

"A Matter of Distance"

Catalogue text for *Desert Cliché: Israel Now – Local Images*

Catalogue: 138 pages, English / Hebrew, 18 artist texts, introduction by **Galia Bar Or** and two additional essays by **Amy Cappellazzo** ("The Story of the Foreign Eye in Four Parts") and **Yael Zerubavel** ("From Blooming the Desert to Shattered Myths").
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In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes asserts that a society makes itself images because it needs them as magical objects in order to legitimize the existing social order. *Desert Cliché* focuses on typical distinct Israeli images, on trivial stereotypes and clichés which are linked to the shaping of the Israeli identity; those identification badges which played a meaningful role throughout the years in constituting and cultivating the social order. The works in this show span a few principal axes, which have accompanied Israeli art from its outset: holy places, tourist sites and evasive borders, sacred earth, the myth of heroism, military clichés, states of emergency, anxiety and terror, and the symbiosis in the relations of the "Arab" and the "Israeli".

Desert Cliché was conceived in America. It was curated for the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Florida, and is making its premiere performance in Israel, before leaving to the States, as part of a joint project of the Israeli Forum of Art Museums (among them the Museum of Art, Ein Harod and the Herzliya Museum of Art). It is the advantage of distance that gave birth to the exhibition and allowed me to consider "Israeliness" from the outside; to adopt, as much as possible, the point-of-view of the foreign eye, that which is not a captive of the intensive everyday life in Israel. I sought to exploit the situation of "exile" in order to look from a distance, be an onlooker as it were; to search for the angle you see from abroad (Miami-New York) and perhaps cannot see from home (Tel Aviv-Jerusalem), and generate from the advantage of attentiveness ("What do the foreigners think of us Israelis?") some thoughts whose reflections can be seen in the exhibition. The collaboration with an American curator of an Italian origin, Amy Cappellazzo, reinforced the cultural distance, making it more complex.

The principal underlying our choice of works is linked to the fact that the banal representation clichés of "Israeliness" are also those which sustain the image reservoir of an average American viewer with regard to Israel; a viewer who feeds on images that have been transmitted through the media: camels, women soldiers, sabras, kibbutz, Sabbath candlesticks, holy places, military myths, legends of heroism, and other stereotypes - hackneyed images, "Israeliana for tourists". The exhibition utilizes these images in order to reverse them and expose the intricacies, the irony, and the superfluity of meanings characterizing the manner in which contemporary Israeli art deals with the refuting of such clichés. Instead of the camels, the blooming of the desert, and the legends of heroism, one can see here the very same utopian symbols, only without their original aura, exposed to criticism and to a questioning reflexive gaze.

The "desert" cliché (almost like "Hava Nagila") is the most common representative romantic-exotic cliché regarding Israel as an arid place, in the context of (the physical and cultural) wilderness as well as the miracle of its reclamation. It was selected as a title for the show being a metaphor, an umbrella-term for the diversity of clichés and stereotypes associated with Israel and the Zionist ethos. Thus, underlying the exhibition, which reexamines the boundaries of language and interpretation (what can be conveyed and what cannot), are the gaps in intercultural understanding (how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived through foreign eyes looking at us from the outside). Will the foreign, intrusive gaze, attempting to decipher us through the myths it knows from the media, be forever a romantic gaze lurking for anyone who glimpses into a foreign culture? Is the foreign eye necessarily also an innocent eye? What happens when quintessential signs of one culture are reproduced in another culture with an exceedingly different set of values and susceptibilities?

Desert Cliché is not a historical exhibition in the sense that it does not trace the age of innocence – those days when the aura of these charged images had not yet been contaminated. It deals with stereotypes, yet it does not offer a generational cross-section that reflects their transformations within the short history of Israeli art. Likewise, it does not discuss the recycling of similar subversive strategies which were employed in the seventies by other Israeli artists (such as Igaël Tumarkin,

Micha Ullman, Joshua Neustein, Avital Geva, Michal Na'aman, Yair Garbuz, Raffi Lavie, and Tamar Getter, who were the first to wipe the dust from stale stereotypes). Rather, it endeavors to sound out an accumulation of current voices which together, and singularly, reflect the state-of mind of the past few years, offering a fresh gaze at Israeliness, aired-out from the mothballs of the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet).

The selection of works exhibited here refers to a given historical moment, representing some of the predominant trends in Israeli art during the past few years. Some of the works would be familiar to Israeli audience as they were already exhibited in Israel in other contexts. Situating them around a panoramic spectrum of issues which pertain to Israeli identity is the novelty here. In this manner, the exhibition endeavors to convey to foreign eyes something of the complex and problematic fabric of life in Israel toward the close of the 1990s, and thus deepen and stratify the gaze, both artistically and culturally-politically, on current Israeli trends and events. Exhibiting the show in Israel, on the eve of its transfer to America, will allow the Israeli viewer to trace a fascinating dynamic process associated with the way in which an entire world of images, a coherent language of signs and symbols, transforms, collapses and is recharged with new contents, in a never-ending process of introspection.

Holy Places / Tourist Sites / Evasive Borders

Throughout the history of Israeli art, the Mediterranean sea motif – the symbol of immigration (coming into the land) on the one hand, and of the Arab threat to throw us out on the other – has been pushed out of the repertoire, as though a plot against the sea has been devised in Israeli painting.¹ In contrast, the desert – the shore, the earth, the land, the borders with the other – is clearly present.¹ In fact, from its outset, alongside the establishment of Zionism, Israeli art has been dealing with "places". In the current show alone, it is possible to count numerous places: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Mount of Olives, Tel-Hai, Nes Ziona, the Valley of the

¹ Gideon Ofrat, *Back to the Sea*, Israel Art Press, Israel, 1990, pp. 124-125 [Hebrew].

Cross, Gethsemane, Ammunition Hill, Rishon Le'Zion, Gaza, Temple Mount – ancient holy places juxtaposed with new, strictly secular ones; "their" places alongside "ours". In his book *Back to the Sea* (1990) Gideon Ofrat, an Israeli art historian, offers a simple explanation: "There is no escape from admitting that the realization of Zionism as a whole emphasized soil over sea [...] the ploughing, the Tower and Stockade, the home, the scaffoldings etc. are themselves the very realization of Zionism."²

The Western Wall and the Mediterranean sea are two distinct Israeli landscape clichés, perhaps the quintessential ones; East and West, two poles of the Zionist paradox, two key sites around which the loose ends of Israeliness may be re-tied. A convenient point of departure for the latter may be **Dana and Boaz Zonshine's** video work (*Untitled*, 1996): Through a fictional computer hybridization, two symbols that have been well masticated in Israeli culture, the components of the eternal binary opposition – the sea and the Wall – are stitched together rendering a new landscape with horrifying meanings. On the surface, a pastoral landscape scene, the motion of wavelets and the rustle of cypresses. But even to a "foreign eye" something here seems distorted: the gaze is inverted, a reversal of the cliché (this is neither the "gaze out towards the horizon" suggesting hope, nor the romantic gaze into the sunset); it is directed from the outside in, from the heart of the sea to the coastline, carried on the waves until it stops. Something is misleading, blocking vision: not a promenade, not golden sands, not the Tel Aviv hotels, not Haifa Bay nor the coastal curve of Acre. The shoreline is blocked by a wall, the gate is locked. The safe shore was pushed aside in favor of the Western Wall area, and the bathers have been replaced by praying figures, whose monotonous body movements are perfectly coordinated with the motion of the waves. This is the sole occurrence in the video – a minimalist movement conveying stagnation. What happened to the geographic and mental space that extended between these two sites? How was the distance between the sea and Jerusalem omitted? Where is the coastal plain?

² See Sarit Shapira, *Routes of Wandering* (exhibition catalogue), The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1992. Shapira indeed compared the empty expanses of the sea to the wilderness of the desert; however, she also noted that the sea is read more as a metaphor for a primeval flow in the spirit of the Jungian subconscious and is related to threatening apocalyptic contexts such as flood and decline, in contrast to the image of the desert which serves her throughout the essay as an ultimate metaphor for a no man's land, for nomadism and lack of center – principle traits of the Israeli art which she analyzes (p. 198; p.146 Hebrew version).

Where is the mountain area? Where is the earth and where is the desert? The vast distance between these two sites is gone. The eastern border touches the western. Beyond the apocalyptic-prophetic meanings raised by the work, it contains an accurate visual condensation of the essence of the Zionist-Israeli paradox: religious/secular, spiritual/material, ascetic/hedonistic, old/new, East/West, here/there; that which is not stitched together in reality is achieved by fictitious means on the computer screen.

In her work *Cold Blood (A Poem in Three Parts, 1996)*, created specifically for Desert Cliche, **Hilla Lulu Lin** manipulates familiar images, undermining official representations of culture which populate the Israeli collective unconsciousness. She presents two prints of computer-generated images: Tel Aviv beach versus the El Aksa mosque on Temple Mount, and in between these – a computerized postcard-size photograph: two eyes blinding in their emptiness. Here too, as in Dana and Boaz Zonshine's work, there is something oppressive and menacing: the skies above these two sites are excessively red and oddly shaped; neither storm clouds nor sunset; possibly streaming lava, possibly rivers of blood – an effect achieved by computerized scanning of a photograph of raw meat. In comparison to the universal contents characterizing the general context of Lin's art, this is an exceptional work in its reference to the specific local context. The visual clichés² that were computer scanned – two such familiar, radical poles of Israelity: the stereotypical image of the most sacred religious site of Islam (Temple Mount) on the one hand, and the banal image of secular hedonistic existence (Tel Aviv) on the other – have undergone a sterilizing treatment, expropriated from their context and hurled into a delusive apocalyptic space. The eyes – eyes of the artist, the witness - see nothing; the gory-sky is reflected in them as well. The streams of blood threaten both sides of the struggle. And the worshipers worship. The bathers bathe, as if nothing happened.

In Lin's delirious reality, the discontent, repulsion and distress are achieved by hybridization. Cold bloodedly she confronts Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, crossbreeding common, mundane scenes with bloody skies. On the one hand, "Tel Aviv" – the essence of modern Israeliness, the city of the secular religion, a new city devoid of heroic history, stretching along the shore; a city that developed as it went along, without a plan, and throughout the years has become a center of culture,

entertainment and commerce, as well as a bustling and trendy metropolis, which looks west towards New York and London. On the other, the Jerusalem "Temple Mount" – site of contention most sacred to the three monotheistic religions; a transcendental place sinking under the burden of history. Prosaic urbanism versus romantic sublime, both equally threatened under the Mediterranean sky.

Does the metaphorical recurrence of the sea in the current exhibition reflect the difficulty felt by young artists in belonging to this specific place? Does it express a political-emotional-existential stand or rather contain cultural criticism? In confronting the open Tel Aviv beach, the ultimate icon of secularism which yearns for the West, with the Western Wall, a residue from the Temple of David which is infused with an awareness of destruction and death, or alternatively situating it under bloody sky, there is not much room for doubt: the Mediterranean sea in this exhibition is an apocalyptic site.

In realistic black-and-white paintings from the beginning of the 1980's **David Reeb** depicted a tranquil Tel Avivian atmosphere threatened by an air raid, as if meaning to say, "this is what it's like when terror hovers over our heads". Subsequently, he has followed for years the daily course of the Intifada in a series of paintings based on press photos taken by professional photo-journalists. Reeb included within these paintings the frame of the film or the contact-sheet, emphasizing the fact that these are paintings based on photographs, thus reinforcing the validity of the painted events as facts taken from the scene, and at the same time pointing to the very act of testifying. His main interest was the routine arrests, the banality of the occupation and oppression tactics.³ Concurrently he developed three additional channels of expression: abstract paintings based on a grid of repeated patterns, landscape paintings (urban and rural), and paintings of company and commodity logos (such as *CAMEL/TIME* [1989] exhibited here). Recently (1995) he began working on a new series – Holy Places – which includes "The Western Wall", "The Dome of the Rock",

³ In both cases, Lin chose common worn-out visual images: "Tel Aviv" as shot from the sea in a touristy postcard pose, and "Temple Mount" shaped as an official representation of a sacred place as early as the 19th century by pilgrims and travellers who drew the landscapes of the Land of Israel in an Orientalist-romantic-sublime atmosphere. The landscape cliché of the "Temple Mount" included "shadows in the foreground of the painting with a miniature, exotic, picturesque Arab presence." Gideon Ofrat, *Back to the Sea*, p. 416 [Hebrew].

"The Tower of David", and "Jerusalem the Golden" – all acrylic on canvas, yet in black-and-white. The recurring motif in all of the paintings in this series, at times appearing on the right at others on the left, is the bar code, this electronic designation of lines and numerals used for encoding the prices of commodities. The image of "Jerusalem" as "the capital of Israel" (a divided city defined as unified), the official representation of the city, is presented here ironically, as a piece of merchandise, an object for bargaining, open to negotiations, like an "Israeli Disneyland".

Here too, as in the works of Zonshine and Lin, the iconic landscape clichés are based on a long visual tradition of picturesque drawings of the "holy places"; a tradition which in the 19th century focused mainly on "Jerusalem": on "the Western Wall" as an icon of destruction and redemption, and on the "Tower of David" as the symbol of "Zion", the embodiment of the Zionist aspiration for a Jewish statehood. The official representation of these places, both in the Jewish tradition (the Bezalel works) and in the Christian pilgrimage tradition, has been in flattened paintings, devoid of perspective and can be seen on touristy objects and souvenirs, such as stamps, rings, soaps, lithographs, wooden cups, embroidered works etc.³ In the 1930's, the Eretz-Israeli painters continued to paint Jerusalem from an Orientalist-romantic point-of-view, thus establishing the official image of Jerusalem as a mythological city and the eternal capital of Israel. Artists such as Anna Ticho, Joseph Budko, Ya'acov Steinhardt and Leopold Krakauer painted the surroundings of Jerusalem in realistic black-and-white paintings, mostly lithographs, charcoal drawings or pencil drawings. Reeb's choice to paint the entire series in black-and-white echoes this chapter in Eretz-Israeli painting inasmuch as it highlights the link to the photographs; adding the bar code undermines the validity of the official image, reducing its "eternity". The erasure of color in "Jerusalem the Golden" renders this move even more extreme: the gold accompanying the images of sanctity associated with the city after the Six-Day War (1967), adding to it a touristy, commercialized and vulgar touch, was obscured into a "colorfulness of pungent tragic contrasts."⁴

⁴ Gideon Ofrat, *Back to the Sea*, pp. 413-426 [Hebrew].

Michal Heiman, like Reeb, manipulates the diversified and illusive tourist industry. She traces key sites on the Israeli tourist route, focusing on the most famous ones, which are spread out like transit stations on the historical course of wars and conquests. Yet, she attempts to harness all these and point them in another direction; one of collecting, locating, sorting and examining the modes in which the official Zionist narrative is photographed and represented. Her varied "sources" spread over a wide spectrum: textbooks, archives, books celebrating the glory of victory, the daily press and family albums, from which she draws sample findings of the archaeology of representation. Michal Heiman returns to a period when the identity of the "Israeli" was crystallized; out of the icon reservoir and the visual cliches she constructs the specimen of the Zionist ethos, the essence of the narrative, like a concentrated capsule of the Israeli photography culture. One of the principles guiding her in the act of sorting is that of locating and appropriating anonymous photographs, whose photographer is unknown (and their interpretation is thus open). This move is part of an ongoing project called *Photographer Unknown*, which Heiman is persuing for the past few years. Her collections are rich with family albums – an "archive" of another kind, more intimate, concealing pieces of private everyday memories, lacking glory and splendour. Having been torn out of family albums, these photographs serve as "ready mades" through which she attempts to reconstruct the mosaic of the Zionist narrative and propose the ultimate collective album of the average Israeli. In a work meeting held during the preparation of the exhibition, Heiman spread before us in a semicircle the variety of photographs which served as a basis for her work for *Desert Cliché Human Bank*. This move was similar to the laying out of Tarot cards: Would you like Herzl? Perhaps the Zionist Congress? Or maybe some photo taken from a "victory album"? Which war would you prefer? Indeed, an initial browsing in her material reveals that most of us, Israelis, have similar, if not identical, memories of the past: a faded photo of Horah dancing from the country's first years, at least one photograph from some heroic war, which could have easily found its way into one of the "victory photo albums", or a photo with the cousins from America by the Western Wall or next to the dedication sign of Ammunition Hill.

The issue is, then, the ritual of being photographed – people facing the lens, in fixed poses, repeating gestures which are dictated by some representative meta-

choreography: a boy and a girl by a tank, arms raised up from a military jeep, circles of sweeping *Horah*, people photographed in the landscape of young Israel, before the Green Line [The common name designating the 1967 border demarcation, before the Six-Day War], past the Green Line; fluid borders which change with each decade. One of the interesting conclusions presented by Heiman's study is the fact that in the photo album of the average Israeli people often tend to be photographed at tourist sites that are related to the myth of heroism, and mainly next to signs, whether consecration plaques linked to the history of the specific site or signs marking the mobility of the borderline. The fact that the country's borders are so fluid and change from war to war affects the ways in which people are photographed: it seems that through their physical presence Israelis mark their desire to set the borderline, as a permanent outpost in a temporary place, perpetuated in the camera's eye, thus undermining history's inconsistency.

Gilad Ophir, unlike Heiman, is interested in places lacking sanctity; in gray sites devoid of a historical aura or heroic past. And what is more prosaic than "Kiryat Rishon" – a new inspirationless suburb recently erected on the sand dunes next to Rishon Le'Zion? His interest in building sites, in the documentation of residential areas on the outskirts of the large commuter suburbs (Rishon Le'Zion, Holon, Ashdod, Rehovot, Or Akiva, Givat Olga) is linked to his prolonged preoccupation (from the beginning of the 1990's) with the concepts of "urbanization", the "conquering of the desert", with landscape architecture and the urban expansion in the outskirts of the periphery. In his clean and meticulous, always black-and-white photographs Ophir documents with a cold and "objective" gaze the accelerated construction work in Israel during the past few years – an unprecedented rate of building in variegated eclectic American and European styles. In this illuminating typological-archival project Ophir situates an unflattering mirror before the essence of the "Israeli dream", reversing the meanings of one of the oldest cliches - that of "conquering the desert" and its "blooming".

A lot has been written about the Israeli contractors' architecture, on the lack of attention to the local-Arab building tradition, which has always been described as one that harmoniously integrates into its surroundings. Much sharp criticism has been voiced against the assault on the landscape and its rape as part of the

victorious machoistic "conquest" of the land. Ophir, however, shifts the critical-ecological stand toward a social direction: in the current show he exhibits 12 booklets [*Untitled* (1992)] containing typology of building sites and models of residential buildings which he assembled and catalogued in a process of archival compilation.⁵ The booklets are placed on a pedestal, offering themselves to browsing, like sample catalogues, as if this is all about selecting a carpet or upholstery. Browsing through the catalogues exposes one facet of Israeli society, which, to quote Rona Sela, the curator of Ophir's latest exhibition, "adopts building styles belonging to other cultural traditions (France, Switzerland, Spain) and not always compatible with the local climate. [...] These alienated constructions are replete with nouveau riche features – outsize dimensions, stylized fences, kitschy capitals... [...] These hybridized motifs of houses lacking proper architectural design are like an ironic fulfillment of the forgotten dream of the pioneer settlers – a contemporary cultural absurdity."⁶

In *Kiryat Rishon IV, No. 52* (1992) Gilad Ophir exposes another facet of the contractors' strategy of seduction. He shows the bare backside of a sign situated next to a desolate construction site. The front of the sign is turned toward a new row of a housing project, presumably that of "Kiryat Rishon", a suburb of a suburb. The choice of a rear angle, the rugged land angle, conceals the pathos-filled promise hidden in the commercial signs: Is this "West Park" or maybe "Le Cartier – a Prestigious Cottage Neighborhood"? The pretentious and absurd titles, products of the hard work of copywriters and public relations staff who tend to accompany such projects, seek to infuse foreign stylized glory and grandeur into the Israeli bourgeois dream of home-and-garden; to grant a uniform appearance to the average dream of happiness, an appearance which blurs economic differences. In her essay printed in the catalogue accompanying Ophir's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tali Tamir, an art critic, described this phenomenon as a "Disneyland of happy abodes dotting the local map", adding that "Ophir immortalizes these 'shrines' of beauty but

⁵ This is the original format in which Ophir first exhibited his model houses series. Later, in 1995, in an exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (curator: Rona Sela), he enlarged and confronted fragments from this series. See Gilad Ophir: *Cyclopean Walls* (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1995.

⁶ Rona Sela, "Emptied Walls and Constructed Landscapes", *Ibid.* [Trans. Vivianne Barsky].

is fully aware of their refutedness. He is momentarily excited by their splendor, but immediately repelled by their inherent pretentiousness [...] The suburb has turned into a kind of perversity - an uncontrollable longing, reflecting deep-seated desires, which exploit the last vestiges of a burnt-out Zionist zeal."⁷

"At the end of the day, the shoes are as dusty as after a month of reserve duty in the desert. The road to one of the great Israeli dreams still passes through sand dunes and rocky soil. Of course, it's no longer a question of a pioneer enterprise – conquering the desert or draining the swamps. Not even a Zionist settlement project. Simply a house-and-garden, a duplex, penthouse, garden terrace, sun terrace, or at least with a preparation for airconditioning, at a good location, preferably with a view of the sea, or at least of a prospective local country club, which is bound to be built here, on a "Dutch-style" tiled alley, ten minutes' drive from Tel Aviv, eight from Kfar Saba, or five from the center of Rishon LeZion." [Gideon Levy, "The Company Will See to Install a Jacuzzi in the Cottage", *Ha'aretz Supplement*, April 20, 1996, pp. 14-16 [Hebrew] as quoted in Ophir's exhibition catalogue, *Ibid.*]

In the tour of residential areas, **Philip Rantzer** leads us from "Rishon LeZion" to "Nes Ziona", another old settlement established in the early Zionist pioneering days. In a work entitled *The Nes Ziona Box* – taken from a series of works which bear the same caption – Rantzer returns to his childhood, to the shack his parents were given when they immigrated from Romania to Israel in the beginning of the 1960's. The old wooden shack, with three small windows and a tiny door, is spread out here into a flattened, elongated facade, painted like a child's depiction of a brick wall, with vertical and horizontal stripes of black ink. This possibly-box-possibly-house is situated within a showcase, preserved behind glass as an eternal keepsake. "The Nes Ziona Box", a private invention of Rantzer named after the "Keren Kayemet Box" [The Blue (money) Box of the Jewish National Fund], no longer functions as a box, a container, a receptacle or a house. Writing and pronouncing its Hebrew name in Latin letters is also part of an alienation strategy which deconstructs the meaning, as a metaphorical act aimed at the elimination of the "solid content" of the Zionist

⁷ Tali Tamir, "Fish-Bird and Cypress-Building: On the Photography of Gilad Ophir", *Ibid.* [Trans. Vivianne Barsky].

ethos: "Nes Ziona" is urgently asking to be translated into Hebrew: Is this the "Nes of Zion" (nes in the sense of "miracle" or perhaps nes denoting "flag")?

In Rantzer's work everything is made out of fragments, out of pieces of objects that have seen better days. The colors are always in shades of brown, beige, muddy gray; the colors of sawdust of the South Tel Aviv carpentry workshops. Shreds of paper, parts of furniture, threadbare carpets, old engines, remains of a human junkyard permeated with the memory of use which seems to have clung to them, still humming their music in a rusty tune – objects loosely interconnected, and yet they stand their ground. Turned on its back and hanging from the ceiling, the jocular airplane (*Untitled*, 1995) – half-airplane-half-man (a human spine painted on its belly, and a baby-plane as though carried on its back), made of boards that must have had a different, more functional use once – is likewise characterized by a playful-nostalgic and unthreatening nature. By personifying the airplane, which in Israel is immediately associated with militarism and wars, Rantzer grants it a sympathizing poetical tinge, which softens the image, moderating its traumatic militaristic overtones, practically turning it into an unarmful toy, a friendly airplane.

Sacred Earth/ Myth of Heroism/ Military Clichés

The Israeli conceptual artist Efrat Natan once stated that unlike American Earth Art which was perceived as a preoccupation with Utopian-cosmic-metaphysical ideas as part of the struggle over the definition of alternative spaces for the museum, the "earth" of Israel is a national myth, thus "earth works" here are condemned from the outset to politicization being influenced by the very roots of Israeli essentialism.⁴ Indeed, Israeli art seems to have tired of the irksome delving into the myth of the land worship, has calmed down from searching for the historical roots that have sunk, as it were, into the depth of earth. "The sanctity of the land", "the historical right", "the sacred bond between men and earth", "the pastoral tendency to form an affinity with the smell of dankness" – all these have been discussed endlessly, from

the angles of both criticism and longing throughout the short history of Israeli art, thus received an excessive amount of commentary.⁸

Ariane Littman-Cohen plunges into these hackneyed cliches, giving them a final twist before evaporation: In an installation entitled *Holy Land for Sale* prepared especially for *Desert Cliché* she exports 150 bags of sacred soil to America, marketing holy earth to all and sundry in easy-to-carry, handy-sized packages. The shapes of the bags are reminiscent of cement sacks (construction, blooming the desert) or sandbags (military posts, trenches), which have been miniaturized to convenient dimensions. A collective cultural memory has been packed into bags of earth, just like holy water or souvenirs from the holy land - relics taken by people to the Diaspora.⁹ This project has been carried out in collaboration with "Arim" (in Hebrew: cities, towns), a government-owned company for local development whose logo is printed on each of the bags. Being responsible for all infrastructural preparations preceding the building of new towns throughout the country, "Arim" has been preoccupied for more than twenty years with the blooming of the desert (literally), with all the derived ecological and topographical disruptions. "Arim", the post-Zionist version of the Keren Kayemet Le'Israel (the Jewish National Fund), represents the technological development of the country: no longer a "Holy Land with camels", but rather a capitalistic industrialized state like any other Western country. The "blooming of the desert" here is not a metaphor for planting forests (Keren Kayemet), but rather an expression of advanced technological urbanization. This is not the first time Ariane Littman-Cohen has collaborated with a local commercial company. She did it before when she installed a greenhouse (*Nature Morte*, 1992) in collaboration with the Keren Kayemet Le'Israel. Later (*None of Your Sting, None of Your Honey*, 1994) she worked with the Kibbutz factory "Jordan Honey", which gave her the option to penetrate and manipulate their commercial logo. More recently she

⁸ Yitzhak Danziger's ritualistic attitude to the land, and Micha Ullman's anthropological-digging attitude reflect this charged preoccupation with "earth" in Israeli art. "In 1972 [Ullman] dug pits at the Arab village Messer and at kibbutz Metzfar, and filled each pit with earth that had been dug from the other pit, as a symbolic action of political and existential unity." His pit sculptures are reminiscent of trenches, ditches or graves. See Yigal Zalmona, *Routes of Wandering*, p. 210 [Trans. Richard Flantz].

⁹ In a similar manner, Marcel Duchamp made his glass ampoule – *Paris Air* (1919). According to the Jewish tradition, bags carrying earth from the Holy Land to the Diaspora were used to cover the eyes of the dead buried in foreign soil.

issued cans of purified "Holy Air" under the auspices of a commercial company for air monitoring and cleaning. Joining with commercial entities for the purpose of art necessarily implies a certain degree of subordination for commercial interest, subjecting them to her needs and critical gaze: *Holy Land for Sale* can be discussed in contexts of domesticating nature, being uprooted, wandering, detachment, nomadism and lack of concrete territory to rely on, just as they can be read politically, as a metaphor for transferring areas of land from one hand to another.

In Israel, "land", "earth" and "soil" are charged terms, saturated with all the connotations of heroism and burial, like an open wound in the fabric of normalcy. In the beehives installation – *Virgin of Israel & Her Daughters* (1994) – Littman-Cohen draws nearer to the edges of the wounds, digging into it, this time from a less ironical angle. A dozen beehives, lit in red from within, are scattered around the display space, their top panel wide open; possibly sarcophagi, possibly tombs. The emptied, functionless beehives evoke a memorial site. Originally, the beehive installation was created for Tel Hai '94. [An exhibition taking place every few years in Tel Hai, the fortress of the Israeli myth of heroism, in the Upper Galilee. This year the exhibition was curated by Gideon Ofrat, who chose to exhibit the works in military tents.] There, in that specific context, the work was perceived as a feminist response to the Israeli-male ethos of heroism associated with the Tel Hai legend.¹⁰ Being a female monarchy headed by a queen-mother, the beehive embodies connotations which highlight an advanced level of cooperation, reception and giving (and, of course, the positive side of the female stereotype: nature, motherhood and organicity), and conversely, great cruelty toward the males, whose role comes to an end at the moment of fertilization – all these have shed new light on questions regarding the place of women within the Zionist ethos of heroism, and at the same time draw attention to horrifying parallels concerning the private mother who sends her sons to war, and the public mother (the motherland) who claims her victims.

¹⁰ The Tel Hai myth has been treated in the past by other Israeli artists. The most outstanding was Tamar Getter, whose work has been evolving for years around the Israeli myth of heroism. In the *Tel Hai Courtyard* she confronted Renaissance sketches of the ideal town with a schematic sketch of the Galilean Tel Hai courtyard.

A close examination of the open beehives reveals mysterious signs carved on the inner walls: grooves and burrows, scratches and engravings in the wood. These are the tracks of the wax moth, a beehive parasite which leaves its gnawing marks on the honeycombs, evidence of the slow process of annihilation of life in the beehive. The mythological myth of plenty, "the Land of Milk and Honey" is paradoxically intertwined here with the extinction cliché, "a land which devours its inhabitants". These "lyrical" signs of decay, impressions of the aesthetic violation, were interpreted as a metaphor for the handwriting of the artist, who interferes as a parasite in nature.¹¹ Yet, they can also be understood as an expression of the dialectic of chaos and order; the beehives as embodying the very act of order enforced by man on the chaotic nature. In this context it is possible to go even further and find parallels in the work of the British artist, Damien Hirst, to the idea of freezing the processes of deterioration, degeneration and decomposition by artificial means. It is also possible to attribute to these signs a similar meaning to that arising from Christian Boltanski's tin cans - traces of time and passing life; a collective subconsciousness of death associated with the ritual of the fallen and the dead.

In the past few years, following the serial slaughter of numerous sacred cows of Israeli society in a consistent and sweeping process that is usually traced back to the sobering up from the trauma of the Yom Kippur War (1973),¹² the army has also undergone deconstruction. The military myth, which for years served as the principal glue, the most resistant collective focal point, has been undermined in various frameworks. Subsequent to the nostalgic stage, changes and transformations have occurred in the public attitude to the myth of heroism; in Israeli art, the echoes of this process can be seen from as early as the 1960's (Igal Tumarkin). In Israel of the 1990's the image of the "soldier" and the "woman soldier" are already visual clichés. The old Israeli machoism has turned into one more marketing option (both commercial and ideological). Hence it was possible to see in recent years movie

¹¹ Nella Cassouto, in a brochure printed in conjunction with the installation of the beehives at the Artists' House, Jerusalem, 1995.

¹² I refer to the so-called "Critiques of Zionism", which is perhaps the local version of the critique of enlightenment and modernism. The first fraction in the military legend is generally marked in the Yom Kippur War which was perceived as a trauma; the second fraction occurred during the Lebanon War (1982) when for the first time the very justification for the war was questioned (though in very specific circles). See Yehiam Weitz, "Late Tears", *Politica* 3, Sept. 1985, pp. 36-37 [Hebrew].

commercials featuring an exhausted soldier sipping a cold drink from the hands of a beautiful woman-officer, just as it was possible to observe in the 1996 election campaign of one of the largest religious parties in Israel religious combat-soldiers running on the hills, selling ideology ("Zionism with soul"). In *Desert Cliché*, the artists Nir Hod, Meir Gal, Gil Shachar and Pinchas Cohen Gan, each in his own way, confront the military ethos.

Born in 1970, **Nir Hod** did not grow up on Ariel Sharon's and Meir Har-Zion's legends of heroism, and it would be safe to assume that he never dreamt of going to Petra.¹³ Nevertheless, the military myth preoccupies him, firing his imagination. In the works exhibited here one can see figures dressed in army uniform; in part fictive uniform with added fictional unit tags, false symbols of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) corps (Star of David), military ranks and decorations, and other clearly unrelated attributes. All the figures are characterized by an obscure sexual identity: at times the "woman-soldier" is the artist himself, at others it is the famous rock singer, Aviv Gefen, object of adoration for a great many Israeli youths.¹⁴ The choice of the "woman-soldier" image as a stereotype is linked to Hod's preoccupation with romanticism, beauty and exoticism. In this sense, the myth concerning the "fearless fighters" and the "savages imbued with vision" is at best an assembly of exotic images, used to evoke an emotional impact. His "woman-soldier" is an archetype of femininity, symbol of a total woman, whose costume, the army uniform which is seemingly contradictory to her femininity, renders her somewhat kinky, seductive and perverted.

The Women Soldiers were exhibited originally in contexts of gender and sexuality (in *Meta-Sex 94*), as an example for a flexible model of identity, allowing complete

¹³ Trans. notes: Both Meir Har Zion, a veteran Zionist fighter, and Ariel Sharon, current National Infrastructure Minister, fought in all the Israeli wars. The legendary stories of heroism about the former include his journey to Jordan to revenge his sister's murder, during which he risked his life sleeping in a cave in the vicinity of Petra.

¹⁴ Aviv Gefen, an Israeli rock star, still a controversial figure in Israeli culture, because of his androgynous appearance, the fact that he did not serve in the army, and the fact that his pacifistic songs represent a lost and "messed up" generation which has nothing to do with the fighting machoism. His controversial image dissolved, if only for a split second, following the mass identification rally for support of the peace process during which Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. Aviv Gefen was the last artist to perform on stage, singing his song "Forever Brother"; shortly after he received a warm hug from Rabin, the fatal shots were heard.

dissolution and mobility between identities which do not necessarily correspond to the binary classification of masculine/feminine. In this work, the artist planted his enticing portrait as a woman-soldier with black ponytail and a mobile phone, proudly looking toward the horizon, on either side of her an apparently "authentic" woman-soldier. In that context I wrote that: "The chameleon obsession, the search for surface alternatives (identification accessories, representative uniform, make-up), constituting a privileged self-identity reinvented each and every time, replaces in this case the "authentic" search for the real, unique, absolute "self". The world becomes a mirror to a diversity of fabricated and split identities, to countless stereotypical images, which serve as conductors for some evasive "self", examined over and over again in different variations. In this sense, the woman-soldier is simply another image in a sea of stereotypical images, an empty costume decorating an old postcard from Independence Day, an image on a T-shirt: a glamorous remnant of the dauntless woman. There is no concern with the army, nor with the military experience. The immediate political aspect is completely negligible, at best it is possible to say that these women-soldiers represent some local version of the TV series "Charlie's Angels", and that their symbolic battle will never deviate from the fantastic borders of a fictional script on the TV screen..."¹⁵ By expropriating the woman-soldier's non-sexual innocence, Nir Hod undermines her devotedness to her national task, yet at the same time grants her feminine glamour and romanticism associated with eternal realms.

Although there is no "concern with the army" here, at least not in the critical-political sense, neither the explicit nor the implicit, the *Women-Soldiers* can be treated here also (divorced from the artist's intention) as a footnote illuminating the ultimate Israeli cliché which obfuscates all others. For "a woman-soldier in obligatory military service" is a typical Israeli invention, a unique matchless model of equality between the sexes, a model which has been marketed to the world as an official representation, a pure Israeli brand. Perhaps it is time to reexamine this cliché, to undermine the myth of women's equality, in light of the traditional role division so common in a society that lives from one war to the next.

¹⁵ Tami Katz-Frieman, *Meta-Sex 94: Identity, Body and Sexuality* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Art, Ein Harod, p. 112.

Meir Gal exhibits here four narrow, horizontal wooden boards, covered with fabric. Vertical strips of red, black, white, olive-green, purple and orange, in an asymmetrical distribution and irregular frequency. Ostensibly, an abstract painting, devoid of any political overtones: possibly Color Charts a-la Gerhard Richter, possibly an echo of American abstract from the 1950's. Only the title of the work surrenders its content: *Six Hundred and Seventy Two Centimeters of War Decorations* – colors in the service of the nation, encoded symbolism of the Israeli wars.

An extensive discussion of the roots and hierarchical nature of the Israeli myth of heroism, as shaped thus far during the existence of the Israeli state, is beyond the scope of this essay. Still, it should be noted that from the outset a clear distinction between two types of death has been defined: "between explicable, 'worthwhile' death and a pointless inexplicable death," between those who die heroically in the battlefield and those who went to their death like "lambs to the slaughter". Thus, the content which differentiated between "life here and life there, between the passive, diaspora Jew and the new individual, 'the Israeli', is cast."¹⁶

Thus the gap between those who were killed in war and those who merely died in a training or car accident has been maintained. The first cracks in the myth of heroism could already be detected after the Yom Kippur War. They had intensified after the Lebanon War (1982), and certainly following the outbreak of the Intifada. Although the willingness to continue offering personal sacrifices for an unlimited time is inherent in the majority of Israeli population, it is not what it used to be in the past. The consensus which allowed the leadership's demand of the individual to continue leading an uncertain and insecure life has weakened somewhat; another option, the desire for normality, began to emerge as a result of social-demographic-cultural processes which climaxed upon the beginning of the peace process.

16 Yehiam Weitz, "Late Tears", *Politica* 3, Sept. 1985, pp. 36-37 [Hebrew].

Meir Gal indeed grew up with these cracks, yet the breaches in the wall of the Israeli myth of heroism filtered through his consciousness only after the experience of mutilated bodies in the "Littani Operation" (1978) – an operation of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in Lebanon in which he took part. Gal says that only then did he grasp for the first time the gap between the official narrative of history books, as told in the official channels of the state, and the way in which history occurs in actuality with real people, with the individual's body being an active participant in its crystallization. Only then, he says, did he develop the decided awareness that his physical body is the real battlefield and understood that the question of the body's ownership in this deadly place is no longer clear-cut.

In *Six Hundred and Seventy Two Centimeters of War Decorations* Gal delves into the cracks of the myth, enlarging it into the dimensions of his own body, thus shedding light on the manner in which the State leaves its impression on the life of the individual. Apparently, during the first two decades of the State of Israel, each war had a unique decoration. Thereafter, due to the multiplicity of wars, and on account of the fact that the same men fought more than one war, the Ministry of Defense decided to combine two wars into one decoration, creating more elongated decorations embedding two wars on one medal. In this economical move they created several combinations that were suitable for pairs of wars. In Meir Gal's work, only three of the war decorations are "authentic". The fourth – in purplish pink "feminine" pastel colors – is the figment of the artist's imagination, a sarcastic prophecy, his suggestion for the next two wars. It should be noted that in actuality the Israeli soldier does not tend to wear his decorations and military ranks. In Israel, military legends of heroism are told in alternative channels, ostensibly less official. In general, there is something slovenly about the way in which the Israeli soldier wears his uniform; a sloppiness which embodies a statement, that our army is seemingly different from all others. In light of this, Gal's work can also be seen as a parody on the State's failed attempt to produce symbols of heroism and grant them an eternal visual meaning.

The strong sense of paradox and irony evoked by the work is reinforced by the artist's own interpretation: "These objects, which are produced by the State, conceal a sophisticated mechanism that produces and preserves the sanctification of

faithfulness and the sense of belonging. These war decorations have multi-layered functions: they carry personal and collective memories, just as they are a status symbol in the hierarchy of heroism and sacrifice. It is as though the commandments "Remember!" and "Sacrifice!" are imprinted in their very appearance, evoking anxiety and guilt, telling us again and again about 'the sacrifice of the soldiers who with their blood paved the way for us' [...]. Throughout the years these decorations are fed, each period anew, by the ritual of war, the ethics of sacrifice and nostalgia."¹⁷ Meir Gal interprets the act of attaching the decoration to the body as a symbol of alliance between the individual and the collective. By enlarging the decorations to the dimensions of his own body and by their horizontal mounting he reverses this meaning, as if to remind us that it is not the body which carries the medals, but rather vice versa; it is the medals that carry the body, like a stretcher or an altar.

Generals and military objects are a source of inspiration for **Gil Shachar** too. The militaristic Israeli environment as reflected in his sculptures is merely a matter of routine, nothing to make much fuss about. An army coat is hung on a wall, as though forgotten by chance; a rolled sleeping bag is resting on the floor, and an M16 is cast from a toy gun – personal, familiar objects; life-size banal items found in every Israeli home. Despite their military nature, there is nothing suspicious about them. In their natural habitat they are experienced as common, nonviolent objects, like Coke bottles in America. The copying technique employed by Shachar - the accurate, illusive realism, the unique meticulous processing of the casts and the expropriation of context - evokes a silent revolution in our perception habits. This is not an aggressive nor a destructive move, but rather a gentle, melancholic-poetical gnawing. Nevertheless, the objects transmit something misleading, non-innocent; calming yet threatening. The fluctuation between an organized cultural reading (classical sculpture?) and a paradoxical-anarchic reading (replica? ready-made?) leads to a dead-end. These works carry a double entendre. However, one is disinclined to think of them in a military, violent, political context, as if they express some subversive-radical thought; on the contrary, there is a refined, hesitant statement here about military objects in a mundane, almost friendly context.

¹⁷

Based on a dialogue conducted with the artist.

Shachar's strategy of copying, like Robert Gober's, does not bring the object nearer to reality, but rather alienates it by removing it from reality, from the reproduced product. As in Gober's case, these sculptures can be perceived as still-life, nature morte; as though frozen during the process of casting, orphaned, like deserted objects. The technical effort and the time invested in the production of a one-off piece, a replica of a common object is like re-creating the sublime from the banal. This is also true of the wax casts of portraits placed in plexiglass showcases: a frozen facial expression, a smile that has remained floating like a death mask. Usually, these are people from his immediate circle of friends, family or familiar figures from the Israeli art scene. In *Desert Cliché* Shachar exhibits a portrait of a tanned and smiling man (a well-known Israeli gallery owner), looking about fifty to sixty years of age, dressed in a khaki shirt on top of a white undershirt. His arrogant-impudent-defiant expression, his forceful look and the khaki color of his shirt bring to mind a grotesque-pathetic figure of an aging Palmachnik¹⁸, an ex-general.

"The Sabra keeps aspiring to be more American than real Americans. [...] The decadent yuppieism has replaced the rural asceticism [...] The sabra has become coquettish; he braided his hair, gelled it, pierced his ears, put on a leather jacket and Reebok shoes and started paying attention to his looks, like other peacocks of the Western city. [...] The Israeli sabra no longer wants to meet the guys by the memorial statue, but rather die of old age in a villa at Herzliya Pituach; the machoistic symbols are gradually grounded to dust and replaced by the symbols of unisex [...] In short, the sabra is [...] gradually dissolving from the stage of Israeli history - together with the Zionist religion that created him."¹⁹

Three untidy sets of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) uniforms are loosely hung, emptied, serving as a charged-dramatic base for painting and text. The uniforms were pulled out of a cardboard box full of painted and neatly folded army clothes, as though they had been lying there since the end of the military service: this is a new (1995) and surprising series of works by **Pinchas Cohen Gan** entitled: "Art is Service". The

¹⁸ Trans. note: Member of the striking forces of the Haganah, the Jewish self-defense organization during the British Mandate.

¹⁹ Oz Almog, "A New Pillar of Fire", *Politica* 42-43, January 1992 (Hebrew)

garments, including a decoration of "parachuting wings" and a scribbled army identification number, carry a combination of defying sentences, statements and images quoted from Cohen Gan's private iconography. Each of the items bears one of the following texts: "To IDF with Love after 35 years of pain", "Frozen Condolences", "Positive art", "Who will replace the youth industry?", "After destroying my male image they destroy my art". These defiant outcries appear next to a limited repertoire of images, that seem to have been transferred and duplicated from his earlier works: schematic cutouts of a lanky human figure, severed head, a table, a chair or a house - a sequence of signs in his private syntax of codes.

The formal and textual components, with their strong Cohen-Ganian colors (red-blue-black-pink-phosphorous-green) are associated here with a general universal context (identity and absence, covering and camouflaging), rendered by the very presentation of garments emptied of their wearer (the "absent-present" like Beuys' felt suit). These components are also rooted in a specific local context, in which the "military uniform" is perceived as a common everyday item; an object that is normally found on a high shelf in the closet waiting to be pulled out upon going to reserve military service; a matter of routine in every Israeli household where a reasonably healthy male under the age of 45 lives. The empty featureless figures and the schematic severed heads "decorating" the uniform undermine the simple look of the garment as such, flattening it into a seemingly neutral "base", a canvas for the painting. The attempt to divert from the political context dissolves at once through the writing, which is reminiscent of the way in which children tend to perpetuate the names of their friends on their clothes during farewell rites. This restores the reading to local channels which are derived from the direct and trenchant content of the statements. The irony concealed in the statement relating to the utopian role of art which is mobilized in the service of society (Art is Service), especially when appearing on an army shirt that must have gone through several wars, is deeply rooted in Cohen-Gan's prolonged, critical, subversive activity in relation to society and the establishment. So is the great sadness mixed with the sense of loss (whose uniform is this anyway?) and the exhaustion accompanying the conclusion of a job and the "cashing in" of one's equipment²⁰ ("To IDF with Love"). In this sense, he

²⁰ Trans. note: In Hebrew slang, an expression more or less parallel to "checking out" or "cashing in (of one's chips)", denoting death.

represents a model of an active artist who perceives his art as a social commitment, as a mission. The personal pain and despair, which throughout the years have been woven into an intricate network of pessimistic representation systems, a cosmic-universal expression of the unstable, threatened condition of man in a sterile, strange and alienated world, have undergone a sharp transition here; shifted into the political-local-concrete context, where army uniforms function as nostalgic items with an ambivalent value, as carriers of a threatened male identity on the one hand, and a symbol of lost youth on the other. By hanging them on the wall as unnecessary objects, Cohen Gan departs from the symbolism of lost youth, but at the same time renders the very "service" in the work of art unnecessary; an act attesting most of all to great fatigue.²¹

States of Emergency / Anxiety and Terror / Art in the Bunker

One of the most common ethos cultivated for many years in Israel is related to the Israeli "togetherness"; that collective, seemingly homogeneous entity, outcome of the horror of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is called up again and again to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, in collective solidarity, against the catastrophes descending upon it. The "ingathering of the exiles", then the "melting pot", and more recently the "unity of Israel" - word combinations concealing a powerful ethos, which at different periods corresponded to the need to attach a single identity to a diverse people assembled from many different places. Throughout the years, with the sobering up that came after various calamities, these phrases were trampled upon and refuted, becoming empty clichés in the junk yard of Zionist history. The results of the 1996 elections proved that the historical "melting pot" is

²¹ Pinchas Cohen Gan, the veteran artist in the exhibition, has been dealing for years with the definition of a formal, poly-systematic meta-language whose essence is the confrontation of man with a foreign environment. In the 1970's, as part of his conceptual work, he molded his identity as a refugee and immigrant, organizing acts of wandering and voyages in order to conceptualize the impossibility of assimilation in a foreign environment (fish in the Dead Sea, an Israeli in Alaska). During the 1980's he shifted his "actions" to a more conventional art practice, bringing with him images, conceptual contexts and codes from his journeys, without which it is impossible to decipher the syntax of his current works. (For a more comprehensive discussion, see *Postscripts: "End"-Representations in Contemporary*

gradually being replaced by a much more "normal" social pluralism made up of sectors with mutual concerns and ethnic groups with independent identities and interests.

At the back of **Tiranit Barzilay's** works echoes the gnawing on two heroic myths: the myth of the homogeneous collective and the solidarity, and the myth of the "safe shelter" for the Jewish people, which have been challenged upon the landing of the first missiles on Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. In her photographs she brings together what is left of the Israeli "togetherness" – the young generations, twenty-something, who have assembled for some unknown activity in bomb shelters or in empty rooms, in situations which radiate detachment, alienation and lack of communication – and a collective memory scorched with all the wars, the terrorist attacks, the Holocaust, the Intifada, the various catastrophes and calamities; that everlasting "state of emergency" in which Israelis live – a situation enveloped with dangers, where the end is unforeseen.

Barzilay is represented here by two photographs from an early series (the *Bomb Shelters*) and by two recent works (from *The Rooms'* series) exhibited last year at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The first series (1993) – carefully staged photographs of youngsters in ceremonial attire (blue-and-white) performing functionless actions within bomb shelters – called for an explicit political interpretation: the ritualistic activity was read as an echo of the official-national memorial ceremonies, the most sacred "celebrations of nationalism", recurring annually in a prefixed format; first Holocaust Day, then Memorial Day (for the fallen Israeli soldiers) and straight after Independence Day. Once more the standing in lines, once more the flag is dropped to half mast, new fallen soldiers, new wars, the collective imperative "to remember them all" – these are the symbolic currency carried by Israelis from an early age. The second later series - young people in underwear waiting, obeying submissively, in some sort of mundane group rituals, in empty anonymous rooms, against the background of bare white walls - was perceived as a

change of direction: from the local to the universal, from the public sphere to the private, from representative collective to private-anonymous; as though the concrete political context has been cleaned and replaced by a general formula discussing "generational" conditions of anxiety, loss of identity, solitude, entrapment, powerlessness, passivity, impotence, weakness and detachedness. Yet, if we listen to the "gut voice"²² of the works, it may bring to mind associations or images relates to "Holocaust" contexts (people squeezed in a corridor or queuing for the shower); the passivity, the emptiness and purposelessness of these acts, the intimate exposure of the body, the crowding and suffocation, create in this case too an apocalyptic atmosphere ("they know some unbearable truth and cannot look each other in the eye.")²³

Conspicuous in both series is the conflict between the Israeli collective and the individual: everyone together and each separately; even when there is contact, there is no real contact. The hugs seem more like mechanical gestures, devoid of feeling; people stuck in some place where there is no escape, forced into sharing some secret which casts a great shadow on their souls. The solidarity is established through being in the same trouble, in the bomb shelter or at home.

This conflict is particularly extroverted in the dance scene: three young woman and two girls dancing in a circle within the cramped space of the house. On the left there is a couple caressing, and in the right corner five young men, a girl wearing glasses and a young woman in a night gown, each gazing at some other point in space. If there is an ultimate choreography to the Israeli collective it is the *Horah*, the sweeping dance which embodies all clichés of the Israeli "togetherness": the close knit bond, the joyous revival of

²² This term coined by Sara Breitberg-Semel referred to Tiranit Barzilay's earlier works, where "the official, Western voice talked about the disintegration of meaning [post-modernism], while the 'gut' voice talked about post-Zionism." See Sara Breitberg-Semel, "Tiranit's Youth", *Studio Israeli Art Magazine* 44, June 1993, p. 14 [Hebrew].

²³ Orly Castel-Bloom, "The Perfect Prison: On the Emotional State of the Pictures", Tiranit Barzilay, 1995 (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1996, p. 64. [Trans. Vivianne Barsky & Richard Flantz]

the Jewish State. For Tiranit Barzilay, this is a dance frozen in time. There is no eye contact among the dancers even when they hold hands. The imaginary seams of the "melting pot" have totally come untied, and the deceptive appearance of joy stings the eyes. The Israeli "togetherness" has collapsed here along with the great narrative of Zionism, deconstructed into an empty pattern of a staged ritual. Even if we consider the dance in an extra-Israeli context, this motif has always been associated with iconography that is bound in a harmonious rhythm of cosmic cyclicity, to the bacchanalia and pastoralia of life's joy. "The dance is conceived as a primary emotional outburst of joy, rendered by an identification with nature, an expression of passion, motion, continuity, flow and deep rootedness. In the photographs of Tiranit Barzilay the symbolic fabric of the dance is unraveled. The metaphor has collapsed. The intensity of energy and impulse were reduced into immobility, alienation, isolation, and monotony. The active, internal spin became a trapping fixation. It looks as though the women froze within the circle. They are present in the ritual, but refuse to take part in the dance of ideology. They are fixed to the spot, each in her own private space, planted in their forced state, sterilizing the joy of life. Each for herself."²⁴

"There is a status quo: non-happiness, non-freedom, repression, which are balanced by much obedience, and non-rebellion. [...] Evident, then, is a closed world. [...] The only way to survive in it is to obey laws which were probably not made by the people in the picture, to maintain the existing order, with some recommendation that from time to time one should transmit a soothing and supporting message to one's neighbor, a hug, a touch of the hand, perhaps so that one whose distress has gone beyond the bounds of the desired and the permitted may not deteriorate even further, and harm 'the health of the society'."²⁵

²⁴ This was written on another work by Tiranit Barzilay also featuring the dance motif. See Tami Katz-Frieman, *Meta-Sex 94: Identity, Body and Sexuality* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Art, Ein Harod, pp. 107-106.

²⁵ Orly Castel-Bloom, "The Perfect Prison", *Tiranit Barzilay*, 1995 (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1996, pp. 65-64

The pretext for the collective solidarity, the essence of the object of anxiety, can be seen in **Dganit Berest's** Masked series, which is based on a photographic enlargement of a head image of one of the terrorists who hijacked the T.W.A. airplane to Beirut in 1985; a photograph which originally appeared in Time magazine. Berest's masked face is, first and foremost, a media image; as if seen through a TV screen, as digital information. Vertical strips of flickering TV-blue of the kind used for censoring, blur the figure's contour reinforcing its reading as a visual cliché: this is the stereotype of the "evil other", a modern, media metamorphosis of the old image as perceived in Israeli graphics and in textbook illustrations: "the Arab", "the terrorist" - the same pair of eyes looking out from behind the kaffiyeh, the visual cliché of the evasive, dishonest "enemy", who does not reveal his face. There seems to be no intimate, initial acquaintance here with the image, but rather a reliance on its general formulation, as conveyed through culture.

The series as a whole includes three oils on canvas: two blue, dark, severe-looking works, and one yellowish, light, almost funny work, which is exhibited here for the first time. The series was preceded by photographs and works on paper that included the image of the masked face, yet have been exhibited in various contexts alongside other works. As demonstrated in the exhibition *Postscripts*, where one of the paintings from this series was exhibited for the first time in the context of "end"-representations, the masked face is connected to Berest's preoccupation with the image of the "monster", the dark, mysterious and threatening side, which is inexplicable by science. The empty eye-sockets and the black hole of the mouth reinforce the following description: "This is the masked man, perhaps the head of a terrorist (Ku Klux Klan), perhaps a ghost, a forbidden, threatening image. To display this in the Israeli political context is like displaying a swastika or the Tetragrammaton, all of them taboo.²⁶" Here, too, it is possible to point out two levels of reading: the general tone speaks of psychological-Lacanian (post-modernist) meanings concealed in the image of a screen/mask which is perceived as "a

²⁶ Tami Katz-Frieman, *Postscripts*, p. 138.

mirror that reflects the fear of the inner other, the stranger within.."²⁷, whereas the hidden local voice sounds a different tune with clear political-local overtones. If we stick to this hidden voice, striving for the Arab-terrorist identity of the masked man, we will discover – especially in view of the yellowish third painting, where his "clownish" figure is flickering, gleaming, bouncing cheerfully (the vertical strips which embodied the absence of the face associated with the stereotypical object of fear seem to have been dismantled, scattered) – that this is a distinct preoccupation with a cliché, a mold rather than an essence, an image whose efficacy has been squeezed out entirely, leaving only flickers on a screen.

Local Identity / the "Arab" and the "Israeli"

Many historical, sociological and cultural studies have been written on the symbiotic intricacy characterizing the link between the "Israeli" and the "Arab". The very engagement with and search for a definition of "local identity", which seemingly flickers out of the Levantine dimness, attempting to clarify the components of elusive identity while trying to understand exactly what we are made of. This very quest has already become a common cliché. Yigal Zalmona, Chief Curator of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, who studied the Israeli's ideal-evasive-romantic yearning to the East, described the appropriation of the "Arab" image as a model for the image of the New Jew, "The Israeli", in the 1920's: "The Arab was an example of belonging, a human example of an existential, natural affinity with the land. [...] Transforming the image of the Arab into a myth can in itself indicate to what extent the members of the Jewish Yishuv²⁸ have failed to realize their desire for natural striking of roots, as an authentic part of the East. [...] The image of the "sabrah", like the image of the "Arab", was doomed to fail since it had not been

²⁷ Itamar Levy, "The New Clothes of the Masked Man", *Ha'aretz*, June 26, 1992. In a general-universal-postmodernist context it is also interesting to compare between Berest's *Masked* series and Gerhard Richter's *Baader Meinhof* series, and to Andres Serrano's *Ku Klux Klan* series of portraits, a comparison which places Berest's work as emblematic and detached from immediate political contexts. Roe Rosen, "Four Chapters on Dganit Berest", *Studio Israeli Art Magazine* 70, March-April 1996, pp. 48-49 [Hebrew].

²⁸ Trans. note: The Jewish population in Mandatory Palestine.

formed through a prolonged stay and experience in this land, but rather as a stereotype which was shaped according to the needs, terms and state-of affairs of another place (the Diaspora)."²⁹

The "Sabra" – who is prickly and rough on the outside, but sweet and succulent on the inside – protagonist of the legend of native-born Israelis, sons of the Zionist Revolution, who are umbilically tied to the Israeli nature. What more can be written about this myth, its flourishing and withering, and about the tension between the utopian idea (a secular "gentile" Jew, a skilled farmer and brave fighter) and its destruction? One can only say that from the outset, the image of the Sabra has suited the desert cliché, just as the Arab's. The sabra hedge was not surprisingly linked to an arid landscape and to ruins; its thorns symbolized an obstacle, the suffering and pain awaiting one upon returning to his barren homeland.³⁰ Throughout the years this image has undergone every possible transformation; it has gone a full circle during which it has been "thrashed" from all directions: each side in this double identity mirror claimed ownership, choosing to extract from it different meanings. The Israelis appropriated its rough appearance and sweet fruit, while the Palestinians extracted a symbolic meaning from the stubbornness of its roots. "For the Palestinian, since ancient times the sabra has been a functional tool of the farmer, a means to mark the borders of his place-names. Over the past forty years, houses have been torn down, stones have been moved, and maps have been redrawn, but the roots of the sabra have proved to be the bulldozer's most stubborn enemies. To this day, the borders of ancient villages can be retraced thanks to the invincible nature of the sabra."³¹

²⁹ Yigal Zalmona, "The Twenties in Israeli Art" (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1982. In a wider context of the West's relation to the East one should mention Edward Said, who sharpened the image of the Easterner as an other fabricated by the West in order to define itself as opposite, thus enabling it to control, organize and exert authority on the East. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1979.

³⁰ Gideon Ofrat, "These Sabras", *Back to the Sea*, pp. 279-301 [Hebrew]; see also Sarit Shapira, *Routes of Wandering*, pp. 245-244; and Oz Almog, "A New Pillar of Fire", *Politica* 42-43, January 1992, pp. 10-13 [Hebrew].

³¹ Kamal Bullata as quoted in: Tali Tamir, "The Shadow of Foreignness: On the Painting of Asim Abu-Shakra", *Asim Abu-Shakra* (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, p. 88.

In tracing its transmutations within the field of visual representation, Gideon Ofrat marked the sabra, as an image which has accompanied Zionist painting from its very beginning. "Dozens of years before it was adopted as the symbol of native-born Israelis, the sabra symbolized the Eretz-Israeli landscape and mainly its desert. [...] During the Intifada, the sabra of yesterday collided with the sabra hedges of the West Bank and Gaza Strip villages [...] Its amiable prickliness became the prickliness of fences, camps."³² [...] By the 1990's, the sabra has become an absolute worn-out cliché. Ariella Azoulay, an Israeli curator and critic, called this karmic transformation of the sabra "the fate of a sign."³³

One of the most beautiful and charged stages in the transfiguration of the sabra (cactus) motif belongs to **Asim Abu-Shakra**, an Um el Pahm-born Arab-Israeli who chose the sabra – the ultimate metaphor of the new Israeli – as a central, obsessive motif in his short life (Abu-Shakra died of cancer in 1990). With an awareness to the transformations of this myth within Israeli culture on the one hand, and a reliance on a rich Palestinian tradition in which the sabra appeared as a scenic element symbolizing the Palestinian notion of "Sumud" – the insistence on clinging to the land, sticking to the roots³⁴ (precisely in a reversed sense to that of Eretz Israeli paintings, which chose the very same motif to signify the desert) – on the other, Abu-Shakra plucked the sabra from its hedge, exiling it into a downsized, decorative flowerpot, placed on a windowsill, confined within a frame. The association which might lead to a famous line from Chaim Nachman Bialik's poem, depicting a solitary potted flower which is placed on a window, glancing at the garden below where all its friends are, is not untenable, and may be ironically linked to the fact that as our national poet, Bialik is also recited in Arab schools, thus

³² Gideon Ofrat, *Back to the Sea*, p. 280; 298.

³³ Ariella Azoulay, *David Reeb: Paintings 1982-1994* (exhibition catalogue), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, p. 118.

³⁴ A meaning which is also derived from its name in spoken Arabic "Saber" meaning patience, tenacity and diligence. For an extensive discussion of the poetical-symbolic meanings of the sabra, see Tali Tamir, "The Shadow of Foreignness", pp. 89-86.

serving for Arabs as a cliché of Israeli culture.³⁵ In this move of planting the sabra in a flowerpot Abu-Shakra reclaimed ownership of (our? their?) image, attributing to it meanings of uprooting, alienation, exile, foreignness, detachment, coercion and domestication.

In his monochromatic, sensual paintings, which arouse feelings of beauty, mystery and destruction, and which are reminiscent of Mark Rothko's refined melancholy, the sabra flickers out of the diffusive margins as an icon, a sacred object of observation, an object of lamentation and mourning; elegy to the past, allegory to the present, to the mutation of the floating, rootless identity. Like many other works in *Desert Cliché*, the two levels of reading are preserved in Abu-Shakra's case too. There is the universal level – interpreting the potted sabra as still life/nature morte, as a dialectic of death and rebirth, in contexts of domesticating and cultivation of nature, as well as the local level - perceiving the sabras as allegorical interpretations of the local conflict, as a self-portrait expressing a borrowed/stolen identity, that wishes to keep its "sabra-ness" to itself; or alternatively, as "otherness", which defines and constitutes itself as an entity that has been uprooted from its land, yet still survives.

The sabra is not the only image that has been contested and claimed by the two identities. Its link to orientalism labels it as a typical Arab, Mediterranean image, to which Israelis respond with either a touristy or a romantic gaze. Since the late 1980s, **Tsibi Geva** has been painting kaffiyehs, terrazzi, and backgammon boards –three typical elements characterized by a strong presence in the Levantine cultural field. [...] The image of the kaffiyeh concerns Geva more in the cultural and psychological realms, rather than in the self-evident political one. He is interested in the process of appropriation. How such a charged object, produced by the Arab-Palestinian community, has been adopted into the history of Israeli culture and how it was part of the Zionist interest to view the image of the “Arab” as an archetype of its own archaism. These paintings of Geva are saturated with his dialectic relation to

³⁵ Thanks to Tamar El-Or on her illuminating remark linking the "potted sabra" to the complaint voiced by Israeli-Arabs on being forced to memorize Bialik, while not being taught Palestinian poetry.

the East, described by him as “an intriguing mixture of attraction, magic and threat, sweetness and destruction”. [...]

The image of the terrazzo (the simplest kind of floor-tile known in Arabic as balata) also contains an east/west paradigm. First, its common Arab name and its verbal association to the balata refugee camp in Gaza Strip. Second, through the act of painting geva connects the series with the act of floor-tiling, a manual job requiring diligence, which for many years in Israel has been performed mainly by Arab workers. [...]

Asad Azi is an Arab-Druze born in Shefar'am, a northern village populated by three minority groups: Druze, Muslims and Christians –living in Tel Aviv. [...] His paintings are refined and deeply concerned with “beauty” and its cultural specificity, and thus, not necessarily read as political. His paintings typically integrate Druze, Muslim and Christian motifs, fabrics and handmade lacework, part of eastern rugs, decorative hems, torn pieces of wallpaper, found objects and souvenirs in arabesque-like compositions. Among these “local” motifs are also terrazzi. Yet, unlike Geva’s Israeli, economical, ascetic, unornamented terrazzi, his are more “Arab”, at least their fullness, embellishments and opulence. While Geva’s terrazzi belong to the mundane, simple, unadorned type found in most Israeli homes, Azi’s terrazzi is decorated organized in its pattern that conveys a splendor, remnants of buildings of the beginning of the century. [...] Asad Azi does to the floor tile what Abu-Shakra did to the sabra. He undermines the question of its ownership.

[...] In *Man from Gaza* Azi divided the painting into two parts. One of them includes abstract elements – a lace hem and a geometric grid, white on white. The other, painted in delicate brown monochrome, is a figurative drawing of an Arab worker against the background of an urban landscape. We see a street sweeper from Gaza, who seems to have been caught “in the act,” gazing at a woman, possibly a mannequin, possibly a prostitute exposing her thighs at the entrance of a Tel Aviv staircase. [...] Azi reintroduces the image

of the Arab in Israeli painting: not tanned, not so strong, no longer a striking peasant. Instead, he is a worker from the Gaza Strip, cheap labor, oppressed, defeated, victimized, like a sabra in a flowerpot. [...]

This search for the essence of "Israeliness" has been at the core of many Hebrew works of literature, cinema and art [...]. The post-Zionist era has brought a cynical, more detached version of quests for identity, an attitude which undermines the very act of inner struggle, yielding in advance the desired insight which is supposed to flicker at the end of the searching. Yet, despite this, it seems that Israelis, both Zionists and post-Zionists, continue to inspect the inner image of their multi-faceted split identities.

The photographer **Micha Kirshner** has been doing this for over 15 years now. He began documenting Israeli society in the 1980s through staged portraits depicting mainly well-known figures from Israeli politics and society. He exhibits here a new series of photographs from *The Israelis* project executed over the past year for the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma'ariv*. Once a week in the weekend supplement, he publishes a photograph of a celebrity in a stylized pose, accompanied by props that accentuate the figure's personality. Under the photograph a statement given by the subject on what he/she sees as the essence of Israeliness appears. Printed in the margins are well-tuned, cliché-laden phrases proposed by readers who are invited to leave their definitions of "Israeliness" in a voice mailbox. The effect of the entire series, together with the texts, is cumulative. Like a national lexicon of clichés, it is constructed, page after page, mercilessly as a mixture of possibilities "united in a gradually loosening federation of identities. Kirshner highlights the difficulty in sketching a clear national portrait. [...]

Translation: Daria Kassovsky

