

# Phantoms

## Notes on an Inter-Cultural Encounter

Tsibi Geva, *Notes on the Days of Awe II*, 1999  
Jose Bedia, *Mi Coballende [My Saint Lazarus]*, 1999

Tami Katz-Freiman

One of the advantages in writing a catalogue text after the event is that of delay, the time gap allowing for second thought, for reevaluation of the intuition that spawned the show. The attempt to create an ostensibly arbitrary link between an Israeli artist and a Cuban-American one was a gamble, so to speak. After all, what does *Coballende*, the Afro-Cuban version of St. Lazarus, have to do with burning *Intifada*<sup>1</sup> tires? Will the seemingly self-evident affinities between Cuba and Israel (the political and cultural discursive structures of these two “islands”, each isolated in its own alienated geo-political field) be discernible on the visual level as well? Will the different cultural backgrounds overshadow the similar visual qualities? Will cultural issues –such as universalism vs. localism, center and periphery, national identity, exile, memory and the notion of homeland, wanderings, political passion, reflexive gaze, and social radicalism – emerge from the works as overall themes shared by both artists?

Tsibi Geva and Jose Bedia first met in 1998 in Miami, shortly after Geva’s first solo exhibition there. Bedia was struck by Geva’s *keffiyeh*<sup>2</sup> and *balata*<sup>1</sup> paintings. I remember my attempts to convey to him the multiple layers of meaning embedded in the *keffiyeh* as a highly charged political icon in the Middle East, and his curiosity with regard to the works’ intricate political contents. In Bedia’s home Geva was introduced to the rare ethnographical collection of African and Indian ritualistic artifacts covering the walls. Similarities between the two surfaced already in their first conversation. Geva could relate to Bedia’s political difficulties as an exile, his aversion toward Cuba the state versus his deep ties with Cuba the land, the inner rupture, the rift, the sense of alienation.

Within the framework of *Art Focus 3* the two artists operated in adjacent spaces located underneath Jerusalem’s municipal soccer stadium, as part of a cluster of exhibitions. Both created energetic environments combining wall painting with three-dimensional elements and objects. In Bedia’s case – these were ritualistic objects and attributes associated with the *Coballende* motif, and in Geva’s case – tires, painted canvases, *keffiyehs*, zap straps, and mundane objects (bucket, tin bowl, ropes) collected from the area surrounding his Jaffa studio.

The use of symbolism is at the heart of the joint project. In both room installations Geva and Bedia conjured up the phantoms of their respective cultures through images that seem to have been extracted from the collective unconscious of their peoples (cultural icons and images drawn from myths, textbooks,

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<sup>1</sup>The Palestinian uprising.

<sup>2</sup>An Arab head covering that has become a symbol of the Palestinian struggle since the outbreak of the *Intifada*.

and folklore tales). In both cases the images are charged with a meta-narrative imbued with elements of history, faith, and patriotism. If in Geva's case it is the repressed images of *Israeli* – the Israeli collective that are manifested; In Bedia's case it is the *Cubana* resonating from the work like the beating of tribal drums. However, while Bedia's "other" springs from ancient civilizations, from archaeology and ethnology, Tsibi Geva's "shadow theater" evokes aggressive, sensual images originating in the current local conflict.

When entering the exhibition space, the first gaze falls upon the central wall of Geva's work, the tire wall which he dubbed "the death wall". From floor to ceiling, rows of used black tires, some of them burnt, are bound together with zap straps and fastening strips which stretch and secure them to the wall. Every now and then color stains burst forth, traces of Arabic and Hebrew writing attesting to the tires' history in garages in Jaffa and Acre. A *keffiyeh* tucked into a bucket adds a red color stain to the geometrical black-and-white generated by the tires. The *keffiyeh* pattern, well-known from Geva's works (the symbol of the Palestinian struggle that has become a cliché image of the *Intifada*), has been tightened and refined to form a mesh of black circles, apparently sketched with an austere, modernist line, exhibiting no trace of ornamentality whatsoever. The burnt tires – another symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – have been transformed here into a barrier, a safety net delineating the space like a fence, a lattice, a grid, a death wall, a shock-absorbing wall.

Another geometrical grid competes with the intensity of the tires' contrast. On the adjacent wall a gigantic chessboard of sorts is mounted. Yellow and black squares – painted monochromatic canvases, some function as a surface for additional texts in Arabic – cover the wall from floor to ceiling. The aggressive combination of black and yellow is likewise inscribed in the Israeli consciousness as a denoting evil. The colors of the fundamentalist right wing (the symbol of the *Kach*<sup>2</sup> movement, the flag of *Beitar*), echo in the display space like the sound of the football fans stomping their feet in the stadium above.

The modernist purity of the burnt tires' net and the monotonous rhythm of the yellow and black are violated by decorative wall paintings on the two other walls in the room: two birds, a terrifying giant cyclamen, a predatory vulture, and a single narcissus. One bird is enclosed within the tire cage. The other – shaded, realistic – has been faithfully copied, like the cyclamen, the vulture, and the narcissus, from the patriotism-propagating children book *Yafa At Artzenu* [*Beautiful Art Thou, Our Country*], a 'must' in every home during Israel's first decades. The images are painted directly on the wall, with flowing contours reminiscent of paintings in children's coloring books. Curling within them are Arabic texts inscribed by Kher Fodi, a calligraphy artist from the Old City of Acre who collaborated with Geva. The texts, for the most part about love and spirituality, also flow and intertwine along the concrete beams encircling the space.

The juxtaposition of poetic texts in Arabic (such as "Art is madness"; "The land belongs to all mankind, the proprietor is God"; "True love is the human spirit within us") and stereotypical Eretz-Israeli

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<sup>1</sup> *Terrazzo*, the simplest kind of floor-tiles.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish nationalist party founded by Rabbi Meir Kahana in 1973, subsequently declared illegal for inciting hatred, spreading racism, and supporting acts of terrorism.

images imbued with nationalism and indoctrination reinforces the dialectic inherent in the work. An Oriental Dionysian intensity vis-à-vis an Apollonian force stemming from the western modernistic design; a popular, peripheral folkloric language vis-à-vis an elitist modernistic language; handicraft naïveté vis-à-vis the meticulous calculation of pure geometry; violence (the predatory vulture above the cyclamen, the black and yellow of the Beitar flag) vis-à-vis the romanticism, lyricism, and poetic quality of the texts; as well as dichotomies such as hard and soft, male and female, occupant and occupied.

The preoccupation with the Arabic language is not new in Geva's *oeuvre*. In the early 1980s he incorporated in his paintings Arabic words and phrases transcribed in Hebrew letters. Names of Arab villages and sites such as Umm El-Fahm, Wadi Ara, Arara, Yaffa, Juara appeared in paintings which were perceived, back then, as stormy and wild. Thus, for example, the words of the song *Biladi Biladi*<sup>1</sup> appeared already in works from 1983 and 1984. The charged, forbidden words, regarded in those days as anti-Israeli sedition, were inscribed in biblical Hebrew letters, in a frilly manner reminiscent of Arab calligraphy. Here too, they appear in Hebrew, this time in Geva's own handwriting, delineated by the contours of the narcissus' stem and petals. The narcissus is also painted differently: less graphical, more graffiti-like, in a coarse, primitive line. Geva plays with the act of translation, with the imperviousness of the threatening, undeciphered sound (*adam-dam-adama* [man-blood-soil]), with the musical quality of the foreign word, impenetrable for Israelis; with the ciphering which evokes reflection on identity, on the definition of the self versus the other, on the reciprocal economics of the local culture.

Writer and art critic Shva Salhuv described Geva's work as a radical realization – architectural, painterly, and sculptural – of burning passion, of deadly love, of love-to-death: “Constructed as a room, the work is an alluring, intoxicating shelter for the rational, albeit utterly mad, reverberation of an inner body masquerading as the ‘national unconscious’. The symbols comprising the work – the gigantic Beitar flag and the giant cyclamen, which are the ‘nationalistic’ dialect translation for the large clusters of grapes carried by the spies from ‘the land that devours its inhabitants’ strive to allow the Israeli-Jewish present to emerge in all its glory and awe. The passion inscribed in the oversized body of the cyclamen and the passion dubbed *Biladi, Biladi*, that has replaced the appeal to the Omnipresent, expands in the room like a bomb that is continuously nourished and shaken by its cultivating mechanism. The stadium lying above does not conceal, but rather worships it.” (*Studio Israeli Art Magazine*, # 111, Feb. 2000, p. 58.)

Passion, madness, anxiety, faith, and fervor are also found in Jose Bedia's work. The central theme in *Mi Coballende*, installed in the space adjacent to Geva's, is Man in all his sanctity and wretchedness. The space's center is occupied by a surrealist scarecrow-like figure whose upper body is made of dry reed and whose legs are fitted into odd canvas pants and heavy divers' boots with copper weights. In front of it, in single file, as it were – crossing the room diagonally from the far inner corner toward the entrance – positioned in a parade-like fashion, are a dog wrapped in black fabric, tied up in rope, and in front of it – in the arrowhead, attached to the floor – a head made of concrete, dipped in honey, with coins scattered around it. Behind the scarecrow-like figure, close to the far corner, is a figurine of an Indian sitting on a wooden stool. All these are enveloped by an enormous wall painting of an Earth-Man of sorts, whose arms

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<sup>1</sup>"My Homeland, My Homeland", title of the Palestinian anthem.

are stretched out to the far ends of the room, bending at the corners, as if embracing the entire space. This is *Coballende*, St. Lazarus in its Afro-Cuban version. His gigantic torso is painted directly on the wall, passionately and with circular energy, in dripping wet black paint. He looks like the silhouette of a giant rising from the floor. Carved on his shoulders and arms, like a tattoo, are cryptic lines in white chalk, cosmological signs representing life and death, and he is heraldically flanked by two cigar smoking dogs sitting on his arched shoulders. A pair of huge crutches made of reed lean against the wall, as if supporting his arms, and situated in three of the room's corners are bundles of reed, with bottles of rum placed beneath them as an offering to the saint. A reversed, Oriental perspective (vis-à-vis the Western Renaissance one) captures one's gaze, interlinking all the installation's components. This is reinforced by the ropes and iron chains linking the two-dimensional painting to the three-dimensional objects. The flat image on the wall seems to extend into the installation space, with the vanishing point situated somewhere behind the viewer, inducing a sense of coalescence with the work.

On one of our trips to Jerusalem while working on the project, Bedia told me with shining eyes the tragic story of *Coballende*, a story which sounds far from politically correct to western ears: Once upon a time there was a handsome, rich, virile, and womanizing prince. One day he made a wish to Olofi (one of the Yoruba gods), to allow him to have all of his women every day. His wish was granted on one condition: that every Thursday he would abstain from women altogether, and pray to his god instead. *Coballende*, of course, broke his vow, and all the misfortunes and calamities of the world befell him: He became a leper, lost his crown, and turned into an eternal nomad, a beggar, crippled, and homeless. This is the popular Lazarus, whose story is radically different from the well-known story of the New Testament St. Lazarus. According to Afro-Cuban tradition, *Coballende* is the patron saint of all illnesses and pains. Once a year, on December 17, his sacred day, all the crippled and lame gather in the church named after him in Havana, asking to be healed. In a special ritual, they take their vows and present their offerings to the saint.

Jose Bedia's private *Coballende* reflects the narrative stratification typifying his entire body of work. The story is narrated like primitive comics. The symbolism is literally highlighted, each detail and emblem endowed with significance. The work is replete with iconic elements drawn from the Santeria worship (a unique Cuban fusion of African mysticism, originating in Nigeria, with Catholicism), the Palo Monte traditions (African cosmology, originating in Western Congo), and Catholic rituals. These are supplemented by elements from the Indian art of the Americas. The reed scarecrow situated in the middle of the room represents the physical transformation of Lazarus, who was forced to wear himself out walking on crutches in the jungles, whereas the flat figure painted on the wall is his spiritual incarnation, accompanied by his loyal dogs who alleviated his pain and loneliness.

The moral encoded in Bedia's work is characterized by a naive, non-pretentious, albeit not uncritical, tone. His attitude toward archaic cultures and ancient civilizations is not patronizing. His anthropological view of the primitive other (whether Indian, Creole, or African) is not typified by a predatory colonialist gaze. Bedia is an active, involved participant, rather than an outsider. The combination of Catholic rituals and African cosmology is part of a lively popular culture in Cuba. Bedia himself had undergone at the age of sixteen an initiation and sanctification ritual in the spirit of the Palo Monte tradition, which is, thus, a fundamental element in his identity as an exile emigrant. His critical approach supports cultural continuity,

the adoption of the past traditions and their incorporation in the present, and proposes a re-examination of cultural values silenced in the name of progress. In an electronic digital world of materiality and virtual reality, Bedia proposes an alternative imbued with humanism, honesty and decency, direct communication, and gratitude for the wonders of the universe.

Time and again I turn to the photographs, trying to formulate the secret of the link between the two artists. There is something so similar and yet so different in their works. In retrospect, it seems that beyond the initial biographical-cultural characteristics, the secret of the encounter ultimately lay in the climate or nature of the works, their frequencies and meta-language. Both define exposed nerves, feelings, passions, memories, fears, dreams, nostalgia, oppression, and prejudice in a current, homogenous, rich language. Conspicuous in both works is the swift, impulsive line; an acute dialectic of opposites is apparent in both: spiritual and earthly, nature and culture, ancient and current, occupier and occupied. Discernible in both is the black and its pungent contrast to the white of the coarse, bare and raw space at the rear of the stadium. Both are saturated with archetypal motifs, and in both the physical presence of the artist is felt, and the traces of his handwriting are detectable. The difference lies in the deciphering process: Geva's work, which delves into the present, is unraveled through analogical layers, the meanings peeled off like an onion; Bedia's work, which delves into the past, is read in a descriptive manner, illustrative in the clean sense of the word.

Beyond all these, the big difference emerges, the principal distinction between the two becomes clear. Bedia's phantoms, with all their mysticism and spirituality, are not threatening after all. On the contrary; there is something friendly, light, nonchalant and non-frightening about the way he addresses the world of the dead and his culture's ritualistic origins. Tsibi Geva's phantoms, on the other hand, are violent, charged, dark, cruel, disconcerting and harsh. I wonder whether this is also how it would appear to a foreign eye? Is my gaze inevitably infected by the disconsolate tangle of the political situation in which I live? Is our "blackness" really so different than theirs? Will "our other" forever remain exotic, dark, undecipherable, provoking and a challenge to any embracing touch?

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\* The quotes were transcribed from a recorded interview with Tsibi Geva conducted during the work on the exhibition, November 1999, Jerusalem.