film *Saute ma Ville* (1968) and, more notably, in *Jeanne Dielman*, she skillfully portrayed the hidden costs of women's transparent housework and the vulnerability they experienced within what Carole Patman termed "the sexual contract" (Patman 1988).

Grounded in this feminist slow-cinema tradition, Nissim's *If I Tell My Life Story Tears Come Out of My Eyes* tempts the Zionist viewer to continue to adopt the colonial point of view and to take another colonial look at the Mizrahi woman cleaning worker as a paradigm of the racial category "natural worker". Yet instead, Nissim forces this viewer to contemplate on heavy breaths, sweat, and tears—the invisible costs of Israel's intranational



racial and gender division of labor, underlying the image of Mizrahi women in Zionist visual archives.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author (S.R.S).

<sup>2</sup> Vered Nissim, in conversation with the author (S.R.S), 27 December 2023.

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