

The Dance

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Let me start with the bottom line: This sculpture needs to be here in Israel and not in a gallery in Seoul. It must be permanently installed in one of our leading museums. A work like this is not created every day, and certainly not by an Israeli artist. The creation is Romy Achituv's wood and honey sculpture bearing the name "The Dance," like Matisse's famous 1910 painting.

Five dancing figures—or rather, the same figure five times—bald, thin, life-size. They are naked, and bend at the waist toward the center of the circle with one leg raised, one hand reaching back, and the other holding their neighbor by the penis. The same image copied exactly five times. Constructed of layers of plywood laser-cut and glued, the five figures are designed with exacting realism using a computerized lathe and installed in a square wooden pool filled with synthetic honey made of glycerin, honey scent, and rooibos tea. Their bent backs are lopped off, and a glimpse from above reveals deep cutouts that fill up with the honey solution. An infusion tube connected through the right big toe of each dancer sends the liquid into the reservoirs. Five pumps attached to the pool maintain the steady circulation.

Achituv writes in an email: "The image I began with was of a ceremonial circle of dancing men, crowded together, steeped in their own saccharine juices. The image stuck with me for many years, and I still don't entirely understand it."

Matisse's two versions of "The Dance" come to mind: the early one in New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the second one, at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. Matisse's merry springtime idyll shows five pink maidens dancing naked in a green field, making a nearly closed circle. (Two of them are not quite touching, and leave the circle somewhat open, as if inviting us to join). The scene is a paean to freedom, to pleasure—to creation. In that sense, the sister piece of "The Dance" is Matisse's 1910 painting, "Music."

In Achituv's sculpture Matisse's five women have been replaced by five men. The idyll is here, too, in the honey that flows into the figures, into the pool, and back, in a perpetual cycle. There is, however, in this perpetual flow, a static repetition that echoes the one-dimensionality of the five dancers. What was meant to symbolize the free, open, liberated flow of movement, is instead an image of fixation. Unlike Matisse's dancing circle, Achituv's is closed within itself, impenetrable. It does not allow for expansion, i.e. our engagement. Moreover, whereas Matisse's two paintings affirm an innocent, direct, and freewheeling Fauvism (despite the exactness of the composition), Achituv's

sculpture expresses in its language a synthetic and impersonal quality: an unnatural, mechanical, sculpture in which even the honey is artificial. Between the image of the dance as an expression of liberation and release, and the contrived creative processes of the sculpture, a bitter contradiction is revealed.

Matisse's "Dance" is a celebration of health, youth, and Eros. At first glance Achituv's dancers seem oriented towards those same values, but then we notice their brutally severed backs, their gorged and hemorrhaging bodies, not to mention the IV infusion affixed to their toes.

These are, therefore, sickly, battered, tormented figures that dance in spite of their condition, as if to embody what Nietzsche calls in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* "a dance-song and satire on the spirit of gravity my supremest, powerfulest devil, who is said to be 'lord of the world.'"

And later: "At my dance-frantic foot...My heels reared aloft, my toes they hearkened—thee they would know: hath not the dancer his ear—in his toe!"

What, then, is the erotic message of Achituv's "The Dance"? In an email to Achituv, the German choreographer Antje Boekman, writes: "The way each dancer clutches the penis of the dancer next to them looks like painful masturbation...something between lust and castration."

Achituv responds: "Grasping the flaccid penis in this manner is for me more about control than sexuality, but I guess it's impossible to completely avoid the homoerotic reading."

What, then, is at the root of this strange male ritual? Boekman suggested viewing this dance as a war dance or tribal dance. Even if we accept Achituv's reading about control, we are still confronted with the loss of individuality within a social system: conformity, uniform obedience, and standardization, in which the libido, too, is subjugated to the power of the collective. Accordingly, the physical emptiness of the dancers manifests an existential emptiness: the loss of both personal identity and the authenticity of the individual.

Matisse was inspired to paint his dance circle by William Blake's 1786 Classicist painting "Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing." For us, however, the circle of dancers evokes the hora circles of the early Zionist pioneers that appears time and again in the paintings, drawings and prints of Saul Raskin, of Moshe Matus, Lea Grundig, P. K. Henich and others, even in a sculpture by Batya Lishanski, not to mention in countless historical photographs. The hora circle confirmed the all-important tenet of "togetherness," the ecstasy of being swept away in collective pioneering experience, and even the stamping on the ground in order to be released from it.

Is Achituv's circle dance a nod to the collectivism that castrates the spirit of the individual? Perhaps it's an ironic monument: A fountain in a pool designed to glorify the pioneering generation.

I am reminded of [Eli Shamir's](#) 1983 painting, "Four Dancers in the Valley." Shamir's dancers engage in a ritualistic dance in the heart of the Jezreel Valley. The brown tones of their bodies complement the brown tones of the earth. They rise from the ground in a manner reminiscent of Raphael's "Three Graces," endowing the valley, the breeding ground of the Hebrew pioneering spirit, and the artist's childhood home, with a mythical dimension. The covenant of myth, classics and feminine power is a covenant between the artist and a place, between the artist and ancestral values. How deep, therefore, is the gulf between Shamir's dancing circle and Achituv's, whose pool is a kind of non-place, and whose force, the liquid flowing through the figures, is devoid of any trace of myth?

Efrat Natan's 2002 installation "[Raising the Scythe](#)" is another spiritual ancestor of Achituv's sculpture. The installation is comprised of a cluster of a dozen scythes leaning on and into each other, echoing the rotational movement of the raising of the scythe, but also the hora circle. At the same time it weds the pioneer-settlement image with the image of the scythe of mortality. The dance of labor and creation has become a dance of death.

Achituv's last foray into honey comes to mind, too: his 2012 installation based on Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's last Tape." [I wrote about the piece](#) in 2013, contextualizing it within the artist's previous video works, which emphasized the tension between the standardization of the letters appearing on the screen and the viewer's physical intervention in the projected image. This piece now seems like a prologue to the tension between the generic standardization of the dancers and the freedom of physical expression inherent in the concept of dance. On that piece—and perhaps relevant to this one—Achituv wrote: "In my mind, this exposé of the life of a bitter and self-contemptuous 69 year-old man, disillusioned with the hubris of his youth, and with the narratives that had fed his choices and sacrifices, echoes the narrative of a 65-year-old state examining its own childhood and adolescent myths."

The honey poured in that work: 300kg of it flowed down from high above Krapp, a veritable stream of honey that spilled, sprayed and accumulated on Krapp's desk and from there, dripped to the ground.

As I wrote then: "What begins as long, gossamer strands of honey ends up lying in a mass of thick goeey muck waiting to be cleaned up. The vat from which it drips evokes some supreme organic being, an unseen creature consisting entirely of discharge and intake, lacking sight or cognition, a sort of blind, classic Beckettian 'God'...As the sweetest sap trickles down from above, it is worth recalling that honey – or nectar – was the food of the gods on Mt. Olympus, and thus in the present context it becomes an

ironic, bitter, version of divine benevolence. Furthermore, the memory that in ancient Egypt honey symbolized the tears of Ra, the sun god, intensifies the irony of the heavens' silence in the face of Krapp's existential shame—in the face of our existential shame...the honey emitting from the tube in the video is like an orgasm that lasts exactly as long as the words. It is an erotic 'action painting' of language, confirmation of one's continued potency (in Beckett, as long as the characters are talking, they are still alive). Except that the orgasm is not an organism, just as the words have no real existential substance."

The honey flowing from the bodies of the dancers into the honey pool and back again into their bodies is the same honey as wretched Krapp's. The honey flowing through the veins—and recall the pumps that controlled the flow of honey between the museum halls of Fridericianum Castle, [Joseph Beuys's 1977 artwork](#) for the sixth Documenta—is the same ironic grace, the existential shame, the flow of artificial semen towards a mock orgasm.

As we may recall, Matisse's "The Dance" was also a statement about art, an affirmation of sensory spontaneity and liberated creativity. What does Achituv's sculpture tell us about art? Perhaps it laments the loss of such values in postmodern culture. Or as Nietzsche put it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Only in the dance do I know how to speak the parable of the highest things."

Translation: Ilana Sichel