

Rami Maymon, *Hunting West*

Inga Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2018

Text by Ilanit Konopny

Hunting West¹

Rami Maymon (right room)

The Book of Genesis tells the story of a damsel who stood holding a jug on her shoulder by a water well. When the servant approached her and asked: *Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher – Rebekah made haste and let down her pitcher from her shoulder, to quench his and his camels' thirst.* In biblical paintings, her pitcher stands for the pitcher of life, plenty, and eroticism, and the well is a fertile womb. This identification of the Orient with the image of a pitcher and of the pitcher with women expanded in 19th century Orientalist painting and photography. In 1920s Italy, drawing on the restored connection with the Roman past, the *Novecento* painters viewed pitchers as a symbol of the human condition, a reflection of the human figure – while highlighting Roman architecture, sculptures, and vases. Israeli art during the 1940s was split between the camp of artists “who are not afraid of the jug (among others) and also identify the Orient with the jug, and the artists of abstraction, who strive to merge in international language of forms that negates local content,” and reject the Arab jug motif. However, “the big revolution was in the Postmodern trend of the 1980s. This is the trend where the vase of life has changed into the vase of death, from the vase of Eros to the vase of Thanatos, from the water pitcher to the urn.”²

The visitor who steps over the threshold and enters the heart of the gallery's right side, comes face to face with Rami Maymon's eastern wind. As he looks at an abstract blue geometric shape or reads the inscription “A girl holding a water Jug, ca. 1880, private collection, Paris,” his mind conjures up the dormant Orientalist figure on the stitched and stretched fabrics. While absent and expropriated from the pages of a book, the image endures in its living-dead state through collective memory, through the history of abstract art in its local context. In the early second millennium BC, Babylonian clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform writing recount *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – the fifth king in the Sumerian dynasty:

¹ The exhibition's title was inspired by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's poem *To the West Wind*.

² Gideon Ofrat, “The Eros Vase and the Urn” in *Within a Local Context* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Mehuad, 2004), pp. 252-258, (in Hebrew).

Gilgamesh, dazzling, sublime. Opener of the mountain passes, digger of wells on the hills' side. He asks Utnapishtim, the hero of the Akkadian flood story who like the biblical Noah saved mankind from extinction, to tell him how he was granted eternal life in the Garden of the Gods – the Sumerian paradise. Ea, the god of wisdom and magic, suggests that the Gods who punished all of mankind, destroy only the sinners: *Instead of your bringing on the Flood, let lions rise up and diminish the people.*³ In Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt, lions were considered the guardians of the gods, and statues of lions often flanked the entrances to temples. In the 1930s, in the Land of Israel, Abraham Melnikov sculptured the Canaanite style Lion of Judea in commemoration of the casualties of the battle at Tel Hai, inspired by Assyrian lion reliefs. The lion, who raises his head to the sky with a roar, faces east as a symbol of “the rebirth of the historical Hebrew nation,” and a political allusion to “the idea of Jewish domination over both banks of the Jordan.”⁴

The eye of the visitor to the gallery's inner space travels between a Persian sculpture of a lion, an Egyptian tomb, a biblical jug, a Canaanite desert. These were coated, shielded, defaced with layers of colors and shapes, obstructions and openings from other sources. In stitched, glued, two-dimensional and three-dimensional collages, they intermingle with French Orientalism and sculptural Modernism. Maymon disrupts the observation of the entire, purportedly original, image, leading it on a journey from the figurative to the abstract. He sculpts a pair of black bars that were placed on plinths, covering the objects or the space trapped inside them, like an imagined archeology museum.

In a reversal of Melnikov's declaration that “East and West are distant from each other and neither makes contact with the other even when they meet”⁵ – Maymon looks for dialogues, metamorphoses, and hybridizations of Eastern and Western representations. He walks among the pages of art history books, books of local and universal shapes and images. In an act of tribute and vandalism, Maymon intervenes, distorts, highlights, and downplays photographic objects to form collages, returning them to the photographic medium. The collage is enlarged as a wallpaper, as photo paper, divulging the intimate details and the archaeological strata of the artistic act. On the immense collage lies a single, direct formalist photograph, divided into light and shade: two black birds with white heads, facing one another as in a ritual of offering exchange or ancient trade with stone-age tools: one presents an elephant's tusk and the other – a sharpened flint axe.

³ John Gardner and John Maier, *Gilgamesh* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1985).

⁴ Yigal Zalmona, "Modernists and the Fascination with the East" in *A Century of Israeli Art* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2013), p. 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

From its place on the gallery wall, the eye of Nefertiti hovers above the entire space, like the eye of Ra, the sun god who guards the capital of the kingdom in Egyptian mythology, or a symbol that wards off the evil eye. The eye of Nefertiti as a metronomic representation of beauty and perfection, as a talisman for a good life – makes its way from archeological sites in Ancient Egypt to a postcard from a German museum, taped to a piece of cardboard picked up on a Greek island. The journey of Maymon's eye East and West is one that has no hierarchies, an ongoing state of becoming and migration from the ancient, to the contemporary, to the ancient.