

Dani Shoshan, In Search of an Israeli Art

By Osvaldo Romberg

What is an Israeli artist? During the 1970s, the Israeli scene was heavily influenced by a group of curators, artists, and critics who purported to create an Israeli identity in art. They undertook such a difficult task by promoting artists who borrowed from international imagery a certain iconography which they then transformed and adapted into local terminology using deliberately dirty technical processes.

In this way, dirty plywood, bad finish, and handmade texts were institutionalized as a sort of sloppy conceptual art. A clever eye at that time would of course notice the semblance of a Rauschenberg collage, or a Twombly scribble, or even a late Arnulf Rainer mixed with a Tapies. One might even find a remaking of Beuys using Hebrew letters.

This kind of operation, in which a national identity is articulated and advanced almost by force, is a very difficult task. For example, we should not forget that after the Second World War, American Abstract Art was not simply the creation of Clement Greenberg or Harold Rosenberg (although they may have been brilliant marketers and writers who ideologically articulated the discourse of their time), but an evolving process involving young American artists mixed with European refugees arriving in the United States fleeing Nazi persecution (such as Breton, Leger, Matta, Ernst, Dali, Masson, Mondrian, Tanguy, and so many others). The process was slow and complex and the consequence of many factors, and not just the result of promotion by one or two curators.

This Israeli project of identity of the 1970s, which I mentioned above, was successfully overcome once international practices began to be known in Israel through a variety of media outlets, publications, and traveling exhibitions. As a consequence, the 1980s and 1990s in Israel saw a relaxation of the earlier xenophobia to create an Israeli art at any cost. (It is also important to recall that at the same time, there was a disparate group of artists, living in Israel in the beginning of the 1970s, that sought to create an art that was perhaps not so much "Israeli" but extraordinary and original by international standards. Some of the individuals that one might recall include Michael Gitlin, Benni Efrat, Joshua Neustein, Menashe Kadishman, Pinchas Cohen-Gan, Nahum Tevet, Buki Schwartz, as well as myself. These artists exhibited in international art cities such as London, Paris, and New York, and collectively these artists put the name of Israel on the map without contributing to a fanatic idea of Israeli identity. Other artists at the time were also doing good work at an international level although they did not frequently travel outside of Israel.)

It is important to note that there are an enormous and rather disproportionate amount of art schools in Israel in relation to the total population. The new generation of artists and critics that began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, especially those graduating from the different schools and academies, created a new panorama. Some became very successful, and continue to exhibit their work internationally today. This new Israeli

community that emerged then and which continues to develop today is marked by a confluence of many ethnicities and cultures including those from Russia, Ethiopia, Morocco, and America. As these cultures were absorbed, they helped to produce new sets of tendencies which reflect a far more diverse and heterogeneous Israeli population than the “Cultural Zionism” of the late 1970s.

The work of Dani Shoshan is one example of a new ethnically diverse art situation in Israel. Shoshan grew up during the aforementioned period, and in this sense has avoided a dilemma which has affected and decimated a generation of artists and curators in Israel. Shoshan, as well as many other students of Israeli academies, attended universities and art colleges in Europe and America and then returned to Israel to live and teach. During that time, theoretical ideas and developments that have shaped art of the 1960s and 1970s had begun to arrive in Israel. A new generation of artists developed who were politically involved, while others took an ontological approach towards “the land.” I believe that the particular work by Dani Shoshan that we are exhibiting today belongs to this later group. Shoshan is of Moroccan descent and in actively resisting the imposition of a certain cultural identity has created a mixture of religious and telluric iconography which is at once local and cosmopolitan. The black and white photographs of the Israeli desert are inserted into a cosmopolitan exterior structure.

Formally, Shoshan’s work looks like minimal three-dimensional structures, such as Sol LeWitt’s empty cubes, or even Donald Judd’s wall pieces. These structures have been imposed on black and white photographs of empty landscapes from the Israeli desert. The works claim your attention from far away and absorb and attracts you, inviting you to approach it while at the same time refusing to let you in. The three-dimensionality of the aluminum bars physically separate you from the photograph, making any easy perception of the work difficult and forcing you as a viewer to continually move around the pieces on the wall. In a way, these virtual volumes without mass pervert the idea of the flat photograph, as well as a pure and simple black and white photography perverts the idea of a minimalist structure from the 1960s by Judd or Lewitt.

Normally, contradictions can too easily neutralize each other. However, in the work of Shoshan, this contradiction between a volume without mass and a flat photograph reinforces in the viewer a sense of solitude. The formal reduction that takes place when Shoshan sacrifices the color of the photograph, and sacrifices the mass associated with volume, together with the fact that his materials are so poor (black and white photography and aluminum, the latter of which is a conventional material for window frames and shutters in Israel) make this work a very Israeli manifestation.

At the same time the merit of this work is not only how it relates chronologically to the evolution of Israeli art, but also how it comments on photography and sculpture, and at the same time prompts in the viewer a strange mixture of religious and melancholic views that remind one of the early years of the State of Israel when everything was straightforward and tough.