

Eliahou Eric Bokobza: The many-sided artist of the sands

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The exhibition ***Nationality:Jewish*** deviates from the artistic landscape of Eliahou Eric Bokobza. Viewed against the background of all his other exhibitions meticulously constructed to date, the deviation ranges in extent from the subject of the exhibition, via how he creates his paintings, sculptures and objects, and up to the design of the space and the accompanying catalog. His exhibitions are in the nature of a one man show in both senses. And here, Bokobza has been invited to the Judaica wing of the Ein Harod Museum of Art, a gallery abounding in contents and exhibits with which his works are required to integrate.

The Judaica collection of the Ein Harod Museum of Art (initiated by the Museum's founder, the artist Chaim Atar) comprises Jewish ritual items from Jewish communities of the 16th century to the present day. The collection of items of Jewish culture is displayed in full accordance with the course of Jewish life – birth, circumcision, bar mitzvah, marriage and death – and with the events of the Jewish calendar – the Jewish festivals, the Sabbath, etc. Bokobza's mission is to integrate his works within the display of Jewish folk art, whose values constitute a prescribed given and are mostly canonical and traditional. How could the items of the Judaica collection possibly abide in peace side by side with the works of the artist carrying messages that are occasionally political, frequently social, usually gender-based and always thought provoking? The answer is that in his work the artist successfully provides numerous keys to diverse interpretations, which he has similarly performed in this solo exhibition where his work exchanges identity-hats. Yes, Bokobza is the hats-artist.

The oeuvre of Bokobza is endowed with the ability to absorb significances that are not immanent or that are not the first to categorize any of his works. The title of the exhibition, ***Nationality:Jewish***, declares that we are dealing

here with identity and that we can therefore rely on Bokobza that in his exhibited works (over the past 12 years) he has supplied us with the key for this kind of reading and interpretation – a key for opening the door to Jewish identity. The stock formulation "Nationality: Jewish" is borrowed from the "Nationality" particulars on the Israeli identity card – the "blue" one. The bureaucratic particular is a focal point in a wide public controversy based on defining one's personal identity. In 2002 this item in the Israeli identity card was changed and the term "Jewish" has been replaced by asteriks (this is merely an outward change since in the official registry the classification remains Jewish nationality). Consequently, if the concept of nationality (or nation) is accorded to a group of people aspiring to self-determination within the context of a sovereign country and is connected to a specific territory, then designating the nationality as Jewish signifies taking an approach that sees Israel as a "cultural Jewish national state". This approach combines one identity component with another where the two – country and religion – are not necessarily interdependent. Derived from this attitude are additional concerns such as secular language and sacred language, civil anthem and religious prayer as well as the secular geographical place and the divine religionistic "place". The state and the religion march hand-in-hand.

And here, the sand-works of Bokobza are placed among the Jewish ritual articles chosen from the collection. But what, for instance, is the connection between the salt-cellar and pepper shaker which are kitchen utensils the artist designed, and the 19th century bronze Hannuka lamps? What is the connection between his secular articles and the Jewish ritual articles? Let us now address ourselves to an examination of Bokobza's works.

The work *Salt & Pepper* (2002) is built on the model Bokobza designed and turned into a leitmotif in his oeuvre (usually as a silhouette or as a duplicated ornamentation). The model includes a building with a cupola in the shape of Rachel's Tomb, a house in the Tel-Avivian international Bauhaus style, and silhouettes of an olive tree and a date palm. The four components, taken from the local visual culture, come together in a kind of "schatness" of styles and significances combining modernism with tradition, ornamentation with usage,

internationalism with localism, and, of course, contrasting the sacred with the profane. Bokobza sanctifies the articles by interweaving the Rachel's Tomb building – the holy place close to the holy city, and the Bauhaus buildings – the secular place in the city that has risen up from the sands. The term "sand" often recurs – sand of the earth and sand of the sea, sand whose significance is secular as opposed to sacred, sand (חול) that is not of the country (i.e. ל"ן meaning abroad), and sand of the first Hebrew city. As mentioned in the title of this text, Bokobza the many-sided artist is "of the sands".

The *Refugees*, those selfsame square paintings that were released from the wall, grew legs and horns and began to march freely. They, too, are of bipolar identity. Their original significance in the context of Bokobza's exhibition *Zion's Fiction* (Nelly Aman Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2003) points to their status as Arab refugees that have been driven from their homes. These two-legged paintings now wear the apparel of their Jewishness, which affords them the nomenclature in the image of the Wandering Jew. Look at the horns of the Jewish one – horns that are familiar from anti-Semitic propaganda – and it could be viewed otherwise, that these are the horns of Moses that have often been bestowed on him in the history of art. In any case, we have before us an object-painting that has been sentenced to grow legs and to march to its diaspora. Bokobza's *Refugees* bring to mind the works of Zoya Cherkassky – *Baby Malewitz* with the legs and *The Wandering Jew* whose image is woven on a cushion, on both of which a similar visual language has been employed and which deal with the artistic identity versus the Jewish identity. Their journey of wandering could likely bring together the *Refugees* of Bokobza with Cherkassky's "refugees". Now look at *The Local Creatures* created for the exhibition *Bezalel Version B* (Artists' House, Jerusalem, 2006), at the center of which is a painting of Rachel's Tomb. Does this hybrid creature (the younger brother of the *Refugee*) not mix the mundane with the religious, his "local" identity with the holy place? *Local Creature*, such is his name, his place is on a sideboard in the living room of a Jewish home as a reminder to the watchful and protective eye of God, in accordance with the verse, "Behold,

the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him; upon them that hope is his mercy".¹

An additional work that wears several identity-hats (and also a keffiyeh) on its head is the painting *Patriarch 1*, a detail from the exhibition *Tzayar-Tayar (Painter-Tourist)*, (Nelly Aman Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002). Is this a patriarch of the Christian church, a rabbi with phylacteries on his head, or perhaps an Arab wearing a keffiyeh? It would appear that none of these answers is correct but nevertheless they are all truthful. As is fitting for the standing of a patriarch (the father of a family or a senior man of religion) we are looking at Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl. This is Bokobza's version with regard to the photograph of the Visionary of the State, shot by the Bezalelian artist Ephraim Moshe Lilien, which is also entirely staged displaying Herzl disguised as an Arab wearing a keffiyeh in the likeness of the biblical Jew.² Bokobza makes full use of the identities-game between himself and Lilien, between the Jew and the Arab, and between the authentic and the pseudo-Oriental, in order to formulate a multi-identity image of his own, to which he adds phylacteries in a strikingly conspicuous manner and designs the keffiyeh in the shape of a tallit (the Jewish prayer shawl) replete with stripes and tassels.³ Thus by portraying the image under numerous identities does the country in question demonstrate strangeness – it reveals itself to be out of touch by being suitable everywhere.⁴

The series of silk screen prints *Moadim* (2004-2005) is dedicated to the Israeli Jewish festivals including Yom Kippur, Succot, Simhat Torah, Purim, Shavuot and Yom Haatzma'ut (of secular origin). The religious ordained timetable of festival-date-printing serves as a wide field for combining social-political criticism and will-o'-the-wisp-identities. The print Bokobza prepared for the

¹ Book of Psalms, 33,18

² Guy Raz, *Short History of Local Photography, Countrywide Cultural Basket*, Tel-Aviv, 2010, pp. 24-25 (in the Hebrew)

³ The plethora of identities in the work of Bokobza continues the tourist's gaze (he named it "painter-tourist" in his exhibition under that title) in the manner that Lilien looked at the east from an Orientalistic point of view.

⁴ Gideon Ofrat, "Where is the child?", *Eliahou Eric Bokobza: Tzayar-Tayar (Painter-Tourist)*, Nelly Aman Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002, with unnumbered pages.

Purim festival benefited from the custom of traditionally disguising oneself and portrays two men in disguise on a wallpaper background in the form of a smiling pumpkin (well known from the popular Christian festival of Halloween, All Saints Night). The one is disguised as an IDF soldier and the other, the man with a moustache, is disguised as a queen wearing a crown inlaid with precious stones on his head and a dress with an extremely low neckline. The subject of the gender identity is present in the artwork of Bokobza and this is one of his most amusing displays. The print for the Succot festival is less cheerful. The booth, positioned between colorful mountains and constructed in the form of the Bokobzaic "Bauhaus", has a roof of green thatch. However, this booth does not stand firmly on the ground but is stationed on three legs like a kind of satellite that has just landed and its detachment from the place signifies the rootless situation of the cactus-Sabra Israeli.

The painting *Tomb of Absalom* (2010), from the series *Eye Toward Zion* dealing with superstitions, is also displayed in the exhibition. The painting portrays the building described as the Tomb of Absalom, located in the Kidron Valley between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount, with its pointed cupola and a large eye at the center. Good-luck charms against the evil eye (of the well-known kind that are sold as souvenirs in every fair) hang beneath the painting and together with the central eye total up to a dozen eyes. According to tradition this memorial symbolizes the burial site of Absalom, King David's son. However, archeological research has determined that this building dates several hundred years later than the time of Absalom. A custom that has remained ingrained with regard to this memorial is to throw stones at it – rebellious sons are brought to the memorial and forced to cast a stone at it in order to expunge their bad luck. Furthermore, the two fundamentals of this Bokobzaic work are planted the one in the secular place and the other in the religious place, and thus give expression to this popular-traditional custom implemented in practice of throwing stones, which happens to be the product of faith but which has absolutely no real basis for its existence or for its ascribed significances.

The outstanding painting in the exhibition is certainly *Bar Mitzvah* (2000). It portrays the coming of age celebration of the boy Eric Bokobza (perhaps it would be correct in this case to call him by his Hebrew name – Eliahou) . There are four figures in the painting: The bar mitzvah boy, a black singer in charge of the music, a belly dancer for the entertainment, and an IDF soldier. The soldier appears in the painting in order to denote the location – Israel. But apart from him these are the figures who actually accompanied Bokobza on his 13th birthday celebration. Discerning what has been discussed in this text will highlight the gap between this bar mitzvah celebration and a traditional bar mitzvah ceremony. There are no phylacteries on the arm and the head, and instead of being called up to read the Torah the bar mitzvah boy stands on the platform (before the singer) dressed in a white suit, with a kippah on his head and clutching dollar bills in his hand – in accordance with the popular Mizrahi custom. But it is the belly dancer who completely removes any hint of toeing the Jewish celebration line. The Orientalistic woman clothed in a belly dancer outfit has red hair and is wearing a crown, earrings and bracelets that make her look alluring. This "Flora" before us is the star of the painting which, however, remains titled *Bar Mitzvah*.

Eliahou Eric Bokobza, who defined himself as the last of the Mizrahi Bezalelians⁵, who turned the local belly dancer into a "large odalisque",⁶ who brought the Arab family back to the Tel-Aviv of Nahum Gutman and later housed it in the Israel Knesset in Jerusalem,⁷ and who returned Kfar Bir'am to the consciousness of Kibbutz Bar'am in his monumental painting of two halutzim and three kibbutz girls dancing in a confrontation with an Arab riding on a donkey and two Palestinian women wearing traditional dress.⁸ The works of this artist are the ones that are now fitted in among the items of the Judaica collection and are enveloped in an additional analytical layer. They are mutually enriched by the positioning and benefit from the Jewish-Judaical context (even though they do portray a deviation from the tradition). The

⁵ Exhibition *Bezalel Version B*, The Artists' House, Jerusalem, 2006

⁶ Exhibition *Flora*, Nelly Aman Gallery, Tel-Aviv, 2006

⁷ Exhibition *Jaffa*, Nahum Gutman Museum, Tel-Aviv, 2010. The painting *The Citrus Grower*, was bought for the art collection of the Knesset.

⁸ Exhibition *In This Place*, Bar David Museum, Kibbutz Baram, 2012

Judaica wing requested the works of Bokobza and for this exhibition the artist E.E. Bokobza can say Amen.

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Zoya Cherkassky, *Baby Malewitz*
2005, Mixed media, 18 cm ht.



Zoya Cherkassky, Cushion, detail
from the *Wandering Jew*, 2002,
Embroidery, 36x36 cm



Ephraim Moshe Lilien, *Joshua*, 1908

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