

The Matter at Hand

"BLADE MEMORY"
CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY
ART (CCA)
12 DEC 2020 – 3 APRIL 2021

One of the glaring revelations of the pandemic in the context of the Israeli art scene has been the utter fragility of large art institutions (likely elsewhere, too). Throughout the crisis, it has been primarily independent, nimble actors – those who are accustomed to improvising in precarious conditions – that managed to keep the local art scene somehow alive.



Yaacov Dorchin, *Chair*, 1969,
 Polyethylene and metal chair frame, 73 × 46 × 56 cm

The Center for Contemporary Art was smart enough to invite three such figures, artists-curators Ishai Shapira Kalter, Naama Arad, and Eran Nave, to organise a group exhibition on short notice (the show will have a second chapter at the Dortmunder Kunstverein later this year).

"Blade Memory" is in line with earlier exhibitions staged by these curators (independently or together) often in smaller off-spaces, with a focus on the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture, explorations of the materiality and forms of the mundane, and rejection of narrative structures or obvious topicality. But the curators' first foray into an institutional framework expands both the scale of their endeavour and its potential for greater conceptual and art-historical resonance.

The entire show is staged within a kind of theatrical decor built by the curator/artists, which makes it feel more like a total installation than a conventional grouping of individual works. Two actual Tel Aviv streetlights flood the ground floor with a hazy yellow light. Underneath them stands a wooden *Sukkab* – a traditional makeshift hut, where guests hang out during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, presenting a mini-exhibition of condensed, unframed, unceremoniously hung paintings and drawings. The view from the second-floor balcony onto the ground floor is interrupted by a set of cheap, white plastic blinds, of the type used all over the city to convert balconies into rooms. The scenery is complemented by a captivating work by Yonatan Geron and Ariel Kleiner, *Surrealism* (2018), which covers the entire second-floor ceiling with low-hanging office tiles, planted with flickering, buzzing fluorescent lights and 300 living crickets (is this what the post-Anthropocene apocalypse will look like?). It makes the entire floor into an eerie, deserted, office building, looking onto the nocturnal "street" scene below.

The exhibition could be read as an homage to Tel Aviv and its hodgepodge

All images: Liat Elbibing



View of "Blade Memory", Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, 2021

aesthetics, and this possibility becomes all the more real with Boaz Arad's *Untitled* (2016), a blackboard with a diagram mapping the intricate relations between the characters in Ya'acov Shabtai's quintessential Tel Aviv novel, *Past Continuous* (1977). Arad's work charges the exhibition with a much darker tone, though. He was an influential local artist, teacher, and curator, who took his own life in 2018 after being accused in the media of having had intimate relationships with a few of his high-school students. The controversial inclusion of this particular work, which clearly hints at Arad's role as a teacher (the blackboard) and at the inescapable burden of the "continuous past" (as the novel's title suggests), makes us revisit our perception of the city. What is it that lies beneath its façade of casualness and social energy? What messy relations of power sustain its perceived informality? What past continues to haunt and divide its current art scene? This shadow gets even darker as we encounter Siona Shimshi's *Class Picture 1939* (1965): an unpainted clay relief showing the smiling faces of an all-male yearbook photo, with only one sad girl in the middle ("it's a site of trauma", curator at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Dalit Matatyahu, proclaimed to me after

visiting the exhibition. The display of Arad's work functions in another way as well: it lays out a certain artistic lineage. With its careful attunement to everyday "stuff" and its adherence to formal grammar, Arad's practice certainly has a lot to do with the curators' ongoing matter-driven project. As an artist-curator himself, Arad also promoted many young artists working in this vein at the HaMidrasha Gallery, where he implemented an intuitive, non-thematic approach (his group exhibition "Cherries", 2017, is emblematic of this practice).

With the inclusion of Shimshi's work, along with a piece by Ya'acov Dorchin (*Chair*, 1969) – which seems uncannily contemporary and entirely unrepresentative of Dorchin's usual macho aesthetics – the curators stretch this materialist lineage even farther into the past. These two artists took part in the 60s in exhibitions organised by the 10+ group, which later became associated with "Want of Matter": an artistic sensibility, closely linked to Tel Aviv and its urban landscape, which was characterised by the use of everyday materials (most famously, plywood), a "sloppy" hand, and a proclivity for the underwhelming. "Blade Memory", thus, situates the Y generation "prosaic

materialists" at the end point of a whole genealogy of similar matter-driven aesthetics – historicising, and thereby institutionalising, this current trend in Tel Aviv art.

But institutionalisation comes with risks. "Want of Matter", for instance, became a stamp of "good taste", the hegemonic *bon ton* of "cultured" Israel: too comfortable and assured in its calculated retreat into the object, in its unrefined approach, in its "solution" for idiosyncratic Israeli visual language. Its protagonists knew all too well how to project a certain unpretentious pretentiousness, "simple" (yet actually sophisticated), "sloppy" (yet actually measured and recognisable), "down to earth" (yet actually elitist), "unadorned" (yet strictly aestheticised). This historical spectre looms over "Blade Memory" and the current local materialist (re)turns. Are we seeing a new "Tel Aviv School" forming? A new materialist orthodoxy of the casual and the mundane? The reaction against illustrative, idea-driven art is entirely commendable, but even a necessary reaction could quickly turn into a new doxa if it becomes too sure of its answers.

Arnon Ben-Dror



Ceiling: Michal Makaresco, *0546816227*, 2020, 10 balloons with helium, variable dimensions
 Floor: Yizhak Golombek, *Comb*, 1989, Plywood, 85 × 320 × 77 cm