



CONTAGIOUS  
**TRUTHS**

TAMAR NISSIM



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MARCH 10 - JULY 8, 2022 | HADASSAH-BRANDEIS INSTITUTE | KNIZNICK GALLERY



THE HYGIENE PROJECT, 2021, DOCUMENTARY FILM



The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute is proud to present “Contagious Truths,” a solo exhibition by Israeli artist Tamar Nissim.

Tamar Nissim’s videos, photographs, and installations explore how Western hygiene methods were interwoven with nationalist ideology to control women in mid-20th-century Israel. Nissim’s videos draw from personal interviews, archival research, and testimonies to trace the effects of these policies on women’s bodies and lives: Mizrahi immigrants who complied to prove themselves civilized; nurses who enforced strict hygiene protocols; mothers whose babies were taken away in what has come to be known as the Yemenite, Mizrahi, and Balkan Children Affair.

Glass bottles, bars of olive oil soap, and photographs of cleaning products extend the context of the videos, offering windows into these women’s environments. Pairing audio of herself and her mother with footage of her daughter, Nissim forms an intergenerational portrait. Unflinchingly, she confronts the legacy of trauma, how it remains in the body, and its possible ends.

**OLIVIA BALDWIN**

*Curator*

*Kniznick Gallery | Hadassah-Brandeis Institute*



THE HYGIENE PROJECT, 2021, DOCUMENTARY FILM



# CONTACT TRACING: On Health, Nation and Body in Tamar Nissim's Work

ROTEM ROZENTAL, PH.D

Tamar Nissim's videos, installations and performances unravel how a newborn state conflated personal hygiene with the health of a nation, and cleaning methods with the formation of model citizens. In this struggle over the well-being of the body, ideology is converged with domestic spaces, national needs are equated with parental decisions and discrimination wears the guise of public health. Nissim shows how standards of hygiene were maintained by the Zionist *Yishuv*, or pre-state Israel, and by the nascent State, and how these standards shifted both how individuals saw themselves, and were evaluated by institutional authorities. Addressing painful historical moments and their documentation (or absence) in national, institutional and private archives, Nissim draws attention to those who would inevitably fail to meet the criteria, and to those who enforced these standards. Simply put, meeting standards for health and hygiene meant meeting the threshold for citizenship. And, of course, someone will inevitably not meet the constitutive criteria.

Nissim explores how her own home was shaped by such perceptions, as she focuses on her matriarchs, who understood their success and value in the world based on how they keep their houses and bodies clean.

In *The Blue Will Shine White*, *Jabotinsky 38*, the artist's daughter, Noa, brushes away dirt from a pile of soaps, while we hear Nissim interviewing her mother about life in Tel Aviv during the Mandate era. Her mother talks about playing with Arab neighbors and the Arab women who were working as housekeepers, about keeping everything in their tiny apartment well organized, while sharing towels and taking a bath once every few days. "It was a model for our mothers," she says, "to be very tidy and clean. And I tell you, we had to scrub every day."

Nissim's intergenerational perspective, which plays out in private spaces that are defined by the dominant ideology, raises questions about the conflicts between parental decisions and public health, between the State's expectations and the daily functioning of bodies in the social field. In Nissim's works, the criteria for cleanliness are internalized and inherited, handed down with the traumas the indoctrination process may have caused. In *Banana*, a female hand places a banana in a white bowl, over a white tablecloth. She then pours boiled water over the banana, a process that darkens the skin of the fruit. Nissim's grandmother, who emigrated to Palestine from Bukhara, used to wash everything with boiled water, "even the bananas". She would clean the house until it sparkled and shone white. But here, the water causes damage, rendering the banana dark and inedible, or, at least, not visually appealing. The video is then not a visualization of a memory, but an attempt to challenge it: to examine its premise to its full extent.

Within that messy meeting point, of cleaning practices, medicine, and the health of the growing nation, Nissim's works weave a clear connection between hygiene and the productive function of a nation, between political ideology and the establishment of the identity of a

nation of immigrants and refugees. Cleanliness becomes the litmus test for the adequate operation of the home as the space where civility is practiced and rehearsed before it is accurately performed in the public domain. The body, Foucault suggested, is “involved in the political field,” as power relations, exercised through viewing and a complete exposure of the body, “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” In this domain, violence is not needed in order to subjugate the body. The body is “calculated,” measured, and technically organized into place.

In the Zionist context, hygiene education became emblematic with the process of modernization. To be a Zionist meant to be associated with progress and modern life as Zionism aspired to rejuvenate the body. Weakened physicality, by this perception, is precisely what had led the Jewish people to be persecuted by others. The New Jew has to be one with nature and progress in order to succeed in the enterprise of nation building. As Dafna Hirsch has shown, a clear division was carved in this emerging civic space through questions of hygiene, as these became entangled with childcare. Medical centers, hospitals and service stations for mothers and children during the Mandate era differentiated between women of *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* descent. Nissim offers an impossible dialog between those who worked on behalf of the Zionist institutions to train the public to adhere to the criteria, and the mothers who had to acclimate to their demands, between official documents and educational pamphlets, and the personal experience of individuals. Nissim takes on the role of the nurse in *National Health*, explaining to low-income mothers how to take care of their children. The monologue is based on textbooks dedicated to hygiene. She also appears as two nurses in

*The Trail for Good Health*, who are holding a rug, on which a woman and baby in traditional Yemenite garments are seated, smiling. The nurses seem to be aiding the magical journey to Israel. The nurses, however, are stern, perhaps apathetic to this enchanted voyage. The video is inspired by a propaganda film created by the Israeli Defense Forces, and an advertisement by *Hadassah*, which depicted a nurse holding a model of a hospital. In the IDF film, Yemenite families are flying on an Oriental rug that is then transformed into an Air Force plane. The Yemenite babies grow to become pilots. In Nissim’s video, the nurses might be limiting the movement of the new immigrants, or grounding them into place.

The women who emigrated to pre-state Palestine and, later, Israel, from Muslim countries and from the Balkans were perceived as a backward community, in painful need of education regarding the health and well-being of their babies. Newborns and tender toddlers would have been temporarily removed from mothers residing in tents and immigration camps, supposedly to ensure their health and safety. Mothers were told their babies passed away, but the babies were not given back to be buried according to Jewish tradition. That raised the question: What happened to those children? The answer is not clear even after more than 70 years, and three Committee investigations into the affair. Some of the children may have died, but there is evidence and testimonies of missing children who were adopted by families in Israel, Europe and the U.S. The Israeli government continues to withhold documents on this chapter of history from the public, and refuses to fully apologize to the families for the governmental and medical attitudes towards them in this tragic affair.

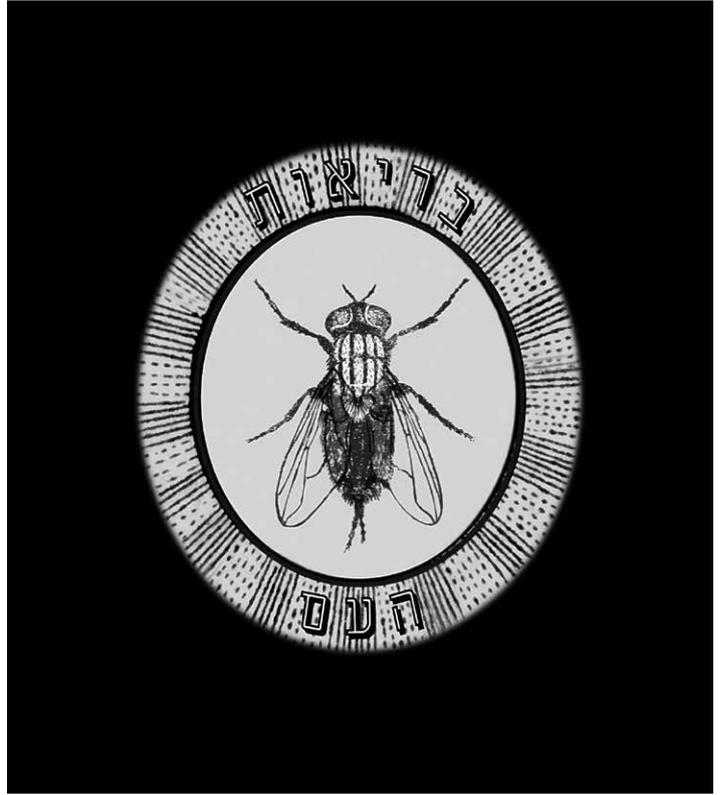
The possibility of an impossible dialogue culminates in *The Hygiene Project*, in which violence is present and discussed, although not seen. Babies and toddlers are removed from the care of their mothers, and yet, we neither see them, nor hear them cry. For the script, Nissim used testimonies given by nurses and mothers to the Yemenite, Mizrahi, and Balkan Children Affair Committees, which inquired into the disappearance of children during the big waves of immigration to Israel immediately after it declared independence in 1948. “The immigrants have contempt for hygiene, just like the Arabs who die like flies in the east,” the head nurse explains to the camera. Other nurses pour milk into glass bottles in choreographed mechanical moves. They complain about malnourished babies, helpless mothers, about having to take responsibility and teach these women how to bathe babies, prepare their foods and make sure they are vaccinated. In order to become *Israeli* babies, the nurses explain, these children have to be separated and torn away from the dirty tent and “Oriental” perceptions of life and health. It is a struggle for indoctrination that saw Mizrahi women as emotional, hysterical, unaware of their own physical needs and health, similarly to those helpless malnourished babies. Nissim deconstructs the figure of the nurses/women and mothers who prioritize the needs of the State over the nuclear family. She shows how ideological propaganda permeates and defines the everyday, the body, and relations between those who occupy the civic space. Nissim’s nurses talk about mothers who gave their children happily and willingly to the nurseries, so they can be well fed and treated. The mothers talk about lost children and babies who refused to let go of their dresses. Hygiene methods became a powerful tool for polarizing local communities, to justify prejudice and discrimination, to divide and conquer.

*The Hygiene Project* ends as it begins, with a group of earnest, determined, devoted nurses, who had only realized their blind spots in hindsight, when it was much too late. In a weird way, the covid-19 pandemic is raising similar issues, where we are all arriving at the same unlevel playing field of parenting and decision making, where each move seems to place us in a specific category, in some form of identity we may have never thought we would occupy. Nissim’s ongoing work reminds us how the politicization of health measures is ever more present in our immediate surroundings, as the discourse around public health during a grave moment of emergency has been used to sow fear, misconceptions and misinformation that contributes to discrimination.

**ROTEM ROZENTAL** is Executive Director for the Los Angeles Center for Photography. Between 2016-2022, she served as Chief Curator at American Jewish University, where she was also Senior Director of Arts and Culture, Director of the Institute for Jewish Creativity and Assistant Dean of the Whizin Center for Continuing Education at American Jewish University in Los Angeles. She received her M.A. from the Cohn Institute for History and Philosophy of Sciences at Tel Aviv University in 2011, and her Ph.D. from the Art History Department at Binghamton University, NY in 2019. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum.com*, *Tablet*, *Forward*, *Philosophy of Photography*, and *Jewish Currents*, among other outlets. Rozental’s work has been recognized and supported by various organizations, including Artis, Independent Curators International (ICI) and The Center for Jewish History. Her book, *Pre-State Photographic Archive and the Zionist Movement* is in press with Routledge.



THE TRAIL FOR GOOD HEALTH, 2019, VIDEO



NATIONAL HEALTH, 2019, VIDEO



THE NURSE STATION, 2021, INSTALLATION





THE BLUE WILL SHINE WHITE - JABOTINSKY 38, 2019, VIDEO



**TAMAR NISSIM** is an interdisciplinary artist based in Tel Aviv, Israel. Guided by archival research, Nissim traces the influence of historic, traumatic events on women and children. In transforming this research into performance, video, and photography, Nissim interweaves themes of familial relationships, militarism, and nationalism with culture and politics. Centering femininity and remembering through the body, Nissim reveals non-hegemonic perspectives, raises questions about identity, and confronts women and children's unspoken traumas from the past as she reflects on those of the present.

Tamar Nissim exhibits her work widely in national and international museums, galleries, and non-profit institutions. Recent exhibitions include Kaunas Biennial, Lithuania; Guimaraes Biennial, Portugal; Tel Aviv Museum, Israel; Museum Bat Yam, Israel; HaMiskan, Ein Harod; and Indie-Collective Gallery, Israel. Nissim holds a BA with Honors in Textile Design from Shenkar College (Ramat Gan, Israel) and attended the "Advanced Artist Program" at HaMidrasha School of Art (Beit Berl, Israel) where she earned a Master's of Education in Art Education. Nissim received an Honorable Mention at the Guimaraes Triennial, Portugal, and is the recipient of four Rabinovich Foundation grants, and a 2019 Ha'Pais Council for the Culture and Arts Grant. Nissim is a member of Indie, The Collective Gallery for Photography, and the recipient of the Israeli Minister of Culture's prize.

## KNIZNICK GALLERY

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## HADASSAH-BRANDEIS INSTITUTE

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI) develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide by producing and promoting scholarly research, artistic projects and public engagement.

One of the only academic centers of its kind, the HBI provides research, resources and programs for scholars, students and the public. The institute publishes books and a journal, convenes international conferences and local programming, and offers competitive awards, residential fellowships and internship programs.

The HBI Artist Program provides an artist the opportunity to have a solo exhibition for 12 weeks at the Kniznick Gallery at Brandeis University. We invite proposals each fall that relate to HBI's mission of developing fresh ideas about Jews and gender.

## TAMAR NISSIM

*"The Hygiene Project" Cast: Nirit Aharoni, Nova Dobel, Noa Frummerman, Shirly Fridrich, Yuli Fainerman, Ruth Tubi, Maya Oshri, Meshi Rein, Lili Golan, Yarden Karavani; Production Manager: Moran Kedem; Art Director: Yael Miterani; Editor: Itay Tal; Cinematography: Shay Skiff; Sound Design and Mix: Sahaf Wagshall; Online and Color: Peleg Levi.*

*"National Health," "The Trail for Good Health" Performance: Tamar Nissim; Cinematography: Noa Nissim; Online and color: Gal Nissim, Andrea Lev Ari.*

*"Banana," "Braided," "The Blue Will Shine White-Jabotinsky 38" Performance: Noa Nissim, Cinematography: Tamar Nissim; Online and color: Andrea Lev Ari.*

*"The Nurse Station," Indie Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2021. Photography: Tal Nisim.*

*"The Blue will Shine White #1," Olive Oil Soap Bar #1, Olive Oil Soap Bar #2 Photography: Tamar Nissim.*

*"Forth and Back" Performance: Luciana Kaplun; Cinematography: Tamar Nissim.*

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**FRONT COVER:** The Blue will Shine White # 1, 2018, Still

**INSIDE COVER:** Banana, 2018, Video

**BACK COVER:** Forth and Back, 2017, Still



OLIVE OIL SOAP BAR #2, 2018, STILL

