The Arena of Thanatos: Psuché, Soma, and Sigalit Landau’s body representation—a comparative study

Nava Sevilla Sadeh* 1,2

1Department of Art History, Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel; 2Art Department, Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel

Abstract

Sigalit Landau is an international sculpture, video, installation, and performance artist, born in Jerusalem, and raised also in the USA and the UK. This study seeks to analyse Landau’s unique body representation of figures made of papier-mâché, focussing on the installation “The Country.” The point of departure of this study is a passage from the Platonic dialogue Timaeus, whose text strongly resembles Landau’s succulent human images composed of soft bones, moist flesh, and sinews. This analogy then leads to a wider comparative discussion on the meanings of the body in Archaic and Classical aesthetic concepts in comparison with its postmodern meanings. In addition to the strong interest in the structure of the human body, another common concern of both the ancient body images and those of Landau is that both engage with death (thanatos). The premise underlying this study is that both the body and its implication of death in Ancient Greece, and Landau’s body images, reflect metaphorically a political arena. However, while the political meanings of the ancient body images were constituted in manifestations of religion by means of purification, and were aimed at praising the homeland (polis), Landau’s bodies manifest meanings of abjection, express political criticism, and are thus profane, reflecting loss of faith. Landau’s loss of faith and sceptical spirit are inspired by two sources: the collective trauma of the Holocaust and the criticism of the occupation policy in her country. These two sources are main issues in many other works by Landau and are united in “The Country” installation, and particularly in the body images.

Keywords: classical reception studies; platonism; political criticism; purification; abjection

*Nava Sevilla Sadeh (PhD) is a teaching fellow and art researcher at Tel-Aviv University and a lecturer at Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts, Tel Aviv. Her research interests include Classical Reception studies—the Classical presence and influence in contemporary art; Classical reception studies as a methodology for the study of contemporary art; analysis of Greek and Roman art through a philosophical orientation; mythological mosaics from a neo-Platonic perspective; Otherness, gender, and art. She has published on classical influence upon contemporary art; an analysis of the mosaics from Sepphoris, Shechem, and Scytopolis; Interpretations of Greek and Roman sculpture. Among the courses she has taught are: Classical presence in contemporary art; Style and visual analysis of art; Classical concepts, gender and interpretation of mythology in Ancient art; and Roman mosaic art and wall painting.
The present study of Sigalit Landau’s body representation is comparative and based upon the presupposition that the body is a kind of political arena, common both to Landau’s artistic work and the Greek Archaic and Classical visualization and conceptualization of the body in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. This comparative approach is also supported by the characterization of Landau as an artist associated with historical, mythological, social, and political awareness. Landau herself has defined her art as mediation:

My work is about building bridges. [Un] consciously looking for new and vital materials to connect the past to the future, the west to the east, the private with the collective, the sub-existential to the Uber-profund, found objects to the deepest epic narratives and mythologies... using scattered, broken words to define bric-a-brac and transform it into a soft heap of new dream-buds, to act beyond the uncertain horizon.

The approach underlying this study is that of the discipline of Classical Reception Studies, a field that researches the features and implications of Classical concepts in contemporary culture. Noteworthy is the definition of reception by Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray: “by ‘reception’ we mean the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented. These are complex activities in which each reception ‘event’ is also part of wider processes.” Nonetheless, and constitutive to this research, Classical reception can also be contradictory, subversive, and antagonistic, as noted by Neville Morley: “However, part of the history of this reception is the history of disputes over the use and abuse of antiquity [...]” and—“[...] The possibility exists, if a correct methodology is chosen, of establishing an objective account of the past with which modern society can be compared and against which it can be evaluated.” Referring to Hegel, Morley stresses the view whereby the examination of the past is actually a concern with the present. Citing Nietzsche and Marx, he stresses the uses of the Classics in order to criticize modern culture and exemplify its deficiencies and sickness. In the field of art, and in relation to Landau’s work, this suggests Fredric Jameson’s comment that a good parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original. As will be shown, the Classical sources that conspicuously embody Landau’s works will both underlie and constitute as a wellspring for this analysis, although the findings will eventually be anti-Classical. The discipline of Classical reception studies is employed here as a methodology and a comparative strategy in order to reflect a contemporary phenomenon, and to contribute to an in-depth interpretation of the contemporary works analysed, employing textual sources and ancient visual images. The following discussion focusses on Landau’s papier-mâché figures that dominated the installation “The Country” (Figures 1–4), as typical of her perception of the body.

These figures are characterized by extreme exposure of body components, muscles, bones, and tendons. A passage by Plato in the Timaeus dialogue is remarkably apt regarding the corporeality of Landau’s human images:

[...] He who modeled us, considering these things, mixed earth with fire and water and blended them, and making a ferment of acid and salt, he mingled it with them and formed soft band succulent flesh. As for the sinews, he made them of a mixture of bone and unfermented flesh, attempered so as to be in a mean, and gave them a yellow color; wherefore the sinews have a firmer and more glutinous nature than flesh, but a softer and moister nature than the bones. With these God covered the bones and marrow, binding them together by sinews, and then enshrouded them all in an upper covering of flesh. The more living and sensitive of the bones he enclosed in the thinnest film of flesh, and those which had the least life within them in the thickest and most solid flesh. So again on the joints of the bones, where reason indicated that no more was required, he placed only a thin covering of flesh, that it might not interfere with the flexion of our bodies and make them unwieldy because difficult to move, and also that it might not, by being crowded and pressed and matted together, destroy sensation by reason of its hardness, and impair the memory and dull the edge of intelligence. Wherefore also the thighs and the shanks and the hips, and the bones of the arms and the forearms, and other parts which have no joints, and the inner bones, which on account of the rarity of the soul in their marrow are destitute of reason – all these are abundantly provided with flesh, but such as have mind in them are in general less fleshy, except where the creator has made some part solely of flesh...
in order to give sensation – as, for example, the tongue. But commonly this is not the case. For the nature which comes into being and grows up in us by a law of necessity does not admit of the combination of solid bone and much flesh with acute perceptions. More than any other part, the framework of the head would have had them if they could have coexisted, and the human race, having a strong and fleshy and sinewy head, would have had a life twice or many times as long as it now has, and also more healthy and free from pain. But our creators, considering whether they should make a longer-lived race which was worse, or a shorter-lived race which was better, came to the conclusion that everyone ought to prefer a shorter span of life, which was better, to a longer one, which was worse, and therefore they covered the head with thin bone, but not with flesh and sinews, since it had no joints, and thus the head was added, having more wisdom and sensation than the rest of the body, but also being in every man far weaker. For these reason and after this manner God placed the sinews at the extremity of the head, in a circle round the neck, and glued them together by the principle of likeness and fastened the extremities of the jaw-bones to them below the face, and the other sinews he dispersed throughout the body, fastening limb to limb.¹²

The resemblance between the Platonic text and Landau’s images is salient. As a demiurge, Landau has moulded succulent human images composed of soft bones, moist flesh, and sinews. However,
these images are lacking one very important sub-
stance in the human body, which the Platonic pas-
sage describes further on—the crust that protects
the flesh: “The fleshy nature was not therefore
wholly dried up, but a large sort of peel was parted
off and remained over, which is now called the
skin.” Landau leaves the bodies of her characters
skinless, exposed, and thus extremely vulnerable.
However, the resemblance to the Platonic text,
which reflects the profound interest in the human
body in Classical times, alongside the profound
interest of the artist in the structure of the human
body, and the somewhat larger-than-life character
of her work, offer points of departure for an anal-
ysis based on a comparative study. The first chapter
focusses mainly on an analysis of the Classical
visual and literary implications of Landau’s body
representations, while the second chapter focusses
on an analysis of her work.

**PSUCHÊ: THE MYTHICAL ARENA**

The extreme corporeality of Landau’s figures
makes them resemble corpses evoked from the
Underworld. The figures look like the living-dead,
apparently tormented between life and death in a
kind of Purgatory. Landau makes death shock-
ingly present, as if the viewer has been cast into
Hades’ realm and thus become a mythological
hero such as Odysseus, Heracles, Theseus, or

Figure 2. The Country, The Porter, 2002, Metal armature, papier-maché, and other mixed media, 182 × 54 × 95 cm.
Photo: Asnat Harpaz Courtesy of the artist.
Psyche, all of whom entered the Gates of Hell and returned alive.

There, the viewer is confronted with human remnants walking around like deceased mythological giants in the Underworld. In ancient Greek thought, the body was perceived as dual: one part remained in the grave, while the other entered the Underworld, where it could still undergo pain. Emily Vermeule has described Hades as a place both far away and straight beneath the earth’s crust; but as a region separate from the earth. In Hades, the dead wander aimlessly in an ill-defined countryside, like serfs on an estate: Achilles’s *eidolon* treads heavily in the meadows of Hades, while the giant Orion hunts field-beasts in this liminal zone. In the Underworld (*nekia*), Odysseus encounters tormented souls such as Titius, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, still carrying out their punishments, and encounters also the tormented *eidola* of Agamemnon and Ajax. Achilles expresses his misery in the Underworld by declaring his preference to be an ordinary anonymous workman than a glorious dead hero decaying in hell. Achilles is a typical hero, living a short life, while it is his death that defines his glory. The first mortals to enter Hades, according to Hesiod, were the men of the Bronze Race, who introduced violence, war, and murder into human history: “[...] Might thought they were, dark death got them, and they left the bright sunlight.” Vermeule also

Figure 3. The Country, The Porter, 2002, Metal armature, papier-maché, and other mixed media, 182 × 54 × 95 cm. Photo: Avi Hai Courtesy of the artist.
notes that the Gold and Silver races of older times were covered over by earth on their death, but were not in Hades; Hades itself was intended for the warrior generation. In Hades, as was believed in Antiquity, the body was transferred to its new state of belonging by means of purifying rituals and procedures such as burning and burial. Indeed, the worst thing was for a body to be left unburied. As indicated by Vermeule, death was not complete in an instant but only following a transitional passage, marked out by several clear stages in which the body was washed and cleansed, anointed with oil and wrapped from head to foot; a vigil was held over the prepared body (prosthesis), and a processional escort to the burial location (ekphora) took place, where purification rituals were carried out. In the Odyssey, the ritual of purification was demanded by Elfenor’s soul, whose body was not buried, and the soul asked for a proper burial and burning. The dead also need comfort and a mother’s care, support them by closing their eyes, straightening their limbs, or fixing the jaws. Agamemnon complains in the Underworld: “And the bitch turned away from me: even though I was on my way to Hades she did not bring herself to shut my eyes with her hands and close my mouth.” Landau’s walking-corpses ostensibly have not undergone such procedures but remain as abandoned, unburied, decaying bodies left untreated, and thus contaminated. (This will be expanded later in the chapter focussing on Landau’s work.) Their exposed tendons and sinews call to mind corporeal visual and literary images of death and dismemberment of the body from the Iliad, such as the death of Sarpedon, Prince of Lycia, by the relentless sword of Patroclus. The poet portrays a bloody battle at its climax, when the great Sarpedon falls like a mighty tree rotting in blood:

Then again Sarpedon missed with his bright spear, and over the left shoulder of Patroclus went the point of the spear and smote him not. But Patroclus in turn rushed on with the bronze, and not in vain did the shaft speed from his hand, but smote his foe where the midriff is set close about the throbbing heart. And he fell as an oak falls, or a poplar, or a tall pine, that among the mountains shipwrights fell with whetted axes to be a ship’s
Even so before his horses and chariot he lay outstretched, moaning aloud and clutching at the bloody dust.26

Patroclus then extracted the sword from Sarpedon’s body and thus from his soul:

Even as he thus spake the end of death enfolded him, his eyes alike and his nostrils; and Patroclus, setting his foot upon his breast, drew the spear from out the flesh, and the midriff followed therewith; and at the one moment he drew forth the spear-point and the soul of Sarpedon.27

Accordingly, the death of the corporeal body releases the soul. The link between body and soul is shown in the sixth century BCE red-figured crater painting by Euphronius (Figure 5).

In compliance with the poetic text, the hero’s midriff is detailed and blood erupts from his body, while his spirit is borne by Hypnos and Thanatos in the presence of Hermes Psychopompos (guider of souls). This portrayal seemingly also links between corporeal death and release of the soul. The ancient Greek view made a clear distinction between the corporeal body and the decaying flesh, and the wind-breath ψυχή that left it.28

In the terrestrial world, where corporeality is destined to disappear, the ψυχή is the reflection projected by the unchanging and immortal Being, the spark of divine. The human body, which is visible and perishable, is the simulacrum of the soul, which is the simulacrum of the divine or the Being.29 The ψυχή is the principle of life, its energy and movement, and thus the core of the unity between body and soul.30 This unity was manifested in life and art in the concept of kalokagathia (“kalos kai agathos”), which means “the good and the beautiful,” and refers to the harmony of mind and body of the nobility in Archaic and Classical Greece. The artistic manifestation that conveys this concept is that of the sixth century naked, striding, and beardless male youth marble image known as the Kouros. This type, of which some dozens have been recovered, is a non-specific image, as exemplified by the Kouros from Attica.31 Kouroi were placed on graves and represented premature death in battle. The Kouros is characterized by symmetry and linear geometry, by an approach of pattern, graphic articulation and planar surface, stylization and minimalism, and

Figure 5. Euphronius, Death of Sarpedon, Calyx-Krater, around 515 BC, National Etruscan Museum, Vila Giulia. Public domain.
schemata—generalization and abstraction. Those characteristics reflect the demand for regularity and order (kosmos), while the conceptualization of the human image features the archetype of manliness and, in Platonic terms, its idea. This aesthetic conception connects between the beauty of the spirit (agathos) and physical beauty (kalos), with the geometric qualities and symmetry reflecting the proper character, which is the ethos, based upon the Socratic principles of moderation (sophrosyne), self-control (encrateia), and excellence (arete). The image of the Kouros thus constitutes the harmony between body and soul expected from the nobility in the Archaic period. The body of the male citizens was guaranteed inviolability and corporeal sovereignty by Solon’s reforms of 594–592 BCE; thus, they could not be enslaved or tortured. Hurwit notes that although there is plenty of violence and death in Archaic art, there is almost no pain or suffering, with the face of the vanquished often resembling that of the victor, and the figures showing no emotion. The Kouros type symbolized the eternal arete and kalokagathia of the polis elite and enhanced its heroism, solidarity, and unity. The hero who had sacrificed his life in battle for the polis won imperishable glory (kleos aphthiton), which is desirable, as indicated by Sarpedon: “[...] For in any case fates of death beset us, fates past counting, which no mortal may escape or avoid—now let us go forward, whether we shall give glory to another, or another to us.” This kind of death was conceived as Beautiful Death (kalos thanatos), in which everything is beautiful (panta kala), for despite the bloodshed and abjection, death in war was conceived as noble and lofty. This concept is illustrated in a phrase in the Iliad: “A young man it beseemeth wholly, when he is slain in battle, that he lie mangled by the sharp bronze; dead though he be, all is honourable whatsoever be seen.” The warrior’s bloody death results from his eminent qualities of courage and bravery, and this shines out from his corpse. Fighting in the front ranks, risking one’s body (soma) and soul (psuchê), and dedicating one’s life in the flower of youth for the sake of the polis, was considered glorious and honourable, and a bloody death marked the hero with the sign of a man of courage (agathos aner). Vernant’s words clearly reflect this state of mind: “Over the corpse of the hero, who lies there without strength and life, the brilliance of youth shines in the exceptional beauty of the now inert body, which, in the immobility of its form, has become a pure object of vision, a spectacle for others.” The funeral rite of cremation on the pyre was aimed at purifying and preserving the panta kala, by consuming the ugly (aischron)—the entrails, tendons, and flesh, all which are considered to be rotten; for the preservation of beauty demands the disposal of the corporeal remains, which must “disappear from the eyes of the living.” Being obliged to the polis, the human body, and particularly the male anatomy in Greek culture, was in effect a political arena, as expressed by John J. Winkler: “We might even say anatomy is politics: that is, the field we call anatomy was coded for the Greeks with social messages about class and status.” This worldview is manifested in the Classical period in the definition by Phallos Politikos that describes the commitment of the male Athenian citizen to be involved in the affairs of the polis and to contribute to its defense and flourishing. The citizen in the Athenian democracy could not be enslaved due to debt, his body was declared to be a free zone, exempt from physical intimidation, and could not become an object of physical, economic, or sexual violence; The body of the Athenian citizen was considered in the Greek democracy as sturdy and autonomous against every kind of aggression and unpermitted invasion. This inviolability was characteristic also to the Bronze Men, the race preceding that of the heroes, portrayed by Hesiod in the poem Works and Days as rough, brutal, and violent, and devoting themselves to battle. Due to their relentless and tough nature, they eventually exterminated themselves and passed nameless into the House of Hades. The visual embodiment of this concept is the bronze sculpture from Riace Marina (Figure 6), in which the bronze figure can be interpreted as a metaphor for Hesiod’s Bronze Men, the metal that the heroic world itself employed for armour, weapons, and utensils, and for the warrior’s strength and invulnerability. The figure’s stance expresses pride and willingness to fight, and he is crowned with a victor’s wreath. This image is archetypal and not individualistic, since the democratic ideology demanded an equal spread of military glory throughout the entire body of citizens. The monuments erected to
honour the democracy’s success were thus symbols of the sameness and equality of all its able fighters. This pre-eminence of men over minorities such as women, children, slaves, and foreigners, with its accompanying dichotomy, constructed the body of the Greek citizen in the polis as a diverse category, and thus a political arena symbolized by the sculptured images.

SOMA: THE EARTHLY ARENA

Similar to the Greek Archaic and Classical heroic images, Landau’s figures too are non-individual and lacking identity. They are relatively huge and muscular, but with the prominent difference of being totally skinless. This condition evokes the myth of the satyr Marsyas, who dared to compete with Apollo in playing the flute, and was consequently condemned to the punishment of being flayed alive. Flaying was the punishment imposed by the god upon the satyr because of his hubris, and thus illustrates the dichotomy between the divine and the mortal. As a demiurge, Landau adopted the god’s position and flayed her human images. The skinless body represents the utmost condition of vulnerability and corporeality; and, poetically, as stated before, a body that can still undergo pain in the Underworld. The vulnerability of Landau’s images with their exposed muscles and tendons is increased by the material substance of the papier-mâché, which is made from daily newspapers containing unpleasant news; whereas the bodies of the limestone Archaic heroes are solid and those of the Classical figures are of impermeable bronze, as a metaphor of their glorious heroism. Landau’s skinless images present an arena, borderless, and permeable, as a reflection or microcosm of the earthly arena—the political situation in a land; namely, the artist’s homeland, whose borders are uncertain and permeable. Historical records, as indicated by Foucault, are etched and leave their mark upon the body arena. Landau’s body images are useless: namely, not good (agathos), as against that of the Greek hero, who is useful to the polis. Thus, they are not beautiful (kalos) but aischros—ugly. Such a body is a Soma—a body from which life has fled and left the husk or shell of a once living being, and is detached from the psuche that can no longer dwells in it. The possible pain of a human being in a physical condition such as this is perhaps unthinkable. Against the Greek peaceful and glorious Kouros symbolizing Beautiful Death (kalos thanatos), in which allegedly there is no pain, Landau’s living corpses are tortured in an ugly and cruel death and thus totally separated from their life force, i.e. their psuche. The encounter of the viewer with a soma undermines the instability of the viewer’s own existence, making present what a human tries in vain to eradicate.

Figure 6. Riace Warrior, 460–450 BC, Bronze, 1.98 m, Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. Public domain.
Derrida’s contemplation upon religion. Derrida is agitated by the Jewish tradition of circumcision, which he conceived as traumatic, brutal, ruthless, and primordial, a “pagan crime,” and as a symbol of the perpetual bleeding and wound of the human spirit. This intentional injury, backed by religious codes, symbolized by Derrida in poetic images of corporeal inflamed sores and crusts, led him to a deep break with religion and faith. Derrida asserts that prayer is directed to nobody, since by its nature it is actually an admission of the non-existence of God. Thus, atheism is immanent in the prayer; the possibility that god does not exist:

“[...] I would go so far to say there should be a moment of atheism in the prayer. The possibility that the god doesn’t answer, doesn’t exist [...] You have to accept the hypothesis that you may pray for no one, for nothing.”

John Caputo expresses Derrida’s loss of faith: “Derrida writes by looking up to heaven [...] But with this difference, Derrida’s look is cast not toward heaven but toward the future [...] unable to see a thing [...] lacking divine foresight.”

Landau’s exposed wounded corpses too appear to have resulted from a break with faith, typical of the overall atmosphere of contemporary art. The wounded and deformed body, its corporeality and abjection, are among the main concerns of contemporary art.

The question arises as to where does the specificity of Landau’s tortured body lie among other contemporary deformed body images? Two analogous works in the installation also focus on parts such as bones, tendons, muscles, and blood: “Venetians” by Pawel Althamer and “In-Between” by Yiqing Yin, both exhibited at the 2013th Venice biennale.

Althamer’s installation was composed of numerous skeletal body images, devoid of an outer covering. Somewhat similar to the interpretation of Landau’s installation, these ghostlike human semblances are engaged with various occupations in a way that evokes the description of Hades in the Odyssey mentioned earlier, where the dead wander aimlessly in an ill-defined countryside like serfs on an estate. Thus, the viewer becomes a mythological hero who enters the arena of thanatos. Althamer’s work has been defined as “mythologization,” and Althamer himself has expressed his affinity to the Classics, noting the significance of the use of Greek sculptural tradition, the connection between body and soul, and the way that spirituality is expressed through the body, noting
that: “Body can be a key to the spiritual world [...] You can’t fly if you are not ready to fly, because the flight is a spiritual experience, not a physical one.” Indeed, Althamer’s figures are much “cleaner” than Landau’s corpulent figures, and their expressions are emotional and human, as if they bear all the burdens of human suffering, as opposed to Landau’s expressionless corpses. The installation “In-Between” by the artist Yiqing Yin displays an ethereal figure embroidered onto a liquid organza fabric lightly woven, as a sort of epiphany or the birth of a mythological goddess. The embroidered figure is drawn in delicate silken red strands, and her body dissolves into long fringes trailing on the floor. Such an appearance generates an ostensibly heavenly character. However, the red strands might also suggest a resemblance to blood, shifting the interpretation to that of abjection and corporeality. The dissolution of the figure into the streams of red strands offers a hallucinatory image, as illusory and deceptive as phantasmagoria. This accords with Fredric Jameson’s distinction of postmodernism as a schizophrenic experience; while also with Jean Pierre Vernant’s discussion on the character of the phasma, or the oneiric simulacrum of the divine in Antiquity. This intensifies the contrasting approach taken by Landau in her corpse images, or soma, an approach that is atheistic, as shown previously.

The particular origins of atheism, scepticism, and loss of faith reflected by Landau’s soma are dual: ghosts from the past alongside the present condition; or in other words—the memory of the Holocaust that eliminated belief in God, together with a strong criticism against the occupation policy in Israel, i.e. “The Country,” as implied by the title of the installation. “The Country” installation was created over the course of 22 months: the time that had elapsed since Thursday, 28 September 2000, the day the El-Aqsa Intifada broke out. The papier-mâché that composes the installation was created from the pages of a daily newspaper called The Country (Haaretz), containing bloody events, headlines, images, and texts.

Figure 7. The Country, Fruit, 2002, papier-mâché, newspaper, and other mixed media, 14 cm. Photo: Asnat Harpaz Courtesy of the artist.
of war discernible in the scattered papier-mâché fruits, such as: “2 boys killed . . .,” “. . . shot to death . . .” (Figures 7–11).

A diary written in Hebrew by the image of a Writer describes the controversial military activity (Figures 12 and 13). This figure (Figure 4) recalls an ancient Egyptian writer, calculating the End of Days. Landau’s dual concern regarding the serious issues of border conflicts and Palestinian and Israeli–Arab rights in her country, alongside the Jewish historical suffering, is recurrent in all her work. Video works such as “Knafe” (2014), “Hands” (2013), “Masik” (2102), “A Tree Standing” (2012), “Window” (2012), “Azkelon” (2011), “Arab Snow” (2001), and others, focus on the Arab–Palestinian conflicts, while the issue of Jewish suffering and the Holocaust is dealt with and interpreted in installations such as “The Endless Solution” (2005), and “One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings” represented at the Venice Biennale 2011, together with the video “Salted Lake.”73 The motif of shoes, very dominant in The Venice Biennale installation, is a symbol of refugeehood, wanderings, and
displacement, and thus functions as a common denominator and connects both issues—the historical Jewish displacement with the current Palestinian displacement. “The Country” installation seemingly unites both issues, since the extremely wounded bodies are connected literally to the Holocaust, while the papier-mâché material contains the political texts mentioned above, referring to the war-related events resulting from the occupation policy and the violation of human rights in the occupied territories.

This critical position introduced by Landau undermines the basic concept underlying the establishment of the State of Israel, in a familiar phrase attributed to the dying national hero Josef Trumpeldor—“It is good to die for our country,” which is in effect exactly the Greek concept of a noble and lofty death in war (kalos thanatos) and the magic of glory (kleos aphthiton) that clung to it. This similarity brings us back to the beginning of this study: the resemblance between the ancient Platonic text that served as a point of departure for the discussion, but which now seems misleading. The significance of the Timaeus dialogue in light of the analysis conducted and the arguments presented here is discussed as follows.

The Timaeus dialogue engages with exploration of the nature of existence. Critias, one of the participants, asserts at the beginning of the dialogue that Timaeus will be the first speaker, opening his speech by portraying the birth of the universe, and ending it by describing the nature of the human being. A substantial premise is stated by Timaeus: “That which is created must of necessity be created by a cause.” Timaeus also assumes that the Creator who installed the universe was good and desired that all things should be good and nothing bad. He also desired that all things should be as like him as they could be. Considering that order is better than disorder, the Creator brought order out of disorder. The logic of this order leads to a proposition according to which intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of a soul. For this reason, the Creator put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, to create the fairest and best creation. Therefore, the universe is endowed with soul and intelligence. The fundamentals of this universe are the four physical elements: fire, earth, air, and water, connected by a very sophisticated proportional geometrical structure, to create a perfect universe devoid of old age and sickness. At the centre of this world,
the Creator put the soul, which is diffused throughout the body, making it also its exterior environment. The soul is prior to and older than the body, and designed to be its ruler and mistress. Only after the Creator had moulded the soul according to his will did he form within it the corporeal universe, bringing the two together and uniting them centre to centre. Thus, “The soul, interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven, of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself, began a divine beginning of never-ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time.” As for death, Timaeus states, “if caused by disease or produced by wounds it is painful and violent, but that sort of death which comes with old age and fulfils the debt of nature is the easiest of deaths, and is accompanied with pleasure rather than with pain.” Landau’s skinned figures are certainly not in the process of natural death, but immersed in pain and constant suffering and so cannot experience a “pleasurable” death. These walking corpses embody the extremely infected and diseased substance caused, as Timaeus explains, by the disorder obtaining between the four fundamental elements of which the body is composed: earth, fire, water, and air. In accordance with Timaeus, their flesh seems so infected that it becomes blackened and bitter; and sometimes this bitterness is soaked with blood, and thus becomes extremely red. Timaeus further notes that this redder colour when mixed with black, and sometimes with the yellow of inflammation, becomes bile. A soul cannot dwell in such a tainted body and can never find peace. Landau’s abandoned, unpurified, and unburied decaying corpses resemble refugees expelled even from Hades. Hence, these walking-rotting corpses constitute an essence of suffering, eternal refugeehood, and the arena of the unglorious, unredeemed, postmodern thanatos.

CONCLUSIONS

The analogy between the Platonic dialogue Timaeus and the body structure of Sigalit Landau’s images embodied in particular in “The Country” installation was posited here to function as a starting point for a comprehensive comparative study employing the methodology of classical reception studies presenting Classical concepts and visual comparisons. This comparison can be summarized as follows:

Landau’s wandering walking corpses initially recall the souls of the mythological dead wandering aimlessly in Hades like serfs on an estate, under a condition of eternal suffering. However, whereas in ancient times death was ritually purified, Landau’s bodies seem to have been abandoned without purification and, thus, remain contaminated. This gap between the two approaches is reinforced by the ancient concepts of Beautiful Death (kalos thanatos) and Eternal Fame (kleos aphthiton), common to similar concepts characterizing the premise of Landau’s homeland that considers death in battle as heroic, a premise that seems to be undermined by the artist. Just as the Greek male body in the Archaic and Classical periods was interpreted as a political arena, symbolizing the qualities designed to protect the city state, Landau’s bodies are political
Figure 12. The Country, the diary of the Recorder of Days. Photo: Avi Hai Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13. The Country, the diary of The Recorder of Days. Photo: Asnat Harpaz Courtesy of the artist.
too, but as a subversive expression: while the stone or bronze body of the Greek hero is a metaphor of his invulnerability and an integral part of the polis, Landau’s papier-mâché images are extremely vulnerable; and as flayed and skinless as the mythological Marsyas. These latter bodies are neither good (kalos) nor beautiful (agathos), and hence a soma detached from the psuché. The encounter of the spectator with this soma makes abjection present in the spectator’s life. While in ancient times a series of rites was performed to purify the dead, Landau’s living corpses are far from being purified; and thus far from religion. In that sense, her “corpses” constitute a political arena, that of atheism and loss of faith, as embodied by Jacques Derrida. Landau’s loss of faith and sceptical spirit is inspired by two sources: the collective trauma of the Holocaust and the criticism of the occupation policy in her country. Those two sources are embodied in “The Country” installation by the extreme suffering of the images, and the records of embodied in ''The Country'' installation by the Holocaust and the criticism of the occupation policy in her country. Those two sources are embodied in “The Country” installation by the extreme suffering of the images, and the records of bloody existence in the inscriptions on the papier-mâché. The Holocaust and political criticism are two main issues in many other works by Landau. The refugee state is common in both subjects and embodied in the aimlessly wandering images of the installation, seemingly hopelessly displaced, expelled even from Hades. These images mostly match the latter corporeal description in the Timaeus dialogue, which describes the inflamed body that is defined as bile. Thus, Landau’s living corpses embody the essence of the defiled, unglorious, postmodern death.

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Notes

1. Ilan Wizgan, The Freezing and Melting Point, in Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings, 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Israeli Pavilion, an exhibition catalogue, curators Jean de Loisy, Ilan Wizgan (Paris: K. Mennour, 2011), 173–4.
2. Sigalit Landau: One Man’s Floor is Another Man’s Feelings, 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Israeli Pavilion, an exhibition catalogue, curators Jean de Loisy, Ilan Wizgan (Paris: K. Mennour, 2011), 173–4.
3. Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, eds., A Companion to Classical Receptions (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 1. See also: Lorna Hardwick, Reception Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, Classics and the Uses of Reception (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).
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5. Ibid., 142.
6. Ibid., 143–4.
7. Ibid., 144–50.
8. Fredric Jameson, The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998 (London: Verso, 2009), 4.
9. Exhibited at Alon Segev Gallery, Tel-Aviv, 2002.
10. Such papier-mâché images characterize other installations, such as “The Dining Hall”, exhibited in KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2007. This study discusses Landau’s papier-mâché figures as archetypal, and hence will focus on The Country installation as a case study.
11. The supportive rod of “The Porter” figure even evokes the marble support of the Roman copy sculptures. See: Gisela M.A. Richter, The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950).
12. Plato. “The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the letters,” in Timaeus, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Crains (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 74 d–5 d.
13. Ibid., 76 a.
14. On the allusion to death in “The Country’ installation see: Mikhail Popowsky, Gideon Ofrat, Phillip Leider, Sarit Shapira, The Country (Jerusalem: Spartizan, 2003).
15. Emily Vermeule, Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 7–8.
16. Ibid., 33, 36; Homer, The Odyssey, trans. Martin Hammond (London: Duckworth, 2000), 11. 538–9, 572–3.
17. Homer, The Odyssey, 11. 385–565, 576–600. The Arcaic eidolon takes three forms: a dream image (onar), an apparition sent by a god (phasma), and a phantom of a deceased (psuchè). The eidolon manifests both a real presence and an irremediable absence at the same time. See: Jean-Pierre Vernant, Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays, eds. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Froma I. Zeitlin, trans. Andrew Szegedy-Masaszak and Deborah Lyons (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 164–85, 186.
18. Homer, The Iliad, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924–1925), 11, 488–91.
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19. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 81–5; Jasper Griffin, Homer on Life and Death (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 94; and Homer, Iliad, 21, 543–44.
20. Hesiod, Works and Days, trans. M.L. West (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 153.
21. Vermeule, Aspects of Death, 33–4.
22. Vermeule, Aspects of Death, 2, 12–13.
23. Homer, Odyssey, 11.51–83. Also Antigone demanded a proper burial for her brother Polynices; and Sophocles: Antigone, ed. Mark Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
24. Vermeule, Aspects of Death, 14.
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26. Homer, Iliad, 16, 502–05.
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29. Vermeule, Aspects of Death, 23; and Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 191–2. Plato, Phaidon, 78–84.
30. Plato, Phaedrus, trans. Harvey Yunis (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 245–6.
31. Kouros from Attica, ca. 590–580 BC, Naxian marble, 193.04 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/32.1.1 (accessed October 2006).
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34. Stewart, Art, Desire and the Body, 67.
35. Hurwit, The Art and Culture of Early Greece, 25–6.
36. Hurwit, The Art and Culture of Early Greece, 198–200; and Stewart, Greek Sculpture, 109–10.
37. Homer, Iliad, 12.327–328.
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39. Honer, Iliad, 22, 71–73.
40. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 84–5.
41. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 86.
42. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 88.
43. John Winkler, “Phallos Politikos: Representing the Body Politic in Athens,” Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 2.1 (1990): 35.
44. Ibid., 35.
45. Winkler, “Phallos Politikos,” 35.
46. Hesiod, Works and Days, 140–55.
47. Stewart, Art, Desire and the Body, 52.
48. Winkler, “Phallos Politikos,” 36.
49. Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. D.E. Hill (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Philips, 1985–2000), 6, 382–400.
50. Vermeule, Aspects of Death, 7–8.
51. Paul Rabinow, ed., The Foucault Reader (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 76–100.
52. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 62.
53. See also Ruth Ronen’s comments: “The rejected body becomes a machine decomposed into its spare parts, losing its identity as a living body”, in: Ruth Ronen, “The Body Decomposed, Moving as One,” in Sigalit Landau, ed. Gabriele Horn and Ruth Ronen (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 236.
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67. The installation Venetians by Pawel Althamer was exhibited in the Arsenale, http://www.designboom.
com/art/pawel-althamer-plastifies-venetians-for-the-55th-venice-biennale/; and The installation In-Between by Yiqing Yin was exhibited in the Venice pavilion official location of the Venice Biennale curated by Ewald Stastny, http://www.yiqingyin.com/yiqing-yin-exhibits-at-venice-biennale/ (accessed 2015).

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71. Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 186–7.

72. Popowsky, Ofrat, Leider and Shapira, The Country, 5.

73. All works mentioned can be viewed in Sigalit Landau’s site: http://www.sigalitlandau.com/ The video works Azkelon and “Salted Lake” are part of the Venice biennale installation (2011).

74. Plato, Timaeus, 26 b.

75. Plato, Timaeus, 28 c.

76. Plato, Timaeus, 30 b.

77. Plato, Timaeus, 30 b.

78. Plato, Timaeus, 31 c–32 b, c, 33 b.

79. Plato, Timaeus, 34 b, c.

80. Plato, Timaeus, 36 e.

81. Plato, Timaeus, 37 a.

82. Plato, Timaeus, 38 b.

83. Plato, Timaeus, 38 a, b.

84. Plato, Timaeus, 38 a, b, c, d, e.