



# NATURAL REVELATIONS

## *Esther Bar at the Lathe*

Shai Noy

**W**ith a unique aesthetic approach and a taste for imperfections, Jerusalem-based artist Esther Bar walks the fine line between craft and fine art.

When entering Esther's house, one can't help feeling overwhelmed by the looks of it. Under the high ceilings of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century house, I find myself in a hallway of bookshelves, with artifacts of all kinds scattered about. Tellingly, a living room wall reveals over a century of paint layers, half exposed. Esther notices the fascination on my face and

begins to tell the story: "A few years back, when returning from Spain, we decided to renovate. We hired a painter to re-paint the walls. As he was scraping to prepare for work, this array of layers was exposed. It seemed a very odd thing to do—to just cover back decades of history and decoration under some paint from the nearest hardware store. I decided to keep it as is, so I took hold of the scraper and tried to uncover as much as I could. I now use this wall as a backdrop for most of my product photos."

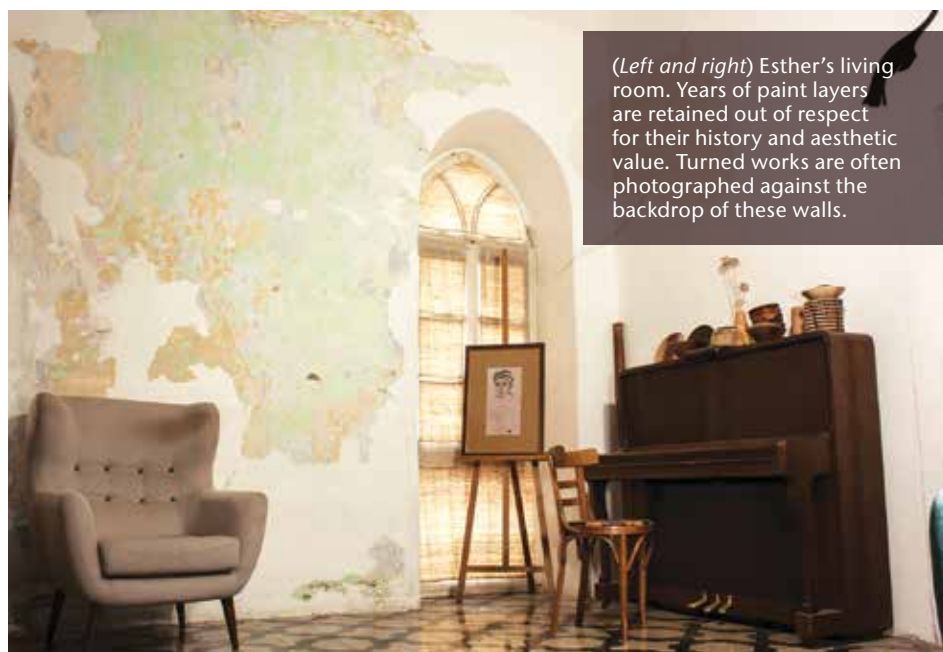
### **Of coffee grounds and resin**

Trained as a product designer and art therapist, Esther practices numerous art forms and crafts, from pottery and sewing to painting and sculpting, and although woodturning is not her only discipline, it certainly has stood out as the main focus in recent years. After studying with Madrid-based sculptor and woodturner Toni Porto, Esther became obsessed with uncovering the sections and curves hidden within raw materials. After experimenting with various casting techniques with the help of ceramicist Paz De Pedro, Esther developed her recycled coffee technique, which has since become a signature mark of her work.

"I guess you could say the first stage of my work is my morning coffee," she explains. "I keep the left-over grounds from my coffee maker and dry them. I then mix them with epoxy resin and cast it along with various natural items such as seeds, shells, pieces of wood, or different types of fruit to form a round block." Esther explains that the block then goes on the lathe and is treated as if it were a normal log. This allows her to take shapes we are commonly familiar with in whole form and reveal their cross-section on a dark, contrasting surrounding. She notes, "The mixture is a hassle to work with, though. It really eats up the tools, and I have to sharpen them all the time."

### **A store of materials**

Among her friends and family, everyone knows Esther as a bit of a hoarder of natural materials. Strange behaviors such as washing eggshells before washing the dishes or fishing pistachio shells out of the bin after a party are not only tolerated, but encouraged. Be it interesting-looking seeds from an unidentified



Esther's cabinet with dozens of drawers containing natural materials, from peach stones to eggshells, all waiting to be cast and then turned.



Eggshells cast in a mixture of recycled coffee grounds and epoxy resin (left) and a turned plate revealing the cross-section of eggshells (right).



For comparison: a whole pinecone and a turned and revealed cross-section set in coffee grounds and epoxy resin.

tree, a weird-looking trunk that was chopped in the neighbor's back yard, or a root pulled out of the ground for whatever reason, they all know Esther would gladly take in these vegetal refuges.

A cabinet with dozens of drawers containing different materials, from peach stones to eggshells, stands proudly in the corner of her studio. Logs are piled up all over in a mess that only she understands, and each comes with a story: "This is a root that had to be dug out to prevent it from wrecking a road... These seeds were mailed to me by a good friend in Spain who found them in her garden." The list goes on—an orphanage of wooden misfits.

### An unlikely woodturning studio

Esther's love affair with woodturning started while she was living in Madrid. After taking a few woodturning lessons, she realized she was hooked and had to have a lathe in her own home. That, however, proved a little complicated. She recalls:

My husband, Alon, was working as the Israeli ambassador in Spain at the time. We lived in Madrid in a very fancy house, to say the least. It was clear to me that in order to feel comfortable in this surrounding, I had to create a working

environment for myself. It was definitely an unusual request, to bring a wood lathe into the ambassador's residence, but with the help and endless patience of the housekeepers, I managed to make it happen. I ended up transforming some of the many guest rooms in the house into working studios for woodturning, pottery, sewing, and painting. I guess you could say that during our stay there, the house was the most chaotic it had ever been.

Four years later, Esther and Alon moved back to Jerusalem. The sawdust had settled, so to speak, ►



Eggshells revealed in a turned container with ceramic cap, 2014, 6" x 3¼" (15cm x 8cm)



A bowl of pistachio shells and recycled coffee grounds, 2019, 2½" x 5½" (6cm x 14cm)



Box with lid of coffee grounds and walnut shells, 2018, 6" x 4¼" (15cm x 11cm)

and the ambassador's house went back to its usual extreme cleanliness and order. Back in Jerusalem, Esther had to convert some of her own bedrooms into studios, where she is now completely focused on creating and teaching arts and crafts.

### All about the material

Esther's work reveals a complex and intimate relationship with raw matter. Rather than a resource used to manifest an idea or vision, the material *becomes* the vision. It is celebrated and almost worshipped, rather than tamed and polished. Esther seems dedicated to keeping as much of the material's original characteristics as she possibly can, even if it means preserving what one might call *the defects* in the original piece. Her work is rich with featured cracks, knots, burls, and even wormholes that celebrate the peculiar beauty that was carefully sewn together by Mother Nature.

"As a former art therapist, I like to think of my work process as

self-therapy," she explains. "What kind of therapy would it be if I tried to hide the bumps and cracks? That is what we like to call suppressing, as opposed to dealing with issues. No one is completely free of bumps and cracks. We all have sharp corners, knots, and burls. I find it much more interesting to feature them and treat them as an opportunity rather than something to be avoided or concealed." Esther often finds herself thinking of her own personal issues and defects while repairing a crack or working with "sick" wood.

### Cast in resin

One can immediately spot a look of discomfort on her face when the question of her technique comes up. Being relatively new to woodturning, she doesn't feel she has a lot to contribute from a technical point of view. About blank casting, however, she does find a thing or two to offer. She says the choice of which resin to use was

quite random: "I tried one I found in a store in Madrid and did all my experiments with it. It worked for me, and I stuck with it. I do have thoughts about changing to a greener type of epoxy that is also food safe, but so far I haven't done so—also because it's a bit of a hassle to deal with import restrictions for these types of materials. So, for now, I stick with what I know."

Esther tends not to agonize over bubbles when working with epoxy, finding that the bubbles work well aesthetically with the dark matte look of the mixture. "It creates a kind of basalt, rock-like texture that I really like," she says. "For the casting, I make my own silicone molds. This allows me to create a precast spigot that fits easily into the chuck. I then start turning, and when I am ready, I cut the tenon off and re-use it in a new cast."

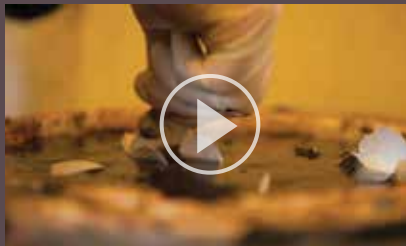
When it comes to curves, however, Esther does not leave much to chance. Her lines are distinct and carefully formed, and she has a very clear idea of what makes



Acacia wood hollow form with lid of coffee grounds and Queen Anne's lace dried flower, 2017, 4" x 8" (10cm x 20cm)

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now see the video!

To see a creative video revealing Esther Bar's methods of work, visit [tiny.cc/EstherBar](http://tiny.cc/EstherBar) or scan the QR code



Plates of cast coffee grounds with embedded natural materials, clockwise from top left: walnuts, avocado peels, a palm leaf, colored eggshells, plain eggshells, straw, 2014-2015, each: 9" (23cm) diameter

a beautiful curve. It is as if she is trying her best to live up to the beauty that nature brings into her art. She can never create something as beautiful as a leaf or the complex and subtle system of a tree's roots, but she tries her best to have her work meet those high standards. The result is an interesting mixture of fine craftsmanship and the somewhat rough, chaotic aesthetics found in nature. In her own words:

I think what amazes me time and again with this type of work is the excavation aspect of it.

You look at a piece of matter, a shell if you would, and you just know that there's a pearl in there somewhere. Your job is to find that pearl and exhibit it in broad daylight. That said, I don't really feel like an archaeologist when taking a new piece to work with. Rather, I feel a bit like I'm on a first date. You try to be polite, ask the right questions, have him feel you'll treat him right. But deep down you can't help thinking: 'I wonder what that looks like naked.' I definitely feel there is something erotic about this

disrobing of raw matter. This is why I chose to name my business, Nature Undressed.

For more, visit [estherbar.com](http://estherbar.com).

Currently based in Northern Italy, Shai Noy is a musician, sound engineer, and writer heavily affected by his Gen-Y origins. Having grown in the hilly countryside of Northern Israel, he finds that anything growing out of the ground fills him with admiration. Shai has been reported hugging trees in various spots around the globe, as well as engaging in other types of mischief, being childishly fond of underground cultural scenes and revolutionary politics.