New York-based multidisciplinary artist Tamar Ettun talks to *Art Radar* about ephemerality, hot air balloons and serving in the Israeli army.

Born in Jerusalem, Israel, Tamar Ettun currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. A young artist working at the exciting intersections of dance, sculpture, video and performance, Ettun teases out powerful relations between movement and stillness, body and object.

Tamar Ettun, headshot. Image courtesy the artist.

**Tamar Ettun** earned her BFA with Honours from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem while studying at the Cooper Union in New York. She then went on to receive her MFA from Yale University in 2010. At Yale, Ettun was awarded the Alice English Kimball Fellowship, which allowed her to travel around the United States chasing hot air
Art Radar catches up with Ettun fresh after her successful booth with Artis at NADA NYC 2014. The artist talks about balloons, growing up in Israel, and the concept and role of the human body in her art practice.

A multidisciplinary practice

You work across a wide range of media, including sculpture, performance, photography and video, to name a few. Was there a progressive trend to include more varied media or have you always been interested in different kinds of art?

I started as a sculptor in Israel. When I first came to New York on an exchange program at the Cooper Union, I didn’t have a studio. I stayed with my cousins, and there was no room for me to collect trash from the streets, preserve dead animals (the project I was working on then) or experiment with explosives. I was extremely stimulated, but had to find new ways to produce work. So I bought a video camera and started filming myself as sculpture in public spaces. As my work developed, I became interested in including more people in my projects and in creating live events that audiences could experience.

My work deconstructs the body and juxtaposes it with inanimate objects. I respond to my immediate surroundings, use materials I find, collaborate with people I know, and make sculptures, performances and videos that are situation-specific, growing organically through the construction process. I am interested in the space between these media, how our perception of a medium guides the way we view it and what happens when I mix it up.
Is there one particular medium that you are especially partial to at the moment and why?

I’ve been ambivalent about making videos for a while and this year I became excited about it again. For the last few years, I have been making performances that invert sculpture and dance. I was interested in the physical tension – sweat, breath – as a live recurring experience, where anything can go wrong at a moment’s notice. I tried to transform movement into something permanent, through repetition, duration and stillness. This year, I became drawn once more towards video pieces as a way of creating something durable, yet still containing performative elements.

Does shifting between different media resonate in any way with the notion of the ‘nomadic’ in your work? What is your personal understanding of the concept of the nomadic, and what are its artistic associations and political implications?

Travelling is a key part of my work, as a way to comprehend diverse personal experiences and multiple perspectives. I am attracted to local personal stories that reflect collective experiences.

My work is a form of mobility for me. The body is itself transitive, nomadic... not merely in
its ability to travel, but in itself, as a thing that sustains harm, that inflicts harm. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an example of the nomadic body in this sense.

Emigrating from Israel to the United States has shaped the way I think about making work. On the one hand, moving is liberating. Not knowing the cultural context of materials and how to code their meaning enables me to think freely about form, colour and tactility. On the other hand, it can be challenging to communicate new knowledge and experiences, while struggling to map strange surroundings. Nomadism questions the status quo and can propose a fresh perspective on a static situation, and for me it is a fertile ground to work with.

Tamar Ettun, ‘One Thing Leads To Another: Part 3’ (performance shot at Socrates Sculpture Park), 2012, hot air balloon, fan, cement, wooden wheel, car parts, steel. Dancer: Natasha Corbie. Image courtesy the artist and Monica Sziladi.

**Performance and stillness**

In your performance pieces, how much is coordinated and how much is improvised? What are your thoughts on the relationship between the controlled and the contingent?
When I work with performers, I usually give them a set of tasks that they perform throughout the piece. For example, in *One Thing Leads to Another* (2011-2013), a dancer wears skates that are cast in cement, weighing over 100 pounds. Her task is to walk from one side of the balloon to the other. Her lower body is fixed to the ground, but her upper body is free to move and help her feet move. I create a map of the performers and plan when the interactions between them will take place or how they will relate with each other.

We also look at other choreographers and artists that incorporate everyday movements, objects and gravity in their work, like Erwin Wurm, the Gaga movement language by Ohad Naharin, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, that serve as guidelines to the physical assemblages we are creating.

I see the performers in my pieces as collaborators – they innovate movements in response to my installations. I am interested in this notion of chance: the physical freshness and primal instincts that are triggered while facing a concrete obstacle.

**Temporality, ephemerality, movement and stillness are other central concepts in your art, for example, in your most recent show *Performing Stillness* (2013-2014). Could you tell us how such concepts relate to you personally and artistically?**

*Performing Stillness*, which I presented for Artis at NADA NYC 2014, is a series of cast limbs, feet and participatory musical instruments. I source discarded or familiar objects and reconstruct new assemblages, stripping the objects of their original functions or meanings.

A pipe that is used to clean flutes is solely considered for its formal qualities: being long, narrow and stable. Each object performs a physical task, like a hand holding a flower, and the gesture is held through the assemblage.

Even though the materials comprising the sculptures are recognisable and the process of their construction is visible, they represent an intuitive, invented world. Some of them, like the musical instruments, can be played and be activated. Their potential for activation is what makes them performative.

I have been using a lot of plastic gloves that come in bright colours. Plastic gloves are supposed to protect our hands from dirt or dangerous materials: they touch what we wouldn’t want to touch. Here, they become frozen remains of the body. Growing up with two siblings who were chronically ill, and later encounters with death and injury, caused me to converse with humanity’s ultimate stillness. My work is an inherently failed attempt to control the horror of death through proposing the human body as a permanent material
Tamar Ettun, ‘Objects on yellow’, ‘Objects on orange’ and ‘Hand holding a flower’ (installation shot of Performing Stillness at NADA NYC), 2014, mixed media. Image courtesy the artist and ARTIS.

Tell us about The Moving Company.

The Moving Company is a group of dancers and actors that I founded in 2013. Tyler Patterson, Tina Wang, Lyndsey Eugene, Maia Karo, Adrian Galvin and I meet weekly at the Abrons Art Center. We have been working on a video and performance piece named It’s Not a Question of Anxiety, which is a series of actions composing the body with materials.

I have been thinking a lot about religious rituals and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Specifically, how, in both cases, there is a need to perform the same act through a set of rules: a specific location, time and props. While in religious rituals the performance of these acts brings social acceptance and a sense of belonging (if you light candles on a Friday night you are associated with a certain group), in OCD, acts performed in solitude
isolate individuals from the community.

These repetitive rituals, either personal or social, have a permanent quality: their fixedness in time – for example, every year on 4 July – and the recurrence of actions makes them eternal. In that way, they are like sculptures, still and never changing.

Along with the movers from The Moving Company, we have been disassembling these terms, and through ongoing study and play we develop multiple actions that relate to thematic sculptural questions. Performing the same action multiple times has an unpredictable emotional effect, and it takes the exceptional commitment of my team to bring each piece together.

Performance shot at Abrons Art Centre of The Moving Company in ‘It’s Not A Question Of
**Politics, art and empathy**

**Having served in the Israeli army for two years yourself, what are your thoughts on the relationship between art, war, politics and the human condition?**

I see art-making as a tool for social change: introducing new ways of thinking that can be messy and contradictory through combinations of materials, bodies, colours and shapes.

When I was in the eighth grade, right wing religious fundamentalist Ygal Amir murdered then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. I was young, just starting to form my own political understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and beginning to question the ideology of the Ultraorthodox Nationalist community I grew up in. After the assassination, a lot of hate and anger was directed towards this community. People would spit and curse at us on the street. I started trying to raise my skirt above my knee while walking with each step I took so I wouldn’t be recognised as a traditionally modest religious girl. These are the kind of idiosyncratic movements I’m interested in: how a political assassination makes one girl raise her hemline in public.

Serving in the army opened up a lot of questions for me. I constantly doubted my morals and values: who is the victim? Can a victim also be an attacker? Can we have empathy towards people that engage in violence? And how does violence shape the future?

War, politics and religion shape how our bodies exist in spaces with other bodies. Although our experiences are private and particular, different sides fighting a war may live similar symptoms, no matter how opposed their causes and ideologies are. I try to translate the overwhelmed and alienated space shared by both parties through my visual vocabulary as a proposal for an alternative community.

**What has been your most enjoyable project to date?**

*One Thing Leads to Another*, the performance-sculpture piece I did with hot air balloons for the past four years, was the most enjoyable, though sometimes the most challenging as well!

After Yale I received a grant to travel around the United States and research hot air balloons. I was interested in meeting balloonists who make their own balloons not for commercial purposes, and was amazed to find that they are mostly blue-collar, working class people that sew hundreds of miles of fabric in their spare time in order to build these inflatable structures. I found what I’ve been seeking for a long time: the colours of the
baloons, how the outside light entered the fabric, the breathing, moving space created, and its relationship to gravity.

The piece has been shown multiple times, and the process of inflation, seeing it grow and change shape is always new and exciting for me. I have wanted to make work that engages with the general public and this piece enabled me to work with people who aren’t necessarily museum-goers, in addition to the art community.

Performance shot at The Indianapolis Museum of Art of ‘One Thing Leads To Another’, 2013, hot air balloon, fan, cement, wooden wheel, car parts, steel. Image courtesy the artist.

And your most challenging project?

A few months ago, I had a solo exhibition in a gallery in Tel Aviv, Israel. I showed the hot air balloon piece I had been working on over the past few years. We planned to inflate the balloon in the gallery and install a series of participatory musical instruments inside it. This was the first time I had had a solo show in Israel and one of the few times I was present for the opening there. I invited all my friends, family and former teachers.

We decided to use an Israeli hot air balloon and not to ship my balloon from New York.
Everything was planned, I arrived a few weeks in advance to install the show, the balloon arrived and we were excited to inflate it in the gallery. But it stank so badly! I assume that the last time they had flown it, it had been raining and that they had packed it wet, causing mildew that wouldn’t come off. No matter how we treated it, the smell wouldn’t go away. The day before I left, the owner of the shoe store next door came to me and asked us to close the door of the gallery because the smell travelled all the way to his store.

I had worked with four other balloons in the past and never faced this problem before. But the first time I showed the piece in Israel, the smell was the strongest element of the piece.

What is on the agenda for you next, in terms of both artistic and research endeavours?

Recently, I’ve been thinking about empathy and neuron mirroring: how our body reacts to the bodies around us and mirrors them. Instinctive empathy. This empathy is primary, not intellectualised or with reason, but a physical impulse that we share with animals. For example, when someone yawns, we imitate them, mirroring their physical action.

My next series of sculptures, made with fragmented body parts, will hopefully grow into full-scale incoherent and illogical assembled bodies, inviting viewers to consider their own bodies in a new way.

*It’s Not a Question of Anxiety* is an ongoing project, for which I’m developing more sections, proposing never-ending, absurd actions with materials.

Finally, I just came back from [The MacDowell Colony](#) where I made my first inflatable mini-balloon, so now I’m building my own real-size hot air balloon from plastic bags! My next series will be presented in BOSI Contemporary in September.

**Michele Chan**

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