

# This Israeli Artist No Longer Believes in a Global Art Community

After recovering from cancer, Haifa-born artist Ella Littwitz is now building a memorial outside the Knesset to Israeli victims of terror. Do we really need another memorial? 'Commemoration is a complex issue,' she says



Zen Read



Ella Littwitz. 'I'm not a prophet.' Credit: Daniel Rolider



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In 2007, when she was still an undergraduate at Jerusalem's Bezalel – Academy of Arts and Design, Ella Littwitz began to take an interest in the Dead Sea region. She decided to descend into the Colonel Cave, in the heart of Mount Sodom, which

contains a huge salt shaft some 80 meters (262 feet) deep. "At the time the cave was closed and dangerous, and there were warning signs posted at the entrance," she recounts.

The person who introduced her to the breathtaking site, which is named after Col. Thomas Gregory Tulloch – one of the founders of the Palestine Potash Company during the British Mandatory period – was her old friend Ido Rosental. He was killed in battle at Kibbutz Alumim on October 7, and his death has become one of the heroic stories of that day.

"We were several friends traveling together; Ido took us on his illegal and semi-secure path," Littwitz says. "Another friend who descended first shouted at some point from the depths of the shaft that he had run out of rope. I remember this very powerful experience of sliding in total darkness with a headlamp, sticking close to the wall of the shaft that was composed entirely of layers of salt and sediment. It was like surveying the Earth's geological past. We went down 80 meters, a height of at least 20 stories."



Ella Littwitz, *Tears*, 2024. A field of salt mushrooms. Credit: Hadar Saifan

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**I no longer believe in an 'international art community.' But I do totally believe in art and its ability to touch complexity and beauty in a universal way.**

**Ella Littwitz**



**A salt mushroom in Ella Littwitz's Tears installation. 'Instead of dripping downward, the mushrooms grow upward.'** Credit: hadar Saifan

And then, for over a decade, Littwitz put her interest in the Dead Sea aside. However, she contracted cancer about four years ago, and after her recovery became attracted to the Dead Sea once more.

"After a long break due to illness, it was probably only natural to have a renewed interest in the Dead Sea, which is gradually disappearing, in the salt that preserves extreme nature, in the destruction of Sodom and, of course, in the woman looking back," she says.

"About two years ago, I also started to take an interest in the War Scroll that was discovered in Qumran – one of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Israel Museum." That's how she came to create the series of works now on display in her new solo exhibit ["For Chaos They Yearn,"](#) at the Haifa Museum of Art.

Littwitz, whose work combines video, photography, sculpture and installations, and is based on in-depth historical, archaeological and geographical research, is one of the most successful and interesting Israeli artists of the past decade. [Israeli art scholar Gideon Ofrat](#) wrote that she is "a daring and original artist with an imagination and vision that are rare in our parts. An artist who rises from the 'wounds' of the 'Israeli condition' to realms of beauty shot through with pain."

She has exhibited in Europe and the United States, including the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, the Kunsthaus Zürich and the Istanbul Biennial. [The Centre Pompidou in Paris](#) purchased one of her works. In Israel, she has mounted solo shows at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv and the Petah Tikva Museum of Art.



Ella Littwitz, *Exhalation*, 2024. Credit: Hadar Saifan

## The mushrooms are weeping

Even before you explore the main exhibit in Haifa, you hear it as you approach the space: It's a sound work on eight channels and shares the same name as the exhibit. The War Scroll includes descriptions of various trumpets blown by the priests during battle: With the help of musicologist Moshe Piamenta, who has researched those trumpets, Littwitz translated this ancient text into a contemporary work of sound, played by trumpeter Mika Riani and arranged by sound designer Daniel Meir.

*What exactly is this scroll?*

"It describes this war of a sect that lived in the region of the Qumran caves; it's not clear which of the Judean Desert sects wrote it. It has this description of absolute evil and absolute good, descriptions of military maneuvers along with messianic statements. The trumpet is used for playing music but also as a conduit to higher spheres that's supposed to remind God of the covenant between Him and the Jewish people."

Kobi Ben-Meir is the curator of both the exhibit and the Haifa Museum of Art. "The work interprets an ancient idea from the tradition of Jewish mysticism, which finds in sound an energy that has the power to influence reality," he says. "At the same time, it echoes the longing implanted in the human soul from ancient times for a war to end all wars."

Littwitz agrees that Ben-Meir's explanation alludes to Armageddon (the Battle of Gog and Magog) and is reminiscent of contemporary messianic concepts. "The ideas in the scroll are very extreme, and it's really amazing to see even in the current war rabbis and soldiers blowing shofars and trumpets in areas of assembly. Even before October 7, there was polarization in the country and the world in general, and in the past year everything has become more extreme. The exhibit speaks about the human desire for chaos."



Ella Littwitz, *The Day the Sky Hung Low*, 2022. Credit: Hadar Saifan



Artist Ella Littwitz. 'Today, we have a perception similar to the sects of Judah.' Credit: Daniel Rolider

*Basically, over the past year your work has become even more connected to the reality.*

"At first, I was scared by its topicality. The scroll contains a sentence: 'The blade of a sword devours the slain of wickedness.' Piamenta believes that the sect sees itself as the servant of God in *tikkun olam*, and the idea of the burning of heretics assumes a concrete expression. In other words, the word 'devours' relates to the fire that consumes the sacrifice and will remove the guilt. Today, we have a perception similar to the sects of Judah. A messianic vision of the end times, talk about war in terms of 'total victory.' We are controlled by an extremist government, which reminds us of the concepts that exist in the scroll. Atrocities are committed here that are 'justified' under the guise of 'purity,' and the fact that we are the 'good' in this dichotomy of good and evil."

In the space where the trumpets are sounded, in an installation called "Tears," a field of salt mushrooms is displayed. They are formed at the Dead Sea when the salt begins to crystallize around a well of groundwater inside it. Littwitz describes them



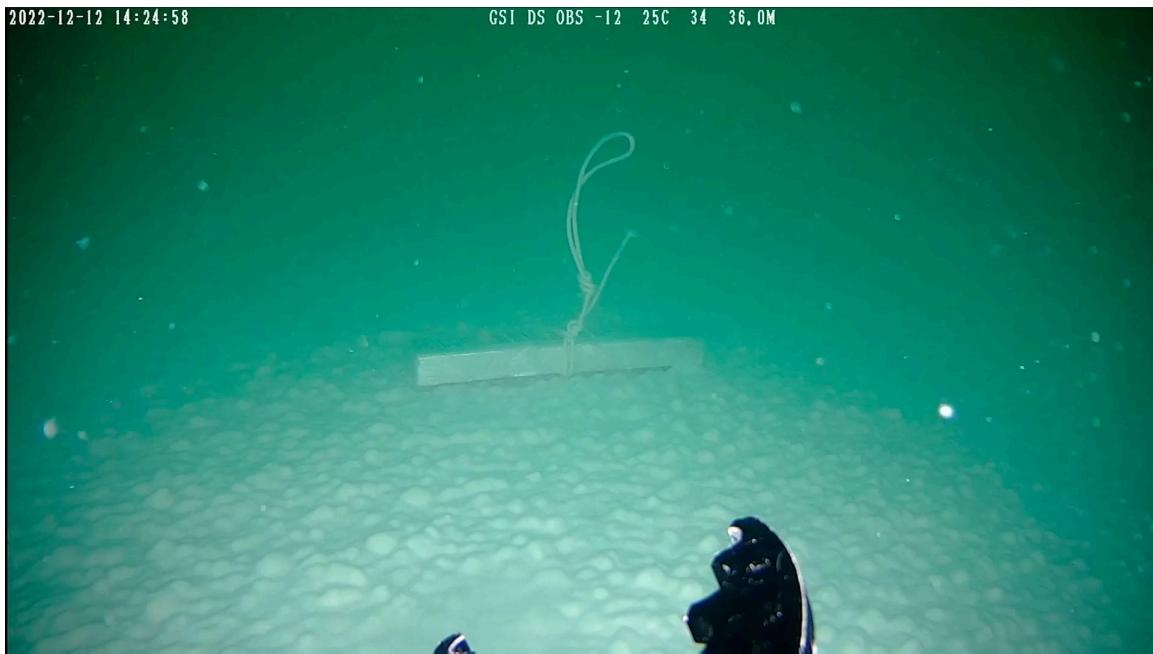
as inverted stalactites: "Instead of dripping downward, the mushrooms grow upward."

The "salt mushrooms" are harvested by Littwitz and placed on copper plates, where they continue to absorb and release salty water – like tears. She has been collecting them for the past two years (in cooperation with the Dead Sea Works) from evaporation pools, and in the exhibit she adds copper bindings that leave them fragile but support them like crutches.

"The mushrooms don't stop weeping from the moment they leave Sodom, their natural home," she says. "The liquids they secrete leave a patina on the copper bases and the pieces I included, so the sculptures are actually in a constant process of transformation."



Still from Ella Littwitz's 'Ontology of The Void,' 2024. Credit: Ella Littwitz / Ziv Mor, Dead Sea lab, Geological Survey of Israel



**Still from Ella Littwitz's 'Ontology of The Void,' 2024.** Credit: Ella Littwitz / Ziv Mor, Dead Sea lab, Geological Survey of Israel

There's also a seven-minute video work, "Ontology of the Void," with materials Littwitz filmed in recent years at the Dead Sea Works, underwater, with a special robot belonging to the Geological Survey of Israel, and in the shaft at the Colonel Cave. The films were made before October 7, and now she's dedicating the work to Ido Rosental.

"I went down there again with two extreme photographers and two women. We planted a 360-degree camera in the middle of the shaft – and that was some day!" The work shows the production processes of the white and red potash in the factories, simulating the appearance of new mountains that are also destined to collapse and disappear.

Littwitz's illness enters the picture in the series "The Day the Sky Hung Low," which includes photos that have undergone technical processes and present her surroundings in shades of red. "After I fell ill, I discovered that my studio is located above a room of high-voltage transformers belonging to the Israel Electric Corporation. An examination revealed that over the years I had been exposed to extremely high levels of radiation." Littwitz is currently suing the IEC.

"As someone who works with materials, I was both interested in and repulsed by the radiation that can't be felt but is capable of changing material and affecting the human body. I thought about the gap between 'the sky fell on me' and the fact that, infuriatingly, they continued to function as usual as a sky. I aimed the camera as far and high as possible, until I could see nothing in the viewfinder."

*You cooperated with the Dead Sea Works. Do you also have criticism of the way people are damaging the sea?*



**Ella Littwitz, Edith, 2022.** Credit: Hadar Saifan

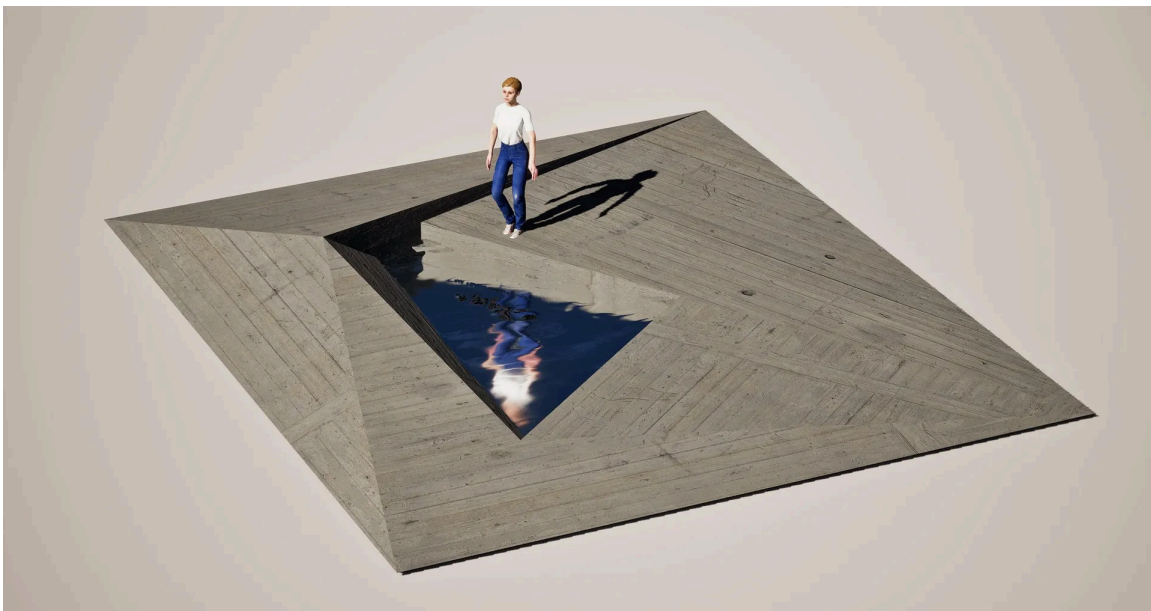
"It's interesting to think that everything is happening in Sodom, a place that symbolizes destruction due to the sins of society. But I really connected with the approach of Prof. Nadav Lensky of the Geological Survey, who sees the condition of the Dead Sea not as a catastrophe but as a reality that contains both beautiful and difficult things. The works deal with disappearance and change. The video also deals with a situation of a 'false vacuum' – a term from quantum physics that speaks of the potential for sudden change in the basic elements of the material, energy and time-space. For me, that connected with the events of this past year,

and how everything is delicate and subject to radical and sudden change."

## Archaeologist of the present

Littwitz was born in Haifa in 1982, grew up in Yuvalim in the Lower Galilee, and now lives in Jaffa with her partner, artist Amir Yatziv (whom she met at Bezalel), and their two daughters. She's a graduate of an international program for art in Ghent, Belgium, and lived for several years in Europe. She started to study art "really by chance," as she puts it. "I happened to hear in Bezalel about industrial design and encountered the late photographer Yossi Berger, and from conversations with him I enrolled in the department."

Over the years, she has researched boundaries and materials from different places and, after historical research and collecting materials, weaves them into particularly aesthetic installations and sculptures.



A simulation of the memorial to commemorate the victims of terrorism, which will be situated in front of the Knesset next to the monument for Israel's fallen soldiers.

She began working on the installation "The Unknown Land of the South" in 2014, when she was living in Belgium, after discovering that there are 24 countries she can't enter as an Israeli artist.

"The work was created from the issue of the boycott," she says. She reached out to people from these countries in order to obtain soil from them. "It was very easy to get it from Iran and Lebanon. It began with colleagues I met abroad, and continued with archaeologists and diplomats. Sometimes soil came to me via a third party with some note. I was able to collect soil from 19 countries." She was unable to get material from, among others, Yemen and Somalia.

The process took three years. The finished sculpture is a steel wheel divided into segments, with soil poured into them from the countries that denied Littwitz's entry due to her nationality. There are other versions of the work, one in a museum in Dallas and another in Hong Kong.

Another artwork draws on a formative experience, Littwitz explaining that she has been collecting stones since age 3. She gathered them from nature sites, which were marked as part of official hiking paths, into a pile in the 2021 work "The Path" – which features white-red marker stones that are familiar to any hiker.

Did she steal the stones? "Actually, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority helped me," she clarifies. "Part of the work process for me is related to negotiations with those managing the area. To understand the mechanism. Inspectors helped me collect the stones – there's no intention to have a hiker get lost."



In a 2020 cast black basalt piece entitled 'Yesterday,' Littwitz paid homage to the iconic wall relief 'Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem,' by artist Dani Karavan. Credit: Daniel Tchetchik

In a 2020 cast black basalt piece entitled "Yesterday," Littwitz paid homage to the iconic Dani Karavan wall relief "Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem," which was created for the inauguration of the Knesset building in 1966. This time, the material was purchased in the Czech Republic and underwent melting and casting.

"Karavan created a work from three materials – limestone, light and shadow. I wanted to work with a hard material," she explains. "I made a composition that clearly alludes to Karavan's work, but with some changes. It deals with the collapse of democracy, but it's also about hope. I created a repair option when I omitted the bottom part of Karavan's composition."

Haaretz art critic Avi Pitchon wrote about the work, which was displayed at the "NonFinito" exhibit in Tel Aviv's Artport: "Basalt – lava that has cooled – is utopia's subsided storm, and the wall relief is an architecture of ruins." In his review, Pitchon quoted the curator Vardit Gross, who called Littwitz "an archaeologist of the present."

He added: "The symbol for what has died serves as prophecy of a post-apocalyptic utopia. The monument is already prepared. Only future generations will know the severity of the catastrophe, after which they will gather around it and start again from scratch."

*So, are you a prophet?*

"I'm really the Prophet Isaiah," she says sarcastically, before confirming that she is in fact not a seer. "The processes that led to what is happening now are very long. I'm not a prophet of anything – I just live here with my eyes open. [Philosopher Yeshayahu] Leibowitz already talked about that decades ago."

Until October 7, Littwitz worked with three galleries overseas, including the HLP in Brussels and Alexander Levy in Berlin. She stopped working with the third one, in London, this year. "The relentless binary discussion in the fields of culture and academia in the past year surprised, upset and angered me," she explains. "At a certain point, the oversimplifications started to bore me."



**Ella Littwitz, *The Path*, 2021.** Credit: Eyal Tagar

*Why did you stop working with the gallery in London?*

"The two galleries with which I've remained are very supportive. With the third, it was hard for me to see how I would continue to work with some of the artists it represents, who adopted extreme ethical positions. I feel that professional difficulty in the international arena, and also this year I experienced fear at exhibition openings. But the bottom line is that we have more urgent struggles to deal with here than to fight these esteemed possessors of the absolute truth abroad. All our energy must be directed to the return of the hostages and the cease-fire."

*Do you see any way of restoring relations with the international art world?*

"I mainly hope that the loss of hope won't suppress local work. I no longer believe in an 'international art community.' But I do totally believe in art and its ability to touch complexity and beauty in a universal way. I'm more concerned about our ability as a society to recover."

### **Another memorial?**

Littwitz is currently working on a memorial to commemorate the victims of terrorism, which will be situated in front of the Knesset next to the monument for Israel's fallen soldiers. It was already planned prior to the October 7 attack. The Knesset has two monuments commemorating the fallen in Israel's wars: "The Burning Bush" by sculptor David Palombo, which was installed in the Knesset plaza in the early 1970s; and the 2007 monument created by artist Zelig Segal, which is part of every official ceremony or visit by world leaders to the Israeli parliament.

The cornerstone-laying ceremony for the construction of the Littwitz memorial took place at the opening of the latest Knesset session. The planned monument is made of exposed concrete, is square and almost flat. The surface of the monument will be somewhat elevated with sharp corners, which will create



triangular areas. In the corner, Littwitz plans to create a groove that will become a trapezoidal reflection pool sunk into the ground, from which the viewer, building and sky will be reflected.

*Do we really need another memorial?*

"Commemoration is a complex issue. The committee asked me to present a proposal, and I reluctantly agreed. The present period makes preoccupation with the commemoration of victims of terror attacks far more difficult. There's a monument in the Knesset plaza only to the fallen in Israel's wars, and it's certainly appropriate that a civilian monument be built as well."

*Most of your work is about fences and boundaries. How does this monument fit in with that thinking?*

"I relate to monuments that are anti-monumental, which don't glorify death and don't impose themselves on the space. I thought a lot about the word 'halal,' which [in Hebrew] means a physical space and is also related to our fallen. A visitor who approaches the pool will discover the verse chosen by the professional committee, 'Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,' inside the water. The complete form holds the missing form, and what's missing defines the complete shape."

*So on the one hand you're cooperating with the Knesset, and on the other you're criticizing it in the work "Yesterday," which relates to Karavan's "Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem" relief.*

"There's hope that this place is still ours. I'm cooperating with the Knesset, not with the government. If I don't believe that the Knesset is ours, I have no reason to live here. The Knesset belongs to the people. The government will be replaced and the Knesset will remain. The work by Karavan, which gave me the blessing for that project, was supposed to celebrate democracy when he dedicated it in the Knesset."

*Before his death he said that he wanted his work to be removed, because he didn't agree to have it serve as a backdrop for the speeches of the current lawmakers.*

"I think that he didn't understand the cultural validity of the work, that it's no longer his. Just by the fact that it already belongs to the public, it symbolizes the possibility for repair and hope for the place."

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