

Chicago Life

Spirit Regained By Sigalit Zetouni

Summer 2019



Nelly Agassi, "Elsa." 2019. Wool, cotton, and rayon. Dimensions Variable. Produced In collaboration with the Weaving Mill, Chicago. Installallon View of 'Nelly Agassi: Spirit of the Waves; Graham foundation, Chicago, 2019. Photo: Suzette Bross

Chicago-based artist Nelly Agassi (b. 1973, Tel Aviv) grew up in Isreal and studied art in London, England. Her work is expressed through performance, video, large installation, sculpture, and works on paper, and has been exhibited and performed in international spaces that include The Arts Club of Chicago, Aspect Ratio, Hyde Park Art Center, The Israel Museum, Poor Farm, Tate Modern, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, La Triennale di Milano, and Zacheta National Gallery in Warsaw. This year Agassi was named a Graham Foundation Fellow, and is currently showing a new body of work in an exhibition entitled, "Nelly Agassi: Spirit of the Waves," which is installed in the Graham Foundation's Madlener House, the Prairie-style mansion located at 4 W. Burton Place in Chicago. The exhibition includes a large-scale textile installation, intricate embroideries, works on paper, sculptures, and at 6 p.m., on July 31st, Agassi is going to present a site-specific performance in collaboration with musicians Ryan Packard and Peter Maunu.

The Madlener House was constructed in 1901-02 for Albert F. and Elsa S. Madlener. Originally built by architect Richard E. Schmidt and designer Hugh M. G. Garden, in the 1960s architect Daniel Brenner ultimately transformed the mansion into the Graham Foundation's headquarters. In her current exhibition, Agassi addresses the architectural transformation of the house from a private domestic living place into the mid-century modern institutional space that was renovated for the public. She recreates erased fireplaces, closets, doorways, and reframes every existing detail in the house, and throughout the exhibition narrates both the real and imagined stories of immigration and relocation. Along with her own experience as an immigrant, she creates a fragile, yet powerfully inspiring human tale. History tells us that the first Madlener who came to the U.S. was from the town of Uberlingen, in Baden, Germany. His first name was Fridolin, and

he was born in 1835. Fridolin's working-class parents encouraged their son to become a merchant, and the young man eventually left his homeland for the city of Chicago. Success was swift, and when he was just twenty-three years old Fridolin was already one of Chicago's leading liquor merchants. His company was located on W. Lake St, here in the city, and it was there where whiskeys from several distilleries were blended. Fridolin quickly became known in the liquor industry through his ability to pick by sight and sampling the extraordinary liquors from the plain ones. But above all, it was his idea to mix figs with rye whiskey that garnered him notoriety. Initially, Fridolin Madlener sold bottles of fig rye to help with constipation, and then later as a "health whiskey." (The health claims were not yet based on scientific discoveries, and since whiskey was not subject to the labeling requirements of the Food and Drug Act, he was able to make a fortune.)

In 1866, at age thirty-one, Fridolin married nineteen-year old Margaretha Blatz, the daughter of Milwaukee's beer baron, Albert Blatz, and with the help of his now father-in-law, he ventured into owning and operating a brewery. He supported the arts, gymnastic associations, and was also active in the German-American community in Chicago. Years later, he prepared his son, Albert, to take over the business. Albert, who attended the Latin School of Chicago, Yale University, and then a wine apprenticeship in Germany, assisted his father in managing the liquor company.

When Fridolin died in 1897, Albert took over the company, and in 1898, he married Elsa Seipp, the daughter of a prominent Chicago brewer. Upon his marriage, Albert commissioned the Madlener House in the heart of the city's Gold Coast neighborhood. The mansion resembled the German Neoclassical work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and his followers, though Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright also influenced many of the details: There was the early Prairie School design of breaking with horizontal lines, and the square brick massing from 19th-century Germany that was designed for the German heritage of the couple, but the garden's facade also referenced a local style, including Sullivan's famed floral ornament, as well as the abstracted and planar ornament that looked to the modern. In her exhibition, Agassi's new work is drawn from research of the past. Her art depicts a story of love and human nature. There is a subtle tension that coexists with a quiet beauty in Agassi's flat drawings and striated textiles. A sculpture is installed in Elsa's dressing room, and sparkling embroidery follows the change of color in the original deep, oxblood Mahogany molding that frames the first floor but was bleached during the renovation. The work is a culmination of Agassi's 2019 Graham Foundation Fellowship and explores concepts of identity, relocation, erasure, preservation, and architecture's role through time and change. A program of public events that includes lectures and performances accompanies the exhibition.

"Nelly Agassi: Spirit of the Waves" runs through August 3rd, and more information can be accessed online at www.grahamfoundation.org.