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ART Shaul Setter



Hilla Ben Ari, "Rethinking Broken Lines - A Tribute to Heda Oren." Life-size segments of frozen motion. *Assaf Saban*

“**A**bandon all hope, ye who enter here,” is the inscription Dante encounters as he enters the gate of Hell in “Divine Comedy.” And into Hell he strides, in the wake of his guide, Virgil. Together they pass through its nine circles of suffering, meeting sinners, heretics and traitors who groan under the eternal instruments of torture.

The cluster of exhibitions titled “In Her Footsteps,” currently on view at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, posits the opposite approach: of instilling hope in those who enter Hell’s gate. This it does by means of gender reversal. The nine circles of Hell become nine spaces for eight exhibitions by female artists (and one research laboratory). Each of the artists has embarked on the path of the past and attached herself to another woman, some of whom are artists themselves, or objects of art. Together they connect into different Virgil-Dante pairs. Each contemporary artist follows the Virgil she fabricates, creating her as a figure; and that Virgil leads her Dante through the circles of history in which she was active and which were often hellish for her.

There’s a woman who was committed to an insane asylum in London and a young girl who was forced to strike erotic poses for the camera in the Weimar Republic. Less dramatically, there are also nameless women with no identity who are the subjects of photographs, female artists for whom esteem abides in others, and a painter who died young.

The exhibitions as a whole delineate a path of reconnaissance, reconstruction and rehabilitation. They extricate their subjects from the limbo of oblivion, from belittling interpretation or from a diverted gaze. However, to this end they each adopt different strategies. Some remain committed to the historical narrative, others engage in detailed rites of conjuring up their subjects. There are

works that are programmatic or ecstatic, while some are more open than others. Each of them is resolved according to the degree of proximity between the artist and the object of her artistic creation, between Dante and Virgil – who is holding onto whom, and how strongly.

The exhibitions posit alternative dynasties of women, based on a return to a remote or rejected mother, and the weaving of a spiritual kinship. At their core is the question of separation: how to avoid responding to the patriarchal edict of struggling against and vanquishing the parent, and then internalizing him or her as an abstract law, according to the conventional pattern of male initiation. And on the other hand, how to avoid being assimilated completely into the mother, maintaining total identity with her, remaining in her circle. The more complex and layered is the attitude toward the returning mother, not only biographically but above all aesthetically, the more interesting the project becomes.

The exhibition by Hilla Ben Ari displays just such an approach. It’s a tribute to the choreographer Heda Oren, who lived in Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov, studied in Paris and New York, and created works for the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. In her creations,

from dance works to rites and pageants for commemorative days and holidays, she sought to weld the demands of national fulfillment in an agricultural society with modernist, metropolitan forms. If Ben Ari hadn’t “found” her, one might have thought she’d invented her. For the past decade, Ben Ari, who is also from a kibbutz, has been making video works dealing with the choreography of human bodies in non-urban spaces. It would appear, then, that Ben Ari has met the mother to whose body she can attach herself.

A tense divide

However, Ben Ari does not fall into the grasp of identification: The exhibition posits a tense divide between her and Oren. Indeed, that unabated tension is the theme of her work. Ben Ari deconstructs Oren’s choreography into segments

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of postures, gestures and body movements, which she explores from their mode of interruption. In a darkened space, she projects 10 video works of different postures, vertical and horizontal, in which one dancer – and sometimes two or three – carries out one strenuous and difficult movement, in which the body is stretched to the limit of its ability; a suspended and constricted movement, or a monotonic one, which repeats itself slowly.

These poses are taken from Oren’s choreography, but they are removed from the sphere of dance – from the sequence of the moving body and the cadence of the shifting motions – and rendered as fragmented gestures. Ben Ari does not imitate Oren’s movements; she reconstructs them and then stops and examines them in a space that is no longer the site of a show, but of training. The segments of frozen motion are projected life-size and thereby stretch the video – the work of the projected moving image – to its extremes: Hardly anything moves, at times all is perfectly still. It’s a spectacular move of retracing as a procedure of decontextualizing, of closeness and cutting.

On display in the museum’s lower floor is the precise archival research that Ben Ari carried out together with the

curator, Tal Yahas, containing letters, notes and sketches by Oren, still photos from her dances and video documentation of several of her works. The poses and movements that Ben Ari would draw on are discernible here. But her work is not devoted to the historical materials or to Oren’s biographical image, or her work. Its subject is to be found in the lacuna between the video that captures the continuous, articulate movements of Oren’s works, and Ben Ari’s video work, with its tortuous delayed movement.

Ben Ari disconnects Oren’s movements from her aesthetic and her ideology – from the body movement that connects to the kibbutz movement, from the erect body posture that grounds the nation’s independence in its land – and hurls them into a darkened no-place in the video works, to interruption of the posture or mechanical repetition. With Ben Ari, there is no returning to movement, it’s no longer possible to dance.

This is a solid, hard work, and as such it suggests a different model for a “feminine work.” In the face of “femininity” as gushing and fluid, as the blurring of boundaries between self and other and as exaggerated attachment – in other words, as failure in the voyage of separation, or as a celebration of non-separative – the feminine appears here in honed and cohesive embodiments. If we found, in the Jesus-like male figures of Jewish and Israeli art, bodies that were distended, breached and broken, battered and bleeding, the feminine body in the work of Hilla Ben Ari, though tense and intense, preserves its unity, is of a piece, unbroken. A probing body, not surrendering and cruel. That is its hope.

Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 4 Habanim St., Tel. (09) 955-0010; Friday, Saturday, Monday, Wednesday, 10:00-14:00; Tuesday, Thursday 16:00-20:00; “In Her Footsteps” closes April 22