

# HAARETZ

## The Miniature Heroics of Roy Menachem Markovich

Galia Yahav, 06.12.2013

We'll begin at the end: at the back of Raw Art gallery in Tel Aviv there's a video work that removes the smile accompanying you throughout "Tipat Mazal"- the fantastic, bright, funny and delightful show by Roy Menachem Markovich. The work is a horrifying twist to the show, that turns the whole experience around and gives it a renewed morbid meaning. But before you reach it, the exhibition lays out a humorous display of leftover sculpture, the ambitious produce of an art course with no self-awareness, a sharp joke about the deterioration of a certain modernist style broken down into the complete dictionary of clichés. The anachronistic agenda is organized as a brilliant ploy of general knowledge mixed with subtle humor, forming the pretense of an amateur- imitator.

Three showcases are placed through the space, the kind of plywood platforms covered in blue upholstery you can find in certain store windows, community centers and institutions. Rows of small statues in metal and wood stand on them "Sculptures that can't make art because of time and space problems" Markovich calls them in his "Sculptures Manifest".

Blocks of different materials and textures pile one on top of the other, metal springs emerge from the top, diagonally crossing the space like a soaring aircraft. A golden penis stuck on a piece of broken furniture with dark polish, wobbling on a marble cube like a miniature imitation of Louise Bourgeois type eroticism. Rounded metal scraps, maybe part of a chair back, create three arches of a downsized city square sculpture. Three silver balls sitting on plinths look like something between three sized handles and boiled eggs in foil from a hotel breakfast. A piece of rugged stone placed on a mirror plate, with a metal spring spiraling around it. A large rectangular wooden log on a round metal plate translates into a fatal meeting between two materials of high modernity. Chair legs or desperate screws vertically rise like pillars to the eternal, like factory alloys- frozen liquid metals looking like the suburban nephews of "Development of a Bottle in Space", left over materials, poetic waste à la Constantin Brancusi.



There are samples of sculptural minimalism and there are poetic, soft organic materials (like the four golden gates emerging from rice cakes, a wooden log or loaf of bread impaled on a stick like an elevated rock). A few of them are pedestal statues in the style of early modernism (standing on a glass ashtray and turned on their heads), a few imitate high sculpture, with purist structures, abstract expressionism in the style of David Smith or Richard Serra, or geometric games that flirt with architecture, like a practical joke mimicking an Anthony Caro, in a farcified version.

These titan clashes of shapes, materials and textures, these dense, tension filled spaces, these bold compositions, outbursts and dramatic restraints, all this massive Futurism and Constructivism- doesn't even add up to more than 40cm. They stand in lines like brave little midgets, fanatical ideologists morphed into consumer products, knick knock versions of themselves that were once aesthetic avant-garde and now belong in amateur art classes, their olden days disgracing their youth. "These works break down the aesthetic DNA of the most common and popular Israeli sculpture" writes the curator, Nogah Davidson "Sculpture that is typically large scale, made from heavy materials such as steel and stone, sculpture that its purpose is literally to fill space". He converts this sort of sculpture with representations of "negligence, compliances and fake facades".

Markovich makes fun of how this high modernism was adapted to local measures, how universal aesthetic values were translated into Zionist-Nationalistic memorial monuments. The parody is perfect. "Silent Brancusi with local tendencies // Naughty Danzigers with A.D.D. // Name dropping sculptures // That spit in wells // That spit blood // Anachronistic Futuristic sculptures that sleep with everyone". He writes. The curator also compares the sculptures to "cheap paperweights from a men's gift shop, they turn into a reflection of how a cheap imitation, a ridiculously unconvincing knock-off- demonstrates how the original is ridiculous no less".

And indeed, the miniature heroics look like an arrangement in a sex shop. The phalluses that pounce from the pedestals, the curved balls – all seemingly made for pleasure. The "hard" geometric games combined with the "sensitive" organic quality in some of the works, were meant to create cathartic encounters that instead appear like a recharged device or like a "Turd on a Pyramid" (as one of the works is called– this whole industry of meta-dialect and articulation is now a mock presentation of seductive display stands, a disproportionate imitation. It now looks like a pathetic assortment in the corridors of a municipality blessed with many local talents, an amateur presentation at the community center, or a memorabilia and home décor museum shop in a sleepy town.



"Elevator Sculptures" the artist calls them. The effect of I-want-to-but-it-doesn't-work-out is simply comical.

The exhibition is accompanied with the wonderful "Sculptures Manifesto", written mostly in rhyme, it pleasantly recalls the Claes Oldenburg manifesto "I Am For An Art", another ode to communicative, democratic, self-defining art: "Judaica objects gone bad, sculpture supported by the parents" it says; or: "Streaming sculptures. Downloading sculptures. Transferred sculptures. Sculptures that move to Berlin"; or: "office abstract" "Things that piled up and look good naked // Sculptures of lock and objects of key, one got fat, the other went bald // Another day another Dollar sculptures // Sculptures that coordinate taxes, sculptures that break the axes// Sculptures by a promising artist, sculptures of broken promises // Sculptures of client retention"

And now for something completely different: the video "The Gate of Mercy" shows a short and simple scene from a Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in a senior day centre, a place with didactic décor, of the same kind you find in the exhibition itself. We see them listening to a song. The elderly group sits in front of a projector showing its default display as they listen to the "The Gate of Mercy" by Meir Banai.

The ceremony is run by two young volunteers that check the equipment is working and stand quietly, directing the distinguished, official tone. Trying to stir emotions of muted sadness, the righteous, naive educators, are lost missionaries with no life experience, though bored they are wonderful, promising girls in service of the nation. The song goes on; everyone listens motionless, youth and old age gaze at each other.

As the uneventful scene continues, the tragic-comic void becomes a "Memento Mori". The elderly women are in line for the purgatory. The girls will also die. We also grew three minutes older while we watched and listened to the elderly group watch and listen- for us and them alike, time is running out. With or without a point to it all, with or without the willpower to forstand it, we all wait, because to live is to wait for your own death. Davidson justly writes that the video "sets the tone for the rest of the works- it infiltrates a dosage of realistic, un-metaphorical substance into the whole exhibition, and clarifies for the viewer that though there is plenty of use of humor and sarcasm here- this is not a funny exhibition".

Though it seems at first glance like a wonderful, even nihilistic joke about sculpture made of leftovers from the factory backyard, or the arts and crafts shop, like bohemian sculpture from petite bourgeois materials- forms into a clear statement about old age. About the aging body and consciousness, the decay of ideas and their transformation into clichés, particularly new ideas. This is what it's all about- new ideas that become mannerisms are not solely about good taste that becomes bad taste, they entail the anxiety of death itself. Their excessive kitsch only serves to disguise how much they deny their own death.



Markovich orchestrates the anxiety of death with the tenderness of true life experience, presenting a historical awareness that clenches the heart, that doesn't leap at the viewer but sneaks up from behind like a faint shadow, like a drop of poison penetrating the skin. Only later on does the freezing, morbid effect of the show hit you, linking the video to the objects just to expose the latter's defying old age.

It must be said: it's been a long time since the Israeli Art world has seen such scholarly playfulness, one with elegance, refined, sophisticated sense of humor (turned on the artists' own expense too), sardonic and cohesive iconoclastic motivation, skillfulness, remarkable orchestration and talent. The pleasure rises not only from the suggestive recognition of the mannerist, delightfully bad replicas, but from the quality of the discourse. For the exhibition also demonstrates the rare understanding of when to finish a work, when to let go, to stop fussing with it and us for the sake of "expression". Instead of the customary haughty boredom of young Israeli Art, this exhibition has a good measure of productive frustration.