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The bat who fought the emperor - The Art of Keren Gueller

In her new Petah Tikva exhibition, Keren Gueller shows how the Allies attempted to bring Imperial Japan to its knees using bats.

By HAGAY HACOEN FEBRUARY 5, 2020 21:29



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A still image from Persona Ficta, a new exhibition by Keren Gueller
(photo credit: ELAD SARIG)

In her current exhibition at the [Petah Tikva Museum of Art](#) titled *Persona Ficta*, Keren Gueller tells the astonishing history of how the US Army tested the odd theory that Imperial Japan might be brought low during WWII thanks to the humble Mexican free-tailed bat.

This odd little history from the annals of war began with a letter to the US president by dental surgeon Lytle S. Adams. Adams admitted that the bat was a strange creature, and that what the good Lord had in mind when it was created may never be known to us, but that it was possible the sole purpose of the bat was for Americans to use it to set Japanese cities and factories ablaze to achieve victory, with little cost to the lives of men and women in uniform.

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Roosevelt signed on the idea and ordered it tested, dubbed Project X-Ray. It was quite effective. The bats underwent a surgical operation and a tiny container of napalm was inserted into their bodies. They were frozen into hibernation, packed in clusters, and thrown on a mock-up of a Japanese village built in Dugway Proving Ground in Utah.

Results were satisfactory. Most of the bats woke up and flew to the rooftops, where they exploded into pleasing balls of flame, setting them on fire. Yet the military decided that rather than subjecting the Japanese to flaming bats, it would move ahead with the atomic bomb project.

While this was not the only attempt to use animals in the war (B.F. Skinner authored Project Pigeon, which demonstrated trained pigeons could be trusted with the navigation and detonation of bombs), it was one of the oddest.

In *Persona Ficta*, or Fictitious Person, Gueller presents a follow-up history. Imagine that some of the original bats from Project X-Ray were able to escape their deaths and reach Israel and nestle in Petah Tikva? A stuffed bat taken from the local natural history museum serves to illustrate the point, bridging the imaginary

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THIS IS NOT the first time Gueller has dealt with what humans do with animals or obscure, dark knowledge. In her 2016 exhibition *Florence Syndrome*, she gathered videos of various animals in captivity, a zebra waving its tail for example, and gave the visual materials a label from the field of mental health. The zebra was re-introduced as suffering from Alien Limb Syndrome, a mental illness in which people strongly feel one of their body parts is not their own.



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The mental condition which lends its name to the 2016 exhibition stands for an extreme psychological reaction to works of art and beauty. Those who have it faint when they see them. Named after the city of Florence, it is one of the handfuls of mental problems associated with cities. Some others are Jerusalem Syndrome – when people visit the city and believe they are God or the son of God – and Paris Syndrome, or *Pari Shokogun*, which is experienced by some Japanese tourists in the city of lights who are let down when they discover the real Paris isn't what they pictured it would be.

"I was interested in the act of organizing knowledge into a catalogue," Gueller told *The Jerusalem Post*. "I thought I might be able to invent a mental illness. But instead I found out that [reality is much more disturbed](#) than what I can imagine."

One of the works in the *Florence Syndrome* was a bat opening his wings who was dubbed with Exhibitionism. That bat returned to the front of her mind when she visited Argentina and entered a zoo where bats were exposed to visitors during day time hours despite being nocturnal.

Gueller often focuses on borderlines where various conflicting needs crash into each other: a Jewish-Canadian wedding in which the cameraman orders people about to get the perfect shot; the Montreal Biodome, originally built in 1976 to host

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the Olympic games, as it now serves as a hybrid of man-made habitats and real animals that function in it as if they were in the wild; her Argentinean family relatives who try to impress her with singing “Hava Nagila” despite not understanding the words.

These tableaux and moments are painstakingly shot and edited to get to that perfect scene. A Jewish child singing Hava Nagila who becomes a man who becomes a grandfather or a cluster of bats trying to shield their eyes from the glare of the sun with a glowing electric light in their hearts.

Persona Ficta by Keren Gueller and curated by Shlomit Breuer will be on display until April 15, at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art, Arlozorov St. 30, Petah Tikva. For more information, call 03-928-6300 or visit petachtikvamuseum.com.

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