

Maya Aroch – A Poem and A Promise

Artists' Studio Tel Aviv Gallery, 10/03 – 24/04/2017 , Curator: Eitan Buganim

Like proof of the existence of a will exceeding itself, Article by Malachi Sgan-Cohen

The exhibition "a poem and a promise," displayed at the smaller space of the gallery at the artists' studio, is Maya Aroch's first solo exhibition. Aroch constructed an installation comprising of a floor mural extended over the whole space, alongside sculptures and drawings, which partially include texts and Hebrew words. The exhibition name, "a poem and a promise," anticipates the poetic-allegorical dimension at its basis, exposed during the visit with the works deeply examined, and the words and texts appearing in some of them, being deciphered.

Upon entering the exhibition, the eye is immediately caught by the dark red color, which is exceptionally prominent in the floor mural. This work is constructed of a crossword resembling sequence, assembled from dozens of identical shapes of the iconic graphic heart symbol. The heart shapes are glued together and adjusted to the flooring grid in the space. They are scattered in different directions and combinations and create a varying heart-clover pattern of red "islands," which carry six sculptural polyhedron-like figures, colored an identical red.

At the center of the space, two white pillars erect up to the ceiling level; their capitals are replaced by plaster casting of hands in a pointing gesture; they encircle the pillars and point at the viewer. The two pillars at the space center indicate to a ceremonial, temple-like location, where the index finger in all the hands, is extended in a manner which emphasizes the gesture and maybe the will of this obscure entity to approach its objects. In a ritualistic context, the hands evoke a representation of God's right hand. In the tradition of the western-Jewish-Christian art (especially in late ancient history and early middle ages) where a more specific depiction of the image of God was forbidden. Concerning the hearts scattered on the floor, the pointing hands are depicted as the hands of God, judging and examining the human-heart. The hand motif reappears as plaster castings on the floor in the shape of a fan with five hands arranged in a reoccurring stroke gesture.

The monolithic-geometrical element (pillars, in this case), confronted with a human-physical element (hands), is a combination that reoccurs in different manners throughout the exhibition. It is also merged together in drawn and sculptural shapes, colored in an anthropomorphic-shade. As an illustration, the polyhedron-like figures, seem like tombstones or lopped figures, scattered like stones in a synthetic-graphic-imaginary Zen garden, participating in a puzzling, viewing space, chosen and rearranged carefully, where time is suspended, as if to create a balance between nature and human, random and deliberate. Unlike the defined Zen garden, the installation is open to the viewer, but it seems that it, too, does not enable a comprehensive view of all its components. It hides

more than it reveals and, by that, conceals a hidden aspect and a thorough insight regarding the limits of human perception and understanding. The "hearts" idea at the basis the iconic-graphic shapes on the floors, connects in another sense to the Zen garden, whose rocks planning, according to one hypothesis, is based on the symbol for the word "heart" in Kanji - 心, Chinese symbols adopted by Japanese script.

Other stones and geometrical shapes appear in the exhibition in the various drawings on the walls, where a few of them are adorned with Hebrew Poetic texts (in full or as single words) written by three Israeli poets – Leah Goldberg, Ya'acov Orland, and Yehuda Amichai. In three of four drawings hung on the frontal wall across from the entrance, the poems appear in full. Before reading and deciphering them, the texts appear as a drawn texture, which combines with the representation of the stones and the described geometrical shapes, when they appear as "carved" or sketched on those shapes. The three poems raise existential questions, mental and dream states, as well as ars-poetic deliberations, which create an echo to the reading and the interpretation of the installation at the basis of the exhibition and the fact that the innocent-graphical vision hides the coping with heavy-weight questions.

"The river sings to the stoneⁱ," Leah Goldberg's poem, appears in one of the drawings ("Stone number 2") as a Hebrew text carved on one of two three-dimensional flat, geometric shapes. The speaker in this poem represents the poet, who is the passing river, described as someone who riddles the riddle of the world and sings its psalm, while the stone represents the world. The poem emphasizes the gap and fundamental contradiction between the "passing" and changing human against the steady "valid" world. The poet adds that although there is an open abyss between man and the world (as a stone), the two of them were cut from "one eternity"; he emphasizes his act of love towards it: "I kissed the solitary flesh of her stone." These words echo in the hearts, the shapes of the various stones presented in the exhibition (as drawings and sculptures), and in the stroking gesture of the hands-fan sculpture on the floor; they suggest interpreting the installation as an allegory for the artist's existential state. However, the poem also consists of an ethical confession by the poet who claims that while the stone is "a sworn faithful," she is a betrayer. This confession raises the self-criticism of the creator and the moral guilt accompanying her attempt to reach an expression of truth (as part of the artist's suffering).

In another drawing ("Stone number 3"), "I dreamt about youⁱⁱ," a poem by Yehuda Amichai appears in perspective lines, approaching and moving away on top of a shape resembling a corner wall, floating in the air, wearing a dark halo around it. This poem talks about a dream the speaker had about a woman: "I dreamt about you. My dream was like a great vaulted worry inside a railway station

hall..." In the same manner as the "concern" presented in the poem like a substantial independent entity, located at a real place (a hall) – the words in the drawing turn into image and substance. In the same manner, in the whole exhibition, verbal concepts are made present as objects in the space. For example, it seems that the emotional dimension of concern and anxiety penetrates and is present in the installation through the red color

infiltrating all the time at the lower, basic level of the space (in the scattered heart shapes). It solidifies through there into the red polyhedron objects.

Amichai's poem continues to describe memories of the relationship with this woman. It expresses a longing to a primal childhood time, to being in the present, in hope or a promise to return to that time in the future: "and what has been will be again..." This childhood experience is referred to again in another drawing, which features two words: "Et Ze" ("this") taken from that same poem by Amichai. It is written in printed letters on top of an amorphous shape of a dark stone; behind it, there are wavy lines which are ascending and descending while the top of the drawing paper itself is cut as waves. In the poem's context, these words express a gesture of a primal and childish will and desire: "I remember you happy: you were like children/in front of a sweet shop, just pointing:/This, this and this.." This childish pointing gesture is perpetuated in the drawing, described through its literal expressions. It turns into some sort of memorial monument to the lost time of childhood, where it hangs alongside the sculptures of stroking hands standing on the floor from one side, and the authoritative pointing hands on the pillars, preaching and observing, from the other side.

"The mirror" by Ya'acov Orland is another poem appearing in a drawing on a geometric polyhedron shaped stone floating in space in the exhibition ("stone number 1"). In wavy lines, interchanging between negative and positive, the poet declares in first-person that "a day will come/where the masks on my face will betray." He claims that then, all his fears and anxieties will be revealed to the world. The mask mentioned in the poem corresponds with the sad plaster mask, standing on the floor, leaning on one of the pillars. This sculpture prompts another drawing in the exhibition: "self-portrait" shows a red mask with a small head above it. Both are constructed by pseudo-geometric shapes. It seems that the artist's choice to identify her self-portrait with the mask indicates to her identification with the metaphoric simile of the mask in Orland's poem. In this sense, the portrait shouldn't be interpreted as the personal-private aspect of "self," but as a target of the archetypal "self" principle, with its spirit entirety and the contradiction merging in it. If the mask is like a psychological self-representation, the small head on top of it may seem like some kind of "superego," representing the moral and conscience principle of man or the artist in this case. It is also possible to think of the affinity suggested by the Hebrew language between the words "mask" (Ma'se'ha) and the word "authority" (Sam'hut) mentioned earlier regarding the gestures of the pointing hands on the pillars.

Apart from the poems that bring poems as a whole or as separate words ("that"), the two sculptures in the exhibition contain words taken from these three poems. Such is a pile of black stones, at the left corner near the entrance, embossed with separate words from those poems, where each verse is identified with its own font. This way, the poems are disassembled to their foundation stones and turn into tangible sculptural objects with presence and weight.

Another example of the merger and transition between words and sculptures is the work built as a three-dimensional right triangle made from concrete, which is placed on a red wooden shelf engraved with the word "ve'ha'halom" ("dream"), taken from Amichai's poem.

This sculpture reappears in one of the drawings of a three-dimensional pseudo-geometric cat, walking on many legs and carrying on its back a series of small geometric structures (two pillars, polyhedrons, and a pedestal with a couple of stones), which prompt the shapes in the space. Within them, the word "ve'hañalom" ("dream"). If I described above how geometric shapes turn human in the exhibition, in the case of the cat, the living becomes geometric, places in a gray-enigmatic world where all forms are equated to an animistic existence between life and still.

The polyhedron shaped stones appearing in the exhibition, as stated before, in diverse sculptural and drawn variations, prompt the enigmatic polyhedron from Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving "Melancholia I" (1514). This masterpiece, depicting a spiritual-allegorical self-portrait of "the melancholic artist" and consists of numerous cryptic attributions that have had infinite interpretations, including the polyhedron mentioned here. In the present contest, I would like to outline a few similarities with the installation in discussion and its analysis as a cryptic-allegorical arrangement, where the artist is observing her existential state. The polyhedron at the heart of Dürer's composition, hangs on a thread, hiding a stain resembling a face or a skull on its surface. Maybe it is to remind us of the imminent death (like a "memento mori," in the same way as the hourglass hanging over the head of the melancholic figure) and the recognition of the limits of the scientific-geometric research and the illusion of appearances. Geometry, science art, and architecture are represented in Dürer's engraving by various measuring and work tools, scattered around in disorder, unused when the darkness of melancholy wraps the artist's world (with wings of an angel) and prevents him from doing anything but sitting and yearning.

The renaissance ambition of man to understand the ultimate eternal nature of reality and form the world in his image (like mimicking the secrets of godly creation – like Leah Goldberg's poem, mentioned above – "the river sings to the stone"), is confronted with the futility of this effort, in light of the human emotional residues and the finiteness of life. The face depicted on the enigmatic polyhedron is portrayed as a "stain," where melancholy stains the theoretical-mathematical and spiritual-heavenly ideal of the renaissance man and threatens to undermine of his emotional stability and clarity of spirit. By that, the artist changes into someone who lives the tension and contradiction between geometry and melancholy, like two opposing forces wrestling with each other.

A similar tension is felt in the exhibition as well, where the resemblance and affinity between Dürer's "Melancholia I" and Aroch's installation "A Poem and a Promise," continues beyond the enigmatic polyhedron shape, on to the use of words in the work and their integration with animals. In this manner, the negative side of melancholy appears in Dürer's work in the image of a demonic bat, hovering above the horizon, carrying the title of the engraving. In Aroch's installation, it is the cat accompanying the artist, bearing the word "ve'hañalom" ("and the dream") on its back. This word is not the title of Aroch's drawing (appearing, as mentioned, as a concrete sculpture on a shelf); it is instead a "squire." In that, the cat is portrayed at the artist's squire and loyal adjutant, carrying for her the term "the dream," as an additional essential tool in her tool and form box, while the artist, as far as she is concerned, turns into some sort of "warrior-dreamer."

In resemblance to the ambivalent nature of melancholy as it was comprehended in the renaissance era, as an emotional inclination characterizing the creative "genius," the dream reflects a different emotional state identified with the artist, as someone gifted with an advanced imagination (considered at the age of Dürer to be third in the hierarchy of "genius," after intelligence and spirituality). The affinity between the "imagination" to the night and darkness kingdom, is expressed in the symbolism of the animals in both works - Dürer's bat and Aroch's cat, as nocturnal creatures "amicable" with darkness, and by that, may represent the melancholic aspect of the work, as a yoke or heavy and tormenting burden, connotative with the artist's talent gift. The cat, of course, as opposed to the bat, is a domesticated animal, close to man; it lives with him, by his side, but maintains its independence and its savage, instinctive and mysterious origins within the domestic. As a friend to man, the domesticated cat resembles a dog, which also appears in Dürer's engraving, beside the melancholy artists. It is blighted and portrayed sleeping reclusively. Contrary to it, Aroch's cat is awake and in motion, undeterred by the fear and anxiety that seem to possess it, suggested by the depiction of the tail between its legs and the expression on its face.

The exhibition title "A Poem and a Promise" ensconces the promise and high expectations of the work. This promise is portrayed when delving into the symbols and poems appearing in it as if expecting a remedy for the anxious and restless soul of the sensitive and life-loving artist, who wishes to express amazement and reach an expression, and a sincere and genuine reunion with himself and with the world. Like Dürer's "Melancholia I," Aroch's installation wishes to outline a complex allegorical portrait of the artist as someone who lives the arduous struggle of constant discomfort and volatility, which exists between moments of nadir and zenith, as a consequence of those great and lofty expectations and the effort of living and realizing them. Subsequently, the artist's redundant observation on the depth of the human experience might result in his paralysis, loss of will and drive, and a melancholic existential state of withdrawal and freezing in place. Nonetheless, ironically, whatever act of artistic expression of melancholy is itself very much a victory and overcoming it, as well as proof of a will exceeding itself.

ⁱ Leah Goldberg - Translator unknown. From: *Feminist Theologies: Legacy and Prospect*. p. 147. .

ⁱⁱ Yehuda Amichai, *Amen*, Translated from the Hebrew by the author and Ted Hughes, Harper & Row, 1977. p. 86