

Rami Maymon / *Him-Self*

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What happens between sunrise and sunset? One day, one revolution of the Earth. And what about 80 years? In human existence it's an entire life. In cosmological terms — it's the blink of an eye. What is the similarity between our existence in the present and between what has already become history? Between the artwork of a living artist and that of an artist who passed away? Between the contemporary visual language and the language of the 1950s or '70s? What kind of relationship can be woven between objects, people, or cultures? What shall we do with the icons since iconoclasm? Since the idols of the past have been smashed? Does 'new' mean to erase the old? Are we still deep down committed to the modernistic ethos of progress? And what does this commitment do to our labor and to the meanings we cast into the material and the objects we created? Does the consciousness of historicizing that we developed eradicate all content at the outset? Is it true that at the very moment they come into existence that we already realize how transient is their existence — just as ours is? But the blink of an eye in cosmological cultural history, an appearance destined to go out of fashion, into oblivion, or, in the best case scenario, to gather dust in the Museum's cellars and re-appear in a different context by someone else who is fated of his own free will or otherwise, to bend them into the conceptual projects engaging him at that very moment in the future in which the present has become the past.

The title of Rami Maymon's exhibition, "Him-Self," is borrowed from Uri Lesser's 1928 painting included in the Mishkan Museum of Art's book from 1970. However, instead of calling it *Self Portrait*, as in the original, in this exhibition Maymon has translated it into "Him-Self." This re-translation draws the attention to the act of translation itself and the gap between different systems of signs, inviting thought on how the artist perceives himself as "other" through the act of representation and the inevitable integration of the representation he created in the history of representations, the history of art, and the history of Israeli art in particular.

In this exhibition, Maymon responds to the Mishkan's collection in numerous ways. He chooses and extracts isolated sculptures from the

Museum storerooms, places them on a stage, populates them with sculptural works he created, deconstructs the book of the Collection, paint, draws, and sews on its pages, conceals parts and reveals others, adds and erases, designs and rewrites the canon, organizing the existing works in new conceptual categories.

This stage continues prior stages reflecting different principles in his work, in which Maymon used reproductions of canonical artworks, art books, and catalogs as readymades. In this way he examined long-standing narratives and hierarchies, unravels them to open a rereading of the familiar or forgotten. Restoring the latter to visibility requires actions similar to archaeology. The use of artworks as a platform for new works turns the gaze from the object to its context, thus facilitating subversion against schema of thought fixed in the history of art, and to delineate an alternative genealogy and new pathways through this field.

Maymon's work exhibits the reverse of how an archaeologist refers to the heritage of the past: instead of being revealed, the found object (*objet trouvé*) undergoes disruption, covering, and concealment. In this state, observation of the works is almost paradoxical, because there is more concealed than revealed, and the viewer must fill in the lost information. Where the image is entirely hidden, the work appears as an extreme analytical step in which the artwork's visual values are absented and whatever remains of its concrete appearance is its symbolic value, the details that are embodied in the data in the accompanying book from which it was possible to empty out the signified from the sign and leave it as is. The image in these works thus appears as a present absentee, like a spirit that we are unable to call up from the dead.

An eye made of glass

The exhibition hall has two entrances: one is the impressive frontal entrance, and the other one is at the side, seeming to invite infiltrating into the exhibition. It is difficult to decide through which one should observe the exhibition, since both embody magic. Choosing the frontal entrance seems to mean that we responded to the perfect order that the artist has arranged in the Mishkan Museum, as if we heard him telling the story he wished to tell "in the correct order," edited to perfection. Entering from the side, we may feel that we are perhaps walking in the artist's shoes for a moment, since the

artist always challenges the narrative by deconstructing the systems arranged according to the editors' values.

Nevertheless, let us enter the exhibition from the front, and ask what is it we are seeing and what we are not seeing. First, we ascend several stairs into a bright space. Before us are four black boxes standing on a stage. Three are sealed, while one seems to be open, cut on a diagonal, out of which a sculpture rises up. It is gold, and it is not large. Behind this arrangement is a white wall; to see what is hiding behind it, we must move around. Crossing the wall, an additional arrangement is exposed: it has three or perhaps four figures — the sculpture of the head of a man placed on the floor; the sculpture of a woman and child; a transparent board screens what may perhaps be the fourth figure — an abstract object — a pair of circles with a line stretched between them connecting the wall and the floor of the stage. Now we can also see that on the rear wall of the space is a series of abstract, colorful collages. Only if we come closer can we see the text underneath, revealing that the collages were made on the pages of the book. We shall further discover that the multiplicity of the mediums — the complete spectrum of modes of visual action — are like a study of the space of possibilities in the field of creating signs or traces, and, in particular, of ways to erase, cover, and conceal.

Goddess and chorus

Let us go inside again. The screen goes up. On the dramatic stage are four boxes. Only one exposes its contents — Moshe Sternschuss' sculpture of the Goddess Ashtoreth (1970). The light-filled shrine becomes Ashtoreth's temple, while she herself was bathed in its modernistic lines. We can only guess at the contents of the boxes surrounding Ashtoreth's box.

In Ugaritic and Egyptian source texts, Ashtoreth is identified as the goddess of fertility, love, and sex, but also as goddess of war. The ancient Phoenicians saw her as the dawn star and the evening star. The drama taking place behind the arrangement at the front hints at a possible interpretation of the relationship between the Ashtoreth images and the black boxes that look like the Kaabah stone. In both cases, we are dealing with creations by humans who attribute magical powers to the works. Worship of the images signifies the human desire to control what is uncontrollable, the need for an external source for meaning, in making order in our chaotic lives. However, while

Ashtoreth's body and form symbolizes the human drama, the Dionysian in human existence, what challenges, endangers, and troubles the body are those moments of life and death. The black Kaabah-like boxes signify eternity and divine perfection merging with geometric perfection, the order and control that belong to the god.

In the scene taking place behind the backs of the goddess and her attendants, figures that are difficult to see as anything other than archetypes, the head of a man without a body is placed on the floor, a bound woman is tied to a pillar, and a naked child leans on his mother, embracing her, almost entirely merging with her. His head is tilted backwards, his eyes are closed, and his future is unknown. If this arrangement represents human existence, this set-up depicts it as a tragedy, and if so, we may think of the sealed boxes, of Ashtoreth's maidens, as a Greek chorus predicting the tragedy but also providing a solution to it. The chorus locates the humanistic in relation to the cosmic, explains its fall as inevitable, the tragedy as soluble, and our human actions as rooted in hubris, shortsightedness, and the understanding of our earthly location, our temporariness.

The curtain goes up. But the curtains in this theatre neither go up nor down. They are not made of fabric but of paint, paper, plaster, metal, and glass. Their function is not to go up and reveal events at a designated time, but to remain fixed in place, to conceal, to screen, to remind us to what extent the gaze depends on the movement of the body which is the transformation of matter into time.

A marginal comment

"The Museum" Book of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod (1970) is a fascinating historical document. Not only for us, the people of Ein Harod, but for its approach to the issue of preservation. The small booklet whose pages have already turned yellow, presents reproductions in color and in black and white with a short text describing the history of the Museum. The taxonomic description of the works in the Collection looks more like a capital declaration than a text on art in the usual sense. It lists numerous artists, classified by origins and school. It is not a coincidence that all of the artists named were born in Europe or the Americas, while the birth of the art of the Jewish People is dated to the 19th century. Judaica, some made in Arab

countries and Iran, are not included in the “sculpture” category and appear without the artist’s name.

What arouses more astonishment is the fact that the text, sometimes so technical as to be annoying, appears in translation into no less than nine (!) languages — Arabic, Russian, Japanese, Yiddish, English, French, Esperanto, German, and Spanish. What significance should we attribute to this extravagant gesture, so heavy an investment? Does it arise from the perception that Israeli and Jewish art are the outcome of the “ingathering of the Exiles”? Perhaps the translation into Japanese is the harbinger of the beginnings of globalization? Does it refer to turning the gaze outward, to the desire to be accepted by the nations of the world? Either way, what is obvious in the catalog is the great importance attached to the words used in commemorating institutions, personalities, and objects. Whoever is in the text is in the canon, and whoever’s name is missing is pushed into the background. Out of all of the human dramas, out of all of the objects into which people cast meaning, only a few are mentioned in the mirror of history — those who have been lucky enough to have been graced with the written word.

Rami Maymon, whose works move in the spaces between photography, sculpture, and installation, took the Mishkan catalog and used it as a platform for painting and collage. The black and white pages became colorful, abstract, and expressive in moderation, perhaps because of their size. Only in a few cases did something remain from the reproduction, the object commemorated in the catalog. All that remained exposed is the text: name of the artist, name of the artwork, year it was made. The new buried the old and all that is left on the surface of the earth is a monument. The resulting hybrid seems to force us to read the new image through its accompanying label, the monument of the image which it replaced, to read the abstract through the symbolic, to surrender to the urge to decode, to give oneself over to the Rorschach-like state and guess the contents of the “black box” from out of the twists and turns of that other black box — our consciousness.