

Contemporary art exhibit takes visitors to the 'navel' of ancient Jerusalem

'Umbilicus' opens in the Kishle, a former British Mandate prison and active archaeological dig, part of the Tower of David Museum

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Curators Adina Kamien (left) and Malu Zayon at their 'Umbilicus' art exhibit at Kishle in Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum, opened July 9, 2024 (Oded Antman)

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Constructed nearly 200 years ago as a military base by the Ottomans, then used as a prison during the British Mandate, the Kishle, part of Jerusalem's [renovated Tower of David complex](#), has long been an active archaeological dig, with discoveries dating back to the days of the First Temple.

Now it's home to its first art exhibit, "Umbilicus," curated by Adina Kamien and Malu Zayon, which offers a dialogue between the archaeology and contemporary artworks.

"You really have all the senses activated here," said Kamien, during a Times of Israel tour of the exhibit several days prior to its July 9 opening. "Working in a space that's 2,800 years old is a dream come true."

To be sure, entering the Kishle, a long, domed space with the feel of a cathedral, is a heady experience in itself.

A glance toward the upper walls shows the former cells used to detain prisoners, with graffiti etched by members of the Jewish underground organizations during the British Mandate period.

For the last 20 years, archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority have dug far down, excavating a massive wall dating from the time of the kings of Judea during the First Temple period.



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Kamien and Zayon added works that relate to the layers of time exposed in the narrow, arched space.

There are intricate oil-on-cloth paintings by Lihi Turjeman; a chandelier-like hanging by [Hannan Abu-Hussein](#) that catches the sunlight streaming through windows high on the thick walls; Yehudit Sasportas's handmade ceramic jars carved with swampy forests and inky swirls; and video and audio works by Sharon Balaban, Sahar Azimi, Merav Shinn Ben-Alon and Matan Daskal, installed in the niches.

The works weren't commissioned for "Umbilicus," said Kamien, but were chosen for their contemporary references and discussions with the ancient space.

"I'm trying to create that coherence here," said Kamien, "looking at Jerusalem as the umbilicus, as the center of the world, where the world was created for three religions."

The umbilicus, or navel, is a theme repeated in the exhibits' works, in Turjeman's planetary and mapping paintings, in Sasportas's rounded urns, in Shinn Ben-Alon's series of drawings of the navel and Balaban's video installation, "Navel Balloon" which creates the feel of the connection between mother and fetus.



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Turjeman's tapestries appear to be part of the massive, peeling walls of the Kishle, as her works often combine her paints with pigment taken from buildings being demolished to create a dialogue with the architectural features of a space.

Abu-Hussein's chandelier and an additional installation are made from dozens of pairs of pantyhose, raising associations of bare, fragile and damaged limbs, part of her ongoing discussion about the oppression of women in the Arab world.

And yet, they also look like they belong in this underground space, remarked Kamien.



Yehudit Sasportas's urns in the 'Umbilicus' art exhibit at Kishle in Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum, opened July 9, 2024 (Oded Antman)

Eilat Lieber, the Tower of David Museum director, waited six years for the renovations on the museum to be completed and another year for the new staircase that leads to the Kishle building.

She also had to get permission from the Israel Antiquities Authority for an exhibition to be mounted in an active archaeology dig.

"They don't love to have art here, but they do appreciate it, in the sense that it brings people here," said Lieber. "They were in the middle of their work," she added, as demonstrated by the sandbags sitting at the very bottom of the Kishle, visible from the sturdy platform that visitors use to walk around the space, "but that's what makes it so interesting, we at the Tower of David want that conversation."

Down below, visible from the walkway, are Sahar Azimi's images screened on the Kishle floor and in its cisterns. This choreography, filmed at the Dead Sea, features flickering lights of ten dancers, creating a sense of moving water against the ancient stone floor.



Sahar Azimi's images in the 'Umbilicus' art exhibit at Kishle in Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum, opened July 9, 2024 (Oded Antman)

Throughout, Daskal's sounds are soft and uplifting, emerging from speakers planted in the building and surrounding the artworks with another layer of meaning.

As a whole, said Kamien, she wanted the exhibit to be a refuge for visitors from the tensions and sadness of the last nine months of war.

"I want a little escapism, a little respite," said Kamien, who also teaches at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. "I deliberated here and during my work at Bezalel how much to connect to the times. We can't take one step without thinking about it."

Lieber said she sees visitors coming to the Tower of David to look for answers to challenges presented through history and finding comfort in knowing that life always goes on.

"I'm sure we all have many questions after October 7 and we have to discover what will be the next meaning of our lives here," she said.

"Archaeology and art are eternal," said Lieber.

"It's what remains of the human spirit," added Kamien.

"Umbilicus," July 9, 2024, until November, at the Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem.