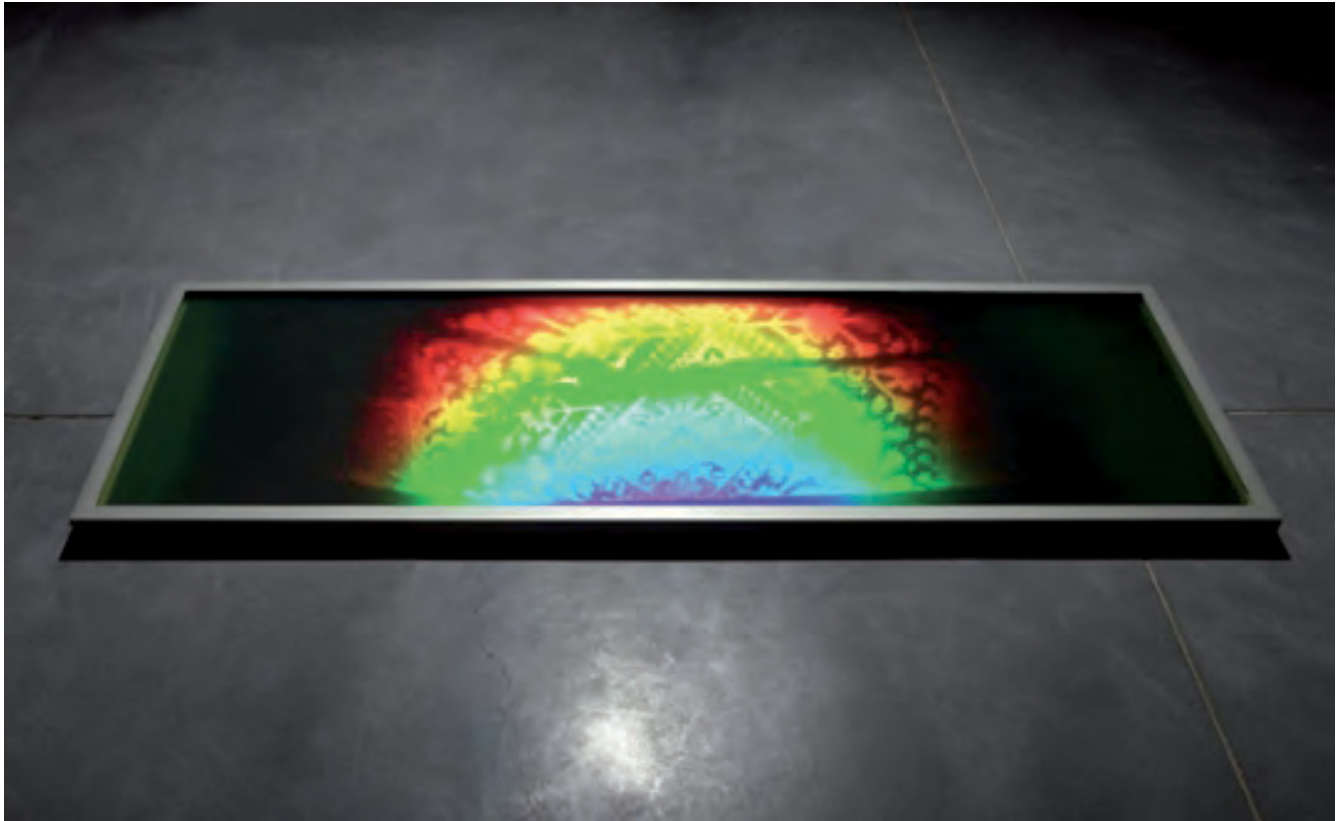


Moshe Ninio: A Turkish rug and a trick of the eye



When seen in the exhibition, Moshe Ninio's "Rainbow: Rug," a hologram, appears to be nearly 6 feet in height. Photo courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crouse

Step into the darkened Project Room 1 at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and you'll see a rectangular mirror in the middle of the floor. A hologram image flickers above the rectangle as you walk around it, becoming clear only if you stand in just the right spot, a few feet from the center of the room. There, a rainbow of light echoes the shape and texture of a classic antique Turkish rug.

"Rainbow: Rug," which is nearly 6 feet long, is the work of the Israeli artist Moshe Ninio. This exhibition, which continues through April 18 at the Bergamot Station-based museum, is Ninio's first solo show on the West Coast, and it contains only the single piece. But this ephemeral "rug" stands out, created with technology that is both costly and already archaic, using lasers emanating from the gallery's ceiling to etch out the image in space.

"The hologram appears as a pleasant spectrum," Ninio said during an interview over coffee at Woodcat, a cafe in Echo Park. "It becomes like a horizon which you can traverse, and the rainbow appears but can't be reached. As a child, you want to go to the rainbow, but it evades you."

Ninio himself seems similarly elusive. Following a 45-minute interview, the artist initially asked the Journal not to quote or even paraphrase anything he'd said, explaining that he avoids all Internet and social media engagement in an effort to speak only through his art.

Search for information about Ninio and his work online and you'll come up with very little of substance about the Tel Aviv- and Paris-based artist. Only after prodding from the museum, Ninio relented and gave permission to publish his statements.

Ninio's resistance to adopting new technology is fitting for an artist who uses the holographic medium, first popularized in the 1970s. Ninio only this year swapped his old clamshell-style flip phone for an iPhone, and he spoke of his distrust of smartphones as a tool of state-sponsored surveillance.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1953, he is represented by the Dvir Gallery there and by Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris. His work has been shown at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and other major European and Israeli museums and galleries. He also teaches at the prestigious Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem.

Ninio made his first holographic rug 30 years ago, and when he decided to recalibrate the work in 2000, to update the color and size, the technology already had become obsolete. "I looked all over the world — in Paris, London — to find somebody who can do it," he said.

He found the solution at Holographics North, a hologram production company run by astrophysicist John Perry out of the basement of an old school building in Burlington, Vt. Ninio spent a few days there to create the work.

"We used a pulse laser to make the master," Perry said. "You first make this master hologram, which is only viewable with laser light. And then, from that master, you make another hologram, basically a hologram of a hologram."

That second hologram, called a transfer, is viewable under ordinary white light. Perry works primarily with commercial clients, producing images for pharmaceutical or automotive trade shows, and with science museums. But he estimates he's worked with about 60 artists, most notably James Turrell, known for his light spaces. He also helped Canadian artist Michael Snow fill Vancouver, British Columbia's original railroad engine house with holograms and was asked to create a hologram from a Frank Stella maquette for an exhibition in Cleveland.

"It offers visual qualities that you just cannot get from any other medium," Perry said. "The very saturated spectral colors, the 3-D and the movement that you get, holograms can be animated ... by a good artist; those qualities can be used to breach new territory."

The image moves in and out of perception, emerging and receding according to the movements of the visitor, allowing the artist to determine the rules for how it can be seen. "The more the viewer advances toward the hologram after hitting its spectral peak, the more it evades him or her," Tel Aviv curator and critic Ory Dessau wrote, adding that the artwork "immobilizes the viewer's body by which it is activated, rendering it passive, motionless, freezing it together with the image."

Elsa Longhauser, executive director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, saw an earlier version of "Rainbow: Rug" while visiting Jerusalem.

"In 1996, it was installed in a dark, rough space on the lower level of Teddy Football Stadium, which was under construction in Jerusalem," Longhauser recalled. "Being in Israel for the first time was a poignant revelation; getting to know Moshe Ninio has been similarly poignant."

Longhauser had met Ninio the previous year, at a symposium at Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia, where she taught. “I found him to be an extremely intelligent and insightful and precise critic, but also extremely poetic in the way that he sees the world and expresses what he sees,” she said.

Just as a rug is created through an interlaced network of threads, “Rainbow: Rug” is made through the interweaving of laser rays. The piece uses 20th-century technology to simulate an ancient traditional craft. “The rays reweave the rug and reconstruct it,” Ninio said. “It’s like the process of weaving but with light.”

Ninio said because he is Israeli, visitors often mistake “Rainbow: Rug” for an Islamic prayer rug and therefore a statement on religious and political tensions. But, he said, his work is not at all political. “It’s very radical at this point in time not to be political,” he said. “In Israel, people see a carpet and think it’s Arabic. Not at all.”

The rug uses a Garden of Eden pattern common in Oriental carpets and represents a “simulated Eden,” Ninio said, referring to the biblical area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that lies in present-day Iraq, Syria and Turkey. “The carpet evokes a certain landscape.”

The floating rug does recall the legendary flying carpets of King Solomon as well as the Arabian Nights stories and Disney’s “Aladdin,” but, said Ninio, “The old magic is transformed by a perverse magic, which is holography.”