

SUGAR COATING

Eliahou Eric Bokobza's "Zion's-Fiction" is a sharp funny and apocalyptic work. In his previous one-man shows, "Plaisir Oriental" (2000) and "Tzayar-Tayar" (2002) , Bokobza engaged in a cultural critique, examining the displacement of figurative and symbolic systems from one culture to another, and the gradual emergence of multiculturalism. He systematically probed the israeli sytem, searching for the early, Bezalel-made roots of the israeli image and mercilessly chipped away at the country's machismo and national chauvinism.

This time Bokobza locates his story in the realms of outer space and produces a new phase of Zionism out of thin air. It is a kind of jock at the expense of industrialist Stef Wertheimer's notion of "phase-three Zionism" but also a critique of the jewish settlers in the west bank and Gaza, who consider themselves to be the "New Zionists". The installation opens with a large diptych entitled "banishment". the term is a loaded one in jewish history, evoking events from the expulsion of spanish jewry to the deportation of european jews during world war II, and it has become central to the discourse with and about the palestinians. Banishment is discussed in israel as a punitive measure, whose cost-effectiveness must be gauged: only the various human rights organizations still raise the moral issues involved.

Bokobza effects a nightmarish reversal by showing adam and eve, both dressed in space suites, being cast out of paradise by Herzl himself. This Herzl is the same fictive figure invented by Herzl's friend and admirer, artist Ephraim Moshe Lilien, overcome with zionist sentiment and art nouveau aesthetics, Lilien has repeatedly painted Herzl as a male nude of ideal proporthions.

Herzl stands in Bokobza's installation holding the flaming sword and expealling the armsbearing Adam and Eve. He seems to regret ever having made the zionist endeavor, the way God repented of creating man and sought to destroy mankind in the flood. Bokobza's painting is pretty, colorful, easy to read: the bitter pill is coated with sugar.

After the banishment, the camp represented by Adam and Eve proceeds to do what it knows best - to settle in an organized fashion, taking its cultural and aesthetic heritage and planting it where it does not belong.

Bokobza is here developing ideas raised in his previous works, such as the incongruity of the international style buildings in the local landscape and especially alongside the palm trees, symbols of the east. In paintings reminiscent of comic book drawings, he shows tanks towing houses and water towers. these structures all have legs like a moon-lending vehicle: they will never take root in the landscape, but will forever remains its temporary lodgers.

Bokobza paint on silver and gold color plastic material made up entirely of tiny holograms. This substance, combined with the sweet vividness of his art, make the paintings into charming objects with a deliberately cheap sheen. Bokobza is referring to the way in which high-sounding ideologies have been melted down into pennies and are sold as a tempting product to a coars public, which the artist often imagines as semi-robotic. "the woman settler", for example, is shown wearing a headdress and an apron, but this woman of valor has red metal arms that end in wrenches.

"hero" is a parody of the quintessential zionist hero, the one armed yosef trumpeldor: he is depicted in an olive colored astronaut's suit, a medal pinned on his chest, his gaze resolut. In 21 works Bokobza creates an entire world: conveyors, tree settlements and their inhabitants. there is an arab laborer in his kaffiyeh and an armed guard whose space suit sports a policeman's badge.

The areas called simply "territory 1" and "territory 2" are full of small, enigmatic figures, which bokobza calls refugees. They represent the local inhabitants, whose existence the settlers ignore: bokobza gives them a three-dimensinal presence. The refugees are a series of 24 small paintings (20 by 30 cm) glued on wood. They are mounted on bronze legs and two small hornes protrude from theire top parts. The "bodies" of the refugees are painted with large eyes, floating inside a colorful pattern. The refugees have no mouth, only legs on which to flee, and horns sugesting their demonization by the settlers. They are lovable and pitiful.

Bokobza is not trying to present the israeli-palestinian story with any complexity, but rather to offer a parable, and this he does well. Unlike his past works, this exhibition raises the intriguing question of its own future interpretation. Bokobza has transformed general questions of east versus west into a distinct comment about a specific political issue.

Bokobza has developed his own unique style. It is interesting to see his work as part of a general change in israeli art's accepted aesthetic.

His past works corresponded directly with the art of David Reeb and Pamela Levy, and to a large extent with that of David Tartakover. But Bokobza is more colorful, prettier, funnier as though trying both to challenge his observers and to entertain them.

At the moment his work may be linked to that of Eliezer Sonnenschein. It also has affinity to the work of Keren Shpilsher, the young artist who exhibited a fine first installation at the Helena Rubinstein Art Pavilion's "First Portarit" show, and whose work is now on display at the Time For Art Museum. All three share a style that combines playfulness and naivete with a touch of the absurd. Shpilsher and Sonnenschein's images are much more violent, but Bokobza may be sharper in his inditification of geographic boundaries as the heart of the problem. Arrogance, obtuseness and tyranny can also extend into some "outer space".

Bokobza Allusion to science fiction (through the punning name of his exhibition) and the sweetness of his colors and hapes only give him, like the court jester, the freedom to make more extreme statements. Bokobza's "reservist" is especially reminiscent of both Sonnenschein and Shpilsher: it is a statue of a man made up of two square paintings and aluminium body parts. The man is dressed in a uniform, his arms are those of a robot, and an israeli flag protrudes from the side of his head. Yet the statue's back sports a large romantic, candy-red heart, raising perhaps the possibility of hope - but hope of what kind?

Smadar Shefi - "Haaretz " - israeli daily newspaper 19.12.2003