Black Box

Ferry, terminal, the beach, a hotel room, a border crossing – each one of these bureaucratic instances is exposed as an illusion. Danny Yahav reviews Ohad Meromi's show, Resort.

Critique / Danny Yahav Brown December 17, 2015

In Hebrew, Ohad Meromi's native language, the words for visit and for revisit (in the sense of *reconsidering, re-evaluating*), share roots. However, as similar as they might sound in Hebrew, the difference is just as great. A person may visit a show – visiting in the most basic sense, as a gesture conditioned on the good will of both sides: one party visits, the other accedes. On the other hand, a critique revisited upon the object of the visit, or, conversely, a criticism aimed at the visitor, builds tension between the parties. This tension, even when sub-textual, endangers the mutual good-will gesture.

Ohad Meromi's show, Resort, focuses on the tension between visiting and being revisited – being at the receiving end of a critique. A resort is an invitation to visit. A short-term invitation, the guests being sent away as soon as their term runs out and another guest is knocking on the door. Meromi sees a dissonance between talking about an actual visit and revisiting criticism upon oneself, upon the ethos of visiting, of the resort.

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[1]Ohad Meromi, Resort Installation view
2015. Photography: Yuval Chai

The space at the entrance level, labeled Black Box, is mostly bare and neutral, allowing the visitors to perform any activity they can think of, as long as it relates to the five scenes from a play the artist has written and to the five sculptures he has constructed. Hospitality of sorts takes place in this space, where the act of visiting responds to the artist's invitation: he invites visitors (dance troupes, performance artists, singers) to perform acts over which he has no control (such as rehearsals), which occur at pre-determined and reserved periods. That is to say, the visitors are invited to be in the space, in the most basic sense of the word. However, the Black Box, is not just a documentation tool, but also a term defining time, marking it between existence and non-existence. In the context of Meromi's show, the Box – as far as a resort is possible in that space – signifies some kind of fatalistic gloom: it is the resort and its end. It is borrowed time and its termination. The prospect of returning there stems from the perspective of a catastrophe, of being crushed, annulled; thus, necessarily, from the perspective of representation. This procedure allows Meromi, and not for the first time, to critique the visit he has initiated, and to pull the rug from under it, again and again.

אוהד מרומי, נופשון. מראה הצבה. 2015. צילום: יובל חי **[2]**

[3]Ohad Meromi, Resort Installation view
2015. Photography: Yuval Chai

Five sculptures? Sculptural environments? Formalistic text illustrations? Architectural models? It doesn't matter. Deciding what goes on in the second level is up to you. I, for now, call them sculptures, and they are wonderful. Even before you understand it, Meromi's work seems amazingly precise. This kind of expression can easily yield to the logic of the associated spaces – a terminal, a hotel room, a border crossing, a ferry, or the beach, as he calls them. It lives its sculptural life as a sum of its parts, as an independent entity, free of imposed meaning. This is about norms of beauty, of proportion, of the quintessence of light and shadow, about sycophantic color, covering and uncovering, abbreviated figurativeness (brevity again), and of freehand, made-to-order abstraction. And also about what is (supposedly) required (or not) – Russian Avant-grade, constructivism, etc. – thus according to the explanatory text at the entrance to the show. The sculptures and their positioning – on square wooden daisies around which the visitors may walk– are magnificent. Such beauty is not to be taken for granted.

אוהד מרומי, נופשון. מראה הצבה. 2015. צילום: יובל חי **[4]**

[5]Ohad Meromi, Resort Installation view
2015. Photography: Yuval Chai

A booklet accompanies the show: a play in five acts, each one translating into an architectural model, which suggests linear movement with a beginning, a middle, and an end, a kind of bureaucratic modernism which controls people's movements. These are different kind of people, in different situations – those who are lucky enough to be able to choose and those who are not. It is like a metabolic system, biting, tasting, swallowing, digesting, and expelling one and all with the same indifference. Be it a ferry, a terminal, a beach, a hotel room, a border crossing – each one of these bureaucratic instances is exposed as fraudulent, as a suspension of knowledge of the system, as in "what you see is not what you get." These are tools that can bring people closer to the desired, sometimes real resort, or to the utopic one (freedom). For example, even when people come through the doors of the ferry, they are doomed to be ejected on the other side, as destitute remnants, or, conversely, as privileged (the prospect of a catastrophe, a drowning, or a crash buzzes in the background as an unrealized, but possible, scenario. This scenario, by the way, is not particular and thus terribly democratic).

[6] אוהד מרומי, נופשון. מראה הצבה. 2015. צילום: יובל חי

[7]Ohad Meromi, Resort Installation view
2015. Photography: Yuval Chai

Meromi’s sculptures are reflexive: the viewer is looking at representation looking at representation. In one sculpture of a large wooden airplane, the roof opens, turning into bleachers where passengers can sit and look at themselves from the outside. If an airplane is a tool that can swallow and expel, then these passengers find themselves straddling the fence of their own metabolic system. Is there comfort in this reflexive assumption? Is it a signifier of comprehension? Can I, as a viewer and as a frequent flyer, really confront and comprehend the diminishment of my subjectivity, which occurs every time I’m jostled along by airplanes, ferries, and in and out of border crossings? Perhaps so, but that does not bring solace. If anything, it increases the sense of frustration and loss which multiplies in direct proportion to the increasing mobility and its various bureaucratic manifestations.

“Nostrils
Ears
Mouth
Pee
Asshole
Eyes
Pores

Get it out!

Ears
Mouth
Pee
Asshole

Cunt
Eyes
Pores”
(Ohad Meromi, from Ruins, a chapter from the show’s booklet.)

We talk a lot now about refugees. The refugees’ problem, many say, is one of the worse we have known and it would bring about demographic changes. And I think the problem is private, first and foremost, the problem of those who must substitute a new life for the life they have known. To continue the metabolic system/body metaphor, who says expelling is more difficult than ingesting? And perhaps there is no difference between the two, and a no-man’s-land lies at both ends? And our body, physically and metaphorically, with its various orifices, oozes in and out without hierarchy, because it must? And why even compare between food and its byproducts?

אוהד מרומי, נופשון. מראה הצבה. 2015. צילום: יובל חי **[8]**

[9]Ohad Meromi, Resort
2015. Photography: Yuval Chai

This is what I find fascinating in Meromi’s work, in which the unequivocal volume (sculptural and ideological) is flattened into one-dimensional equivocality. Yes, that’s right. This is a place where the political is not dichotomous; where refugee status is not only the purview of the penniless, or those deprived of their basic rights, but rather it belongs to anyone who has gone on vacation: a place

where having means someone else’s not having; a place where roving is not only possible but almost required; a place which confronts its own measures of representation and the language which defines its nature; a place where the mechanism and its obliteration are revealed. Meromi describes a school trip that has gone awry and had ended up in an inquiry and collective punishment, about the threat of border control officers being tenfold greater than the risks of the journey, of hotel room architecture which clashes with family values and creates chaos, of everything which is quotidian. There is a dissonance between Meromi's text, which is frequently blunt, and the restraint and the blinding naughtiness of his sculptures.

Nevertheless, and maybe despite of the above, Meromi hangs on to a non-cynical possibility of analog interaction, of contact, of learning. This is what the Black Box is for – a temporary welcoming space, allowing the visit and the revisit to co-exist. This is a relatively relaxed crossing point, with no hierarchy and no confusing bureaucratic paperwork, creating confidence in the ability of a resort to bring the gift of trust, may it be for the briefest time.

[10]Ohad Meromi's exhibition [10] was on view at The Center for Contemporary Art, Tel-Aviv from October 15th through December 12th, 2015.

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