

Open studios – Artists-in-residency

Michal Sophia Tobiass



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crédit photo: Goni Riskin

**villa
arson**

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Atelier 1

nice

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Michal Sophia Tobias is a transdisciplinary artist. Born in Jerusalem, she now lives in France. She settles here to get closer to the ancient stories that the archaeological territory has to offer. A former ballet dancer, aerial acrobat, contortionist and swimmer, she regularly works with other artists and researchers to rediscover her forms.

Following an injury, she considered changing her form of artistic expression and asked herself: What happens when you're off stage? From then on, she choreographed her sculptural pieces. Her work is imbued with the trace left by the body. If the performers don't join in, the audience can. From her first photographs in her exhibition *Bearing Walls* (2016), to her latest exhibition *Eye of the Mountain* (2022), she will move from observing the holes left by the installation of works in exhibitions to investing the holes themselves by piercing the walls with small holes. In the end, she even builds sculptural pieces to enter them. From observable holes, traces of past history, to the exploration of human-scale cavities, she developed a particular interest in the pre-linguistic world, before the dawn of writing. So she set out to discover the past through the prism of archaeology, geology, astronomy and mythology. These are all useful elements in the construction of cosmic stories steeped in the experience of time, mourning and an animistic understanding of the world she's offering us to see.

Her interest in the pre-linguistic world led her to take up a residency at Villa Arson, where Michal Sophia develops a research project entitled "L'Ère du taureau". It focuses on the study of petroglyphs (rock engravings) on Mount Bégo in the Vallée des Merveilles and Fontanalba, and the development of a painting and printing technique using tempera color and pigments, in connection with the presence of copper in the Alps, particularly in the Daluis gorges.

G. L. : What research did you come to carry out in south-east France?

MS. T. : I'm very interested in prehistoric paintings, in the images that preceded writing and held immense symbolic power. As in Israel, archaeological digs show evidence of signs of coal life from fire dating back a million and a half years. But no rock paintings have been found, so my research keeps bringing me back to France, a region rich in prehistoric paintings and engravings. In 2019, I visited four caves in Dordogne where original engravings and paintings changed my whole perception of the world in general and of myself as a painter. I felt a deep connection with these paintings, as if I were finding my tribe, it awakened my imagination.

In March 2023, I joined a field study with Professor Boris Valentin (Sorbonne) who is studying prehistoric engravings in the Fontainebleau forest. This research also led me to the world of enigmatic engravings on Mount Bégo. I spent two days with a guide exploring Mont Bégo. In the first stage of my materials research, I refer to the geology and stone memory of this site, thinking that, as in archaeology, my work is also layered. The first layer, before referring to the engravings and the worlds of content they evoke, would be the geological layer on which this world rests. My need to

engage, through pictorial actions, in a process of oxidizing iron in rock is also linked to the state of the world today. Mineral dimensions are measured in hundreds of thousands of years. We see a different proportion of time and the possibilities for change, and it helps me to breathe in this difficult historical moment.

G. L. : In your previous exhibitions, you have already treated copper as the first metal that man extracted from the earth. How is it that, even here, in your research on rock carvings, you have reconnected with this metal?

MS. T. : In conversations with archaeologist Nicoletta Bianchi and anthropologist Jérôme Magail - who are studying the rock engravings on Mount Bégo from different angles - I was struck by reflections on the relationship between the way the engravings were made and the way copper was worked. Observing for the first time the technique of engraving on rock, I thought that the rock must be hard to work with, because the engraving is made of small domes and not of a single fluid movement. On the contrary, like copper, the rock of Mount Bégo is soft.

In other words, it's an aesthetic or ideological decision, not a material necessity. This hammering technique is also used on copper, which reinforces it. In addition to the aesthetic link I've created - between the aesthetics of etching and copper, and my great enthusiasm for rediscovering this primary material with which I've already had the privilege of working with - there are also two other themes that led me to approach copper as part of my research: mythology and science. (Here, geology).

There's a rock engraving that's interpreted as representing the Pleiades star cluster. In my last exhibition, *Eye of the Mountain* (2022), I dealt extensively with the theme of the Pleiades and their immanent link with the goddess Hathor. Hathor is the goddess of minerals and copper, and the first host of the Valley of the Dead. On the scientific side, Dr Henry de Lumley, a leading researcher of rock engravings, also attempted to discover the link between the engravings and copper by studying the connection with the tool used to carve the rock (the dagger). To find out where the copper came from, he turned to geologist Gilbert Mari, who had explored the copper mines in the Daluis gorges in the region. Much to my delight, I was also able to meet Gilbert Mari and discover the existence of native copper. Copper that doesn't need to undergo a chemical smelting process, but grows on the rock like a ripe fruit. This discovery was very moving for me, and entered my pictorial research, which also attempts to retrace the life of this copper.

G. L. : Besides your preoccupation with the Pleiades and their relationship with the Egyptian goddess Hathor, you have also dealt with other constellations in your past works, which you surprisingly found in the rock engraving of Mount Bégo. Can you tell us what your interest in them is and how they relate to the current study?

MS. T. : In addition to the Pleiades cluster found in the Mont Bégo engravings, I also found engravings showing the constellations of Orion, Canis Major and, of course, the Taurus constellation in which the Pleiades reside. These constellations belong to the Winter Hexagon,

an astronomical time marker. This is a hexagonal zone in the sky where certain constellations are more visible in winter. For example, Orion, the Pleiades and Sirius, which lie in Canis Major, are celestial objects which, throughout history and in different cultures, have been associated with mourning rituals, supporting the dead in their transition between worlds. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades in the constellation of Taurus are the lamented, weeping over the dead and human suffering. Orion, in Egyptian mythology, helps the dead make the transition between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Sirius is the astral representation of the god Anubis, who executes the judgment of the heart after death. This world, which deals with death rituals and the figure of the mourner, has long occupied me and existed in my previous work. My preoccupation with the dead probably stems from the same knot that makes me interested in the distant past and, in many ways, seeks to make peace with the painful events of my personal history as well as human history. In my exhibition *Snake Shall I become* (the 4th Hour), 2022, I make direct reference to the Egyptian Books of the Dead and the goddess Hathor through work with copper and the hieroglyphs of the arm and snake. As part of the exhibition, I created two choreographies for the arm, and last summer I began work on a new choreography entitled *Opening of the Mouth* (*Looking for a Pulse*), which continues my preoccupation with funerary ceremonies and the presence of copper and the arm in these ceremonies. I say all this to mark my total surprise at discovering that this choreography is not disconnected from my research here in Nice, and that the presence of copper, the Pleiades and the figure of the lament reappear in my research without me trying to find them. I don't yet know what form things will take, but I find it very interesting and comforting that, at such a painful moment in history, the Alpes Maritimes, an environment born of collision of the earth and that lives in mineral measurement of time, is bringing me back the copper that symbolizes the possibility of rebirth and an open sky that did not forgotten either its rituals nor its dead.

Residence organised in the framework of a new partnership with l'Institut Français d'Israël.

Wednesday October 29 2023

- 6pm – 7pm

Garden

In conjunction with the artist's research, Bertrand Roussel, director of the Nice Archaeology Museums, presents a prehistoric fire-lighting workshop. We discover how to light an ember by rubbing two pieces of wood together or by striking two stones.

- 7pm - 8pm

Michal Sophia Tobias opens her studio Atelier 1

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