Belu-Simion Fainaru in conversation with Avital Bar-Shay

The conversation between curator Avital Bar-Shay and artist Belu-Simion Fainaru took place during the installation of *Rose of Nothingness* in the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, unfolding the thought processes and ideas behind it.

Avital Bar-Shay: Over the years, your work has developed into a readily identifiable, deeply personal artistic language, weaving philosophical depth with conceptual inquiry. Your life journey—from childhood in Romania, through immigration to Israel and studies in the United States, to artistic endeavors in Europe—has given rise to a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual influences that continue to inform your work. How have these various stations and encounters shaped your artistic language?

Belu-Simion Fainaru: I was born in Bucharest in 1959 to my parents, Eveline and Jean. My father had dreams of becoming an artist, but that path was cut short by World War II, when he was deported to a labor camp in Transnistria and forced into hard labor for three years. The experience left deep scars. After the war, he turned to architecture, eventually heading a school of architecture in Bucharest. At times, I feel that I have carried forward the artistic dream that was interrupted—as though, through my work, I have sought to restore a voice to what was silenced in his life.

I grew up in communist Romania, and despite the declared ideal of equality, as a Jew I always felt a subtle sense of estrangement. It was a quiet, almost imperceptible foreignness, yet one that imprints itself on the consciousness and shapes the way one looks at the world. In retrospect, I understand that this feeling never disappeared; it merely changed form and continued to resonate in my work.

In 1973, I immigrated with my parents to Israel. The transition was abrupt: a different language, different gestures, a different rhythm of life. Here, too, despite a sense of religious and historical affinity, I found myself once

again in the position of an outsider—both inside and looking on from the outside. In a way, the experience of immigration taught me that identity is not a fixed place, but a continual movement between places.

As a young adult, I went to study in Chicago, where I was first exposed to the international art world, and in particular to American art. After graduation, I continued my training in Milan, and later settled in Belgium, where my international career began to take shape. I staged solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, Brussels, M HKA, Antwerp, and SMAK, Ghent. Concurrently, I participated in group exhibitions alongside leading figures in contemporary art, including Luc Tuymans, Jan Fabre, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramović, Olafur Eliasson, and David Hammons, among others. During this period, I also formed significant relationships with a number of curators, among them the international curator Jan Hoet, with whom I collaborated on exhibitions and public projects around the world.

One of the high points of my artistic journey was my participation in Documenta IX in Kassel in 1992—a landmark international exhibitions. I sometimes say, with a smile, that I presented the smallest work there. It was titled *You Have Always to Start Anew* : a glass of water, with an egg resting at its base, and above it a small boat made of wax. For me, it was a metaphor for the human journey, its fragility, the fine balance between sinking and staying afloat, and the need to begin anew, time and again.

More broadly, it seems to me that moving between countries, languages, and cultures is not merely a sequence of chapters in a biography, but an existential condition. Migration has taught me that one is always suspended between belonging and estrangement, between memory and a new place. Perhaps this is why, for me, art is not the making of objects, but a space where one can simultaneously hold multiple identities, homelands, and memories, and move between them, like a small boat on unstable waters, setting out each time anew.

Your installation at the biennale, *Rose of Nothingness*, engages with Jewish mysticism, memory, and water. What are your sources of inspiration? How did

your encounter with Kabbalistic thought shape the way you conceive of, and give form to, the act of creation?

When we immigrated to Israel, we settled in Safed, a place where the Kabbalistic tradition originated and developed. Safed is not an ordinary city; it is a place charged with spiritual memory. Its stone alleys, the shifting light over the mountains, and the unique silence of the place inspire the sense that the visible and the hidden coexist there. As a teenager, I was not consciously aware of this, yet the mystical ambience seeped in, almost like a scent in the air. Looking back, I understand that this was my first encounter with the possibility that reality extends beyond what is seen. Years later, while living in Belgium, I met thinkers and scholars engaged in Jewish philosophy and the study of Kabbalah. Through long conversations and sustained intellectual exchange, I was introduced to a rich and intricate world of thought in which language itself carries a spiritual dimension, and letters are not merely signs but vessels or entities charged with meaning. Ideas pertaining to light (*Ohr*), contraction (*Tsimtsum*, reduction of the divine energy or divine withdrawal), and the relation between being and nothingness gradually ceased to be solely theological notions and gradually became a generative field for creative reflection.

Kabbalah teaches that Creation begins with an act of divine contraction, with a moment in which *Ein-Sof* (infinity) withdraws, opening a space in which the world can come into being. It is a compelling idea: that emptiness is not absence but a condition for emergence; that the void is not simply a vacant space, but potential. For me, confronting the void is inseparable from the attempt to comprehend existence. At times, it is precisely what remains unseen that grants things their meaning; a presence that reveals itself through absence, like an echo that lingers after the sound has faded.

In this sense, for me, art has become a space in which thinking can unfold through matter. I often feel that artistic practice resembles a search, an attempt to touch the moment in which something emerges from the void. It may take the form of a small gesture, a delicate material, a near-fragile

object—yet within this simplicity, a meeting occurs between matter and spirit, between thought and form.

Perhaps my work does not seek to explain mystical ideas, but rather to create the conditions in which they may resonate. As in Kabbalistic language, where letters do not only carry meaning but also generate a field of possibilities, so too in art: sometimes a hint, a small interval, or a minimal gesture is enough to open a door into what lies beyond the visible. Ultimately, my encounter with mystical thought did not yield definitive answers. On the contrary, it reinforced the questions. It is perhaps precisely there, in the space between the known and the concealed, that art finds its place.

The notions of rupture (*shvirah*) and repair or mending (*tikkun*) recur in your work in various contexts. Do you see the act of artmaking itself as a gesture of rectification, an attempt to mend that which has been broken?

The notions of shattering and restoration have accompanied my thinking and work for many years. These are not only philosophical or mystical ideas, but also a way of apprehending human reality itself. We inhabit a world of fractures—personal, historical, cultural. Human memory carries traumas, losses, and ruptures that cannot be fully mended. Within this context, I am deeply drawn to the ideas that emerge from the Kabbalistic tradition, especially the concepts of *Shvirat Ha'kelim* (the Breaking of the Vessels) and *Tikkun* (rectification, restoration, mending). According to this view, the world comes into being through a moment of rupture, and from that break emerges the possibility of creation and an ongoing process of repair.
I don't believe that art can truly repair the world in any literal sense. It cannot restore what has been lost or fully heal the wounds of history. But perhaps it holds a more subtle role: art can create a space in which we become aware of the fracture, a space in which it can be contemplated, acknowledged, and given form. In this sense, artmaking may be understood as a modest gesture of repair: not a complete or final restoration, but a careful attempt to gather the fragments and reintegrate them into a structure of meaning. At times, this takes shape through the simplest of materials: an old house, dismantled and

reassembled; a table bearing porcelain vessels collected from ruined homes; or a drop of water, falling over and over again into a quiet space. These are small, almost fragile gestures. Yet it may be precisely within such gestures that a possibility of *tikkun* resides, not as a grand promise, but as a sustained movement of attentiveness, memory, and responsibility.

In several of your exhibitions from as early as the 1990s, you used the title "Visual Text." The installation *Rose of Nothingness* operates as a "living text," whose meaning emerges through the viewer's observation and participation. In what way do you conceive of the installation as a visual text?

I perceive *Rose of Nothingness* as a space where meaning is generated not through letters or words, but through suspension, gaze, and attentiveness. Venice—where the Talmud, the foundational text of Jewish law in religious tradition, was first printed in the 16th century—symbolizes the shift from orally transmitted knowledge to a written text, open to endless interpretation. In my installation, each drop of water is a unit of time and a sign, a moment that invites the viewer to become an active reader, to participate in the work, and to transform absence into presence.

The water acts as a multi-layered surface of reading, where reflections, viewers' movement, and shifting light create a subtle but charged field of signs. Moments of stillness are not emptiness, but presence through absence, echoing Jacques Derrida's notion of *trace*. The installation may be construed as a Kabbalistic-Talmudic visual text, where absence and potential open space for reading, memory, and spiritual dialogue. In this way, the work establishes a meditative realm where time, matter, and consciousness converge. The viewer experiences the tension between presence and absence, between the visible and the hidden, and meaning unfolds continuously, much like reading the Talmud or engaging in Kabbalistic study: interpretation is infinite, and each new gaze adds another layer to the experience.

The title of the work points to another dimension in your practice—the engagement with trauma and memory, particularly the memory of the Holocaust. How do these ideas translate into your visual language?

The installation *Rose of Nothingness* draws inspiration from the poetry of Paul Celan. Its title comes from his poem *Psalm*, and in particular from the image of *black milk*—a liquid rich with contradictions: nourishing and life-giving, yet dark and toxic, evoking death.

Looking back, my work over the years has grappled with the tension between personal history and collective memory. Within this setting, the Holocaust occupies a significant place, not as a narrative representation, but as a resonant field. My works ultimately create encounters with traces of memory through everyday objects and charged materials that carry invisible fractures and hidden histories. For example, in the installation *Black Milk*, a table holds white porcelain vessels filled with burnt black oil, evoking a dense image of memory. Intimate objects become witnesses to rupture that unfolded within culture itself. As in Celan's poetry, here too, meaning emerges in the space between the objects, in the gap between being and nothingness. The installation offers a meditative space where the viewer is invited to pause, listen, and contemplate the ongoing tension between what was lost and what continues to resonate.

Rose of Nothingness and *Black Milk* reflect the notion that memory and life are never complete, and that absence is an inseparable aspect of existence. The installation encourages us to think of time as a space in which presence and absence mirror each other, where each moment is a repeated response, and each drop marks existence that demands attention. In this way, an experience crystallizes in which fracture and lack are also a potential for renewal, a space in which memory persists through absence, enabling the encounter with history, pain, and the aspiration for balance to becomes a moment of insight into the nature of existence and time.

How does trauma take shape in your work?

My engagement with trauma is grounded in the understanding that it is not a historical event that can simply be reenacted or represented, but a condition in which the psyche and memory are forced to confront a persistent state of existential tension and discontent. At the heart of my works are reflections on time, matter, and the psyche: on the recognition that time is not linear, but stretched between moments of presence and absence, and that memory is not tangible, but felt as an experience of tension, of reverberation. The everyday objects, fragile materials, and symbolic liquids, as in *Black Milk* and *Rose of Nothingness*, serve as mediators of history: they enact the gap between life and death, between rupture and repair, and allow the viewer to sense the weight of history experientially rather than merely intellectually.

In this context, the trauma of the Holocaust becomes a space for philosophical reflection on existence. It reminds us that life traverses the boundaries of creation and fracture, memory and oblivion. The works transform absence into a space of meaning, rupture into a potential for growth, and contemplation of loss into an opportunity to experience the dynamics at the core of human existence.

In an era of uncertainty as we experience these days, a period marked by global crises and complex conflicts around identity and culture, these works are more relevant than ever. The installations create a space in which one can engage with the dialogue between past and present. They offer a glimpse of the possibility of both intrinsic and extrinsic rectification and healing, fostering empathy and understanding toward ourselves and others. Art is not passive; it serves as a vessel and a space of experience, a sphere where we can rethink life and the ways in which we navigate between memory and creation.

Do you see art as a universal language capable of fostering dialogue?

Yes, I believe that art is a universal language. To me, its essence lies in its ability to touch fundamental human experiences, emotions, memory, pain, hope, identity, and belonging. These experiences are not confined to a single

nation; they are shared across humanity. While each work is created within a specific cultural context and carries local baggage, the moment it encounters a viewer, it transcends its origin and opens a dialogue that goes beyond spoken language and national borders. Art does not erase differences; it creates a space where they can coexist without entrapment.

I believe art provides artists with a space for free expression, a space to pose complex questions, challenge conventions, and formulate identity openly. Especially in our times, art has the power to act as a bridge, fostering empathy and offering a human perspective where public discourse is polarized and hostile. Therefore, even when I exhibit within a national framework, I do not see it as a statement of seclusion or self-differentiation, but as an opportunity to bring a singular voice into a broader, human, universal conversation that crosses borders.

As an artist, I view art as a realm of sanity within an often-unruly reality. It is a place where I can speak freely, yet responsibly and critically, both about myself and my society. For me, artmaking is not merely personal or aesthetic expression; it is an invitation to a live, ongoing dialogue with others. In that encounter, the possibility of a shared space emerges: one where difference is not threatening but enriching; where multiple voices can coexist; where one can listen, question, and dwell in complexity without rushing to closure. Art, for me, is an act of connecting, a continuous effort to build bridges between people, experiences, identities, and narratives, opening a path toward hope, understanding, and empathy in a turbulent and violent world.

Art operates in the inner sphere of human experience. It challenges certainties, opens fissures, and offers new perspectives. Its role may not be to "change" the world directly, but to enable new ways of seeing, dialogue, doubt, and hope. Perhaps transformation is simply a byproduct of the very existence of a space where one is allowed to question and imagine differently, a realm that honors freedom of expression.

How do you perceive your role as an artist today?

My role as an artist today, I believe, is to create a space for thought and experience, one that allows for deep reflection on memory, pain, and fracture,

but also on the human capacity for repair, finding meaning, and connecting with others. I see myself as a mediator between past and present, someone who creates an artistic reality that invites the viewer to pause, listen, and observe in a space where direct language is insufficient. For me, the artist's role also involves creating a platform for connection and dialogue: a space that brings people, ideas, memories, and perspectives together, even when they originate from diverse or even opposing places. In this sense, the artist constructs a shared space for observation, conversation, and engagement.

Today, the artist does not merely represent or document, but generates a realm of possibility: a possibility for reflection, dialogue, and connection between people, and between the memories of the past and contemporary life. Especially in an era of uncertainty, global crises, and cultural conflicts, my role is to offer time and space in which encounters can occur, where experiences can be felt, questions can be raised, and existential inquiries can be posed. Art thus becomes a philosophical, meditative, and profoundly human practice.

To conclude, in this era of war and instability, do you, as an artist, have a message of hope or optimism to convey?

Even in an era of war, instability, and global uncertainty, I believe that art can offer a pathway to optimism; not a naive optimism, but a profound one, born from the understanding that humans are capable of pausing, listening, and reflecting. In the quiet moments, in the pauses and contemplations that art allows, a space emerges where one can acknowledge pain and fracture, while also discovering the possibility of *tikkun*, connection, and meaning.

As an artist, I strive to create such spaces, where the viewer does not merely observe an object or a story, but also feels the tension between presence and absence, between memory and forgetting. Even within rupture and trauma, there is room for moments of attention and empathy. These small gestures—a drop of water, light glinting across a surface, a space for reflection—become openings for mending and repair, enabling us to reconnect with ourselves and with others, and to glimpse horizons of life even amid hardship. The optimism I speak of does not eliminate difficulty; it arises

from a conscious decision to hold both fracture and hope, memory and the capacity to emerge from nothingness. Art becomes a philosophical act: it provides a meditative space in which we can rethink existence, the other, and our relation to the world, offering a way to live within pain without losing the ability to see and to believe.