

A Matter of Distance

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Desert Cliché was born in "exile." It is the advantage of distance that gave birth to the exhibition and allowed me for the first time to draw closer to an understanding of the experience of *otherness*. It 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 have the perspective of distance, to be an onlooker as it were; to search for the angle one sees from abroad (Miami - New York) which perhaps is inaccessible from home (Tel Aviv - Jerusalem). From the advantage of attentiveness ("What do the foreigners think of us Israelis?") I have gained some fresh 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. Thus I found myself busy narrating, translating and interpreting the cultural reality to myself as well as to my colleagues and the potential audiences.

An Israeli exhibition abroad is in itself problematic, if only on account of its built-in political charge, the narrow geographic demarcation (of Israel on the world map) and the preoccupation with cultural-national identity. This becomes even more complicated in light of the effusive charm of *otherness* and the international saturation of the multicultural discourse. Such an exhibition, whose essence lies in its "Israeliness," can assume different forms: dozens of filters have been employed in selecting artists and works for "representative" shows, which seek to cut across cultural gaps and convey the "Israeli story" to a foreign, less

acquainted audience. These have usually branched off in two directions: The first, concrete and anchored in reality, relies on local elements, commonly read in cultural-political contexts. Associated with this category is the cultural filter of "place" (the worship of the land, Jerusalem, the political conflict, the qualities of the local light, etc.); or alternatively, the "lack of place" filter (wandering, the desert myth, exile, periphery, lack of center). The second, with the Holocaust trauma looming over, is a more general and abstract option, either emphasizing elements of memory, anxiety and victimization, or adopting the formal filter, highlighting the Jewish-pioneering ethics of material poverty (the Israeli version of *Arte Povera*), anti-aesthetics and anti-luxury. To this abstract category it is also possible to ascribe exhibitions accentuating the textual element derived from the spiritual meanings of being the "People of the Book" and from the primeval prohibition to make idols. And, of course, there has been, and always will be, the "universal" filter, which refers to the "human"; which is interested in meta-qualities (refinement, encoding, lyricism) that are not linked to a specific time and place; which does not seek to attach unique identity traits to local art.

Desert Cliché, with its distinct concern for clichés and stereotypes that are related to the crystallization of Israeli identity, can be seen to a great extent as a teasing show. I intended to present the trivial, that which is ostensibly self-evident; the banal representation of Israeli clichés, which overlap the average expectations of the American viewer who feeds on secondary images that have been transmitted through the media. These are as good as truisms: camels, women soldiers, *sabras*,

kibbutzim, *Sabbath* candlesticks, legendary military events, and other stereotypes - legible images and visual clichés which "pass" the media threshold because of their immediate visibility. They manifest as "Israeliana for tourists," hackneyed national symbolism. And then, when the eye has already picked up what it recognizes - they surprise with all the ironic inversions, the intricacies and the superfluity of meanings. Instead of the heroic woman-soldier, we see a man dressed up as a woman, who is dressed up as a soldier looking to eternity. Instead of the camels, the blooming of the desert, and the legends of heroism, we see the very same utopian symbols, only without their original aura, exposed to the artists' criticism and skeptical reflexive gazes that offer an extensive web of interpretive possibilities regarding both the multi-faceted conflicting reality, and the art which strives to reflect it.

Desert Cliché is not a historical exhibition in the sense that it does not reflect the full picture of Israeli art, nor does it trace the age of innocence - those days when the aura of these charged images had not yet been sullied. It refers to a given historical moment (the mid-Nineties) and presents a selection of mostly young artists, whose works address Israeli banality, infused with remnants of the history, myths and ancient ethos. The exhibition deals with stereotypes, yet it does not offer a comprehensive survey that reflects how these stereotypes were transformed within the short history of Israeli art. Likewise, it does not discuss 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 and Tamar Getter, who were the first to confront such stale stereotypes). Rather it seeks 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 *Keren Kayemet*.¹

Created by the most accomplished artists currently working in Israel, the works in this show span four principal axes, which have in fact accompanied Israeli art from its outset: (1) holy places, tourist sites and evasive borders; (2) sacred earth, the myth of heroism, military clichés; (3) states of emergency, anxiety and terror; (4) local identity: the symbiotic relationship of the "Arab" and the "Israeli." The images revolving around these axes pertain to Israel's pressing questions, and thus constitute a mirror image which reflects a specific cultural context. Yet most of the works also give themselves to a universal, general reading, which extracts from them a meaning related to issues which have been on the agenda of the West in recent years. At times, precisely those qualities that can be conveyed in any language, that stem from universal situations and preoccupy artists all over the world, are visible. At other times, another voice can be heard, the local voice, which ostensibly transmits in secret frequencies that only Israeli ears can receive. It is a voice so linked to this place; a voice that an outsider will never truly understand. The power of the works lies in this dialectic between the two voices, in the imbalance between them, in their varying dosage in accordance with the beholding eye. Thus, by re-examining the boundaries of language and interpretation the gaps in intercultural understanding are exposed; i.e., how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived through foreign eyes. Will the foreign, intrusive gaze decipher Israel through the stereotypes learned from the media? Will the view be forever romantic? Is the foreign eye necessarily an innocent eye? How is it possible to avoid a patronizing, touristy, or chauvinistic attitude? And what happens when quintessential signs of one culture are

transferred to another culture with a vastly different set of values and susceptibilities?

Why “cliché” and why “desert”?

By definition,² a “cliché” is a culture-dependent term. Presenting Israeli clichés outside their country of origin is almost like explaining a joke. Yet it should be clarified: The exhibiting artists make use of clichés in order to undermine them, to hurl them back onto the cultural field, refuted and emptied of their original content, and recharge them with a content that is contrary to their initial one. This is, of course, only one of the strategies employed by current Israeli artists, but it is the essence of this exhibition. The “desert” cliché (almost like “*Hava Nagila*”) is, I believe, the most common representative romantic and exotic cliché regarding Israel as an arid place, in the context of (physical and cultural) wilderness as well as the miracle of its reclamation. It was selected as a title for the show because it is a metaphor, an umbrella-term for the diversity of clichés and stereotypes associated with Israel and the Zionist ethos. In fact, there is not much “desert” *per se* in the show (at least not in direct reference), nor is there a discussion regarding the presence of the desert myth, with its diverse meanings, mystifications and interpretations, in Israeli art. The evasion is intentional and stems from the excess of commentary which has exhausted the subject.³ To summarize its essentials, the boundless desert is perceived as an emptied landscape, devoid of a defining center or direction, and as such, it has been interpreted as the mythical expression of no man’s land; the physical and mental space of the nomad, of anyone whose home, time and personal history have been lost. The gloomy desert desolation is “a symbol of total exile - empty, deserted, condemning one to a life of solitude, unforgiving, barren - yet at the hands of the Jewish

people, it is blooming and yielding unmatched wealth and abounding variety...”⁴ Add to this the historically traumatic aspect of Israeli identity which was molded during forty years of wandering in the desert, where the Israeli people were delivered from Egypt and given the *Torah*, and an entire generation had to be replaced before they could get to the promised land. From there, it was a direct path to the heart of the Zionist ethos - the conquest and reclamation of a seemingly uninhabited territory, as well as the adoption of Bedouin cultural traits, such as the *kaffiyeh*, the prickly pear (*sabra*) and the very integration into the surroundings. Thus, the title *Desert Cliché*, in Hebrew letters and an American pronunciation, ringing in a foreign language, says it all: like a Ministry of Tourism advertisement or a billboard striving to sell us the Zionist dream, the utmost local authenticity, wrapped in a foreign melody. It is meant to stress the ridiculousness of the term, its emptiness, the provincialism inherent in its migration from one language to another, while echoing the wave of Americanization increasingly sweeping Israel.⁵

Chains of Identity

Having flattened categorical, value-oriented and hierarchical distinctions between different territories in the world, the post-modern era now makes it possible for Israeli art to be placed on the multicultural map as an equal among equals. The question of what that “Israeli” component is within Israeli art, like the distinctions between “locality” and “internationality,” “center” and “periphery,” has preoccupied the Israeli art discourse for years, in every era adjusting the balance between the former and the latter according to the current needs and the spirit of the time. The body of works exhibited here introduces alternative stories, intertwined and/or simultaneously recounted, clearly proving

that the "Israeliness" of the art which is created there today is an open, polyphonic issue. The "Israel" emerging from these works can turn out to be a part of the Oriental Levant', and at the same time, a distinctive element of Western culture within the Levant. In any case, there is no homogeneous block of an exclusive patriotic essence, no unit pride, nor any nostalgic yearning for some remote homeland. In this context, and since the exhibition was curated in Miami, the unofficial capital of Latin America (Cuban immigration, political exile, multiculturalism), a small comparison in the matters of "identity" so dear to the West is called for: It seems that the ethnic-cultural baggage of Israelis is no less entangled than the Cubans', if only because it contains a mixture of denied identities which in the course of time have constituted some kind of a "floating, oscillating identity",⁶ rootless (like Abu Shakra's *sabra* in a flowerpot); an antithesis to the two-thousand-year-old Jewish tradition and to the deep rootedness and love of the homeland - characterizing previous phases in Israeli culture. From my short acquaintance with Cuban art I have learned that the problem of identity and the repudiation of ethnic labeling exist there too to a large degree, not to mention the myth of nomadism and displacement (frequently represented there by images of rafts or boats). However, despite similarities on the level of language and images, there is a significant difference in that Cuban artists have chosen to live in exile, whether as a political statement or due to economic reasons. It seems that despite persistent criticism of the Cuban government, there are still strong ties to a distant Afro-Cuban tradition and an echo of longing for the homeland. In a wider context of Latin art, this clinging to tradition (rituals, rites, voodoo), whether its roots are Indian, Haitian or otherwise tribal,

becomes a commodity even more in demand as a last, rare vestige of authenticity on earth. In comparison, it seems that a nostalgic and lamenting attitude toward tradition is totally nonexistent in Israeli art of the Nineties. If there appear, from time to time, symbols originating from Jewish tradition or from the Bible, it is always from a critical perspective, rather than from a consecrating or nostalgic one.⁷ Moreover, since 1967 it seems that many Israeli artists find it difficult to express their love or even nostalgia toward images of home and homeland. With the occupation, the point-of-view has become increasingly entangled in an inexhaustible reflexivity, saturated with criticism and guilt-ridden self-flogging.

The delight of demythifying or "Is there anything more durable than a destroyed myth?"

No doubt, Israel is a society that thrives on myths and at the same time feeds off their destruction. In the sarcastic style of the journalist and publicist Doron Rosenblum, things look as follows: "It seems that nothing is safe anymore: no myth has remained intact, no long-term success is guaranteed, and nobody can be too sure about his status. [...] And indeed, from the good old Seventies on, the country has witnessed a continual sequence of myth underminings, a wholesale slaughter of sacred cows, mighty downfalls from the zenith to the nadir, smelling like Lysol: the *Yom Kippur* war, the economic scandals, the first political turnaround - all these, it seems, have brought down the wall of old values. [...] Indeed, till this very day, entire systems keep collapsing - the settlement plan, the *Histadrut* [Israeli labour federation], the workers union, the Israeli Defense Forces' deterring force

* Name given to countries of the near East, esp. those bordering the shores of the Mediterranean sea (Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt). In borrowing, "Levantine" refers to a person with superficial manners and education, lacking real manners and refinement. [T.N.]

[...]. But is there anything more durable than a destroyed myth? Is there anything more alive and kicking than a slaughtered cow? For though a myth falls seven times - it rises again; rises seven times - and falls again. For eventually we have remained, more or less, with the same [...] demythifications, which themselves became sacred cows of sorts. [...] Moreover, due to human crowdedness, on account of the increasing breathlessness and the acceleration of materials in the media, in politics and in economy - the graph depicting rise-and-fall, success and failure, myth and its demythification, 'in' and 'out', has transformed from a slow ripple to a blurred, post-modernistic zigzag, where everything intermingles: the speedy take-off marks the beginning of the crash, opening is a sign for closing, the height of expectations is also a profit realization rendering depression."⁸

And indeed, the manipulated representations of the national reservoir of clichés, as seen in the current show, reflect an accelerated tendency to demythify and deconstruct the historical and ideological basis on which they rely; a tendency which has recently been given the academic label "Critique of Zionism" (a product of the so-called "New Historians").⁹ Dealing with representations of the socio-political reality, *Desert Cliché* echoes these processes by offering a diversity of viewpoints which undermine the monolithic nature of the Zionist narrative - that collective biography which has been engraved in Israeli awareness as a single hegemonic "history," and by sounding out other tones in that "blurred, post-modernistic zigzag" of turnarounds and crashes. It should be mentioned that, whether the critical point of view stems from personal pain or from an anti-exotic, ironic or cynical position, the artists participating in the exhibition are not necessarily committed to the same degree of direct confrontation in dealing with the "political situation." For some, the reference is

indirect, suggested, repressed or implied by the general context of the exhibition, while for others, it is direct and penetrating. It is these differences that give the exhibition its heterogeneous nature, and reflect modes of confrontation prevalent in Israeli reality fluctuating between denial, repression and confrontation.

Desert Cliché in America

Although the exhibition addresses an American audience, while intentionally avoiding a specific, local ethnic context, it is assumed that it will also evoke curiosity among a part of the Jewish population. In this context it should be noted that the clichés and stereotypes accompanying the attitudes toward Israel, cultivated throughout the years by the various Jewish organizations, are influenced by and feed on the Israeli-made ones - the product of the official-national-representative voice. From the illuminating charged responses received during the preparation of the exhibition, it became apparent that some part of American Jewry still perceives Israel as a "needy" relative, around whom a utopian aura should be cultivated, as an expensive insurance policy that will bear the right fruit at the right moment. I learned that Israel is imprinted in their minds as an ultimate place of refuge which cannot afford to be subjected to the changes dictated by time and history. I learned about anxiety that is rooted, so it seems, in the trauma of Jewish existence; anxiety that has crystallized for generations against the background of persistent Jewish persecutions in the Diaspora; anxiety about the destruction of "utopia"; and worst of all, anxiety about the exposure of the cracks in the ideal fabricated image of Israel as a "miracle in the desert" before the seemingly foreign, unsympathetic eyes of the gentiles. Stripped of its mythic cover, for this segment of the Diaspora population the reality as seen through the critical

(subjective) eyes of Israeli artists can be perceived as a real threat undermining the protective shield. However, is it not time to sober up? Assuming that art reflects the spirit of time and culture, perhaps it will be *Desert Cliché* that provides the degree

of intimacy required as the impetus for a close self-examination. For despite the pain involved, perhaps that which is exposed beyond the dreamy horizon of the images deconstructed by the current show is closer, firmer and even plausible.

- ¹ On the historical circumstances that have influenced the shaping of the current state-of-mind, see Yael Zerubavel's essay in this catalogue.
- ² By definition, the origin of the word "cliché," like the word "stereotype", is in printing, where it refers to an unchangeable printing plate, cast from a mould, bearing various shapes and/or type. In borrowing, these terms are used in the social and cultural sciences to designate an idea which has lost its originality or impact due to overuse; a truism - a simplistic-general concept of a thing, person, group of people or idea and their presentation in a schematic, banal manner. Usually, stereotypes and clichés are accompanied by prejudice, and it is well known that stereotype and prejudice are perfect runways for anyone seeking as wide and low markets as possible for his products.
- ³ On the desert myth and its mystic-romantic-existential presence in Israeli art (the desert has been perceived as a metaphysical ground, which is above and beyond material topography; an unobtainable ideal, a sacred site and the height of existential fulfillment) see Gideon Ofrat, *Back to the Sea*, Israel Art Press, Israel, 1990 [Hebrew]. See also Edmond Jabès, "This is the desert. Nothing strikes root here", a talk with Bracha Ettinger-Lichtenberg in the exhibition catalogue *Routes of Wandering* (Curator: Sarit Shapira), The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 256-246. For an extensive discussion of the "desire for the desert world" in the works of artists such as Yitzhak Danziger, Igal Tumarkin, Michael Sgan-Cohen, Larry Abramson and others, see the chapter "The Desert Generation" in *Routes of Wandering*, pp. 225-220.
- ⁴ More on "blooming of the desert" see Zvi Sobel as quoted by Sarit Shapira in *Routes of Wandering*, p.83 [Hebrew].
- ⁵ The Israeli writer Yizhak Ben-Ner entitled the new and ridiculous hybrid language *Angrit* (in free translation, *Hebrish* or *Engbrew*), a mixture of English and Hebrew which is becoming increasingly spoken by young Israelis.
- ⁶ Yigal Zalmona depicted the unique condition of Israeli identity as fluctuating "between a yearning for a crystallization of a distinctive collective identity and a condition of floating identity." See Yigal Zalmona, "Foreword" in the exhibition catalogue *Routes of Wandering*, p. 258.
- ⁷ It is interesting to note that alongside the canonical stream in Israeli art, other channels of creation, which pay greater respect to values of tradition and folklore have always existed, and still do; however, these have never been incorporated into the canon, and thus have always remained outside the Israeli cultural discourse, somewhere in between kitsch for tourists and "low art."
- ⁸ Doron Rosenblum, "Overcrowding Bites (Lecture papers on the subject: Introduction to the Mechanics and Technique of Slaughtering Sacred Cows)," *Ha'aretz* Supplement, November 11, 1994 [Hebrew].
- ⁹ Under the category of "New Historians", it would be proper to mention the historian Ilan Pappé, the sociologist Uri Ram and the critical-scholarly stage provided by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in the periodical *Theory and Criticism*. Other publications that served as sources of inspiration and provided a theoretical-historical basis for this text are: Nurith Gertz, *Captive of a Dream: National Myths in Israeli Culture*, Tel Aviv, 1995; Tom Segev, *The First Israelis*, 1949 [Hebrew]; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, New York, 1993; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty: Toward a Critique of the 'Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture," *Theory and Criticism* 5, Autumn 1994, pp. 113-131 [Hebrew], p. 194 [English abstract]; Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: Jewish Illegal Immigration to Palestine*, Tel Aviv, 1996 [Hebrew].