



Art

Naama Tsabar's Smashed Guitar Sculptures Invite Intimate Encounters

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Now and then, Naama Tsabar breaks an electric guitar at her studio. With safety goggles on and blasting 1990s rock (ideally PJ Harvey), she tears a store-bought instrument into shreds. There are a few limitations: The size of her Brooklyn workspace dictates how far the wood and metal parts fly, and she must be alone. “This is a moment of release that I have to do privately,” Tsabar, who was featured in *The Artsy Vanguard 2018*, told *Artsy*, of this adrenaline-fueled act that creates the raw



materials for her sculpture series “Melodies of Certain Damage.” “It is not about the moment of breaking,” she added.

Intricately bolted to the floor, the sculptures are open to audience activation. These dismantled electric guitars go beyond the show of destruction—rather, they are a way to elevate the senses. Various factors dictate each shattered composition: The artist’s seconds-long gesture, gravity, and pure chance each play their part. A group of these floor pieces are a part of Tsabar’s first institutional show in Germany, “Estuaries,” which runs from April 12th through September 24th at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. In the show, their brutally smashed beauty still yields sounds, when the works are activated by a group of local women musicians during designated performances—the public is also invited to play them during opening hours.



While in this series, the artist works with the firmness of these instruments’ hardware, another series, titled “Work On Felt,” takes a much softer approach, using the velvety titular material, which she’s worked with for over a decade. Perhaps Tsabar’s most recognized body of work, the large slabs of felt are carved with various patterns, and attached to tight strings that transform each sculpture into a musical instrument, with a connected amplifier elevating the melodies created by soft felt and metal cord.



“Each work is a platform for the viewer to have a unique experience beyond what I create at the studio,” said Tsabar. While she works in isolation at her Brooklyn studio, these works aim for audience participation. The invitation to pull the strings and imbue the space with booming melodies “hopefully empowers each participant,” said the artist, who also aims to “reshuffle the institutional hierarchies between the visitor, the art, and the space.” The sound of the work echoes into the soaring interiors of a museum—in this case, the lofty Kleihueshalle of the Berlin museum.



Tsabar’s very first experiments with sound took place while she was studying for her MFA at Columbia University. In those works, she tied strings onto pieces of paper that she had embedded with carbon fiber, building on her experience performing as a rock musician. She shifted to fine art during her move to New York in 2008 from Israel, where she was born and raised. “There I was, playing with the simplest form of art, which is a piece of paper and a line,” the artist remembered. The tension she witnessed in sound waves prompted her to explore a material that is typically associated with absorbing—perhaps silencing—the sound: felt. “Felt can take a curve but not collapse,” she said. “Felt is an entry point that can retain tension.”

In the Hamburger Bahnhof show, these felt works are placed adjacent to a set of works by Joseph Beuys that also use felt. Both artists make use of the material’s fuzzy touch and sandy texture to convey warm comfort, but also a sense of alarm. While World War II–induced trauma was the main catalyst for Beuys’s suits and blankets in the material, for Tsabar, felt is connected with audio.



Counterintuitively to her sonic sculptures, the material is an ideal conveyor of silence. “The carbon fiber is actually a good conductor of voids of sound, and in fact, felt is used in many instruments such as banjos and drums,” she said. In her sculptures, however, the material is given a voice. “No longer silent” is how she described the works once audience members participate.



These works, however, are also decorative. The forms that the 42-year-old artist cuts into the felt with a knife react to the challenge of “working through the limits of a rectangular piece of fabric,” she said. Her compositions explore geometric reflections as well as corporal inspirations, such as breasts and limbs. Tsabar’s technique blends surgeon-like precision with a playful curiosity for what the material can bear.

Tsabar first experimented with felt after she finished grad school in 2010. Early works in the material were floor pieces with heavily industrial gray elements, but around 2015, she became curious about colors and, more importantly, adding “a voice” to her works. While artists like Robert Morris created their own hyper-masculine take on the material, Tsabar hoped to explore its queer potential and relation to the body.



Her current burgundy- and purple-colored works for the Berlin show (all 2023) are made from a lighter form of felt, which allows sound to penetrate into their surfaces. The saturated color palette was inspired by recent trips to the deserts out West, which also allowed the artist to replicate “the slopes and hills that resemble the curves of the body.”



These works are also connected to her own experience as a queer woman, since her work is activated through intimate invitations to touch and play, and she exclusively hires women musicians and singers to perform using her works. All dressed in black, these collaborators always include her life partner, Sarah Strauss, as well as, for the Berlin show, Berlin-based cellist Julia Bitat or Argentine drummer Tatiana Heuman. One woman might sing to the tunes played through a smashed guitar, another might gently wave her arm to rub the strings of a felt structure.

In Tsabar’s work, sound—especially voice—binds together the women touching and playing her creations, often nodding to lesbian sexuality. For example, two works from 2010—Untitled (Double Face) and Doublesilverbust—are each formed from two electric guitars, demanding two performers’ dual effort with the strings to play them. These works seem to compare the act of producing music in sync to sex: Two bodies act in an instinctive harmony, responding to each other’s physical rhythms.



Working with sound, performance, and audience interaction can create challenges for a contemporary artist, and Tsabar works with a large number of galleries to help realize these projects. Showing with Kasmin, Goodman Gallery, Spinello Projects, Dvir Gallery, and Nazarian / Curcio (formerly Shulamit Nazarian), she considers the firm relationships she has built with each of her galleries critical in her journey. “I am aligned with all my galleries because I seek that human connection in each of them,” she said.

Whether an ambitious museum exhibition or a one-off performance at the Guggenheim, the scale of Tsabar’s performative work often requires her galleries to work together, which she sees as “a learning curve.” “The most important factor is that I really like the people I work with,” she said.

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