

Zipora Fried: Between Light and Dark

Laura Scherling, Ed.D. | Exhibition Review | January 10th, 2020

On November 21st, 2019, Zipora Fried’s solo exhibition *As the Ground Turns Solid* opened at the contemporary art gallery Sikkema Jenkins & Co., with a series of eight large-scale drawings.¹ *As the Ground Turns Solid* was on view until January 11th, 2020. In Fried’s series of pencil drawings, she examined the flora and fauna of Lamu Island, where she recently completed an art residency through the organization Tilleard Projects.² Fried’s visually arresting drawings consist of painstakingly-composed lines that capture the *unique features* of the isolated Lamu Archipelago (located near the northern coast of Kenya) with its “explosive” sunsets, lizards, cicada bugs, birds, and fruit trees intertwining with its “infinite characteristics of the sand,” white walls, Arabic arches,” and traditional *dhow* boats that come and go as if “by divine providence.”³ *Mattia*, as pictured below, explored the potential of color and form found in Lamu’s untouched maritime locality, where each mark became “subsumed within a larger color field”—where today there are still no cars or roads.⁴ Remarkably, Fried’s studies of Lamu Island during the day were in stark contrast to her studies at night, where *a dark, more violent visual language* emerged in her exploration of the Swahili settlement and its “threatened seas.”⁵ Her observations at night were expressed through an experimental video she created during the residency. Although the video was not included for public exhibition, it explored a critical point in this review.

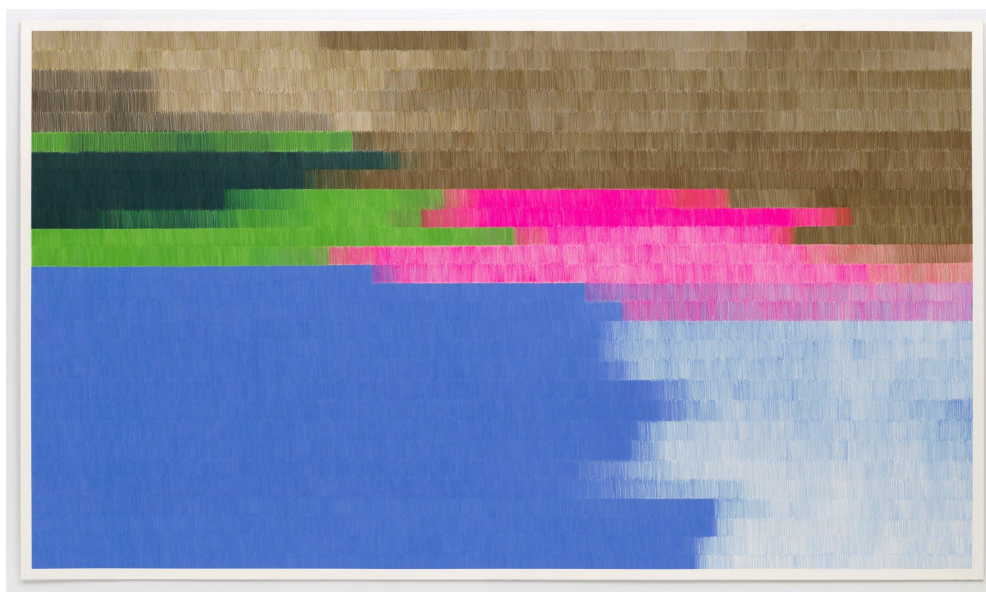


Figure 1. *Mattia* (2019). Colored pencil on paper, 52.5 x 90 inches (133.4 x 228.6 cm).

Before discussing Fried’s visually divergent study of Lamu Island (e.g., her drawings created by day and her video art created by night), it is important to briefly discuss her

¹ Sikkema Jenkins & Co was established in 1991 by Brent Sikkema. Sikkema is a San Francisco Art Institute alumni and has been in gallery-related work since 1971.

² Tilleard Projects, “About.”

³ See Figure 1: *Mattia*; Fried, interview; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., “Press Release for Zipora Fried: *As the Ground Turns Solid*.”

⁴ Fried, interview; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., “Press Release for Zipora Fried: *As the Ground Turns Solid*.”

⁵ Fried; Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

background as an artist. Zipora Fried was born in Haifa in 1962, 14 years after the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. Fried's practice is diverse, including sculpture, video and photography, and drawing. Her work is included in public collections at The Whitney Museum, the Harvard Art Museums, and The Albertina Museum in Vienna.⁶ She studied at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna and afterward spent four years living and traveling throughout Asia, once taking the Trans-Siberian rail from Moscow to Beijing and finding inspiration in "intense moments of isolation."⁷ Fried currently resides in New York City and, arguably, her public persona is fairly reserved, to the extent that I was delighted that she has been kind enough to interview with me and share memories, videos, interview transcripts, and a reflective essay. These brief, meaningful interactions have led me to wonder what her life was like in Israel, Austria, Beijing, India, and beyond. What it was like exhibiting with Patti Smith and Thiago Rocha Pitta in São Paulo,⁸ or being recognized for creating one of the "best artworks of the 2015 Armory Show."⁹ I had many questions for Fried, and I am not the first person to try to understand her approach to deconstructing and reinterpreting "formal conditions of object and image."¹⁰ Whether stepping on and off of boats on Lamu Island, questioning the "hyper-digitized culture" that we live in, or making art to defy the "possible monotony of life," it was clear that Fried perseveres with a high level of conviction. As an artist and as a woman, she is assertive yet humble, "expressing enough authority when harassed" to travel and explore freely while also willingly taking the role of the "silent interpreter" in a world that she views can be a confusing place.¹¹

In Fried's work, she frequently grapples with the subconscious and the multifaceted conditions of human and natural life where, as she describes, "the logic of nature" can be "lost in our mechanical servitude to technological hegemony."¹² In an anonymous young writer's review of this exhibition, he depicted that Fried's "monumental color drawings" are "deceptive in their formality," guided by "a nervous energy" and a "degree of (*self-*)discipline that ultimately rewards" the eye.¹³ Perhaps it is similar frenetic energy that drove Fried to "harness [...] excess emotional energy" and film life on Lamu Island at night, after having spent days observing and interacting with Lamu Island's dream-like fabric of "sailors' singing," sights, scents, and sounds.¹⁴ Fried reflected, "I dedicated my days to all the brilliant colors and movement around me on Lamu Island ... I dedicated the nights to filming a short video depicting the interactions of humans and animals with the natural world around them, and with each other."¹⁵ *After a Night's Darkness and a Day's Sail* is five minutes and 30 seconds long, shot with a night vision camera. This experimental short film is primarily non-narrative, providing a glimpse into the island's "threatened seas" in a "distorted reflection of the violence and fragility within the ocean's ecosystem."¹⁶ For me, it was particularly disappointing that this piece was removed from being displayed at *As the Ground Turns Solid*.

⁶ Sikkema Jenkins & Co., "Press Release for Zipora Fried: *As the Ground Turns Solid*."

⁷ Fried, interview.

⁸ Rigby, "Dark Paradise."

⁹ Rigby, "Dark Paradise"; Goldstein, "10 of the Best Artworks of the 2015 Armory Show."

¹⁰ Sikkema Jenkins & Co., "Press Release for Zipora Fried: *As the Ground Turns Solid*."

¹¹ Fried, interview.

¹² Fried.

¹³ Anonymous writer, 2019.

¹⁴ See Figure 2: *After a Night's Darkness and a Day's Sail*; Fried, interview.

¹⁵ Fried.

¹⁶ Fried.

Living between the light-and-dark dualism of Lamu Island, Fried's personal experiences can also be related to the history of Lamu. The story of Lamu Island and its surrounding township is historically dynamic, beautiful, yet disturbing. Lamu was established around 1370, developing out of a conflicted economy powered by slave trade until around 1907. As an interconnected seaport and "meeting point between the Arab and African world," the people of Lamu are ethnically diverse with a mixture of African, Arabic, Persian, Indian, and Chinese ancestry. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Centre, this area is under various threats, including lack of sewerage and infrastructure, inadequate marine infrastructure, and deteriorating dwellings.¹⁷ Exploring this "violence and fragility," Fried intentionally explored emotional acts and social bonding between the people of Lamu and their ecosystem in her video recordings. Against the "constant movement of the ocean," Fried captured "human figures dancing across the darkness, communing with each other on the beach," "horses swimming," and a "beached whale who lies on the shore, slowly breathing."¹⁸ Interspersed within these moments are scenes of trees with their permanence against the constant movement of the ocean.



Figure 2. *After a Night's Darkness and a Day's Sail* (2019). Five minutes and 30 seconds, black and white.

In our interview, Fried expressed, "I always work in between light and bright colors and darkness."¹⁹ Fried's philosophy as an artist can be interpreted in that we are driven by our subconscious and inundated by our emotions whether we like it or not, existing between the light and dark, at times conflicted, at other times serene. Nevertheless, the imperfect lines in Fried's large-scale pencil drawings, along with the imperfect, benevolent vignettes in her short film, all seem to *consolidate* her "restless energy," taking viewers to a contemplative space where multiple colors and "the spectrum of light" become "allegorical to the variations of human feelings"—carrying our memories, our senses, and our stories.²⁰ When Fried depicts color and form in her work, she recalls "conversations, music, and sound." Existentially, she also views that she is creating something that is simultaneously "vulnerable" and perhaps even "unnecessary." Therefore, she honors the fact that many of us are also psychologically torn between functioning as "productive drones" while struggling with our own type of consumer rebellion, essentially our desire to resist dominant culture and return to a quieter, more natural, or primordial state of being. In a quieter space, away from dominant culture, Fried finds a world filled with more laughter, more gratitude, where strangers greet us with smiles. She envisions a

¹⁷ UNESCO, "Lamu Old Town (Kenya)."

¹⁸ Fried, interview.

¹⁹ Fried.

²⁰ Fried.

place where we can perceive ourselves in relation to nature without the constant pressure of being commoditized.²¹

²¹ Fried.

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