

THE REFUGEE WOMEN WEAVING ART FROM BROKEN LIVES



A Tel Aviv project that began with basket-weaving to help African women asylum seekers has blossomed to become a showcase for international cutting-edge art. **Dr Pamela Peled** meets the women behind this remarkable initiative

One of Judaism's most fabulous tenets evolved out of pain, echoing down through the ages: Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:21). Not only were Jews strangers, as the injunction admonishes, they were slaves. On their flesh they know not to do to others as they would not be done by.

Modern Israelis have the chance to put this into practice. Some 30,000 refugees live in Israel, many from Africa. They wash dishes at restaurants or clean houses; coronavirus has killed their already limited ability to earn. Among the weakest and most vulnerable are the women, who are often single mothers. Some are ill, some have ill children; many are destitute, lonely and lost.

Enter Diddy Mymin Kahn, an angel presiding over a magical space in a dilapidated tenement in Tel Aviv. From the outside it's just another drab location;



buzzed in through an iron gate, the visitor climbs an unprepossessing stairwell to crash into Kahn's kingdom of crocheting heaven, pulsing with children and hot food, volunteers and nuns, and women (today in masks) creating breathtaking art.

Kuchinate, or 'crocheting' in Tigrinya, the language of Eritrea, is a collective of African asylum-seeking women who crochet colourful baskets, carpets and other creations in a studio that doubles as a collective kitchen, haven and home. The workers, escaping their rundown, lonely living quarters for some healing hours of community and productive labour, earn a basic salary. Extra cash comes from sale of the products, traditional coffee ceremonies and workshops for the public.

Beautiful Diddy Mymin Kahn, clinical psychologist and an electrifying 55-year-old mother of three, was born in Israel, grew up in South Africa and lived for years in London. In 2009, back in Israel, she offered psychotherapy for refugees living in a shelter funded by the United Nations Victim of Torture Fund and run by the African Refugee Development Centre. "I was working in a pilot project to offer assistance to women who survived brutal camps in the Sinai; women who had been raped and tortured by Bedouin smugglers who demanded ransom for their release," recalls Kahn. "They had no idea how to react to therapy; there was not even a word in their lexicon for it. It was culturally alien for them to talk about negative events in their past to a stranger." A survivor explained: "Thinking and thinking – you can spoil your mind." What they needed, Kahn understood, was food for that day, a job, somewhere for their children to sleep. Together with two others from the

shelter – Sister Aziza Kidane, an Eritrean nun and nurse, and Natasha Miller Goodman, a South African immigrant artist – Kahn set up Kuchinate in 2011. The not-for-profit organisation started with five women on its books. Today almost 300 women sew, crochet, chat and heal in the centre; 70 take home a regular pay cheque. When the pandemic hit, Kahn flew into overdrive, organising sewing machines for women stuck at home, as well as food, medicine and medical help. A hotline of psychologists and social workers contacted each Kuchinate woman regularly, mapping needs and providing solutions. "It was important for our women to keep working," Kahn explains, "for their mental health as well as to put food on the table."

It might take a village to raise a child, but what if you leave your village with an ill baby, and you are beaten and hungry

and not wanted anywhere? Kuchinate nurtures women like this; incredibly, they bounce back with quiet dignity and innate joy. One of the managers today is a survivor of brutal domestic abuse and a list of challenges from here till the days of redemption. During the Corona lockdown she sewed protective masks for those fighting their own battles for survival.

Masks are only some of the colourful new products. As well as the trademark baskets and rugs, Kuchinate women also create striking purses, notebooks and ragdolls. Donors can buy the dolls for refugee children. And in that joyous studio, where women who've seen it all crochet their tears into glorious colours, powerful art has emerged as testimony.

In 2012, Gil Yefman, prize-winning artist extraordinaire, heard about the Kuchinate Collective and briefly considered inviting the women to his studio. "But I explore the body and gender identity, among other issues," he explains, "I could hardly bring victims of rape into a space full of models of genitalia."

Instead he went to them, and they taught him to crochet baskets. Yefman spoke to them of art, they spoke to him of Africa, and together they wove their stories into life-size baskets. Yefman set up speakers within the works, which resonated with the women's voices relating their stories. "For me crocheting is like writing," says Yefman, "the needle is the pen; the yarn a stream of thoughts; the chain of stitches equals the changing points of view comprising a narrative."

And what a narrative: stories of survival and grit and pain echoed within the baskets clothed with crocheted human forms. A gash of red on one face

is juxtaposed with a smiling mouth on another; crocheted flowing dreadlocks are pulled back to reveal a colourful earring. This powerful installation, entitled Body of Work, has been transferred to Haifa and New York, where it was shown in the Ron Feldman Gallery. The piece has also been showcased in Holon's Design Museum as well as the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Another Yefman-Kuchinate collaboration, the eerily beautiful work Hedgerow, has been acquired for the permanent collection at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The work is part of Yefman's Kibbutz Buchenwald project, where he worked with Holocaust survivor and pioneering conceptual artist Dov Or-Ner to examine the void between history and memory. The project is a reference to Rudolf Hess' layout for the crematoria at Auschwitz, where leafy trees lined the path to the crematoria, as if to hide the horror that had taken place.

For Hedgerow, Yefman and Kuchinate women managed a circle of 265 volunteers who crocheted green leaves out of wool and acrylic to hang on twisted gas pipes, the soft and hard materials and natural and manmade fibres symbolising the dichotomy between nature and machine. A few faded brownish leaves lie under the hedge, the soft wool belying the very hard subject matter.

The indirect touching of trauma and balance is made concrete by refugees in Israel referring to the Shoah through crocheting for their own survival. This is art that makes you want to reach out and hug someone.

"Women who have seen it all crochet their tears into glorious colours"

Sandra Weil, chair of the Kuchinate Board and a respected curator, is also sharing the women's nightmares-into-inspirational art. Since June, Ambiguities, an art exhibition that has been created on an old farmstead in southern Sweden, has been displaying two Kuchinate pieces: Human Baskets, based around metre-high baskets, and Fabric Faces, a collection of large masks.

One exhibit, created by Achberet Abraha, a Kuchinate member from Eritrea, takes the form of a beaded basket 'family': herself and her two daughters in Israel, and another basket placed alone and lonely, representing the son she left behind in Eritrea. It is all the more poignant in such a pastoral setting; it's a long distance from Africa to Scandinavia. A felt and beaded textile mask by Meron Asmerom Weldu (a single mum also from Eritrea) bears silent witness to the unspeakable torture she has suffered. Its clear blue eyes are threaded with torrents of tears and the words "Sinai is bad in the world" arches across the face. "Remember!" is embroidered beside the tears. Lina Otom Jak Agolon from South Sudan has crowned her basket with a duplicate of one of her own colourful handkerchiefs, the prominent cheekbones of the face depicted on the basket, echoing Lina's own classical beauty. Only the staring eyes, starkly outlined in circles of white, hint at the horror they have seen.

A separate collaborative project with Sweden, back in Israel, featured the Swedish photographer Miriam Alster. She followed the Kuchinate women for three months, taking photos of them working

Clockwise from top left: Salamawit Hagos; Akbaret Abrha with Dr Diddy Mymin Kahn; Dolshi Mebrahtu with her unfinished basket with the words, "with patience all hardships will pass"; Lina Otom Jak Agolon and mural; Zerife Yuhanns; Previous page: Lina Otom Jak Agolon

and exhibited these photos alongside those taken by the famous Swedish photographer Anna Riwwin, who captured Jewish refugees working in a toy factory in Sweden during World War II.

All the art chants one refrain: once we were all refugees. Although most of the African women wait patiently to be resettled in friendly countries, some of them are making a new life in Israel, supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Christian organisations in Europe, the Comoboni Missionary Sisters, the Tel Aviv Foundation, private donations and more. There is also a network of 'mahazut' – Israeli 'friends' of Kuchinate who ferry mothers to hospitals to visit sick children, or help with English or legal problems. Kuchinate provides a "goodness of fit between what they need and what we can offer", explains Kahn.

As Coronavirus recalibrates our world and world-views, it remains to be seen whether the strangers among us will ever be fully embraced. But one thing is sure: in a studio in Tel Aviv, women whose lives were once unravelling are slowly crocheting them back together again. ■

See: kuchinate.com; for details of Ambiguities see: rikstolvan.se. Dr Pamela Peled is a columnist for the Jerusalem Post and lectures at the Interdisciplinary Centre in Herzlia, Israel. See: peledpam.wixsite.com/website