

This Exhibit of Old-fashioned Zionist Heroism May Make You Laugh

Funny and sad, heroic and pathetic at the same time, an exhibition of photographs takes a critical view of national and military museums.

Galia Yahav Aug 13, 2015 10:52 AM



From Ilya Rabinovich's exhibition 'Museutopia | Israel – Moldova.' Courtesy

Ilya Rabinovich has documented national museums in his native land of Moldova and military museums in Israel, to which he immigrated at the age of eight, later moving to Holland. The results of his visual exploration are now on view at the Holon-based Israeli Center for Digital Art, in the exhibition “Museutopia | Israel – Moldova.”

The exhibition consists of about 40 photographs hung in an old-fashioned way, like posters attached to strips of wood on mobile coulisses that are placed in a regimented manner in the museum space, imitating the aesthetics and design of the institutions to which they refer. The more heroic, patriotic and one-sided the images are, the funnier the exhibition becomes. The hyper-seriousness of the didactic exhibits and the manifest straining to depict unquestioned heroic exploits generates a marvelously comic atmosphere.

There are two main types of photographs. One is a general view of the sites: a parking area with the skeleton of a historic bus, corridors with flags rammed into iron pillars, a grayish mortar perched on a platform in the center of a hall with a “Do not touch” sign on it, and lots of plastic

chairs for the children, adolescents and soldiers who sit through talks while touring the museums.

The other photographs are close-ups of exhibits. Staged scenes of heroism, featuring famous historical figures such as Ariel Sharon alongside anonymous people who fell while on duty in devoted silence. The moments depicted are both historical and generic. Faded black-and-white photographs are pasted like patches on black Bristol board. A cutout of a pre-state Palmach commando firing a rifle bursts out of a plastic panel. Here's a shot of a field bed and a Hermonit, a soldier's winter coat, apparently exemplifying Israel Defense Forces equipment. A life-size mannequin of a man in a cap and a coat leans on a wooden bunk bed, while the mannequin of a naked woman lies on the bed across from him, the nipple of one breast left uncovered by the gray blanket. They are depictions of illegal immigrants incarcerated by the British at Atlit, now a heritage site, and are usually viewed through a screen as silhouettes, but the photographer shows us their "behind the scenes" reality. The pistols of Major Generals Shmuel Gonen and Ezer Weizman are fastened with plastic holders to a perforated surface, and copper plates explain their origin.

Everything is low-tech, deliberately emotional fusions of authentic items from the past and exhibition methods from the present meant to make them accessible and glorify them. It's all groundless, exaggerated, pathetic and sad.



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The two types of photographs reveal the aesthetics of arranging and exhibiting the past, the graphic language and the architecture mobilized for a military museum. They tell the meta-story, the construction of the narrative of the collective Zionist memory, but with deviations. The latter

expose the selectivity that is adopted in telling the history – both the selectivity that inherently underlies museum logic and the specific Zionist selectivity that seeks to tell the history of Israel’s just wars and their ethical code.

The photographs reveal archaic means of manipulative dramatization and indoctrination embodied in the mannequins and archival images. The killing instruments on display died themselves and became mummified exhibits. The level of museum reconstruction is embarrassing: nothing is computerized, there are no sound-and-light effects, holograms, nothing technological. Most of these museums were established in the late 1980s (after the Lebanon War) but look like memorial corners in schools from the 1950s.

Time and again, the illusions of the didactic displays are spoiled by unheroic invasions of reality: the prosaic chairs for the visitors, the air conditioners, the automatic drinking devices, the direction signs. The journey into the past is also hidden by the accessories of the exhibits’ placement; the scaffolding of the sets is too overt and prevents an illusionary immersion in the material. The physical flaws reveal the ideological scaffolding and the story becomes cracked both in theory and in practice.

End of a monopoly

“A museum is not a final object,” the curators, Hadas Zemer Ben-Ari and Eyal Danon, write. “It is a culture- and history-making machine. Its identity, aims, and the functions it fulfills change in accordance with the hegemonies and order of privileges customary in a given society. A museum – a society’s storyteller – is therefore a political and social product that reflects the power relations that created it, and the contexts within which it operates and which it is supposed to represent.”

The exhibition heightens the nostalgic dimension of the dusty museums we first encountered in primary school. But it does so critically, assailing the heritage of battle as a hackneyed concept that preaches to the converted, is frozen in time and out of touch with the contemporary Israeli ethos, trying instead to reconnect desperately and violently with an imaginary collective imagination. In fact, to reinvent it when this is no longer possible.

According to the curators, the museums that Rabinovich photographs are archaeological sites, monuments to ideology. But the discomfort they evoke also stems from a failure in the simple material sense. “The sites documented are not impressive,” the curators note. “Most of them present patchwork spaces comprising added construction, improvised cabinets, portable walls, and outdated display cases.” Their irrelevance does not stem from the abandonment of the Zionist narrative of “a land without a people for a people without a land,” but is possibly due, according to the curators, to “the animated debate being conducted in Israeli society concerning the monopoly over power. This debate renders the centers of power and the hegemony less transparent and self-evident.”

The military and heritage museums still represent an era in which the monopoly over violence was in the hands of the establishment and the elites. But now, the curators observe, “They have lost their monopoly over ‘being Israeli.’ Consequently, this is not a decline of the narrative, but only of the monopoly over its writing.”

A genuine interpretative danger hangs over critical photography of this sort. In the right-wing, militaristic ethos that dominates Israel today, in which the military option is the first and only one that unifies the nation, some will see the project as an act of protest against the neglect of these museums. They might view it as seeking to restore the lost honor of these institutions, whose worn and tattered appearance is inconsistent with the glory of the past that is celebrated through them. Someone might end up injecting funds to enhance, electrify and computerize these exhibits, to maximize and streamline the military museums, or at least to prove through them that the defense budget must not be cut.

“Museutopia | Israel – Moldova,” Israeli Center for Digital Art, 4 Ha’amoraim Street, Holon; Fri.-Sat. 10 A.M. – 3 P.M., Tues.-Wed. 4-8 P.M., Thurs. 10 A.M. – 2 P.M. Until October 10.