

"We are a Bound Family" / Tali Tamir

About Tal Amitai-Lavi's first solo exhibition, The Kibbutz Art Gallery, Tel Aviv (Curator: Tali Tamir), October 1996

Between the "holy family" and the "bound family" separates, in the work of Tal Amitai-Lavi, a safety belt and a slogan of the Ministry of Transportation: "We are a Bound Family."

Tal Amitai-Lavi attacks the question of the family, one of the central concepts in Jewish culture and Israeli society, a concept that swells every year during the holidays and remains taboo. Few, certainly in the field of plastic arts, have touched it on such a direct level.

Tal Amitai-Lavi moves around the "soft belly" of the family: the dinner table. She paints her father dipping in a soup bowl, floating between parsley crumbs. At his side, her mother is immersed in the bottom of the bowl under a pile of spaghetti in tomato sauce. The mother and father are painted in a sleeping position, whether floating or dead. Helpless, they are positioned between the knife, spoon, and fork appropriately set on the checkered tablecloth (the father) or on a floral oilcloth (the mother).

The rules of the set table, table manners, and food contain within them the entire family metaphor: not only the means of control used by parents over their children through food and feeding, but also the predator-prey relationships and the potential for destruction and oppression lurking in every family, somewhere under the folds of the tablecloth and among the hidden layers of the subconscious. It is a form of cannibalism, involving inter-generational and inter-familial power struggles.

In a series of sculpted works from the late 80s named "The Family," Daniel Zak portrayed the arbitrariness of the familial connection when he drew a thin metal line between a rancid, undefined drop of semen and the image of a human fetus.

Tal Amitai-Lavi is much more blunt than he was. As she continues to walk the thin line between the random and the intentional, she scatters kernels of rice (or rather, paints the scattering of the kernels) on a Hebron marble slab—a material associated with gravestones, yet commonly found as the countertop in almost every middle-class Israeli kitchen. From the scattered kernels, the writing becomes clear: "We turned out fucked."

The familial relationship, mediated through the simple imagery of common food (which family does not eat rice and meatballs?), is revealed in its other facet and exposed as a complex, vulnerable system that seeps way beyond the daily chore of cooking.

Motifs of cannibalism between parents and children are well-known in the mythological dimension; one could mention the fear-striking painting by Goya describing the god Saturn devouring his sons. Tal Amitai-Lavi, in a Freudian-macabre spirit rather than a mythological one, turns the motif upside down and expresses death wishes and aggressive impulses directed at the parents.

Tal Amitai-Lavi does not build a scenario of fear and terror, but rather confronts the myth of familial connection through games of chance and gambling, such as the Lottery and jackstraws. Scattering the jackstraws is like scattering human semen: random, arbitrary, and uncontrolled. You need luck in life to win the big prize and to be born into the right family. “Luck is after you,” as the Lottery slogan quoted in one of the works says. Tal Amitai-Lavi gambles for luck out of the maze of the familial connection. She allows herself to untie the “safety belt” of the family and cast her own private lucky cards.