

Eliahou Eric Bokobza – Herzl and the Refugees

by Naomi Aviv

"It seems to me to be more logical to establish a Jewish homeland in a place that is less historically loaded...I cannot be at all sympathetic to devotion without leadership, to turning a piece of Herodian wall into a national remnant, and thus hurting the feelings of those born there."

(Sigmund Freud, January 26, 1930. From Letters, Vol. 3, Ha'ir newspaper, published October 16, 2003).

Even though his mischievous and highly magical drawings appear to be naive, there is no chance that those viewing the exhibitions of **Eliahou Eric Bokobza** (born in Paris in 1963) will leave with the impression that the conquest and the settlement movement in Israel is a distant and abstract problem, one that belongs to unlucky "others". His temptation tactics would not even put the vegetable world to shame. His epic drawings confront the eye with a noisy artillery barrage of materials and colors and a glitter of shapes and backgrounds. After that, the viewer is also in store for a conscious organization of all the drawings into a critical-political meta-narrative that brings us face to face with provocative messages and positions Bokobza as an artist who does not believe in separating the aesthetic from the social. From a visual perspective, the apothecary Eliahou Eric Bokobza, who completed his art studies three or four years ago, is not exactly a bashful cyclamen flower or a polite squill plant. Though he is, indeed, a proper Israeli citizen who fulfills his obligations and does reserve duty, when it comes to his plastic language it's no holds barred. Though he sows the land in his drawings with "bonbons", it soon becomes apparent that they have been poisoned.

In the final year of the previous century, at the close of the last millennium, when Bokobza completed his art studies at the Kalisher- Pollock art school in Tel Aviv, all he needed to do was reach out and pluck the ripe fruits of the post-Zionist discourse that was just beginning to establish itself, including its discussion and research into the politics of the Mizrahi identity (of Jews from Arab countries). It also involved academic consideration and expunging of "forbidden memories", as cultural researcher Ella Shohat prefers to call the venomous ideas that have emerged from the margins of the cultural-intellectual discourse and have decisively shattered myths in Israeli society.

Since then, Bokobza, who was brought to Israel at the age of six but still feels like a stranger, has been delving into Israeli memorabilia with a combination of enthusiasm and sarcasm. He has steered his artistic accomplishments between, on the one hand, collecting and abstracting visual cliches and representations from institutions in the Promised Land—those affected by Eurocentrism according to modern Zionist literature and art in the style of E.M. LILIENTHAL, Gur Aryeh and Zeev Raban—and on the other hand, formulating his own personal, sweet yet stinging language, highly influenced by Japanese toys, primarily robots, and by his obsessive fondness for lovely and beautiful objects. Bokobza considers naive representations of Israeli culture as a form of static folklore dictated by a visual tradition representing a single, obvious identity shared by all Israelis. His ironic language, based upon multicultural thinking, clarifies into a subversive political act. Bokobza turns an exotic image of the Tomb of Rachel (a square with a skullcap and a tree, according to Meir Gur Aryeh) into a sketch of an oriental building, representing tradition, history, holiness and fascination with sites related to death, which appears next to a white Bauhaus building (a block that in any case is based upon schematics and paradigm as ideology).

Bokobza seems to be celebrating the criticism formulated by new historians (as well as by political publicists such as Meron Benbenisti and Haim Hanegbi) and the cracks that have been revealed in the discursive status quo that dominated here until the mid-nineties. He has internalized inspection of the past as a reaction to popular culture. In his installation titled "Zion's Fiction" (which, when articulated, sounds like "science fiction") he argues against the modernism and Zionism that believed in a homogeneous utopian future and therefore, repressed the natives, erased them, put them out of mind, scarred, revoked, humiliated and enslaved them. From one drawing to the next, he weaves a super-plot that examines the preservation of colonialism, including the act of "otherizing" ("creating otherness by means of discourse") and the policing and institutionalization mechanisms of colonialization that are subject to compulsive repetition. What was is what will be. The future takes place within a new geographic space, but the conceptual space is the same. The repressions of the past have repercussions upon the present and the future. In his current exhibit, Bokobza has created a multicultural existential space that comprises east as well as west, settlers as well as natives, white laborers as well as Arab laborers. His work is history as an inevitable human tragedy.

In the drawings Bokobza exhibited prior to this current installation, for example the "Tzayar-Tayar" (painter-tourist) series, he demonstrated his ironic attitude toward the place to which he immigrated together with his parents, who were born in Tunisia, and how he had internalized a traditional colonial point of view even as he examined the east with the eye of an Orientalist. That is, Bokobza, the new immigrant from Paris, son of parents of Mizrahi origin, explored the Promised Land, drawing it and himself in it from the point of view of an Oriental colonialist. He was and remains the hero of the world he has drawn. All of the characters starring in the stories he sets before us are self-portraits.

In "Zion's Fiction," Bokobza's preoccupation with his own place in this new-old land has been replaced by his involvement in demonstrating the process of settling in another space. He attempts to convey a hetero-utopian "interpretation" that erodes and undermines the notion of the mythic Israeli space (as a form of utopia that realized itself) by creating one of the extreme examples of what Michel Foucault refers to as "heterotopia", a place in space outside of space and time, "a different space, a different substantial space, that will be perfect, meticulous and organized to the degree that our space is disordered, poorly constructed and chaotic. A heterotopia will not be an illusion but rather compensation and I ask myself whether some of the colonies operate in this fashion." This for Bokobza is "Zion fiction". His new series acts as a fictional legend of the future, an ancient story of invasion and settlement in a new place, one that appears empty only because its natives have been rendered invisible, repressed, marginalized, until it becomes clear that the very act of invading and settling a place belonging to others contains an act of self-exclusion. We exclude the authentic inhabitants of the place while we, in fact, are paving the way for self-exclusion. "There are other heterotopias whose entranceways appear quite simple, but in most cases they are concealing a variety of exclusions: everyone can enter these heterotopias, but in reality this is merely an illusion: we believe we have entered, but based upon our entry we have been excluded", that is, we remain mere passersby, or uninvited guests who, just as they entered they are likely to leave or to be exiled, over and over again.

The "Zion's Fiction" installation begins at the point where the "Tzayar-Tayar" series ended, with the conclusion that Zionism is infected with imperialism and that it does not interact well with its place; therefore, the last drawing points toward the West. The current installation is comprised of three parts: an expulsion scene and scenes of settlement and refugees. The "Banishment" scene is depicted by a large diptych (1.40 x 2.40 m) in oil on canvas, based on the "Expulsion from the Garden of Eden" by Efraim Moshe LILIEEN, in which LILIEEN's preferred and favored idol, Zeev Benjamin Herzl, appears in the role of God, seemingly expelling Adam and Eve from the Diaspora, which is painted in the form of a flowering (?) Garden of Eden; they are being expelled to the Land of Israel. As in LILIEEN's work, in Bokobza's work there is a large gap between the two parts of the diptych, that is, between the Garden of Eden with its Rose of Sharon lilies where the dominant color is white, and what is happening outside of paradise, where black dominates. Bokobza appoints the same Herzl, bearded and muscular, naked and barefoot, to the role of an angel expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which here is the Land of Zion (replete with landscapes that quote the scenic formulae from Bokobza's previous works: lawns composed of leaves, red earth swarming with ants and the sea formed from schematic waves), to another place (as depicted on the second half of the diptych) that is no less symbolic. It is a hilly place (the hills depicted with glittering holograms, emphasizing the sense of fiction, with silver and golden sheets in a hologramic pattern serving as an actual background for the other scenes), beset with sabra cacti and its land sown with eyes and ants, and also a snake with funny-looking ears (like Bokobza's own ears?). Adam and Eve are placed here wearing space suits resembling uniforms made of camouflage material in a fig-leaf pattern. They are holding rifles. Eve is wearing a pink space suit, as fitting for a girl, while Adam is dressed in blue, as appropriate for a boy in the world of childhood that Bokobza is attempting to reproduce here. This pair of warriors "lands" in a new place, cut off as if they are inside a bubble. The earth, as noted, is swarming with life (ants and eyes), but from their perspective it is abandoned. While Herzl, in the role of the mythological new Jew, is entirely physical, curved and muscular, with the wings of an angel and a sword, Adam and Eve, the new soldiers, seem somewhat ethereal, like toy soldiers, like robots, far from the stooped and depressed image granted to them by LILIEEN. The second panel of the diptych leads us to the next drawing.

Here the second part begins, focusing on settlement, spread over 21 paintings. In the opening scene, the "conveyors" enter, one on a tank and the other on a bulldozer, with a "inspector" over them. The depiction of the building and settlement process is a reconstruction of the history of Zionist settlement in Eretz Israel, a kind of compulsive replication that is depicted as an original sin that ultimately gives rise again and again to the punishment of exile. Therefore, the efforts toward new settlement are set upon a platform with wheels, which is more practical. The new area emerges as a land flowing with bonbons or with precious stones, relatively empty, neutral. But very quickly a tripod on wheels makes an appearance, out of which rises an Israeli flag, planted among the sabra cacti. From there, the road to the first settlement is short and is marked by two "oriental" (Mizrahi) buildings (a modular model of Rachel's Tomb), a Bauhaus block, a water tower topped with a flag, and dorchin's statue that has been moved intact from the corner of Ben Zion Boulevard and King George Street in Tel Aviv. That is, the new place makes sure to supply materialistic needs but not to abandon spiritual needs as well. Everything is on wheels. The first settlement begets a proletariat—robots with scythes or hammers and laborers' caps and blue clothing: a black laborer, a white laborer and an Arab laborer. The Arab laborer does not wear a cap but rather a kaffiyeh, his face bristled like Arafat's; he has a small blue and white oxygen mask. His ears are colored red and green, like the flag of Palestine. His jacket is puffy, to the point of suspicion (is he really a shahid, dressed as a laborer?). His beard, for some reason, is drawn much more carefully, with a thin brush. On the way to the second settlement, the figure of another female "settler" is added—a robot wearing a head covering, a long dress and a maid's apron, as well as the figure of a "watchman" (security guard), with the insignia of the Israel Police on his chest.

The second settlement already has three Bauhaus buildings and four oriental houses on the background of a gold hologram, as well as water tower with a flag on a bed of cacti and Kadishman statue banished there from Habima Square. A pilot is taking off over the painting of the settlement, and a paratrooper can be seen as well. A fisherman and a diver appear at the bottom, and between them we discover the natives, as if they were bursting forth from the bottom of the ocean or from the subconscious of the settlement. In the third settlement, we see the same golden camel in a blue square (quoting David Reeb, hinting at the culture of consumerism, advertisement and billboards) that also appeared in the first drawing of the first settlement series. There is also Tumarkin's statue of the Holocaust and resurrection, in exile here from Rabin Square, as well as a water tower with a flag, a bed of sabra cacti, Bauhaus buildings and oriental houses.

The entire installation is adorned with Israeli flags: triangular and square, with and without the Star of David. Bokobza's preoccupation with the modern Zionist entity is also represented by three rusty iron statues that in some way represent a collection of the three basic shapes: square, circle and triangle.

After the third settlement and a bit before arriving at an unsettled border area, we see images of the "pioneer" and the "hero". The latter, armless (Trumpeldor, perhaps?), bears the insignia of the Lebanese War; he is the more daring of the two and is therefore closer to the wasteland. In the wasteland itself, as part of the landscape, it is impossible not to make out the "native" situated on the soft rise, and formed using a plastic language of points and lines, molecules and synapses, that have incorporated him into the landscape (hence emphasizing the foreignness of the new settlers in this landscape). And then we come to the third part of the installation: the natives, that is, the "refugees".

The natives, a total of sixteen in number (35 x 20 x 5 cm) are designed as genial objects made of bronze or aluminum and oil on canvas on a wooden frame. They are handless and mouthless. Instead of a body they have an eye—a blue eye resembling the symbolic Oriental eye. (That is, they are not merely natives without an identity; rather, they are Mizrahis.) Their bare feet and their demonic horns have been sculpted from ceramic material and cast, some in bronze and some in aluminum. They are, in effect, refugees. Despite their status, Bokobza has made sure to draw them using a technique that is somewhat odd and freer, as if seeking to examine them from within; he therefore has chosen for their primary representation something resembling molecules and synapses (wet oil on wet paint, without waiting for the layers to dry, a technique that allows the colors to flow over one another and to blend into each other, as opposed to the other drawings in the installation, which took a long time to complete because of the need to wait for each layer of paint to dry). Thus, each is given its own distinct personality, even though from the drawing perspective they are virtually abstract.

That is, here is a heterogeneous group of refugees, one represented as an albino, for example. In order to close the circle, let me note that among all of the figures populating the installation, only Herzl and the refugees are barefoot

The installation as a whole is completed by an additional and separate object symbolizing all of the figures that populate the installation, that is, Herzl, the settlers and the refugees: this is the reservist (80 x 50 x 20 cm). The reservist wears a "chai" (life) medallion on a chain around his neck, and he is dressed in a tiger-spotted military uniform, beneath which is a blue striped tee-shirt. He has earphones on the sides of his head, an antenna and flag sticking out of one of them. On his back, on a background of circles, is his heart, drawn using the frontal language depicting the refugees. The reservist is set in a broad aluminum construction, with screws. He holds a spanner in one hand. As opposed to the hero, the pioneer or the paratrooper, the reservist is presented as a robot that performs and provides services. The reservist robot, says Bokobza, represents the artist himself, as he manages to conduct his everyday life within the crisis-laden reality in which we find ourselves. This is how he lives, in his space suit, with a somewhat romantic heart that has been pushed aside so that it will not interfere with his role as soldier.

Prior to the exhibition, Bokobza showed me the installation in his living room. The refugees were spread out over the floor. Each glimpse revealed yet another delightful treasure or precious object from his amazing collection. His apartment is designed as if it were a fetish-like temple, where the ritual of the object reigns. The kitchen has all the necessary utensils, all highly stylized and well-defined, like the shapes in his drawings: geometric shapes that affirm cleanliness and decorativity. The studio is in the next room. An amazing collection of toys and robots. Everything clean and shining (as appropriate for an apothecary). The palettes used to mix his paints are disposable. So are the brushes. Returning to the group of refugees, they are purposefully exaggerated, shocking. "It's a matter of maximum temptation, because ultimately they are meant to arrive at different houses. I expect that those who come to the exhibition, or at least some of them, will take one of these refugees home with them. Of course, each and every detail in the exhibition carries with it the entire story, and here are my refugees, entering Israeli homes through the front door," he states.

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