

# HYPERALLERGIC

## A Studio Visit With Keren Benbenisty

From the migration of fish to the cultivation and branding of new citrus varieties, Benbenisty's practice tracks seemingly natural phenomena while questioning their political and ecological ramifications.

Chelsea Haines, July 31, 2022

From the migration of fish through the Suez Canal to the cultivation and branding of new citrus varieties, Keren Benbenisty's artwork tracks seemingly natural phenomena while questioning their political and ecological ramifications. For this interview, Keren and I discussed her working process through several recent multimedia projects focused on the bluranj — a surreal blue orange of the artist's creation — and its profound implications for reorienting the nationalized history of orange cultivation in Israel, where the artist was born and raised. Our conversation focused on the role humans play in defining and claiming nature for our own ends and the planned and unforeseen dangers of (re)shaping nature itself.

**Chelsea Haines:** You have been working on projects that explore the effects of migration and settlement through agriculture, focusing on orange tree cultivation in Israel-Palestine. The color blue has become a central conceptual and visual element in these projects — where does the blue come from?

**Keren Benbenisty:** You're right that blue has been an important element of my recent projects — and also of previous ones. In the context of each work, however, the color has a unique significance. My recent series of projects, as you mentioned, uses orange tree cultivation in Israel to pose questions about identity and territorial control and here the blue plays a number of different roles.

This project, like most of my work, is rooted in a very particular history; in this case, the history of the Jaffa orange developed by Palestinian farmers in the mid-19th century that takes its name from the city of Jaffa, where it was first produced for export from Palestine to the West. Later Jewish settlers turned Jaffa oranges into one of the country's primary exports. After the foundation of the Jewish state in 1948, Israel became a major orange exporter. The Jaffa orange, which I see as an emblem of lost Arab-Palestinian land, became one of the quintessential symbols of the nascent state of Israel.

There's a personal dimension to my interest in the Jaffa orange. My grandmother, who immigrated to Israel from Morocco, worked as an orange packer for 30 years. Along with a lot of other women, she spent half of the year wrapping individual oranges in pieces of waxy paper. The paper was traditionally peach-colored and covered in blue stamps that indicated the specific brand of the orange grower, the name of the variety, and the orchard's name and location. The paper often also had a blue brand logo. It's really that paper and what it represents that brought blue into this project. I started working with vintage wrapping papers I "inherited" in 2018, transforming them in different ways.

I eventually arrived at the idea of transforming an orange itself by creating a blue varietal, a bluranj. In 2020-2021, following the work of three researchers at the Volcani institute for Agriculture in Israel, I questioned the possibility of creating a blue orange through genetic manipulation. The choice to turn the orange blue came from imagining a process in which the blue ink from the wrapping papers seeped through the paper and permeated the skin of the fruit. Transforming the orange into the bluranj is a way of questioning the ownership of "Israeli" oranges and, by extension, the ownership of the soil where they are grown.



Keren Benbenisty, "Verlan (Jaffa)" (2021), collage, original Jaffa oranges wrapping paper, archival mounting tape, 35 x 35 cm (photo by Jeanette May, courtesy Ulterior Gallery, New York)



Keren Benbenisty, *Land of Blue Oranges*, a series of 60 drawings, blue ink on original Jaffa Oranges wrapping paper, installation view from Fajja, Petach Tikva Museum, Israel (photo by Elad Sarig)

**CH:** It also highlights the labor often made invisible when the orange is presented as a product. The blue seeping into the orange reminds us that despite its untouched or “natural” appearance, the orange passed many hands.

**KB:** At a very basic level, it’s also worth noting that blue is the opposite of orange on the color wheel. Replacing one color with the other is thus a perfect reversal.

The blue orange is a surreal idea that connects typography and topography. The blue ink from the paper wrapper penetrates and takes over the fruit, causing a mutation. The intention here was to echo the process by which maps, treaties, and colonialist narratives physically imprint themselves in the form of shifting demographics and borders.

Although the idea of the paper wrapper infecting the orange is surreal, there’s a possible parallel in real life. The original paper wrappers were coated in a waxy substance, which I’ve heard, but haven’t been able to confirm, was carcinogenic insect repellent. If that’s true, the ideas of marking and contamination come together.

**CH:** You have coined the word *bluranj*, a portmanteau of blue and orange, which also refers to *naranj*, the Sanskrit word for orange. Why did you create this new word and why was it important for you to retain a trace of the Sanskrit root?

**KB:** Names and naming are central to a lot of my work, which is always research-based. I’m very interested in etymology (the study of the origin of words and the way that their meanings change over time) and toponymy (the study of geographic and proper place names).

A name is always more than a name. Names are a relic and a reflection of the power structure in place when it was decided what something would be called. This is certainly true in the case of Israeli orange varieties, as I learned by spending time at the Volcani Institute. Most of the new orange varieties they developed were named after relatives of the institute’s researchers; one named the orange varieties he developed after his girlfriends. The Volcani Institute is an old Zionist institution and the names they choose are part of an effort to lay claim to contested land by imposing Israeli names on what is grown. It reminds me of Israel’s Government Naming Committee, which since 1948 designates names for communities and other points on the map of Israel, including replacing Arabic names with Hebrew ones.

**CH:** Zionist renaming of places is also central to your project *Fajja*, which is named after the Palestinian village that was depopulated and reterritorialized as part of the Israeli city Petach Tikva.

**KB:** I had all of this history in mind when I created the portmanteau *bluranj*. I had already been playing with the names of old Jaffa orange brands in a series of collages, for which I cut up old wrapping papers and changed the brand names by switching around the syllables, following the rules of a type of French argot (*verlan* –which was also the name of the series).

The name *bluranj* embodies the concept of the variety: a hybrid formed by mutation but whose origins are still clear, recognized, and — in some way — honored. On a linguistic level, that was the point of introducing a form of *naranj*, the Sanskrit ancestor of “orange” and its equivalents, into the varietal’s name: to, in some way, tie the new fruit to its origins while also showing how those origins have been lost or distorted over time.

At base, this is about questioning the Jaffa brand: an Israeli appropriation of a Palestinian-developed orange named for a city with a strong Arab-Palestinian identity (that was itself later absorbed by Tel Aviv). This is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The oranges carry within them this entire story, but this is rarely recognized.



Keren Benbenisty, “Bluranj” (2021), collage, inkjet print, blue tape and glass, 11 x 8 1/2 inches, installation view from Ulterior Gallery, New York (photo by Audrey Kenison, courtesy Ulterior Gallery)



From top to bottom: Keren Benbenisty, "Verlan (Perfect)," "Verlan (Apex)," "Verlan (Titan)" (all from 2019) 12 x 12 inches each (courtesy Ulterior Gallery, New York)



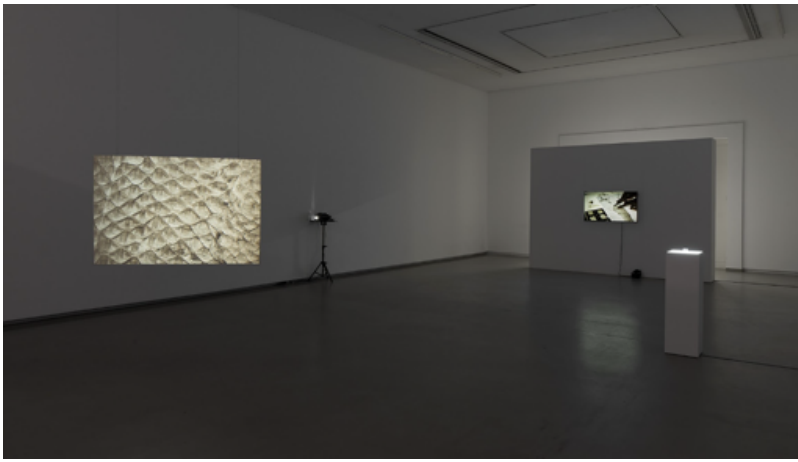
Still from Keren Benbenisty, "Tristeza" (2020/2021), HD video, 12 minutes (courtesy Ulterior Gallery New York)

**CH:** You already mentioned your projects deal with questions of contamination as well as mutation. In *Tristeza*, you explore the plant-based virus that has killed millions of citrus trees since its emergence about a hundred years ago. Migration's detrimental side effects is an issue you have considered in earlier projects, such as your 2016-17 video *Light Skin*, which examines scientific efforts to catalog pervasive ocean species migration from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal. To me, it seems the nebulous line between migration and invasiveness is something you have been thinking through — can you comment on this?

**KB:** I was born in Israel, a country early Zionists misrepresented to the world as "a land without people for a people without land." This mischaracterization justified Jewish migration, but disregarded the existing population of Palestine. That side naturally saw the influx as an invasion. Migration and invasiveness are two sides of the same coin, distinguished primarily by whether you perceive the newcomers or the settled population to be the primary victims. That duality and the conflict it creates are embedded in my conscience and come out in my work, even when it's not my intention.

That's in the background; it's not the starting point for my projects. The actual starting point is a place, a myth, or a natural phenomenon. I research, looking for a story and for a microcosm of what interests me: an element that represents the whole. Once I have the material — which is often organic, like fish skin, an orange, a stone — I work to devise a poetic method of transforming it, inducing a metamorphosis. I try to let the nature of the material itself guide me in my decisions. As I advance through these steps, often unexpected parallels begin to appear. That was the case in the two projects that you mentioned.

In the body of work *Jaydia*, which includes the film *Light, Skin*, there was a direct conversation about migration and invasiveness. I started this project when the Mediterranean migrant crisis — which involved the deaths of Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees attempting to cross the sea to Europe — dominated the news. I had an interest in the Suez Canal as a link between East and West. As I read about the canal, I was struck by the ways that the migration of fish species echoed what was happening in human terms. In both cases, the basic motivation and context are the same. It's the instinct to survive that propels both the fish and the people, and whether this is migration or invasion is a question of perspective. In this project, my primary material was fish skin, which I transformed into a photographic medium: 35mm celluloid film cut into single slides.



Keren Benbenisty, *Jaydia* (2017), installation, HD Video, fish skin mounted on 35mm slides (80), Kodak slide projector, ink on fish scale under magnifying loop, Gyotaku prints, installation view from the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery and Michel Kikoine Foundation, Tel Aviv University (photo by Elad Sarig)

**CH:** The formation of a virus is a natural phenomenon, but as we've seen with COVID-19, the ability of the virus to spread and mutate depends on human behavior. Your work makes visible the intended and unintended consequences of human intervention in nature. This begs the question: will you physically create a blue orange varietal — a real bluranj?

**KB:** I want to create a real bluranj, and I have approached scientists about genetically engineering the new variety. If it succeeds on a genetic level, the next step will be to have it certified by the Volcani Institute, which would imply recognition by the state of Israel: a recognition of an absence by the same state that created it. My ultimate intention is to plant bluranj trees, creating monuments that mark the disappearance of historical orchards and embody the Brazilian farmers' sense of loss. The trees would give form, color, and presence to a history that has been erased and forgotten.

The film *Tristeza*, which belongs to the series of projects that use oranges as the primary material, draws its name from the Portuguese/Spanish word for sadness. Brazilian farmers gave this name to the virus in the 1930s as it captured the sense of despair and loss that they felt on seeing their sickened orchards. In the case of this project, it's the virus that brings about the metamorphosis, in the form of the decay that I show in the film. Purely through happenstance, I was learning about deadly viruses affecting citrus trees just as COVID-19 was emerging as a major threat to human health, and that coincidence brought home to the extent to which the spread and migration of viruses — which for the virus itself is just a means of survival — is a (potentially lethal) invasion for those infected.



Keren Benbenisty, "Bluranjmeter" (2020), wood, paper, ink, and pencil, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches (photo by Audrey Kenison, courtesy Ulterior Gallery New York)

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