

# ULTERIOR

**Keren Benbenisty**

*Tristeza*

June 12—Jul 17, 2021



Keren Benbenisty, *Bluranj* (detail), 2021  
Paper collage and blue tape on glass, 12 x 10 inches / 30.5 x 25.4 cm

Ulterior Gallery is pleased to present *Tristeza*, a solo exhibition by Keren Benbenisty featuring a group of works that the artist produced during the pandemic. The exhibition will open on Saturday, June 12 with a reception for the artist from 4 to 8 pm. The number of visitors at the gallery will be limited during the reception, adhering to Covid-19 safety guidelines.

Of the exhibition, Benbenisty writes:

I spent the transformative year of 2020 in Israel. There, I developed a body of work, *Tristeza*, named after the Tristeza Virus—a plant-based disease which has caused millions of citrus trees worldwide to die over the past 100 years. The name *Tristeza*, which means sadness in Spanish and Portuguese, was coined in the 1930s by a Brazilian farmer who helplessly watched the trees in his orchard gradually decline. *Tristeza* is an ongoing project of my most recent research, including a film, outlining a conceptual inquiry that encapsulates my desire to create a blue orange tree, *Bluranj*, as a way to stimulate and represent a deeper conversation on this fruit's iconic and charged representation within Palestinian/ Israeli culture and society.

In 2017, I began my research on the popular Israeli Jaffa orange brand where I explored the duality of the orange symbol, inherent within Israel-Palestine culture and identity. In the early 19th century, the orange industry in this region was lucrative. Yet, within this economic trading, the orange quickly became affiliated and recognized as the ultimate Zionist symbol that signified working the land, as well as technological progress. As a result, Jaffa oranges became one of the quintessential symbols of the State of Israel, whilst also the emblem of the lost Arab-Palestinian land, a signification that has been erased entirely from the Israeli collective narrative.

I expanded my research on transgenic plant engineering by working with scientists at the Volcani Agriculture Institute in the department for Enhanced Citrus Species. My goal was to change the DNA of the orange and reverse the color of the fruit into blue, promoting the creation of a new species, a hybrid, a mutation of Blue and Orange. Altering one of the most distinct symbols of this land and inventing a new strain, conceptually suggests a poetic read on the continuous conflict of identity politics in both nations.

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The concept of this metamorphosis of the oranges can also be seen as a metaphor for what we experienced during the pandemic. Around the time in which the Tristeza virus first appeared, in 1929, the surrealist poet Paul Éluard published his poem *The Earth Is Blue as An Orange*. This coincidence greatly resonated with me while I embarked on this project. I found an organic link between the metaphor of the blue orange to last year's pandemic. The accelerated shift occurring on a planetary level, where the familiar transformed and became alienated, seemed to find a correspondence with the shift of color of the orange.

*Bluranj* is a name I coined for the new species. It is a portmanteau of blue and orange, with the addition of the letter "J" to mark the Sanskrit origin of the "orange" name—'naranj'. It takes five years to create a new citrus species, which is said to be the time it takes people to acclimatize to a new environment. It might be also the time necessary for the surreal bluranj trees to become real. This project is ongoing, until I set the roots of Bluranj trees, to offer a new view in the landscape where they will be planted.

—Keren Benbenisty

Keren Benbenisty was born in Israel in 1977 and moved to Paris in 1998, and currently lives and works in New York, NY. In 2004 she graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris and attended California Institute of the Arts. Benbenisty was an artist-in-residence at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2009 and has been the recipient of numerous international grants and residences, including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant in 2019. Recent exhibitions include: *Point of Departure*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY (2019); *Open the Land to the People*, Soloway, Brooklyn, NY (2019); *Fajja*, Petach Tikva Museum of Art, Petach Tikva, Israel (2018); *Apparatus for a Utopian Image 2.0*, Centre for Contemporary Arts Prague, Czech Republic (2018); *Unexpected Encounter*, Arts Maebashi, Gunma, Japan (2018); and *Under Erasure*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel (2014). This year, Keren Benbenisty's 4-channel video and sound installation *Half-Life*, 2017, has been acquired by Arts Maebashi in Japan.

## **About the Gallery:**

Ulterior Gallery is an emerging art gallery on the Lower East Side of New York City. Established by Takako Tanabe, a Japanese gallerist originally from Tokyo, Ulterior is committed to the exhibition of works by an intergenerational array of artists of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Ulterior Gallery is located at 172 Attorney St. between Houston and Stanton on the Lower East Side. Gallery Hours are Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 6 pm, and by appointment. For further inquiries, please contact Takako Tanabe: [takako@ulteriorgallery.com](mailto:takako@ulteriorgallery.com).