

Sanctuary in Matter and Form: Galia Linn's *A Place* Dr. Rotem Rozental

Galia Linn creates safe spaces because she knows what it means to need them. “Art,” she says, “Saved my life.” Linn molds past traumas into clay-based vessels and guardians, forming sanctuaries for experiencing strength and weakness, to feel protected and become protectors, to come together and unravel personal stories and rituals. This collective space functions as a repository, enveloping viewers as participants, offering a space to explore being-in-the-world, engaging senses, bodies and minds. In the presence of the guardians and vessels, we take on their roles, provide protection like the guardians and expose ourselves to vulnerabilities, like the vessels. This reciprocal relationship with the objects, the space, one another and ourselves shifts inward and outward, between matter and experience, between concrete forms, bodies and spatial impressions. Linn’s objects offer a return to ancient narratives, and decenter our understanding of them, unearthing and magnifying fragments that may have gone unnoticed. As Linn notes, she works with clay “both as a beginning and an end.”¹

When the spaces designed to contain and protect us became an isolating environment of an anxiety-ridden quarantine, Linn re-imagined the idea of being contained, seeking to shift what we tell ourselves about our origin points. Her installations sought to empower participants (or users) while offering a very literal safe space – defined by the protection of the guardians. In isolation, Linn deepened her research into ancient societies that blurred the lines between the living and the dead, or cultures that substantiated matriarchal spiritual and political leadership. These sources were infused by her own complicated relationships with her Jewish heritage. Human body forms became intertwined with clay, stoneware stucco and plywood. Guardians of our homes, life and fortune emerge from glazed objects and decomposed granite. They rise from the ground, placed in circular forms, or on large pedestals, or, in other cases, hidden in plain sight. Some are made with a mixture of clay and paper, signified by cracks, remnants of the ways in which the artist stretched the material to its full capacity. With these sculptural sanctuaries, Linn re-visits connections with our shared past, ourselves and how we understand our position in the world.

Linn’s space functions through complimentary, needed opposites – between movement and stillness, masculine and feminine, matter and spirit. These fluctuate through shapes that exhume relics of past civilizations, through imperfections, through the presence (and acceptance) of what cannot be changed. If Louise Bourgeois believed that “art is guarantee of sanity,” then Linn’s spaces guard their dwellers, contain their challenges, and

¹ Interview with Galia Linn, Los Angeles, August 2021.

offer them a path for re-telling their story. They offer a strategy to embrace imperfection and mortality, finding beauty in the unpredictable, in the contradictory natural shapes found in this sculptural space, as well as the possibility of beauty in our damages – those inherited and those cultivated. These grounded vessels maintain a clear presence of the hand of their maker, a poignant reminder that all is in a process of returning to dust.

Linn is driven by the next installation, the next site, landscape and its people, by a desire to create *A Place*. “Each place has its own feeling and energy, its own essence,” she says, “I want to create a dialog, a place you can listen to and lose yourself.”² Each site is shaped and activated differently, reflecting its unique circumstances. At a private residence in Altadena, she created a site of ritual where ashes of the owner could one day be scattered, where the guardians seem to protect a fire. In Beverly Hills, a collector was drawn to three large female figures, unwittingly echoing her own three daughters. The installation, Linn says, became about family. In another indoor installation, artists wanted to bring their own work into the space, which was then activated with sound baths, performances and choreography.

Linn’s *A Place* emphasizes and prioritizes the relationships between the viewer, the work and the space they share. If James Turrel asks his viewers to look above, as he forms a Skyspace, Linn consciously proposes a different viewpoint, grounding the viewing experience at eye level, from within a safe sanctuary, directing the gaze inward. If Linn shares any drives with minimalism, they may be found there, in the search of artmaking that is defined by spatial and temporal conditions, as in Lee Ufan’s earlier explorations of material, perception and the relationships between space and matter, or in Walter de Maria’s insistence to prioritize bodily awareness, locating the content of the work in the viewer. Linn differs in the way she opens the possibility of a space for participation and activation. The site leaves its mark on the work, and the vessels that are brought on to the site to form *A Place* bring these markings to the viewer, who, Linn notes, can translate them into something that is meaningful for their own unique framework of (un)consciousness and experience in the world. If de Maria utilized geometric and mathematical forms to produce sublime repetitions, Linn’s work resides in the firsthand interaction with the object, in the meeting points between our senses, scale, texture and structure.

The presence, or absence, of the viewers-as-participants is what defines the work. *A Place* holds and does not hold them at the same time. For Linn, the focal point of the work is the experience, the impact on the body and the senses, and the site as it is defined by the objects. To borrow from Jean-Luc Nancy, this connection may not be formulated in

² Ibid.

language, but in vision, the experience of the encounter, in the space that opens between the object and the participant.³ Nancy understands being-in-the-world as being-in-common, as taking part in a community that substantiates itself through the act of sharing myths, narratives and images. Reflecting on painting, Nancy re-positioned the image as a vibrant realm of experience triggered by vision.⁴ Linn's *A Place*, defined by clay guardians and vessels, by a field of experience, asks to chart a similar route. The attempt to connect with the other, Nancy suggests, is an attempt to make sense. To meet the "other," the exterior, is to touch meaning, to touch an origin that allows an inception of a world.⁵ *A Place* suggests a space for an encounter, guided by the sensorial experience of presence. *A Place* is an invitation, a potential for encounter from which a shared, sacred space could be created.

Rotem Rozental is the newly appointed Executive Director of the LA Center for Photography (LACP). A photo-historian, curator and writer residing in Los Angeles with her family, Rotem empowers and mentors artists worldwide. Between 2016-2022, she served as Chief Curator and Senior Director of Art and Creative Programming at American Jewish University in Los Angeles, where she was also Assistant Dean of the Whizin Center for Continuing Education and Director of the Institute for Jewish Creativity. She is Faculty Member at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, and recently curated the virtual exhibition Dana Arieli: The Zionist Phantom with The Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University.

She received her M.A. from the Cohn Institute for History and Philosophy of Sciences and Ideas at Tel Aviv University in 2011, and her Ph.D. from the Art History Department at Binghamton University, New York, in 2019. Her book, *Pre-State Photographic Archives, and the Zionist Movement* is forthcoming with Routledge.

Rotem's research examines the conflicted meeting points of photographic and archival technologies with civic spaces. Her writings about photography and contemporary art appeared in *Artforum.com*, *Tablet*, *The Forward*, *Philosophy of Photography*, *Tohu Magazine*, and *Doc! Magazine*, among other outlets. She has also contributed essays for catalogues and artist books, including Uri Gershuni's *Yesterday's Sun* and *Capturing History: The Photography of Chim at ANU: Museum of the Jewish People*.

Rotem's work has been recognized and supported by various organizations, including Artis, Independent Curators International (ICI) and the Center for Jewish History.

You can learn more about her projects here: rotroz.com and follow her @rotroz.

³ Elena Cue, "Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy: The West Is No More," Alejandra de Argos, July 2016. <https://www.alejandradeargos.com/index.php/en/all-articles/21-guests-with-art/1418-interview-with-jean-luc-nancy-the-west-is-no-more>

⁴ For more, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

⁵ Nancy, *Being Singular-Plural*, 6.

