

## Israeli Artist Sheds Light on Democracy, Freedom

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By: *Greg Salisbury*

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“May the Father of All Mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths; and, make us in all our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.”

That illuminating quote — part of a revolutionary espousal of Americans’ right to religious liberty — is one of the key passages in George Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, R.I., also known as the Touro Letter. It is also the basis for the National Museum of American Jewish History’s new exhibit, “Liat Segal: Scattered Light,” which opened Jan. 28.

The installation, which reveals itself over the expanse of an entire wall on the museum’s lower level, juxtaposes 18th-century proclamation with 21st-century innovation.



Segal, a 36-year-old lifelong Tel Avivan, has created an LED-emitting machine that is in perpetual motion back and forth across the wall. As it travels, it scatters light that is picked up and “prints” excerpts from Washington’s letter onto a photosensitive surface that Segal has applied to the wall. The printer also has been programmed to project observations taken from the museum’s long-running oral history project, “It’s Your Story,” as well as images of both Washington and the oral history participants.

The result is a mesmerizing treatise on the power and the impermanence of words — and the people who imbue them with both. Standing in front of the machine as it quietly tracks back and forth, trailing blue light, Segal’s installation is a constantly disintegrating and regenerating abstract work. Standing on the landing leading downstairs allows the viewer to see the full scope of the work. The effect of waiting to see what words and faces will be revealed as their predecessors wink out of existence after just a few seconds of life proves to be an incrementally hypnotic way to engage with the art.

For Segal, that transitory sensation is at the heart of the piece. “It gives you the feeling that democracy and freedom are fragile things,” she said, speaking during a break while installing her work. The exhibit “gives you a feeling of the temporary nature of that. You need to hold onto what you were reading — otherwise, it will fade away.”

This show marks Segal’s professional debut in the United States, but it isn’t the first time she has worked with light-created art. In fact, it was “Confession Machine” — a work Segal created for

an Israeli group exhibition that had the machine print random Facebook posts — that convinced Josh Perelman, the museum’s chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections, of the need to expose museumgoers to Segal’s talent.

“As soon as she showed me ‘Confession Machine,’ I knew there was a way to do an installation of that here at the museum,” he recalled of his first encounter with Segal during a 2014 trip to Israel that was sponsored by the nonprofit organization Artis to connect curators to Israeli contemporary artists.

As engrossing as it is, “Scattered Light” raises some questions for anyone familiar with the museum’s mission and previous offerings: Why focus on the Touro letter less than three years after staging a major show, “To Bigotry No Sanction: George Washington and Religious Freedom,” which revolved around the letter that is on permanent loan to the museum. And why use an Israeli contemporary artist barely five years into her career for a show about American religious freedom at a museum dedicated to the American Jewish experience?

The choice to spotlight the Touro letter again in such a technology-tinged and cosmopolitan fashion was a no-brainer, Perelman said. “This was a chance to build a bridge between the most important historical document in the museum and the present day,” he emphasized. “It is important for this museum to be working with Israeli artists, no matter what the politics are. We are communities that are deeply connected, and art provides an amazing avenue to bridge controversial issues and connect our two communities. As we have shown in most of our exhibitions, we are always trying to think of how to push the boundaries of telling stories.”

It was a similar desire to transform information into experience that compelled Segal to leave her job with Microsoft in Israel to pursue using technology to make art. Since she made that move, she has presented her mechanized pieces in shows across Israel, including the 2010 Bat-Yam International Biennale of Landscape Urbanism and her first solo show at Jerusalem’s Hansen House Gallery in 2014, as well as in an installation for the 2014 Amsterdam Light Festival.

Moving from the left-brain world of computer science and data mining to the right-brain one of contemporary art wasn’t as big a leap as it may seem, she said. “I am inspired a lot by and work with information. I take these methods” of information gathering “and bring them to physical manifestation” in works like “Confession Machine” and “Future Regressives,” a piece that uses a mechanical printer to draw imaginary fossils out of sand and salt.

What she has found difficult is finding satisfactory answers for people who question if what she does is truly an art form. “I wouldn’t say there has been resistance” to the work, she explained, “but people would ask, ‘What is the art? Is it the machine, is it the data, is it the result?’ I don’t have a good answer for that; I ask this question myself. Many people ask about the technique — is it art? It is just a technique, like other techniques — if I used paint or wood, they wouldn’t ask me that. It is simply my medium.” Note: Museum admission is free throughout February

**IF YOU GO**

**“Liat Segal: Scattered Light”**

National Museum of American Jewish History

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