

Art as Constructive subversion: Bokozba in Baram

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One of the more amusing scenes - but no less strong - in the documentary film *Cut* (2000) of Nizar Hasan, which dealt with Moshav Agur located in the region of the plain south of Bet Shemesh, takes place at the time of exchange of words between the director and one of the moshav members. In this scene the director asks the man, originally from Kurdistan, to explain the reason for the moshav inhabitants' reluctance to speak about the history of the village (Ajur) and about its Palestinian inhabitants that had been expelled from it during the War of Independence. While mending his business, feeding the cows in the barnyard, the man shrugged his shoulders, expressed mild astonishment and quipped: "Only a jackass doesn't know that Arabs were here before us".

The reply caused loud laughter among those who attended the screening of the film at the Cinematek in Tel Aviv. What was so funny about his answer? It might be that this reaction had to do with the speaker's identity and his nonchalant reaction to the provocative question addressed to him by the director. Here is a man, a farmer, dared to say in simple language the truth which so many know and yet fear to say; he didn't seem bothered or irked when uttering the words in front of the camera and he was apparently indifferent to the fact his interlocutor is Palestinian; he spoke without a shred of protest and without any attempt to apologize for the obvious fact: it was just another prosaic fact of life; nothing worth making a fuss over.

But this fact – its affirmation and denial - assumes a crucial role in the ongoing political drama engulfing Jews and Arabs for over a century. It is related to the very essence of to the long and bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each party to the protracted conflict exerts unending efforts aiming to present a linear national narrative of revival and renewal, connecting it exclusively to the disputed territory. History is selectively recruited by each side to ground its exclusive claim to the place, providing seemingly firm evidence tracing its roots back into time immemorial. And what about the "other" of this drama, the one who makes similar a claim connecting him purportedly to the place? Well, he is doomed; he is inevitably perceived as a temporary sojourner in the land, someone whose origins are extraneous to the boundaries of the disputed territory; the "other" becomes an unwanted guest whose stay is limited in time; it is to be soon expired! Indeed, the fantasy - either revealed or hidden - of both sides is to cleanse the place of the alien and belligerent presence of the other and to turn the disputed territory into a place inhabited exclusively by its indigenous people, the true sons and daughters of the nation.

This depiction is widely endorsed by many official agents of the nation - Jews and Palestinians alike; it is to be found in their respective national narratives. But these agents are not the only ones entrusted with the work aiming at the cultivation of national narratives and their symbolic boundaries. Civil society, with its abundance of non-official agents, supplies not only a fertile pasture for activity that is in

keeping with the official narratives, but gives also expression to activity that challenges and subverts official rendition of the national narrative and its exclusive linear logic. This activity, breaching this rigid logic, is a necessary step towards mutual recognition and reconciliation.

Cultural and artistic activity - in its multifaceted forms and manifestations – has always bore an important role in this context. Literature, cinema, theater and the plastic arts provide a few of the arenas in which activity of this sort is carried out. It reflects the role of culture and art as a subversive, avant-garde activity. But the subversive element germane to this activity does not necessarily seek to promote subversion for its own sake – subversion for subversion's sake - nor is it led by the desire to undermine the basic legitimacy of the Jewish state and its national existence. The leading moral imperative is that a constructive challenge to conventional mode of thinking is necessary for the possibility of designing a better and more humane social reality. As Roger Simon, a philosopher of education puts it, the inclusion of all chapters of history - whether bright or dark - in the narration of the nation is necessary for cultural and moral development of the nation itself.

It seems that this insight accompanies the artistic endeavor of Eliahou Eric Bokobza¹. He walks in the footsteps of a long tradition of Israeli artist who have traded on the trains of Israeli art such as Yakov Steinhardt, Naftali Bezem, Danny Caravan, Ruth Schluss, Gershon Knispel, Moshe Gershuni, Pinhas Cohen, Larry Abramson. All these artists have sought to "make room" for the "other", the Palestinians, in their oeuvres; all of these artists attempted to reserve place for the Palestinians and their heritage in the collective consciousness of Jewish Israel.

It is important to note that these are Jewish artists, playing the role assigned to them by Roger Simon, that is, they challenge Jewish national narrative from within.² They reflect courageous readiness to include the "other" within Israel's national narrative, even when that "other" appears as a *disturbance*, as a threat to their ability to sustain their national identity as coherent entity. Their artistic endeavor is testimony to the necessary affinity between the political and the artistic. It is testimony to the inevitable relevance of art to the political reality in which the artist lives and works. It teaches that the artist cannot abdicate his obligation, his duty to take a moral and political stand. It is proof that any artistic endeavor seeking to ignore existential problems, characteristic of the reality in which the artist lives and works, is in danger of turning his work into a grotesque and embarrassing escapist act.

Considering the artists mentioned above, Bokobza apparently conducts a direct and intriguing dialogue with the oeuvres of Larry Abramson, who is, in turn, carried on a dialogue with the aquarelles of Yosef Zaritsky. Abramson's painting series **Tzova** (1995) is a well known takeoff on Zaritsky's aquarelles dedicated to the same topic – the landscapes of Kibbutz Tzova. It is sort of "a variation on a theme," assuming however an important twist.

¹ Roger Simon, *Remembrance, Learning and Ethics*, New York: Palgrave; *The Touch of the Past*, Macmillan, 2005.
[Footnote in Hebrew text unclear].

² Tali Tamir, *Tzova: Simplification and Blindness*; Larry Abramson: *Tzova* (Exhibition's Catalogue), Tel Aviv, HaKibbutz Gallery of Art, 1995

Neither Abramson nor Bokobza intend to depict concrete entities, may it be human figures or natural landscapes - but rather visual images of the concrete. The message of Abramson's oeuvres is straightforward; the point is to draw attention and to disparage "the blind spot of Zaritsky," described by Tali Tami as widespread phenomena reflecting a trend in Israeli art.³ That is, Abramson's uses his abstract art as a medium to convey a political stand. Again, his brush work over the surface of newspapers' pages consists of spreading, erasing and blurring the reality that lies beyond the patches of color, alluding to the blurring of the Palestinian past in the artistic activities of Israeli artists, especially that of Zaritsky. Abramson's series of oeuvres sought to show how Israeli Abstract Art – associated with the school of "New Horizons" - was employed, either willingly or inadvertently, in the service of the political goal of erasing the Palestinian past while, on the other hand, rendering Jewish presence on the land as something to be taken for granted, indicating, so to speak, the natural order of things.

Although both recall the Palestinian past of the Place, Bokobza's oeuvres, which deal with Kibbutz Baram and Biram Village, follows a different artistic style. Bokobza holds an intriguing dialogue with photographs found in the kibbutz's archives. While preserving the figurative images seen in the photographs, he disassembles and reassembles them anew in his paintings. The result is a spectacular kaleidoscopic spread, a very extraordinary carnival of identities. It allows the viewer to glean and salvage new meanings and readings of the past and to hold a new and fruitful dialogue with the present.

The work consists of five different pieces presenting various scenes of the kibbutz and its natural surrounding; they seemingly provide a pastoral and idyllic depiction of this reality. This effect is elicited through the gay, cheerful and glittering colors and round figures. The paintings recall somewhat the oeuvres of Matisse, endowing the depicted reality with a joyous festivity. The landscape, too, with its abundance of hues and colors intensifies the enjoyment of the eye that lays its glances on the paintings.

It seems that Bokobza's work is inspired by Naive Art and its heroes such as Henri Russo, Paul Gauguin and Anna Marie Robertson. It celebrates heartwarming scenes of rustic life. Simplicity, innocence, naiveté, freshness, optimism, childishness, and harmony with nature - these are among the quintessential characteristics of this art. Yet, one may think that Bokobza didn't have to trade on faraway terrains for inspiration; since his paintings bear a direct affinity to the oeuvres of a local hero, one who had already established close relations with Naive Art - the artist Yohanan Simon, who was a member of the Kibbutz Gan Shmuel and provided depictions of kibbutz life and its landscapes, heavily borrowing from this artistic fashion.

However, if not for the subversive twist suddenly catching the eye - a prank repeatedly employed by Bokobza in his works - perhaps the observer would cursorily dismiss them, judging them to be a gratuitous display of kitsch or mimicry, lacking any innovative quality. Yet, the temptation to pass harsh judgments on his paintings is nipped in the bud, following a sudden insight that "something here doesn't

³ The oeuvres of Palestinian artists, bearing Israeli citizenship, such as: Assam Abu-Shakra, Abid Abadi, Anisa Ashkar and Sharif Wakid are found in conformity with their Palestinian identity despite the fact that the identity itself is most often paved with difficult dilemmas and misgivings [difficulties in making decisions]. This is by virtue of the fact that they work and live in Israeli society and create in the Israeli art field.

click," that the order of things has been violated, that the spectacular collage comprising figures, buildings and landscapes reflects an assortment that defies logic; the astute observer may suddenly realize that the role Yohanan Simon plays in the oeuvres of Bokobza is identical to the one which Zaritsky filled in the oeuvres of Abramson. The oeuvres of Simon and Zaritsky provide the fantasmatic backdrop against which the subversive brushes of Abramson and Bokobza do their work.

Bokobza's constructive subversion is poignantly displayed already in the depiction of the buildings which appear in the different scenes. The typical architectonic structures of the kibbutz, including the tower of the silo and the building covered with the red-tiled roofs are accompanied by a ruin of the stone building of the ancient synagogue along the Ionic pillars that stood in its gates and the Maronite church, with its broadly spanned arched gate and a bell tower figuring a soaring cross. And so they all join company; the architectonic remains from the ancient past (the ancient synagogue operating during the 4th and 5th centuries C.E.), the architecture from the more recent past (the church) and the architecture of the present (kibbutz buildings). They create a spectacle simultaneously displaying continuity and contrast; harmony and disharmony. They tell the metamorphoses of the place that have been transpiring throughout the many generations and hint at the demographic changeovers of its residents. The paintings leave out nothing and seek to conceal nothing.

Completion and contrast increasingly gain scope before the eye of the observer as his eyes wander the length and width of the oeuvre. At the center of the drama appears the constitutive act, the activity that ties inextricably man to the place – toiling the soil. This central piece is reflected by the presence of the tractor – a reminder of modernity - which plows furrows in the red soil, as well as the farmer, digging in the ground with his hoe.

In her memoirs from those days, a member of the kibbutz Rivka Ziv provides us an echo of the exalted feeling that characterized these activities: "Upon this red tractor, we swear allegiance to the wilderness in which fruit trees are planted and plow the land that *fellahin* before us plowed." This scene then interweaves past, present and future: Hebrew farmers engage in the conquest of labor placed opposite to the ruins of an ancient synagogue. The drama seen in the painting ingeniously reflects the "Janus face" of modern nationalism, as Tom Nairn, the scholar of nationalism, puts it: While modern nationalism works in the name of progress and modernization, it borrows its inspiration from ancient past.⁴

On both sides of the main scene – "conquest of labor" - the artist places human figures. The identity of the five figures, standing on the right of the main scene, raises no doubt: they are male and female kibbutz members. We see two complacent men, joined together in camaraderie, their faces spread with confidence. Next to them there are three women, coming out in dance, wrapped in colorfully hemmed, full-length dresses. The artist places the figures at the flourishing front of the kibbutz. The drama teaches of renewal, of continual regeneration, of calm and joyous life.

But while the identifying features these five figures and their activity blend well with the scene taking place at center stage, the three figures standing on the left arouse curiosity. We see two women

⁴ Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited*, Verso, 1997.

wrapped in indigenous Palestinian dress and a thickly mustached man, riding on a donkey. The man's head is covered by a glittery white *kafiya* rounded with a black *cord (aqal)*. The artist places the figures in front of the church. We are witnesses, as it were, to cohesive unity composed of the original residents of the place and their shrine.

On the face it, Palestinians are the theme of this scene; however, the matter is not at all so simple and clear cut. It all depends upon who do we ask. On the one hand, the scene staged before the observer encourage us to think that indeed we are observing Palestinians; but on the other, we know that the artist chose to borrow his inspiration for these figures from photographs found in the kibbutz archives. These photos document female kibbutz members, dressed up in Arab costume. He went even further and placed at their side the donkey rider, whose true identity is unknown. Is he a Jew dressed as an Araba local Arab, or an Arab-Jew? There is no way of knowing for sure.

How can we make sense of this *mélange* of identities? What is the intention of the women leading them to wear the costumes? As we know, however, costume wearing may fulfill various functions. Sometimes it conveys a gesture intending to express respect for the true bearers of the identity one seeks to mime; on other occasions, it intends to mock the true bearers of this identity. As it is widely known, early Jewish settlement in Palestine displayed a deep ambivalence towards the Place and ways of life of its inhabitants. It displayed - probably like the attitude of the kibbutz members who wore the costumes - acceptance and rejection, mimicry and rejection, respect and loathing. Yet, at the very beginning, Jewish pioneers portended a sympathetic approach towards the place, an approach that sought to blend in with Middle Eastern environment and to become an inseparable part of it. Zionist ideology, as Gil Eyal notes, "demanded that the Jews not only return to the Land of Israel physically, but also reform themselves, the shedding of the traits of the *Galut* [Diaspora] and becoming pioneers. The Orient instantly became both the place allowing reform and refinement and also fruitful source of concrete symbols, expressing the break between old and new identity." This approach, Eyal continues, has changed fundamentally after the establishment of the State of Israel; since then we witness an accelerated process in which the metaphor of the Orient has been drained from the meaning it had held in the past and it has lost its coherence".⁵

It should be noted here that the kibbutz archives, from which the artist borrowed the images of the kibbutz members dressed up in costumes, document the atmosphere of the kibbutz which was founded in 1949, a year after the establishment of the State. This means that the act of dressing in costumes by the female kibbutz members was done in an era in which the metaphor of the East was said to have already lost its propitious meaning; it is done in an era in which an accelerated process began leading, as Gil Eyal describes it, "the removal of the enchantment from the East."

It may be that the breaking point on the axis of time is not as clear cut as Gil Eyal seeks to claim, since very seldom such a break transpires. Generally speaking, processes involving change in ways of living and of vogues do not testify to a distinct chronological continuity. They tend to display hybrid quality-

⁵ *The Removal of Enchantment from the East [Orient?]*, p. 12, Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem/HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 2005.

past and present co-exist and create anachronistic whole, temporal coherence. Thus, on the face of it, the orientation of the Jewish settlement project, following the establishment of the State, answers the temporal break that Eyal suggests; it moves according to the logical imperative - "Out with the old and in with the new". In other words, the Orient and its metaphors are doomed to clear the way for the West and its metaphors. But this process - as we can learn from the experience of Kibbutz Baram as well as from other settlements - did not occur; the past continued to echo strongly in the present, that is to say, what was then the present. "Why did we," Rivka Ziv, a Kibbutz member asks, "specifically choose to call our kibbutz 'Baram? Historical tie? Desire for continuity? Why not, for instance: Ein HaGalil? Apple Hill? Bet Tzurim? Forest Village?" Answering these questions, Ziv says: "There was something in the abandoned village that pulled at our heartstrings. There was in it a wild, romantic Oriental atmosphere. The ancient synagogue was marvelous background for photographs. The church bell was a magnet for our hearts; and we pulled its rope in order to hear its resounding bong. On Purim we dressed up as Arabs and wrapped our heads and necks in *kafiyas*. We wanted to fit in after the bitter battles. The land's entirety was ours. Not so long ago, the Arabs were our enemies; and now we wanted and believed in reconciliation."

Let us repeat. "On Purim," writes Rivka Ziv, "we dressed up as Arabs and wrapped our heads and necks with *kafiyas*." Is it possible to see in this act as prompted by a desire of the new residents of the place to wrap themselves in the identity of the others, the original dweller of the place? Does it express a desire of kibbutz members to integrate within "the wild and romantic atmosphere" of the place and to become its "authentic residents", despite the fact that they left the village after two years (1951) and founded their kibbutz close by? And maybe this act teaches us about an unconscious attempt to deal with the stain of the expulsion of the original members of the village, which is burned "like a tattoo on the skin" of the kibbutz members, as Rivka Ziv puts it?

Examining the stories of Ze'ev Yavetz (1847-1924), which recall the repeated occasions in which a Jewish horseman dressed as an Arab at the beginning of the Jewish Yeshuv in Palestine, Gil Eyal makes the following point. "On the one hand," he says, "this figure marking a boundary... the boundary between Jews and Arabs; since the readers learn at the end of the scene that the rider is really a Jew (and even how worthy it is to be a 'new' Jew). On the other hand, if we freeze the scene for a moment, and examine this figure specifically, a minute before it disappears, then it is clear that its ability to mark the boundary is attached to the fact that it crosses the boundary and destroys its order. The costumed rider actually is neither Arab nor Jew but a sort of hybrid, a Janus two-faced Jew-Arab."⁶

Eyal's insight relates to the Jewish-Arab horseman at the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine, during an era in which it was possible to think of blurring and abolishing the boundary between identities; however, it is possible that Bokobza seeks to lure and seduce the viewer to 'freeze the scene for a moment,' to examine it in its own right, a minute before it evaporates, and hence to blur the boundaries of identities now, also in the present era. He may invite us to blur these boundaries, seeing it as conducive and necessary step towards reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians. And indeed, Bokobza artistic feat bears its political intention on its sleeves. He sought to bring his artistic oeuvre out

⁶ Ibid., p. 9

of the museum and to turn it into a controversial public act, and all this without yet compromising its esthetic value. The oeuvre is an art work that makes it impossible for its observers to pass it by offhandedly. It forces one to deal with it daily and to form a stand towards the story depicted in it, to argue with it, to justify it, to rationalize it and maybe to forge means and ways bringing a change in the political order of things to which it alludes.

The hanging of this oeuvre on the central wall of Kibbutz Baram's dining hall, as Bokobza suggests in a simulation that is part of the exhibition, is not clearly self-explanatory. It demands from kibbutz members to face up to a complicated and messy political reality, presented however in breathtaking and beguiling colors. Maybe this was the reason why Bokobza placed the red flags in trust into the hands of the two figures, who embrace his broad-scoped oeuvre from its two sides. They probably refer to the humane and universal values in the light of which the kibbutz members, belonging to the Shomer Hatza'ir movement, should purportedly lead their lives, and to the universal values within whose framework this spectacular, aspiring art work was also done.