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Drawing in the shadow of history – The art of David Duvshani

Inspired by his ancestor and the rich history of this land, Duvshani is one of the artists to take part in the Shuttle art project now shaping up at the Raw Art Gallery.

By [HAGAY HACOHEN](#) MARCH 17, 2020 20:16



Artist David Duvshani and one of his prints now on display at the RawArt Gallery in Tel Aviv.

(photo credit: HAGAY HACOHEN)

Artist David Duvshani is serious about the Crusaders. In his erudite comic-strip, real anecdotes about Baldwin of Jerusalem and Emir of Damascus Buri are depicted in lovely illustrations in contrast with the often brutal or funny punch line concluding the strip.

Baldwin swims in the Nile River and catches a cold, Buri dies when he attempts to mount his horse despite medical advice to rest in order to recuperate from injuries. The march of historical personae and their bizarre fates, at first, is funny, but as the reader continues an eerie feeling intrudes: What was the point of the Crusades? Furthermore, in what way do daily events we now experience – history in the making – differ from these historical accounts of who did what to whom?

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Now participating in [Shuttle at the Raw Art Gallery](#), like the other emerging artists in the exhibition, Duvshani spent a week at the space, working in it and engaging with visitors. The final result of the collective effort will open at the end of March.

Duvshani explains that his interest in Crusaders was inspired by the late cartoonist Dudu Geva one of the greatest cartoonist to work in the country.

Geva often used the format of hassidic tales to land a funny or satirical punch. If the Jewish tale attempts to find hope despite hardships and pogroms, Geva would draw strips in which a drunk Cossack would demand money from a Jew and then his shirt, which the Jew gives him.

In another strip, a holy rabbi says he can save the town if he is brought a black hen. When informed that no such hen is around, he says that all hope is lost and jumps from the roof.

The moral of a story in the Geva universe is that, in reality, there is no gimmick to save the Jews from violence. In that sense, he expresses a very Zionist outlook on the world. Unless Jews actually have strength, his strip says, nothing will help them. Speaking about Geva's rare artistic gift Duvshani refers to it as the ability to

draw “the cuteness of the slaughterhouse.”

As he read about the Crusades, Duvshani became aware that “the strip imitates a weekly-column, but also how people experience the news as a small portion of time divorced from reason.”

Military actions are reported on, but no context is provided, making the lives lost appear to have ended with no real consequences. The violence becomes cartoonish, like Tom and Jerry, where nobody knows why the cat attempts to catch the mouse, and the grand history of freeing the Holy Land becomes a series of absurd events.

As he cites Lebanese-born historian Amin Maalouf (who published *The Crusaders through Arab Eyes* in 1986), William of Tyre and Joshua Prawer, he points out that both the Christian and the Muslim sides “represent something I object to, yet also serve as a mirror to Israeli society.”

He explains that he drew the landscapes in which the characters operate as a homage to Nachum Gutman, one of the founding fathers of Israeli illustration.

“The simple, child-like landscape is what remains,” he says, “and the characters appear in it as if they are ghosts.”



Crusaders by David Duvshani

Another work, *The Travels of Reb Mendelovitch*, is an imaginative re-telling of the journey taken by one of his ancestors, Shneur Zalman of Hebron from 1852 to 1858.

The historical Chabad figure visited India and China to raise funds to build a synagogue, which he did, and he also really was a painter. Family legend has it that he painted the entire Book of Esther on an egg, which he gave his wife, Esther, who kept it on display in their home.

The painted egg was eventually bought by an English visitor who gifted it to the Queen. Impressed, the queen sent for the rabbi and the two met.

While there are no records supporting this anecdote, Duvshani used it to fuel his own telling of the adventures. In them, “the lands he travels through are falling apart,” he says. Motivated by a dream to meet the Queen of England, the rabbi roams the British Empire only to discover that wherever he goes an uprising against the queen occurs.

This is a powerful re-telling of Jewish legends about tikkun olam (repairing the world) as relayed in the hassidic Breslov style. Visual inspiration came in the form of *The Rabbi's Cat*, a 2007 graphic novel by Joann Sfar. Unlike the characters in that French tale – who sometimes encounter hatred due to their Jewishness – Reb Mendelovitch is drawn as a Jew, but functions as if in a surreal landscape where his Jewishness is not an issue.

The Queen of England was also the center of Rutu Modan’s 2010 children’s book *Dining with the Queen*. In it, a young girl is admonished to mind her table manners in case the queen should invite her to dinner, which she does. Duvshani suggests that “the queen is, to some extent, a fake power in the world as she is basically a

figurehead; she offers an illusion of government but doesn't really threaten anyone."

Discussing his work process with other artists participating in Shuttle, such as Noga Farchy, who created shadows on some of the walls and Ido Gordon, who built a massive furniture currently used as a library, Duvshani compliments curator Maya Bamberger for her success in creating not just a group of talented young artists, but also a sense of cooperation.

"I am loving the dialog we have," he said, "and hope it will continue in the future."

Shuttle will open March 28 at Raw Art Gallery. Other participating artists are working on site in the upcoming weeks. They are: Yoav Fisch, Maya Perry, and Dana Tannhauer. Raw Art is located on 3 Hameretz Street, Building 8, 4th Floor, Tel Aviv. The works mentioned can be seen at <https://davidduvshani.com/p/>

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