

FESTIVAL



Japanese artist Momoko Seto takes us on a cosmic journey with the Planets series. (Momoko Seto)

# Mix and match in Musrara

Voice artist Victoria Hana will join forces with Ukrainian counterpart Mariana Sadovska. (Itai Merom)



• By BARRY DAVIS

**T**he annual edition of the Musrara Mix festival will take place May 24 to 26. It is a fundamentally envelope-pushing affair, as befitting the forward-looking ethos of the Musrara-Nagar School of Art. This year's three-dayer takes in a typically wide swathe of creative offerings, including installations, performances, works of art from various disciplines and concerts.

The declared theme of the festival is translocation, a term borrowed from the world of genetics which, concisely and technically, refers to a chromosomal rearrangement in which a segment of genetic material from one chromosome becomes heritably linked to another chromosome. As per the oft-cited – although not necessarily accurate – humorous observation made, apparently, by knighted British actor Michael Caine, “not a lot of people know that.” However, while the festival attendees may not be inspired to delve into the more complex recesses of human science by the items on offer in Musrara in just over a week's time, they will surely take on the essence of that sentiment.

In fact, the principal avenue of thought and exploration of the festival exhibitors follows just that line. The festival orga-

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nizers and, principally, director and chief curator Aviv Sabag, and exhibition curator Sharon Horodi, directed the artists into the world of bio-art. As such [Musrara Mix 16](#) presents works that are directly associated with biological phenomena, involved collaboration with scientists, and were created in a laboratory.

But before you start to get the idea that visitors to the festival will see a bunch of artists running around in white lab coats, peering through microscopes and jotting down experiment data in notebooks, please bear in mind that the event will be hosted by an art school.

You'll need your wits about you when observing Theresa Schubert's beguiling prints that comprise the Somniferous Observatory series. The source machinations come from experiments designed to develop a species of slime mold - *Physarum polycephalum*, if you really want to know - which tends to inhabit shady, cool, moist areas such as decaying leaves and logs. Schubert's visually arresting photographs record various stages in the evolution of the organism under the influence of psychoactive and somniferous substances. The work addresses questions of life, consciousness and control through the use of a simple organism in DIY laboratory setups.

Then there's Momoko Seto's Planets series. The Japanese artist's captivating images fuse macrophotography with time lapse and slow motion technology. The result is a sense of cosmic adventure, of Star Trekkie proportions, with subjects that appear to come straight from outer space... possibly from places where, to paraphrase starship *Enterprise's* Captain Kirk, no person has hitherto ventured.

Iddo Gruengard's contribution to the festival, *Playback [Paralysis]*, also references natural organisms, although it has nothing to do with laboratories or science. The bodies in Tel Aviv resident Gruengard's video work belong to the artist and to John Elias Dabis, who lives in Ramallah, and the project explores the meaning of disability and physical limitations in modern-day Jerusalem. Both are confined to wheelchairs, Gruengard following a hit-and-run accident in India 18 years ago, while Dabis has a debilitating condition, something akin to multiple sclerosis.

Although Dabis was born Christian, he says he does not set much store by any religion per se. Even so, we follow his painfully difficult progress, partly courtesy of a GoPro camera attached to his head, as he navigates his way from the New Gate to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Meanwhile, Gruengard takes an even longer route, from Jaffa Gate to the Western Wall.

There, are several subtexts to the work. Gruengard's original intent was to involve a Muslim wheelchair-bound person trying to get to al-Aksa Mosque, and to see what that entailed. Naturally, the idea was to see what members of the three principal monotheistic religions, for which Jerusalem is a holy city, encountered en route. That, of course, brings in political and social issues, as well as plain old physical logistics. There is also the highly symbolic element of



Iddo Gruengard's 'Playback [Paralysis]' video work explores the meaning of disability and physical limitations in modern-day Jerusalem. (Iddo Gruengard)

people with varying religious backdrops moving toward each other, toward an encounter.

The 40-year-old Gruengard, who is currently the beneficiary of a Mifal Hapayis-funded artist-in-residence slot at Musrara, along with artists from Italy and South Korea, has accrued a substantial educational bedrock to his current work. He is a qualified architect, and also took a two-year program in Performance Design and Practice in London. As such, he not only has a deep appreciation of buildings and town planning, he also has a keen interest in space of all sorts.

"I look at how spaces generate social connections and generate certain hierarchies, and how one can try to break away from that through space," Gruengard observes, adding that in his and Dabis's case, there is far more to be factored in. "With disabled people, you have to ensure that a space is accessible to wheelchairs."

That is clearly a major consideration with regard to Gruengard's and Dabis's challenging paths to the sacred sites of their respective religions. While the able-bodied simply have to decide which gate to enter the Old City from, and

whether to take one alleyway or another, *Playback [Paralysis]* clearly demonstrates that the less fortunate have to pick their way through all sorts of logistical barriers, and also have to rely on the kindness of others to help them proceed.

In particular, Dabis did not appear to be having a lot of fun along his chosen route. You really get the sense of the vibrations the wheelchair absorbs as the GoPro camera takes in seemingly every crack between the flagstones and even the tiniest cavity in the paving. Still, Dabis is appreciative of the helping hands proffered to him.

"They were really good to us, to me and Iddo - the normal people and the security services," he notes. "I got help from the Border Police and even from the Boy Scouts."

It is encouraging to see acts of kindness, especially to people with physical and other challenges, and Gruengard says that addresses one of the main areas he set out to explore. "I wanted to look at whether, in a place that is loaded with emotion and politics, people are capable of showing compassion to, for example, physically disabled people."

The video creation is also part of Gru-

engard's ongoing endeavor to understand his present physical condition.

"When I was injured, I decided I had to create a meaning for my injury," he declares. "Otherwise, I would always feel that it was senseless, that I was injured for no purpose."

Happily, after dropping by the holy sites in the Old City, Gruengard and Dabis manage to meet up at a café in the Christian Quarter. You can tell by their smiles that they have a sense of achievement after wending their arduous way along routes that most of us wouldn't think about twice. It's a nice upbeat denouement.

Musrara Mix 16 also features an intriguing musical meet-up between Israeli voice artist Victoria Hana and Ukrainian counterpart Mariana Sadovska, an original work by Shmil Frenkel involving solo instruments performed in various positions in space, which alludes to parallel states of consciousness and the information overload around us, and Tal-shachar Gilboa's and Roy Avraham's blues spot.

For more information about Musrara Mix 16: [www.musraramixfest.org.il](http://www.musraramixfest.org.il)