

Ouzi Zur

Between Man and Place - exhibition review

Introduction

If Israel should cease to exist out of lack of will or out of necessity, will anything lasting of it remain behind - language, art, culture – or will it all sink into the depths of forgetfulness? We should not just ask this, in theory, in days to come, but we should rather examine through this fear, ingrained in us since birth, the reality, the durability of what has been created here and what makes it unique from other places. This, perhaps, is part of a larger question, from which all existential questions are derived: Is Israel a real place or an ongoing ghostly vision?

Israel is a place that I am almost incapable of seeing ‘from the outside’. I experience ‘**Israel**’ in my imagination, I do not see it. I experience a place that is fluid, a place that is like quicksilver, that cannot – or refuses to – become fixed; a place where most of its residents – first, second, or third generation immigrants – are not rooted in. To this can be added the constant conflict which leaves us with a kind of electrified lava containing enormous energy, produced from the fluidity, the pain, the oppression, the protest, the loss, the fear, the paranoia, and from the black fuel of the Holocaust, from the isolationism, the belonging, the lack of confidence, the over-confidence, the memories from ‘back there’, from the longing, the aversion. And from this energy a whole generation of artists, some young, some not so young, have been nourished, and while they distance themselves from it because they can no longer keep up, even then they have the need to come back to it from time to time and to recharge their batteries. This kind of energy does not, perhaps, exist in any other place in the world and it has the power to destroy those who make use of it.

I try to metaphorically run my hands, like a blind man, over the facial features of contemporary Israeli art. It is difficult to identify common uniting characteristics of its various components, but one can feel them on one’s fingertips, bubbling up from inside, spreading over the surface with the same impressive vitality and inner flame so lacking in the world of Western culture that has closed in upon itself – the world that Israeli artists yearn for, wanting to return to the embrace of the continent from which they, or their parents or their grandparents, were expelled; along with this, is a belated, restrained revenge – to prove that: “Here we are, here in the East, no less European than you are.”

A deeper search uncovers more ancient sources for Israeli art. From the Diaspora, from Judaism. As a distant shard of the vessels of the tabernacle designed by Bezalel, the first biblical artist, Judaica (ritual articles, daily vessels, adorned prayer books, etc.) produced in the Bezalel School of Art was always influenced by other cultures. Some of this can be traced in several areas of secular Israeli art, influenced by the outer trappings of Diaspora Jewry. These trappings existed in the written word alone and outward appearance was almost completely neglected. Judaica is therefore in principle an external representation, typified by ‘mystic’ symbolism, which has for the most part remained barren; only rarely is there a real interaction between it and Western secularism in Israel.

Judaica was the outer trappings of Jewish cultural life in the Diaspora, which followed the biblical (‘the divine’) proscription: “Do not represent [the divine] by any carved statue or picture”. Out of this Judaism emerged generations of artists in Israel that disavowed the written word in order to create a world of ‘foreign’ external creations; but the younger generations returned to the struggle between the word and the image (l’image) – a struggle which produces additional creative tension beyond the tension that already exists here.

Israel could have existed between the East and West if it were not for the tyranny of the same 'lost Europeanism' (diluted by contemporary Americanism), which remains at the heart of Israeli cultural life, and if not for the loss of the culture of those who came from Islamic countries. And now, Korea is the East which is beyond Israeli Orientalism – the East, where Israeli art has almost not been present till now. Is Korea the horizon beyond Europe/America?

The Artists

Orit Livne

Orit Livne captures in lively plastic drawings the fleeting moment, the twinkling of an eye before life deserts the objects and they go back to being still life (dead life). Livne's classic drawings stir up the longing of Israeli art, burning inside it, for the 'lost Europe', the lost classicism, that could impose patterns of beauty and order on the chaos of the rebellious, raw Israeli existence. These are traditional drawings, which manage to go beyond academic hollowness. The still lifes are lit by the low lighting of a continuous sunset. One can touch them, caress them. Like a soul that has left a body, the human presence has deserted the objects and the canvas laid over them, but they are here, like a saint that has risen from the dead, leaving behind its warmth, its light, the vitality of its imagined curves in the folds of the shroud, until it too disappears. There is beauty in the spaciousness of the receptacles that await them, the sensuality of the folds of the cloths that have been removed, that give themselves over to the light and to the shade, in the feeling of heaviness of some of the still lifes as opposed to the lightness of others. A storm gathers above the apples waiting to be bitten in to, wave after wave of bright darkness shines like angels crowding in the obscurity – waiting for man to falter, to take a bite, to know that at the bottom of the stormy darkness weighs down upon him a burning light - a light that makes something ugly of the offering of the apples, which flaunt their fullness in the face of the emptiness of the vessel - full and empty, full and empty.

Amnon Ben-Ami

Amnon Ben-Ami has expropriated remains of objects from their designated roles and in an intelligent, ironic game of colors and materials has turned them into shells, raw materials, reincarnations, of their familiar existence – an existence that has lost its usefulness for the sake of aesthetic contradiction, that is also very starved. Thus he creates a mishmash, a collage, a Frankensteinian nightmare on the thin border between painting and sculpture, between the artistic and the designed, between the beautiful and the ugly. Thus, in his words: "As much as possible, the work must not look like a work of art." 'A Biting Device for Two People': are they biting from the pain of continual torture, from supreme pleasure, or from both of them together? The two people: are they torturing each other, or giving each other pleasure, or is one of them torturing and the other giving pleasure? Is it possible to get to a solution, to satisfaction, to balance, in this relationship? Perhaps the balance of power is expressed in the appearance of the work: the appearance of an inferior industrial product, created in a workshop in the Third World to serve the decadent needs of the declining First World.

And here is a guiding cane for a blind man as a slender object that has been taken from the skeleton of an extinct animal. At the end are imprinted black rings, that mark more links. This is a very thin poetic connection, exact and sharp as the blade of a knife – a connection between the body, one of

whose senses is not working, and the implication of, the extension of, the compensation for the loss. Where does the 'natural' end and the 'artificial' begin? The work is done in 'lean aesthetics', which is both touching and cynical, analyzing with surgical accuracy the border between physical damage and its artistic contribution, which at the same time denies its own artistry.

An excellent work, which is not presented in this exhibition, is a rough, wooden, hand-made wheelbarrow, lovingly made as a toy by a father for his son. Attached to the wheelbarrow are two schematic drawings, which look like illustrations from an absurd instruction manual, in which a man stands, held from behind by the feet of a man in a horizontal position who is walking on the palms of his hands. The two of them are a human wheelbarrow. The duality of the still life with its human reincarnation doubled and reflected doubly in the means of expression – the drawing and the object, which warms the heart in its exact smallness.

Guy Ben-Ner

Guy Ben-Ner turns the mesh of his life as an artist - the creator amidst his immediate family - into a brilliant series of legends full of clever humor that evokes tears of laughter. Guy deals with the tension between the man, the father, the artist and his offspring, whose life wish is to take over his place in the world once they have received from him whatever they need. This oedipal tension Ben-Ner manages to turn into a comic interval. In 'Moby Dick' the hidden sexual tension becomes more acute between the father and the daughter – the tension that emerges from the seams of the story (pushing the woman, the mother, out of the picture). This tension is transformed into role play games.

As opposed to the neutralized, protected home environment, the male maintains his erotic, narcissistic base in his chest hair, which is shaved in the shape of a heart, or in clothespins that bind together into some kind of sensual human hedgehog on his still youthful body. And so, after his wings have been torn off, the father-artist sails on the wings of his imagination to distant islands in the heart of the kitchen, in the bosom of the castrating family, and, with a simple and brilliant magical touch, turns his family and his immediate environment into the objects of his dreams: the millstones hanging on his neck turn into an advantage, a creation. Thus, the contradictions between the artist and the family man, between remaining and setting sail, are resolved. In these works the best of two worlds exist: the raw, immediate, improvised, sly vigor of video language along with the more traditional language of film, which requires an investment, which is respectable and delayed. From the fusion of the two the work is born, a work that can not be catalogued – video-cinema, which brings back to life the sweeping surprise, the magic and the joy of cinema in its early years.

Romy Achituv

Like barren rain, that falls on the heads of the people crowding this world, that exists somewhere between the realistic and the digital; like mirrors that multiply letters-words-sentences to infinity; dream sentences, remarkably ordered but at the same time subversive and free like street dogs. The people that wander on the border areas between the real and the illusionary look for something to grasp a hold of, some solace they can find, but their languages merge into one other and onward from there, through programmed grammatical formulas. Romy Achituv's work is linguistics in the age of browsers, a kind of Tower of Babel of the 21st century, in which, seemingly, it is allowed on the night of language to translate all languages by pressing a button, although the internal meaning, the emotional heart, the culture, the customs, enclosed in the language and heard in it, get lost in the digital passage from one language to another.

Achituv goes beyond transforming the written language to transforming a way of life, social and cultural codes, which are a part of the language, from their natural environment to a foreign one. In this transformation he purposefully maintains the alienation, the foreignness, that are created from it and in it. Thus stands the young girl, who is taking part in a promotion campaign, and declaims a text in a language she does not understand, in circumstances which draw a crowd. The foreign text is spoken both in an environment that is natural for her and in one that is natural for him: The girl has been 'imported' there in order to present a display which includes this declamation, which she does not understand. In both places a foreignness is experienced because of the discrepancy between the girl who is presenting and between the text that is being presented. In a global network the world is stripped of reality: the written and spoken languages become bundles of so-called-words, so-called terms, so-called thought.

Yael Bartana

Like gladiators, that burst forth from the sands of time, they struggle in the male field vehicles against the limestone hills in the presence of the apathetic sea. Yael Bartana creates movies which isolate and record modern rituals as if they were tribal ceremonies, in depth and in the analytical mode of an anthropological movie, and in a constant search for beauty. From documentary raw material, with photographic and editorial manipulations, which change the raw reality, Bartana creates an ancient ritual of a society on the verge of human civilization. There is a hypnotic primeval power in her work.

Through the eye of the outside observer there is something obscure and absurd in these motorized animals, but there is also something of the beauty of the dance. Like extinct sea turtles that are thrown for the last time onto the shore they leave behind their empty shells. The soundtrack hits us with its stifling vitality, with a kind of animal-like primordial dullness. The great beauty of each and every frame speeds up and elevates these male power struggles to mythical proportions. And then the lights of the vehicles are turned on, between light and darkness, and the arena is wrapped in a Roman quality, as in Fellini's spectacles in 'Satyricon', in a warlike Spartan reincarnation. Under the car lights the texture of the hills changes and they are laid bare... as if the ribs of the landscape are being exposed.

Tirtza Even

The speed of movement of a woman obsessed by an evil spirit becomes faster and faster. Each hand moves separately as if in a miniature schizophrenic act, increasing the distress of the observer, until observation becomes a rapid 'blinking'. The speed increases until she seems to be at rest. A grating, dissonant, mechanical soundtrack with a high tone, on the border of human sound, like the shriek of a bat, increases even more the feeling of discomfort and of the evil spirit in which Even captures the objects of her creation in the simple, effective and amazingly clean language of video-art. Even stretches the senses of sight and sound to their limits.

In the second part – a night journey of obsessive peeping through the windows of imaginary neighbors, windows that flicker for a fraction of a second and disappear, shuffled like cards, blending into the next image which blends into the one that comes after that, which perhaps are nothing more than a hallucination of an overloaded brain. In the soundtrack snatches of muffled voices are heard at night from the other side of the wall. In the language of video Even creates a visual - vocal – atmospheric nocturne which touches on urban loneliness. The Hitchcock movie, 'Rear Window', is pervaded by this phenomenon.

In the third part, the screen is almost totally dark, and gradually, out of the darkness, one begins to distinguish fetal movement in the womb of this forced night, an “American Night” of digital darkness, that the artist has imposed by means of a computer program on photographs taken during the day, accompanied by the sound of bells. A slice of routine reality thus turns into a cyclical meditative activity, a ghostly sight that bubbles over onto the living while they are still alive. These video works are kind of seeds, which are imposed upon the imagination of the observer even after he/she has finished watching them.

Aya Ben-Ron

The work of Aya Ben-Ron is a mixture of traditional painting from the Far East and western comics which serves to present in the rich language of images an epic network of masculine Israeli military motifs, that deal with the care of the wounded, and the close ties between men and their suffering and terror in the face of death. Soldiers who bear the wounded in various and unusual circumstances all over the landscape – as close observers of the facial expressions of the ‘wounded’ it is difficult to say if these are not the faces of lovers giving themselves over to gestures of affection. A closer look reveals hints of horror spread around as evidence in the idyllic landscape. Amidst this decorative aesthetics one discovers signs of an apathetic, almost-humorous horror: human beings that have become mutations as a result of atomic radiation, a dead woman sprawled on a swan at sea and the face of her dead lover peaking out from the water like a vaginal scene, and the dove with two pairs of legs (!) staggering in the snow as a sign of hope that has gone awry....

In the spectacles of aesthetic horror one observes real pain and pleasure. Ben-Ron’s heroes wrestle and embrace, perform acts of violence that border on pleasure. We observe them as if they were roosters in the ring, watching them lose eyes, nostrils, mouths, sticking a finger into the orifices of the body in an imitation of the sexual act, all this in fascinating contrast to the visual, graphic way in which the story is presented. A pair of barefoot men in evening suits in murky water join together in a kind of elegant, sensual, touching dance – a mysterious, layered, beauty, which combines the atmosphere of European book illustrations from the 19th century with a touch of oriental decorativeness.

Doron Livne

Doron Livne is a Jerusalem artist. It seems that his ‘Jerusalemness’ has forced itself upon him as a calling, in contrast to the uncommitted lightness of a man of the world that lurks inside him. From this point he separates what is visible and what is read by the eye – the learning eye, the teaching eye, the creative eye – and at the same time he weaves a net of connections between their hidden, elusive meanings, of warp and woof on the desert of the walls. Onto the coordinates between the words and the images are tossed bits of personal memory and associations from art and culture. Livne analyzes seeing as reading and reading as seeing, and this is where an essential, basic element enters into all his work and that is his being a teacher. Unlike most artists who teach and separate the two domains, Livne sees teaching as a work of art and the material creation, as a lesson, not necessarily didactic, which is meant to bring new understanding to the observer.

His displays are a circular journey whose stations are absorbed into each other, a journey that one can begin at any point and which has no beginning and no end, with the illusion of ‘modularity’ that only Livne knows to take apart and put back together again. He deals with the conjurations of the secrets in the passage (the translation) from one language to another (from the mother tongue to a foreign language, from the word to the image and back again). There are times when he digs graveyards for words and images. A page written in scribal script from the book of Yehezkel is

included in Livne's exhibition "Symiosis": "And I shall open my mouth and feed it with the scroll (megilla)..." The holy as object, the language as nourishment: a possible symbiosis for Israeli art.

Grisha Bluger

This is the story of an immigrant as told by an immigrant, or among immigrants, in a country that is made up of only immigrants who take on borrowed identities and life stories. The desire to live someone else's life, a kind of leeching onto other life stories, can sometimes be courageous and obsessive... This "Zelig" in the local, artistic, literary version is the story of the end of Lipshitz Ben Mordechai, who arrived in the Shanghai of the 1920s as a stowaway and became Sam Sanzetti, and in time wandered on again, this time to this difficult country in the Near East, and died here lonely and forsaken as..... Simion Markovitch. Bluger uses this story as a point of departure for his own 'Synzettized' fantasy, made up of different points of view and angles compressed together.

The story opens with labels from original Chinese match boxes (as original as original can be in Bluger's plot, which was Lipshitz's, which was Sanzetti's, which was Markovitch's), an amazing work of miniatures of woven letters and images. It also includes a documentary-historic report (is it in fact documentary?) of the life of....., and pictures from the studio of Sanzetti in Shanghai of women and men, Chinese and white, bathing in fastidious gaiety or closed up in the fortresses of Chinese tradition...Sanzetti's story in its literary reincarnation (which perhaps is close to the truth?) fills in the blanks, enhances the glamour and mystery. Bluger's prints bring the romance to life - an encapsulation in dense, energetic, compositions, which are charged with a festive atmosphere from another time racing towards destruction. The story ends with the prints of the 'matchbox labels' having undergone an artistic mutation, looking like Imperial stamps reminiscent of early Russian avant-garde with a touch of futuristic calligraphy – kinds of codes of worlds in which the different times were mixed up, and a refined nostalgia finds in them the present and the future as a possible hope. Amid this Bulger's hero returns to the East where the horizon had been opened for him for a short time, and now perhaps will be opened again.