

# BRAHMS

Exhibition “Artspace TLV”

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## **Michal Bar-Or, Artist & Curator, on Arik Ramot BRAHMS Project**

In his current project, Ramot evokes the memory through his use of words and photographs, while producing a rich body of work that manages to break through the private towards a wider observation regarding identity, memory and history.

The journey, which ends with this autobiographic project, began when Arik Ramot faced the clearing of his parents' home, a delicate task that led to a progression of remembrance and to a conscious sorting of the past. Along this deconstruction process, Ramot chose to simultaneously fulfill two positions: that of an active actor and that of a passive observer. As the person performing the dismantling, Ramot was highly devoted to his cause, to a constant movement and to harsh decision making regarding the fate of the objects. As an observer, he chose to linger, to arouse questions and even to cease, until stagnation. This duality, which characterized the deconstruction process, accompanies the entire project.

From this duality, Ramot draws a personal biography composed of written and photographed memory fragments. His story is not one of consecutive linearity, but is rather composed of a collection of traces, bits and pieces, moving between major and minor stories, between past and present and between the private story – which is experienced on the flesh, and the family one – which is inherited as a mythology. This collection is accompanied by an echo of national, social, cultural and gender histories. However, this micro history does not leave concrete categories intact, but rather the opposite. It seems that through the penetration of national history to the private one, Ramot offers an historic view which is not based on division, but rather on integration. Thus, the borders of cultural encounters dissolve, forming a complex mix identity and culture – at the same time European and Israeli, east and west diasporas, masculine and feminine, childlike and mature.

Ramot's manner of approaching the words and objects is elusive. On the surface, his project seems as an almost functional inventory, an enumeration of objects and historic or private stories or of an evacuation process, in a manner that is reminiscent of forensic photography. However, after repeated observations, the raw cuts are discovered, and the memories-laden backgrounds and inserted body parts disturb the peacefulness of the still life, while blowing away old dust. The sorted objects, or those that are absent, are driving the stories. It seems that through their own frail existence they are testifying of the past, or of the lives that once existed beside them. As if directing the lens towards them will enable the gaze to open up towards the time that has passed, while also opening the possibility to re-remember, to tell a forgotten story. However, it seems that the objects' story will forever remain locked, unapproachable, and in its place Ramot choose to place another story, a remote cousin of these objects. The new written story, , simultaneously exposes and obscures the objects. It grants them a voice, but a different one; one that leaves a gap between it and its accompanying photograph.

“A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room”, writes Susan Sontag, describing the way photography functions as that which carries within it the unreachable, that which is always already gone. Ramot explores the possibility of photography to perpetuate a fragment of life through looking at what is left behind it, as the lives themselves have already ceased. By placing the orphaned object and its photograph in a similar position – as representatives of lives long gone – Ramot wishes to grant the objects a voice. In this sense, his work can be placed on the trajectory between August Sander's famous photograph, which depicts his son's death mask, and Sophie Calle's work 'Blind', in which the beautiful is photographed according to the descriptions of blind people.

Susan Sontag, In Plato's Cave, in *On Photography*, 1977

**(The Camera)** I bought my first camera at the age of 13. During the summer vacation, my father, an accountant, kept me busy in his office, using a paper roll and a mechanical calculator to add figures. I liked going to his office, because at lunch time he would take me out to a restaurant. But soon the job grew old on me, and I also made many mistakes. So, he got me working at one of his clients, who owned a copy machine distribution company. My job was to place the stencil on the machine without tearing or wrinkling it, applying the right amount of ink and turning the handle to photocopy the document. My hand hurt, but I liked this job. At the end of the vacation, upon receiving my first paycheck, I ran to buy my first camera, an Yashica brand.

100x150 cm

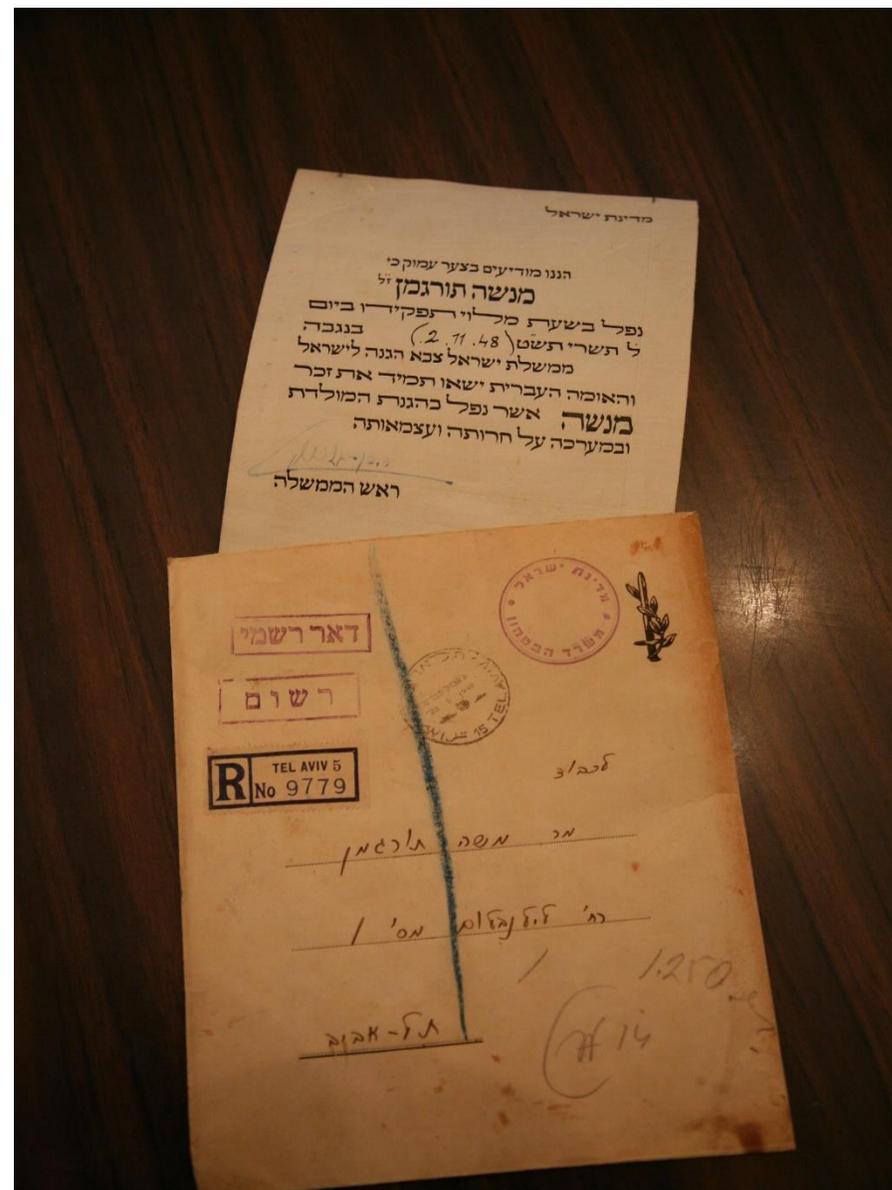
Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Pendant)** About two months after my father passed away, I received a phone call from my mother asking me “do you know who Esther is? I found a golden pendent in dad’s closet saying ‘Esther’”. Embarrassed, I didn’t know what to say. I suggested she should call Tamar, dad’s sister. Tamar told her that their brother, Menashe, who was killed in the last days of the War of Independence, had a girlfriend named Esther. Menashe was supposed to come back for a visit especially for Esther’s 18th birthday, and asked my father to buy a pendant so that he could give it to her upon his return. Just before his planned visit, Menashe was killed and no one of our family heard of Esther ever again. As Tamar recalls, Esther’s brother was a well-known artist so she called his house and asked his spouse about Esther. The lady on the other side of the line confirmed that her Sister in law is called Esther but added that she thinks that it would not be appropriate to ask her if she indeed was Menashe’s girlfriend at the time, since she was later married, and her husband was also killed in the Yom Kippur War. To her surprise, two hours later my aunt Tamar received a phone call, and a trembling women’s voice said “I’m Esther”. Two weeks later, Esther visited my mother and received the pendant, fifty years too late.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



Notification of Menashe’s death in 1948 war of independence signed by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion

**(The Gallery)** For many years, my grandfather Jacob owned a gallery in Brussels, called Artis. As a child, I loved going to the gallery with him. Towards noon, like many other Belgians, we would pass on our way home by the butcher to get steaks, by the grocery to get lettuce and french-fries and by the bakery shop – for a crème cake. After lunch, grandmother would reach for her keys and take out one long chocolate tablet from the locked cupboard in the living room. It was forbidden to ask for more. When my grandparents moved to Israel towards the end of their lives, they brought with them dozens of art works from the gallery. These were hung in two rows, covering all the walls of my parents' apartment to the day of clearing.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Rockets)** Behind the stairs in the backyard, where I also engraved my name in fresh concrete, we would build our rockets base. The materials were pen refills and “gun powder” made of matches and celluloids, which we would receive from ‘the movie studios next door, in exchange for playing as kids in various productions. Sometimes, the rocket would fly very far, followed by loud yelling of the neighbors, which made us run for our lives. But most times, the rocket wouldn’t move an inch.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(FAYID)** It's been months since I visited home and it was my turn to get a break. I waited, covered by a long beard and wearing a bullet-proof vest and helmet, next to dozens of other soldiers, at the sides of the track in Fayid airport in Egypt. When the Hercules airplane landed and its rear door opened, dozens of soldiers came out running. Suddenly a roar: "Girl!". The thousands soldiers who stayed over the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur war haven't seen a woman in months, and suddenly a blonde officer went off the plane. When I managed to open my weary eyes, I rubbed them again and again, refusing to believe – indeed it was she, Orly, my longtime friend and future wife. As if in a Humphrey Bogart's movie, we run one towards another until we hugged, while everybody around us were cheering. Two weeks later, Life magazine published a huge photograph of us, as part of a visual piece on the war's special moments.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(1941)** On a dark night in October 1941, avoiding the Nazis patrols on the streets of Luxembourg, Mr. Lambotte the headmaster of the Conservatory and the piano teacher of my mother, knocks on her door and urges the family to escape immediately as they are scheduled to be taken to the concentration camp. "I will take care of your assets including the piano" he promises. The family escaped and almost all of them survived except for Leon. The piano that spends the war under Lambotte's protection was returned after the war to my mother in Belgium and from there immigrated with her to Israel. The piano was the center of my mother's life as a performer and teacher. Today it is well packed for its continued journey and this time to my sister's house.

50x75 cm  
Archival Inkjet Print



**(Landing on the Moon)** The kitchen of the German family that hosted Eli and me was in close proximity to their pigpen. Sometimes, one of the pigs would even stick his head into the kitchen. The family's small color TV set, a rare device in Israel at the time, was also placed in the kitchen. On July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1969, we all sat down in the kitchen, and to the sound of the pigs' snores we excitedly watched Neil Armstrong take his first step on the moon, live and in German. It was a completely surreal event; ask Eli.

50x75 cm

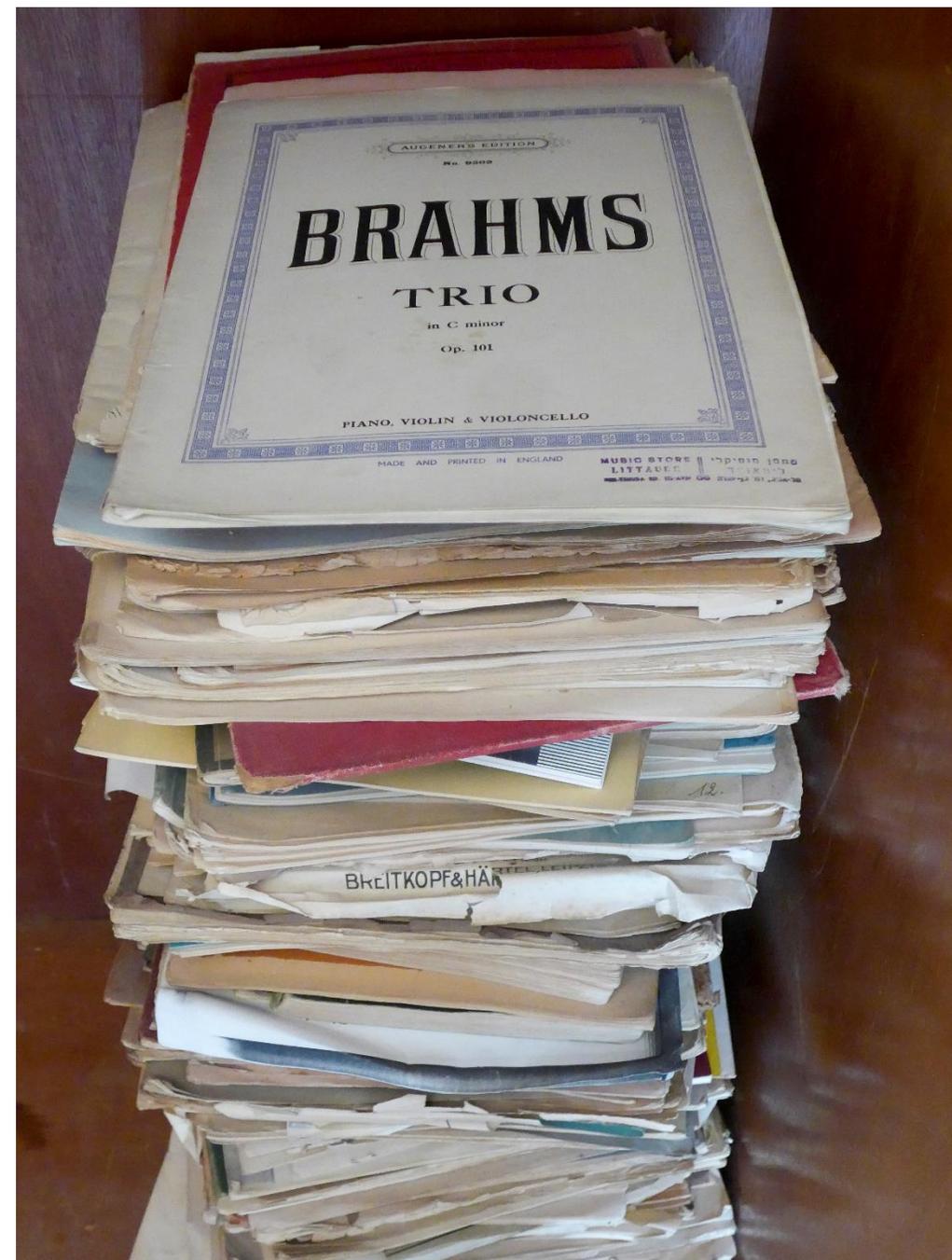
Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Lesson)** The piano lessons my mother would give were very short, no more than three and a half hours each lesson. After the lesson, my mother, turned into a volunteered mentor, would continue the heart to heart conversation with her students. My father, a noble and gentle man, would come back home after work, seeking a discrete way to signal his wife Dina that it's time to finish the lesson. He wouldn't say a word, but rather go to the kitchen and come back with a plate of pastries and fresh juice, which he would silently place next to the piano. When that didn't work, he would turn to more severe measures and opened the kitchen radio to hear the news, while enjoying his daily therapy – washing the dishes. Only seldom would he finally come out, saying in French: “Dina, it's time to finish.”

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Yellow)** Professor Scuto from the University of Luxembourg began searching for Dina following a request he received from a woman looking for her friend Dina from the conservatoire, who disappeared 70 years ago during the war. It was the daughter of my sister who discovered an essay by Scuto in a Luxembourgian newspaper, in which he described his searches. I wrote to him saying that I am Dina's son, and that Dina recently passed away. My Sister and I travelled to Luxembourg and met Prof. Scuto, who introduced us to our mother's childhood scenery. His research explored the attitude of the Luxembourg authorities towards the Jews during the Holocaust. Following it, the government appointed an official research committee, which discovered that certain authorities and some of the citizens at the time assisted the Nazis in their actions against the Jews, and even alienated them after the war. Luxembourg's government and its parliament issued a sincere apology to the Jewish people. The hardships of my mother's family in Luxembourg were published in a recent book by prof. Scuto.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(Jews)** My mother, who was born in Germany and grew up in Luxembourg and Belgium, have not been a citizen of any country until she moved to Israel at the age of 28. Indeed, the Belgian and Luxembourg governments gave her brother, Leon – posthumously after being murdered by the Nazis – five highest medals of valor, accompanied by long letters of gratitude and appreciation for his fearless contribution to their' fight for freedom in World War II. Notwithstanding these medals the family was not allowed to stay in the country and become its equal citizens. Even after the war ended, they were still required to leave.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Glass)** My sister is seven years younger than me. As a child she loved to enter my room whenever I had friends coming. I on the other end used to close the door so that she could not enter. The doors used to have a big glass in a wooden frame. One day she was running and I closed the door on her. She could not stop and collapsed into the glass. A large and deep cut appeared in her wrist and a lot of blood came out. We were alone at home and I had to take charge though I was very scared. We ran out , caught a taxi and ran to the hospital. The wound was stitched but until today she has a long scar but now I allow her to meet my friends as much as she wants.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Mine)** The long flight in the helicopter to the mine in the eastern part of South Africa was of a big excitement to my parents. The flight, the fantastic scenery and the welcome of the group of guards in their tidy suits covered in dust from the Helicopter, were long after remembered by them. My mother was honoured to push the button that rocked the mountain. I took them for a tour on one of the huge bulldozers to enjoy the wonders of nature as well as those of the human nature in an apartheid country.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(Blue)** One of the wedding gifts that I did not like was actually received from my parents. A short while after the wedding, my parents decided to renovate the room of my childhood. They removed the brown wallpaper and painted white the blue wall of my room. Naturally my bed went out as well. It was painful when my room in which I grew up was taken. I was so happy when I discovered parts of the blue wall when we removed and dismantled the big wardrobe.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Chandelier)** The candle like bulbs used to die almost every week but my mother insisted that all the bulbs should always be lit. She did not want my father to use the ladder to replace the bulbs. So every week when I came to visit them I knew what is going to happen. My mother was waiting up to the moment I was saying goodbye and then she would say “Arik, one more minute please could you replace the bulbs?” Naturally it never took a minute to find the good bulbs, bring the ladder, go up carefully, replace one and turn the chandelier and then again. Like that every week.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(Income Tax)** With the money collected by the income tax, the government builds roads, bridges , schools, hospitals, playgrounds and more. This is what my father, the Accountant, used to explain to his young granddaughters. But he did more. The girls liked to play with him “Shop” namely they were the shopkeepers selling to their grandfather whatever they found in the house. He was paying with real money but was deducting 10% for income tax. He had a small notebook where he was writing what he was deducting from them and promised to send it to the income tax authorities. At a certain stage the girls grew up and understood the story so they agreed with him that one day he will give them the amount accumulated in the notebook.

50x75 cm  
Archival Inkjet Print



**(Students)** Many years after she stopped taking piano lessons with my mother, I accidentally ran into her. She wanted to tell me a secret she was keeping. Apparently, so she said, a group of girl students – she among them – would come to our house once a week, hoping for a “bonus”. The bonus was me. Apparently, they liked me, especially when I would return from the army and they would talk about it after the lesson. I was surprised to hear this, and even more so by the sincerity of the woman, in whom I could still recognize the girl she once was. But I certainly enjoyed the story, and it even made me walk a bit taller for a while.

50x75 cm  
Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Shrapnel)** When I was young, my mother, who survived the holocaust, promised me two things. One, that I would never get injections, and the second, that I wouldn't have to be drafted. Both of these promises were broken, and after receiving injections I also fought as an officer in three wars. During the War of Attrition, I volunteered to lead ammunition to the posts in the Suez Canal. Every day I would drive by myself from post to post, in a huge, loaded Russian ZIL truck, while exposing myself to continuous shooting from the Egyptian side. "Every bullet has an address", said one of the signs placed by the IDF along the route. That was the only "protection" I received. One day, I identified mortar shootings from the Egyptian side and jumped out of the truck. I managed to get several meters away and find cover when one of the shells hit the truck's driver seat, setting it on fire. When the fire died, I found in the sooty remains of the truck the shell's shrapnel that almost killed me.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(Danaya)** She was very small, all white, with one black eye. My sister got her at the age of five, from an admirer who later became also a doctor. We looked for a name for that dog, and finally came up with Moshe Dayan. Not wanting to harm his esteemed reputation, we decided to cross letters and call her “Danaya”. My sister promised that she would take care of her, but it was actually my father who every morning would attached black eyed Danaya to the leash that was hanging in the hallway, and take her for a walk.

50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Mattress)**

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Ball)** Each year, my mother used to take me for a summer vacation at my grandparents in Belgium. The journey would take about a week, four or five days on a ship followed by a day-and-half long train ride, until we arrived in Brussels. One day, in the big department store, I saw an escalator. My grandmother's attempts to convince me to ride it all failed, and I wouldn't move an inch. Suddenly, grandmother disappeared from the escalator's horizon and came back a few minutes later holding the big colorful ball I wanted so much. "Come up and you'll get the ball", she said. Ever since, I'm not afraid of escalators.



50x75 cm

Archival Inkjet Print

**(The Synagogue)**

50x75 cm  
Archival Inkjet Print



**(The Flowers)** We once had a cleaning lady that loved my mother very much. She also loved the pictures and sculptures that filled the house. One morning, she decided to add some of her own to the artistic air, and brought us flowers. A colorful plastic bouquet. My mother kindly thanked her, and placed the flowers in a glass vase. Since then, we would follow the drill – every Wednesday morning my dad would take the flowers out of the closet in which they were stored all week, put them in a vase on the side table, and when the cleaning lady would leave, they would return to the closet.

40x60 cm

Archival Inkjet Print



**(Burning Parchment)** When the Romans burned Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, one of the Ten Martyrs, he was covered in the Torah scrolls. His students asked him: “Master, what seest thou?” and he answered: “I see the parchment burning while the letters of the Law soar upward”. Nobody was interested in my parents’ art, history, geography and music books, and they found themselves being thrown from the porch to the sidewalk, on their way to be burned. The noise of their fall was defining to my ears, but the cultural richness we absorbed at home cannot be annihilated so easily.

50x75 cm  
Archival Inkjet Print

