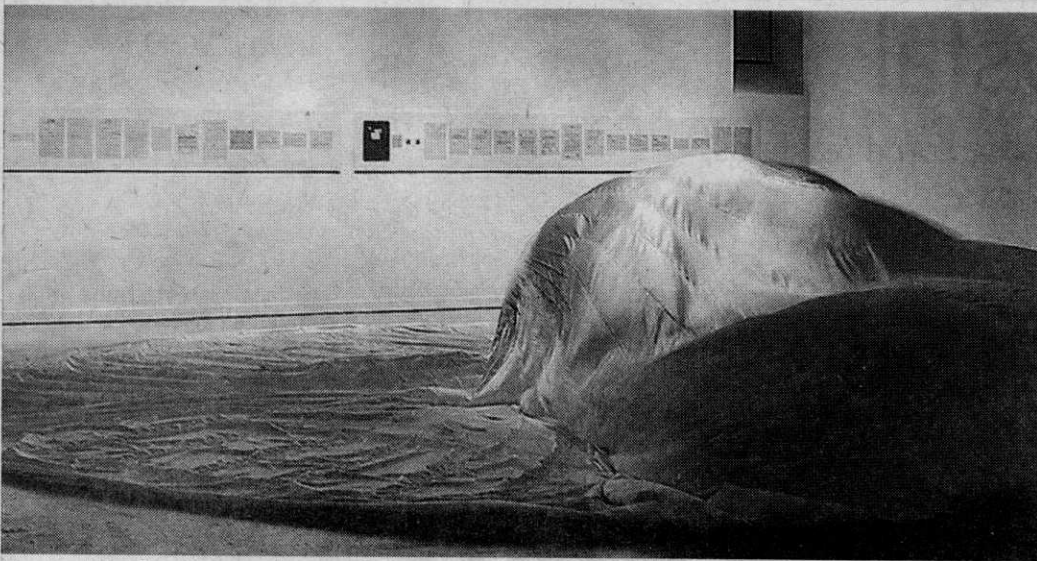


VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW



Nina Levitt's *Thin Air* is a nylon parachute, an evocation of the life of Hannah Senesh. ISAAC APPLEBAUM

A memorial to lives lit by the full moon



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**NINA LEVITT
AT KOFFLER GALLERY**

Until April 20, 4588 Bathurst St.,
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The work honours two remarkable Jewish women, Vera Atkins and Hannah Senesh, whose heroic lives were connected when they both went to work for British intelligence during the Second World War.

Thin Air, the title of Nina Levitt's brilliant and deeply moving multimedia installation at Toronto's Koffler Gallery, holds a couple of meanings. First, thin air is the kind of air people disappear into. Second, thin air is the kind of air that fills cold, silent nights that are presided over by full moons. And the full moon is central to Levitt's installation.

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Atkins, who was born Vera Rosenberg in Romania in 1908 and who died in 2000, was the

highest-ranking female officer in British wartime intelligence. She was responsible for all British agents sent into occupied France and, after the war, she continued to track the fate of all missing agents, investigating the circumstances of their deaths – usually in concentration camps. (Atkins' story is chronicled by author William Stevenson in a biography called *Spymistress: The Life of Vera Atkins, the Greatest Female Secret Agent of World War II*. She is believed to be the model for Ian Fleming's Miss Moneybags in the James Bond novels.) She never revealed that she was Jewish.

Senesh, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1939, volunteered for an elite British parachute corps and was the only woman in a seven-member unit whose mission, according to Levitt's research, was to create escape routes for downed British pilots and Hungarian Jews (including her own mother). Senesh parachuted into Yugoslavia and was arrested as she entered Hungary. Imprisoned in Budapest, she was shot on Nov. 7, 1944, while awaiting trial, by a Nazi officer who allegedly had grown weary of the delay. It was three months later that

the Russian army liberated Budapest. Senesh was 23. Her diaries and poems, Levitt notes, have subsequently become part of Israeli popular culture.

Among the many highlights of this troubling and ennobling exhibition is the way Levitt has managed to bring together the stories of these two larger-than-life women. By employing only a few carefully chosen objects and projections, she has embodied something of their spirit, their courage and, more generally, the times they lived through. All of this would have been easy, in lesser hands, both to sensationalize and sentimentalize.

The exhibition seems to be lit by moonlight – by the full moon upon which the success of spy missions depended. "We were governed by the moon," recalled Atkins, "moon periods – the time when people were dropped" (by parachute).

So in the gallery devoted mostly to the work of Atkins, there are projections on the wall of the dates on which, during the war years, the moon was full. There is also a full-size Quonset hut, within which is projected a loop of excerpts from a postwar film about Britain's spy missions. And next to it are suitcases, each of which, when picked up, plays a sound clip (from a memory chip inside) of a 1995 interview with Atkins, recorded by London's

Imperial War Museum (the interview stops when the suitcase is put down again). The solitary suitcases are powerful images of the lonely spontaneity of any series of missions – anxious emblems of temporariness.

Senesh's gallery seems even more ephemeral – sadly if appropriately. It is dominated by a huge spread of nylon parachute on the gallery floor. When you enter the space, you trigger a couple of hidden fans that start filling the parachute with air and cause it to rise majestically until it fills the entire space. It's like breathing, of course – and death and rebirth.