

If You Thirst *for a* Homeland

FLAME-WORKED GLASS BY DAFNA KAFFEMAN

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Dafna Kaffeman (Israeli, born 1972) creates exquisitely crafted plant replicas from glass using the technique of flame-working, also known as lamp-working. These botanical specimens reflect the natural world of the artist's homeland. They are typically combined with fabric and text into mixed-media assemblages that comment on the social and political realities of living in modern Israel-Palestine.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DORON LETZTER

ARTISTIC PROCESS

Kaffeman travels through Israel collecting plant specimens to recreate in glass. In her studio, she goes through a months-long process of observation, deconstruction, and reconstruction. **(1)** She studies and sketches each plant, part by part. “I try to decipher them, to find the code that I can use in order to rebuild them in glass.” She mixes glass rods and uses powdered glass to replicate the exact colors of each individual plant. **(2)** She melts the glass with a torch and manipulates the material while hot, slowly building up a detailed and very delicate botanical replica in glass. **(3)** Finally, she arranges the glass plants as individual works of art or as part of an assemblage.

DECIPHERING MEANING

The impact of Kaffeman's work comes from layers of symbolism and the viewer's urge to decode and translate an artwork's meaning from the sum of the parts.

White backgrounds

Kaffeman typically chooses soft white fabric as the backing for her artful arrangements of glass botanical sculptures. The use of handkerchiefs recall Jewish practices of commemoration, sacrifice, and mourning.

Textual excerpts

Phrases from botanical field guides published between 1930 and 1960 and contemporary media reports within Israel are often printed or embroidered in Hebrew and Arabic onto the background. The English translations of these texts are the titles of the individual artworks. Out of context, the words feel disembodied and strangely poetic.

Glass botanicals

Each plant Kaffeman chooses has its own environmental, cultural, historical, or religious significance. The artist draws upon these to craft a poignant message about violence, the fragility of human life, and people's connection to the land.

In this artwork, Kaffeman chooses plant species that are most evocative of her homeland: *Pennisetum setaceum* (fountain grass), *Capparis zoharyi* (caper), *Pinus monophylla* (single-leaf pinyon pine), *Limonium pruinosum* (frosty sea lavender), and *Rosa* (rose). Fountain grass and frosty sea lavender are typical of Israel's shoreline, while pine trees and caper shrubs are common to Jerusalem. The text is taken from *Homeland Plants*, a field guide published in Hebrew in 1956. The passage proclaims the comfort to be found in the natural world.



PHOTO BY ERIC ISCHERNOV

If you thirst for a homeland and seek shelter in its bosom, love it and live in its mountains and valleys, its flora and fauna, Homeland Plants series, 2017, Flame-worked glass and printed text on felt

SYMBOLISM AND CONTEXT

What is the symbolism of the glass plants? What is the context of the embroidered text and images? What are some possible implications of an artwork? Dafna Kaffeman does not give us direct answers. Instead, her work invites viewers to contemplate these questions for themselves and build their own meanings.



PHOTO BY ERIC TSCHERNOW

Map, Red Everlasting series, 2008, Flame-worked glass and embroidery on cotton handkerchief

The thorny shrub **Arabian boxthorn (*Lycium shawii*)** is well-adapted to desert environments. Used in traditional medicine to treat sore eyes and inflammation, it is also planted for windbreaks, slope stabilizers, and livestock fodder. The shrub is also considered a colonizing species, which means it spreads easily to new areas.

In *Map*, a simple motif has been embroidered onto cloth. To many eyes, the lines of embroidery are meaningless. To others, the stone walls of the Old City of Jerusalem are immediately recognizable. Land, particularly the city of Jerusalem, is central to the conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian people.



PHOTO BY ERIC TSCHERNOW

A brother in front, a snake in the back, Red Everlasting series, 2008, Flame-worked glass and embroidery on cotton handkerchief

Bulbous barley (*Hordeum bulbosum*) is one of the most ancient crop species cultivated by humans. In Judaism, barley is one of seven species with which the land was blessed (Deuteronomy 8:8); in Christianity, Jesus fed five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fishes (John 6:9-10); and in Islam, barley is mentioned in 250 hadiths or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The civilizing and nourishing presence of barley contrasts sharply with words related to war. The embroidered quote is taken from propaganda material dropped by the Israel Defense Forces on the Lebanese people during the Second Lebanon War. Leaflets portrayed Israel positively as a brother and Syria negatively as a snake.



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