

Shutting One Eye

The steamroller of history and the steamroller of art

Visiting "**A Shining Meteor will Light the Path of the Worker,**" Noam Toran's show

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Industry City in southern Tel Aviv, a Brutalist warren of light industry spaces where RawArt Gallery resides, is slowly becoming a busy nest of artistic endeavors that is pushing out the light industry and its workers. A graffiti-covered freight elevator leads to an open corridor, at which end is the gallery's metal door. A figure of an ur-laborer emerges from under the door toward the hallway as if flattened by the steamroller of history that has turned into the steamroller of art. All this sets the scene for the drama Noam Toran unfolds within the gallery, where the history of labor has been transformed into a theatrical spectacle of panels busy with expressive liveliness, painting on wood and cardboard silhouettes, an experimental workers' theater belonging to an idyllic, still naïve era. In this Utopia, the laborers, dressed in work clothes and carrying sandwiches wrapped in workers' newspapers, will gather on their lunch break to experience militant social culture.

The show is based on an eponymous play, about the Arab and Jewish railway workers' strike in Haifa, in 1934. The play is concerned with the tension between art and the artist and between labor and the laborer. At its center is the anti-hero Heimlich, a parasitical Jewish poet who has been sent by a shifty union official to work in the railway workshops, that Earthly Paradise of poetic inspiration. It is a time of labor, revolutionary, and Arab-Jewish unrest, but the plot occasionally dips into realms of nightmarish fantasy in which an angel, in the guise of a donkey with bat wings, flies along the railways of Palestine.

The welding shops, the workers' canteen, and the home of Bulus Farah, the leader of the Arab revolt, all serve as stage sets, and the play aims to subvert the National Zionist labor narrative back into the Middle East, with its myriad currents that conjoin and separate under the crimson banner, soon to be replaced by the reddening national flag.

The stage set spreads over the fluorescent-lit space, creating a wonderful tension between flat and voluminous, real and illusory, painterly drawings and sculptural impossibilities. You can stroll from stage-front toward the back among the various scene, and when you turn around, the backsides of the panels are revealed as the flipsides of ideas that have become stale clichés. The sense of enjoyment in an amusement park infuses Toran's dynamic show, of the rollercoaster winding and flying past the scary parts - only under bright lights rather than in the dark.

The enactment of the dream in which Heimlich rides the donkey of the workers' Messiah to Wadi Hasa, and gorges on *Sabres* (the fruit of the prickly pear cactus), occurs at the front of the stage. Small black human heads pop up where the symbolic fruit has been, and skulls and bones drop from the palm trees. A cloud rests nearby like a useless tool. In the background, a mountain range hovers over a slowly rotating red windsock. The torso of an injured worker, an amputated leg – from here it's only a short distance to the construction workers who keep falling to their deaths in current-day Israel.

Portraits of workers' leaders of many nationalities hang from the ceiling, and to each Toran has attached a silhouette of a tool as a grotesque mask. There's also a tangle of silhouettes of cranes, puffing smokestacks, massive machines, yokes, wheels, and boxcars; among them, reddened arms

rise, their fists clenched, severed from the bodies of the laborers whose skulls are scattered among the panels.

The scenery of Toran's play can stand on its own as an independent, still work. It has expressivity, plasticity, and beauty that give it life as an ironic lament on the worker's world that is fading into globalization of cheap overseas labor, child slavery, hi-tech industries, real estate, and speculation.