

Zadok Ben-David and Juan Carlos Garcia-Lavin

Ambrosino Gallery, Miami, Florida

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Impressive for their scope and museum quality, two ambitious installations filled the vast new industrial space of Ambrosino Gallery, one of the top private alternative spaces in Miami. A former furniture warehouse, the gallery consists of two separate exhibition spaces housing *2 1/2* by Juan Carlos Garcia-Lavin, a Cuban-born Miami-based artist and *Evolution & Theory*, by Zadok Ben-David, a London-based Israeli artist born in Yemen.

At first glance, *2 1/2* and *Evolution & Theory* have little in common. Garcia-Lavin and Ben-David grew up in different cultures and obviously absorbed different social contexts relating to their environments. But in fact, these two exhibitions offer an excellent example of the universality of art in the global village era – art as a common visual language, which, at its best, can cross cultures and bridge the gap between geographical extremes, remote as they may be. Ben-David and Garcia-Lavin also share a common subject matter – the relationship between science and the body, science and art, regression and progress. Although they differ in their approach to materials, installation techniques, aesthetics, atmosphere and temperament, they maintain a hidden alliance of nuances manifested in their endeavor to suggest a new, poetic, skeptical and inquisitive model, which attempts to trace the link between science, with all its discoveries and secrets, and man, with all his qualms and quandaries, and the world in which we live.

Ben-David's enticing sculptural environment consisted of flat aluminum cutouts, fashioned with a jigsaw through a laborious manual process. The bases of the black cutouts were buried under a layer of filtered and smoothed dune sand that called to mind a yellowish desert velvet. The result was spectacular: 160 silhouette-images of different heights (the smallest is 8 inches high, and the largest towers to 6.5 feet) appeared, at first sight, like diagrams miraculously floating in the air. Exhibited thus far in Israel and

Australia, this installation is a work in progress, gaining new elements with each new venue. (In 1999, when the installation is scheduled to travel to various sites in Europe, it will acquire its final dimensions, eventually encompassing 250 pieces.)

All the images included are based on illustrations printed in science and witchcraft books from the 19th century, such as experiments in electromagnetism, thermodynamics, mechanics, optics, gravity, velocity, acoustics, volume, radiation and motion. These experiments in physics and chemistry from the dawn of modern science seem, in light of the sophistication of computers and the virtual technology, like relics of a naive, romantic world, a world newly astounded by the discoveries of modern science yet believing in the promise progress holds for humanity. Alongside the airy flat objects – laboratory alembics, magnets, gauges, telescopes, images of hands pouring or measuring, and other odd assorted apparatus which seemed to have jumped from the pages of technical books and landed gracefully in the soft sand – walked, as in a mirage, seven apes of various heights taken from Darwin's evolutionary chain. The linkage between man's beastly origin and the constitution of civilization (acquisition of knowledge and self-discovery) triggered the installation's chain of meaning.

The attraction inherent in the conflict between these pairs of opposites – the rational versus the emotional and scientific arbitrariness versus humanistic skepticism – was reinforced through the physical tension rendered by the contrast between the cold metal and the warm sand, between the elegant simplicity of the cutouts and the crude, sensual roughness of the sand, between the miniature and the massive. Like jugglers in a slapstick comedy, these images rebel against the uncontested tyranny of gravitation. With magical realism, Ben-David managed to create an almost surrealistic fictional reality, a deceit that announced the collapse of the partition between reality and dream.

The vast setting of Garcia-Lavin's mysterious fictional science lab contrasts with Ben-David's installation in its real volume and weight. From a branch-like

system of thin tubes, mysterious liquids dripped into a huge stainless steel bowl elevated on metal legs. Six columns stood next to this apparatus, seemingly supporting structural-architectural elements that are, in fact, transparent towers formed by plastic magnifying sheets into which thin rubber tubes had been inserted and through which bubble-filled fluid pulsed toward the ceiling. The first associations that spring to mind are an intravenous hook-up, a constant closed recycling system or a perpetuum mobile. Located nearby, another work was constructed like the round frame of a huge table missing its center. The frame was laminated with cibachromes which resembled enlargements of organic cells, and magnifying glasses were randomly placed along the edges of the table; through these one could look at small round light boxes and observe something which appeared like a microscopic laboratory discovery. Suspended from the ceiling in another part of the space was a spinal cord of sorts – a chain made from transparent plastic handcuffs resembling a fish bone vertebra. Transparent handcuffs again comprised the rungs of a plastic ladder, linking the bay of the space to the 24 foot ceiling. Along the other side of the space, three metal tables, glowing with clinical sterility, served as bases for gigantic test tubes filled with mysterious liquids in which unidentified objects floated and sparkled. The overall feeling evoked while meandering through these works was reminiscent of the experience afforded by a school chemistry lab, including the thrilling risk of deadly poisons and compounds capable of causing an unexpected explosion. These jars, wires, test tubes, petri dishes, respiration apparatuses, and medical pumps had all been blown up to gigantic dimensions in a manner recalling the visual language of operating room and the sterility of a lab, but one also infected by the romanticism of an alchemist who pursues the fragility of the evasive, invisible element of life. Using the lab as a metaphor, Garcia-Lavin wishes to refine the materials of life and locate among them the element of the “self”, precisely that which cannot be identified, isolated, nor embodied – not even in a single cell.

While the cold, clinical, serious and alienated atmosphere of Garcia-Lavin’s installation differed radically from the warm, sensual, light and jocular environment created by Ben-David, both artists endeavored to solve the very

same riddle: Garcia-Lavin turns within, to the interior of the body, in a constant process of introspection, to what transpires under the surface of the skin, while Ben-David looks back in time, tracing the wonders of evolution and examining scientific discoveries with an anthropological mirror of growth, progress or regression. These two perspectives characterize every sort of knowledge-acquisition process, existing in science as well as in the arts. Between them one can find the entire spectrum of the ways of seeing.

Translated by Daria Kassovsky