

Tal Amitai-Lavi & Dina Shenhav: Duet / Neta Gal-Atzmon

About the dual exhibition of the artists, The Heder Gallery, Tel Aviv, Dec-Feb. 2011

In this shared exhibition Shenhav and Amitai-Lavi show images that mark out elusive spaces of emptiness and fullness. In different ways and using different materials they both create worlds whose foundations are fragile and disintegrating, worlds that seemingly materialize from concrete images but which more than anything, create a disturbed mental atmosphere.

Using a thinness of materials, form and color, both artists in their work indicate amorphous places without borders. Over the years both of them deal consistently with questions of memory (as well as in this exhibition of new works). While Shenhav (in acrylic paintings on canvas in variations of black and white) creates narrative charged landscapes infused with a sense of disaster, Amitai-Lavi (in works made of salt and a compound of baking soda and glue) seemingly reconstructs fragile fragments of consciousness.

In previous works she exhibited on different occasions¹, Shenhav referred to the forested landscapes in the context of the Holocaust of the Jewish people. In this exhibition, another context derived from a contemporary photographic image she encountered while surfing the Internet joins the earlier readings of her works: illegal hunting of reindeer in the snowy wildernesses of the Arctic North. In the photograph recording the “successful” conclusion to the hunt, the two hunters in the midst of their labor direct their gaze, for an instant, towards the camera. The photographic act that for a moment stops the action of the hunters, forces the viewer against his will to become a witness to what is happening. This in fact creates an undeniable sense of anxiety and menace.

In Shenhav’s paintings the harsh photographic scene assumes formal and abstract characteristics - sublimated, painterly compositions that provide some relief for the beholder, softening the original image. However the sense

¹ Among others a large installation of a forest made of sponge rubber (Herzliya Museum, “Dog,” 2006, curators: Dalia Levin and Gila Limon)

of emptiness and alienation remains, the burden of knowledge unrelenting. Reading these works goes back to Shenhav's known body of work and its relation to collective memory. The question asked is - what is the role of evidence and what is the observer's place in difficult and clearly unethical events and situations.

Amitai -Lavi's works of salt and baking soda exist in the space between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional that makes it possible to see them as a material two -dimensional object or alternatively, a flat three-dimensional object. Either way these objects have a shell like nature, fragile and vulnerable as shards of ice or snow crystals with a soft and intangible presence. Amitai-Lavi indicates that her attempts to integrate the material is meditative in nature arising out of a desire to freeze memory, to clasp a precious souvenir, or to capture an elusive moment from the world of emotions. Unlike the architectural images she created out of sewing thread in the past², the forest image displayed in this exhibition is consistent with the amorphous nature of the material. Amitai - Lavi states that the guiding principle in her work is the principle of uncertainty - working with unexpected materials gives her only partial control over the final outcome. Thus, she claims, the work process as well as its final result relates to an elusiveness of consciousness, of memory...

It is interesting to note that the creation of these works by Amitai - Lavi (like her previous works with other accessible domestic materials) was done in order to study "poor quality" unrefined materials. The compound that she created in her studio - by mixing baking soda with glue - crystallized in fact as a chemical reaction. Like the alchemist, who in his workshop aspires to turn simple metal into gold, so Amitai-Lavi in her "laboratory" searches for the *Philosophers Stone* as a metaphor for spiritual endeavor. Emptiness in a desire for fullness, reduction in a desire for eternity...

² Among them the image of a house that collapsed in the wake of Hurricane Katerina (Petach Tikva Museum of Art, *The Space Between*, 2007. (Curator: Dorit Gur-Arie)