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Israeli artist gives new meaning to 'from the archives'

An exhibition by Michal BarOr in Petah Tikva features limping representatives of a dusty past and thereby transforms the term 'archive' itself.

By Galia Yahav 11:36 08.04.15 0

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Who would have thought that these words would ever be written: Something interesting is happening at the Yad Lebanim building in the Petah Tikva Museum of Art complex.

The curator Hila Cohen-Schneiderman has devoted this side space – actually a vacant room next to the memorial commemorating the city's fallen soldiers – to various forms of contemporary art that bear a relation to the museum's collection. More specifically, she has extended the institution's sphere of interest to the concept of the archive itself, with its attendant concepts: preservation and conservation, institutional collecting, artistic homage, rewriting history, renewed display and more. The space is gradually being filled by high-quality experimentation, surprisingly personal, by artists who have been invited to rummage through the local past, with its limited findings, and extract something contemporary from it.

This time it's an exhibition (until April 16) entitled "The Hawks and the Sparrows" by Michal BarOr, 31, who holds a master's degree in photography from the Royal College of Art, London. Her solo show addresses the question of what constitutes artistic research. She adds a dimension to the "archive craze" that has seized the art world and acquired cachet with the exhibition "Archive Fever" – a title borrowed from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida – curated by Okwui Enwezor at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008.

BarOr collected a variety of items from Yad Lebanim, from the Museum of Art, from the Petah Tikva municipal archive and from the city's Museum of Human Sciences and Environment. She photographed some of them and installed others in the exhibition as they are, each accompanied by its story.

This is where things start to get complicated and acquire the research and poetical dimension, hysterical and capricious, that underlies the exhibition. What is the story of these objects? How to tell it? The center of the exhibition space is occupied by a taxidermy lion. The accompanying label states that it is "unregistered and uncatalogued." With it comes an explanation, actually a little story. In the 1960s, we learn, the Petah Tikva Municipality issued a series of postcards, one of which carried a photograph of a roaring lion. On the back of the postcard one word appeared: "Lion." There was no way to know whether the image was that of a live lion or of a taxidermy lion that was shut away in the municipal zoo's storeroom for 25 years. Now it's here, it's the epitome of shabbiness: dried out, mane unkempt and sparse, pelt peeling, tail broken. From the start it was a crafty and controversial item, with unresolved interplay between photograph and photographed object, and now, even when it is "substantial" in this space, it remains a backdrop that was abandoned in a storeroom: The show won't take place, the play won't be performed, a roar will not be heard.

There are other stuffed animals in the exhibition, and carcasses of birds, along with "horns" that were found in a locked room above the zoo's offices in a cardboard box labeled "Osemim Gift Baskets Ltd." The box, according to the exhibition catalog, "also contained a broken skull of a small (unidentified) animal, receipts for zoo tickets, and several bottles of the toilet cleaning and disinfecting detergent W.C." There are other lions, too, one of them a photograph of the mosaic "Lion of Judah" by Jacob Wexler (1963), which is "embedded in the black tiles of the [adjacent] memorial room"; the other, Naftali Bezem's superb 1965 drawing, "Lion and Reclining Woman."

Indeed, women are present, too. Besides the reclining woman, there is also "The Transparent Woman" – a large 1969 photograph of a display in the Human Sciences and Environment Museum – a photograph of Moshe Ziffer's 1960 sculpture "Daphne the Palmach Fighter" (referring to Israel's pre-1948 "Shock Troops"), and the sculpture "Nude (Torso)" from "circa 1969" by Jacob Louchansky. Alongside these is a photograph titled "Stack" taken by Zvi Schweitz in 1973, showing a pile of M16 rifles in the exhibition space. However, the archive provided no information about "what exhibition is documented here and who the owner of the weapons is."

Private criteria

What's the connection between the heartrending broken tail of the lion and the logic of an archive? The viewer experiences the exhibition as a wanderer amid official/secret themes. BarOr vividly imbues her findings with this double base. All of them are representative, standing for historical certainty, truth, ideology, yet at the same time they are items of a secretive fetish instilled with life by her gaze and touch alone, with totally private criteria.

In addition to addressing the interrelations between taxidermy and photography as two levels of marking, BarOr displays documents and objects that were found in exhibition spaces and in storerooms, juxtaposing official history with history that slipped away. The result creates a threshold situation for the category of classification itself. The items that were pedagogical objects for purposes of identity building have lost their context, and those that slipped out of the frame, so to speak, are restored to their identity and attached to it – it's impossible to be rid of them, despite their cultural dislocation. A delicate thread of absurdity, or of a comedy of errors, runs through the exhibition: the exhibits rot in storerooms, the sculptures are forgotten in the recesses of memory, the animals are not animals, the conservation decays, the painting is upside down.

There is also a fascinating historical article in the catalog: "The Young and the Bald: The Story of the First Hunter and the Last Ostrich," by Dr. Tamar Novick. It's the saga of Yehezkel Henkin, one of the first members of Hashomer, The Watchman, in the Jewish community of 1920s Palestine. In addition to being a prototype of "muscular Judaism" and "a symbol of bravery and potency," Henkin was a hunter who "with the financial support of European philanthropists and museums… was sent with his gun to find missing specimens of the Holy Land collections [for Europe]."

The Europeans were particularly interested in finding the Syrian ostrich, which was identified with the "na'amit" referred to in the Book of Job. The article describes the encounter between Henkin and the animal as one between two equal rivals, both of them objects of astonished observation: the representative of the muscular Jew-hunter and the speedy, nimble, powerful ostrich. But in addition, the ostrich was bald like him and died prematurely like him. "The memory of Henkin became tied to the last Syrian ostrich… With the help of a delicate technological manipulation, they appear together, standing in that same backyard of display." The story fits the exhibition like a glove, recalling the way in which the French artist Sophie Calle diverts narratives for her benefit. Every item and text unleashes a chain of references and associations, universes of content and historical layers. Thus, despite its modesty, the exhibition is a kind of Thousand and One Nights of the history of the Jewish community in this land (now consisting of wounded lions, birds dying in secret, transparent women and unmarked weapons), stories within stories about the modern Western machinery of classification – a heroic and failed project akin to a broken-tailed taxidermy lion.

BarOr is drawn to frayed, broken and abandoned findings, not glittering symbols of the past but wretched from the start or having become wretched by losing their ideological and historical worth, or their physical quality. BarOr tells their incomplete, crippled, deficient stories: limping representatives of a dusty past.

As such, the concept of the archive in itself becomes, under her hand, a kind of crippled, deficient exhibit.

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