

תרבות וספרות

Closing One Eye

Yonatan Ullman Searches for a Mother and Father

Uzi Tzur, December 4th, 2015



Yonatan Ullman, 'LEGACY' (installation view), ArtSpaceTLV, 2015.
photo: Barak Brinker

The floor of Yonatan Ullman's exhibition is like parched land after a lasting drought. Deep cracks fracture the surface and appear to reach the Earth's core, disrupting everything which may appear to be safe and sound. Ruins of the world as we know it, of the history of Israeli Art, and of all of Western civilization's culture. Apocalyptic as an ancient prophecy: "From the ruins I will demolish". The scorched ground image accompanies the exhibition logo. Hovering above it is an amputated, deficient red 'Star of David' - a ruin more beautiful than its whole.

The shattered floor of the exhibition is in fact Ullman's own New York studio walls which Ullman, as if condemned to eternal exile always carrying his barren home-land with him, tore apart and brought with him back to Israel.



Yonatan Ullman, logo for the exhibition 'LEGACY', ArtSpaceTLV, 2015

The exhibition revolves around a relic from Moshe Gershuni's iconic text-installation "WHO IS ZIONIST" as opposed to "AND WHO IS NOT" written in red oil sticks on the walls of July. M. Gallery in 1979. In that space, which has become engraved in our memories as one of the most significant moments in the history of local art, Gershuni formed a balancing scale between the dichotomies of Israel's society after 1967 - released territories / occupied territories, and the appropriation of Zionism by the right-center as opposed to the 'traitors' of the left-center. Gershuni's cry echoes through Moses's cry: "Who is on the Lord's side?" when he first saw the ancient Israelites praying before the Golden Calf. The Levi's then joined him to slay the others - thus his cry split the Israelites in half by sword and mercy - forgetfulness as opposed to a place in history - can this same cry apply today?

From Gershuni's original work, Ullman leaves only half: "AND WHO IS NOT" (which remains vague to those unfamiliar with the original work). Despair takes over, relief for the 'Other' stuck between the Devil and deep blue sea, between the fanaticism of Religion and Nationality on either side - the hard-edge of the letters Ullman conjures with blood-red oil sticks on to the virgin walls of the gallery suggest refuge in art. At the same time, the words "AND WHO IS NOT" echo like sharp and painful body remains above the incarnated ruins of the ground.



Moshe Gershuni, "WHO IS ZIONIST AND WHO IS NOT", July. M. Gallery, 1979

On the next wall hang four white framed drawings - the gaps between them define a negative cross. 'Gershuni's letters', compressed and sized down as a summary of the exhibition, appear on each. With them Ullman writes a broken sentence: "MOTHER", "WHO AM I", "PLEASE", "OFFSPRING" (the last word could alternately read as: "GET OUT, GET OUT" or a nonsense word resembling "DADA"). The fragmented sentence forms perpetual yearning for Father and Mother to mend the breach, to cure the orphanhood nesting in those who since the paracide linger on "THOSE WHO ARE NOT", to soften the zealously.



Yonatan Ullman, "Legacy" (detail), ArtSpaceTLV, 2015. photo: Barak Brinker

From the shattered ground, against the wall left blank (the wall across from “WHO IS NOT”), erect a lone upside-down Greek column - its Corinthian order is its base, whereas its order at the top was replaced by the elegant proud head of Michelangelo’s David - a figure who had been expropriated from his biblical narrative for the sake of a Western, Renaissance narrative. Ullman as if restores him to his original roots (David served a symbol for the ‘New Jew’) in the image of a plaster replica which he peels the white skin off of to reveal the bloody-red flesh (a theme throughout the limbs of the entire exhibition) of the suffering body behind the myth and its cheap plaster copy. This seemingly a simple act (reminiscent of Sigalit Landau’s ‘skinned’ sculptures), is surprisingly effective in undermining the perfection of Renaissance aesthetics.



Yonatan Ullman, “Legacy” (detail), ArtSpaceTLV, 2015. photo: Barak Brinker

The exhibition's personal-emotional highpoint is the work "MOSHE AND ME" - a black and white photograph, which appears aged as if it taken from a very personal archive. In the photo, which was taken in Gershuni's own home several weeks before the exhibition opened, Ullman's merciful smiling face emerges from the pitch darkness behind Gershuni's head, whose image appears like the other, pale, tormented side of the moon. This derived photo loses itself to a ghostly hallucinatory state, the skin like material which the photograph is printed on wraps the image in a membrane of forgetfulness, its edges torn like those of the skin peeling off the sculpture. Using red oil sticks; Ullman tattooed writing on this moonstruck image: "Moshe and Me". Possibly this ends the search - one day Gershuni will father a limitless legacy (of nationality, religion and gender) which will relieve this place of the wounds it has inflicted. However, for the time being Ullman's prophet desolate floor cracks under our feet like the warning at the entrance to the exhibition - "Beware - viewers are liable for their own safety - please, watch your step."



Yonatan Ullman, 'Moshe and Me' detail from LEGACY, ArtSpaceTLV, 2015.

photo: Barak Brinker

