

Requiem for a Fantasy of Happiness / Tami Katz-Freiman

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On May 24, 2001 the dance floor of the Versailles banquet hall in Jerusalem's Talpiot industrial zone collapsed. The tragedy, caused by flaws in ceiling construction, negligence, and lax building inspection, occurred when the third floor wedding hall caved in under the feet of hundreds of celebrants, killing more than twenty and injuring over three hundred. The wedding video footage perpetuates the last minutes before the collapse, showing guests dancing and drinking, and then disappearing all of a sudden into the abyss under their feet. This devastating image has been etched into the consciousness of many Israelis as a metaphor for the nightmarish quality of Israeli reality.

At the entrance to her exhibition, Tal Amitai-Lavi spread a "red carpet" that leads the viewers/guests into the exhibition space (Untitled, 2003-2004). The carpet, in shades of crimson, blue and gold, has a majestic appearance, thus laying out the meaning of the entire show and recounting the story of an illusion and its shattering. It is a fake carpet painted in acrylic on wood and adorned with a serial pattern reminiscent of a geometric maze. The key to the exhibition is concealed within the outer border of the carpet's decorations. What appears at first as an innocent decorative pattern is revealed, upon closer examination, to be a texture of interwoven words that form entire sentences. Alongside banal wedding phrases such as "it will be the nicest wedding in the world," or "kol sason ve-kol simcha, kol khatan ve-kol calah" [the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the voice of a groom and the voice of a bride], the artist incorporated excerpts from the tragic testimonies of the wedding guests, as reported in the press from the scene of disaster: "we tried to walk on what was left of the floor"; "the floor caved in under my feet"; "we found ourselves falling further and further down"; "half my family was wiped out"; "mommy, save me"; "and then it all collapsed."

Amid these eerie testimonies the artist inserted a blessing taken from her own wedding ceremony: “may you always be young as the morning dew [Heb. Tal, the artist's name], fresh as the dawn [Shachar, her groom], and entwined as these two are” (Untitled, 2003-2004 [detail]). Through the use of this unusual line Amitai-Lavi reveals a detail from her personal biography that may shed light on the affinity between the collective Versailles disaster and her private Versailles disaster — the great promise of her marriage that has shattered. She has distilled the pain of separation, disappointment and disillusionment after ten years of marriage into an exact, refined visual language, casting the narrative of temporary happiness into all five sculptural objects comprising the show.

The most conspicuous object is an empty image of a bridal car — a fancy Mercedes of which only the elegant gift wrap, the gilt ribbons and straps made in China remain (Untitled, 2003). The car appears as a still, hollow shell which maintains the illusion of fullness. Akin to a bodiless spine, the car emerges as a present absence — the mere linear essentials of a construction. Shimmering on the wall in the background is a one-word golden inscription reading “happiness” in ornate English script — the language of Hollywood promise (Untitled, 2003). A second glance reveals that the inscription consists of a chain of hundreds of wedding rings held together like a Sukkah decoration. In this context the fake gold chains are read as a metaphor for the bonds of marriage, for the couple’s mutual dependence duplicated time and again, as it were, forming an endless tangled string that embodies the promise of happiness and its refutation at one and the same time.

On the opposite wall appear the bride and groom, similarly represented by their absence in the form of empty plaster molds (Untitled, 2004). This image is based on the pair of figurines that customarily decorate the top tier of wedding cakes, replicated here as a frieze-like serial pattern. The bride and groom embrace, fragile like hollow and anonymous china dolls; an incarnation of all brides and grooms, they hover, glued to each other like phantoms amidst the myriad images of transient happiness. Another modular object is the wine glass installation imitating pyramid-like structures prevalent in wedding halls, into which wine is poured while

drinking a toast To Life (Untitled, 2004). The breaking of the glass — the focal point of the wedding ceremony — embeds a reference to ruin (the destruction of the Temple). In the present context, that of a structure on the verge of collapse and the blood-red wine, reinforce the symbolic meaning inherent in the site of celebration as a potential disaster. Following the strategy of her earlier works, such as the pick-up sticks (Untitled, 1996), Sandcastle (2001), the domino-like ring of cards (Untitled, 2001), and the tower of Playmobile dolls entitled Atlases (2000-2001), the artist has translated and elaborated on images imbued with emotion and profound anxieties (the disintegration of the family structure, loss and death) into a three-dimensional language devoid of melodrama. She has created a sculptural structure that hangs upon nothing, whose components lean on each other and are dependent on one another, and which even the slightest move will cause to crash.

The sculptural language that defines the objects in the show and distinguishes Tal Amitai-Lavi's mode of perception relies primarily on the formalist presence of an existing structure with an applied, practical meaning. In this case it is the aesthetic of "bad taste" characteristic of the common decor of banquet halls (plastic chairs wrapped in white satin and embellished with shiny gold ribbons, and the fancy Jewish wedding canopies [hupas] often revealed as constructions supported by broomsticks). The artist magnifies the presence of the commonplace structures (the car, carpet, glass pyramid, and bride-groom figurines), but at the same time interferes with their original meanings through their installation and their playful manipulation. She extracts from them pure sculptural values and upgrades them to the level of artistic objects. A semblance of bad taste thus generates values of composition and pure formalism such as the interrelations between empty and full, transparent and opaque, light and shade, controlled and arbitrary.

The concentration on surface appearance and decoration transforms the objects in the show into empty shells. This strategy empowers the works precisely due to the sentimental and tragic excess they carry. This dialectic language, which combines a self-conscious baroque quality with brittle, minimalist frugality, shapes the entire show: "grand" themes replete with

pathos and pain are expressed through a sharp witty visual language. In the context of this form of new expressiveness and sentiment-free sentimentality, visual sparseness does not necessarily obey minimalist canon, but rather convey the great effort to illustrate the collapse into nothingness. In this context one may locate Tal Amitai-Lavi's work in-between the anti-monumental approach exhibited by American artist Tom Friedman and the disintegrating conceptual sculpture of British artist Cornelia Parker. In Amitai-Lavi's case as well, the works' strength stems from the choice of a clear, concise and simple formalist language and banal (partly expendable) usable materials, from the affection for small details, from the obsessive diligence invested in them, and from the sense of magic and mystery involved in elevating the mundane.

As mentioned earlier, the metaphorical anchor of the show is the Versailles disaster. One cannot conceive of a crueler metaphor for the disintegration of fantasy, when the happiest day of one's life turns into a dance of death. In this context, the allusion to "bad taste" and cheap, tacky design acquires a tragic meaning, considering the use of the unstable Pal-Kal method of construction, which reveals itself to be a sham of sorts and a form of deadly negligence. To this one may also add the name 'Versailles' with its imported, escapist ring — an example of Israeli provincialism marketing an illusion of glamour for one night. Indeed, fakery and masquerade are intrinsic to each and every element in the show. Thus, the display space as a whole is signified as the site of an evaporated promise, the scene of a refuted dream, a collection of structures emptied of meaning. The festive, ceremonial atmosphere, the hues of crimson and royal blue, and the excessive use of (artificial) gold decorations against the whiteness of the walls — all these enhance the splendor of the wedding hall, but at the same time resonate with an emptied out fullness, declaring themselves as signifiers of falsity and disappointment. Through minimal means the artist conveys an appearance of perfect happiness, an ephemeral setting for a threepenny romance that is entirely a distraction. The false gift ribbons on the car, the fake glitter of the "happiness" inscription, and the hollow bride-groom clichés, all attest to disillusionment with the Prince Charming legend, presenting the dream of happiness as a mere ephemeral illusion.

Weddings are still one of the basic and most significant cultural symbols throughout the world. The object of yearning for girls and women it still fosters a fantasy about ultimate happiness. Over the years, hundreds of Hollywood films have promoted the ideal of the couple as part of good American consumerism. The aspiration for a little house in the suburbs, two point three kids, a big car, a dog, and a smart-looking wife that will wait for you with dinner ready at the end of a hard day's work — all these are still translated into the object of yearning called “love” and marketed in the cinema and commercials as the realization of “happiness.” In her book *The Happiest Day of My Life or: Why We Are So Desperate to Get Married*, Israeli author Ofra Riesenfeld traces the reasons for this great passion — to get married — in Israel of the third millennium. Hypocrisy, pretense and deception are only some of the sentiments emerging from the testimonies she gathered from her interviewees about the wedding dream presented as a “tough, terrible and humiliating sale agreement,” refined by “layers of romance, tulle and sequins, a band and catering.”

Tal Amitai-Lavi has explored pretense, masquerade, camouflage and fakery in her earlier works as well. In her first solo exhibition (*We Are a Bound Family*, 1996) she focused on the intricate relationships within the family. In her second show (*Aleph for Ohel [tent], Bet for Bayit [house]*, 2001) she continued addressing notions such as home, memory and family through various representations of childhood games and toys. Those two exhibitions already emphasized the illusion of the “happy ending” and the disillusionment with naiveté. The works attested to the frailty and evaporation of the stable home illusion. The horror, brittleness and loss of innocence were manifested in particular in the small details, such as the inscription “something is going to happen” that appeared as waves on which a paper boat was floating, the translucent tiny sandals abandoned by the sandcastle, or the images of structures hanging on a thread (the domino-like ring of cards, *Sandcastle*, *Atlases*). The elicited feeling was that the memory capsule called “home-family-childhood” is not as sweet as it may appear. Something dark and deceitful is exposed through the colorful facade of a happy childhood.

One of the most acute metaphors for the disintegration of the home and family unit appeared in her second show in a mosaic-like work reminiscent of a black-and-white labyrinth (Untitled, 2002). In it a text contemplating the boundaries of the definition of “home” quoted from Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) was encrypted as part of the maze walls: “At what moment does a house stop being a house? When the roof is taken off? When the windows are removed? When the walls are knocked down? At what moment does it become a pile of rubble?”

These tough questions seem to remain open in Amitai-Lavi’s present show as well. Here the pile of rubble of the metaphorical family unit discussed by Auster grows into a body of works based on an actual physical collapse, whose cruelty exceeds all imagination. The anxieties and horror that accompanied it were pushed to the margins of the carpet, well concealed by the rituals and trappings of false beauty. One can not however avoid the catastrophe present in the show despite all the efforts of conceal it. The works presented here reveal a tremendous attempt to protect oneself, to conceal emotion and to hide real pain via strategies of estrangement, cynicism and criticism. However, this restrained emotional state, which toils to present itself as devoid of sentimentality, exposes the artist’s charged, ambivalent and unresolved view of the marriage institution, of conjugal life and of the fantasy of romantic love. The fascination with the power of illusion, the awareness of its far-fetched nature and the disillusionment with it, as piercing as they may be, not only do not blunt the splendor of the fantasy, but rekindle it with an ever brighter light.