Portrait of an Artist as an Old-Young Man

As the art schools' graduation exhibition season is winding down, Tali Tamir revisits the work of two veteran artists – Dov Or-Ner and Dov Heller – and wonders why the radicalism that has bound the avant-garde to social values, crossed various lines, and melted away conceptual and geographical borders found no place in the major museums.

Essay / Tali Tamir November 6, 2017

This summer, when the art world directs its gaze toward graduation exhibitions and hunts for the next fresh stars, I would like to focus on two (quite) veteran artists – one is ninety, and the other is eighty years old – whose daring and originality could inspire many young artists. You will find the work of Dov Or-Ner and Dov Heller neither in the permanent display of Israeli art at the Tel Aviv Museum, nor at the Israel Museum, nor even at the Mishkan Museum of Art at Ein Harod. No major museum in Israel has taken it upon itself to mount a serious retrospective of these two artists, whose private and artistic history embraces seminal events in the political-conceptual art of the 1970s, visits important intersections of Israeli culture, changes directions, surprises, and fascinates. Their old age honors their youth – Or-Ner and Heller are as radical today as they have been long ago.

intro_pic_rea2_17_jump.jpg

[1]Dov Or-Ner, Recycling Project
Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1975

jpg.1978 ,לס ,הלר דב **[2]**

[3]Dov Heller, Loess Soil, 1978

Dov Or-Ner started to operate in the Israeli art world in the late 1960s. He was born in Paris in 1937, survived the Holocaust, emigrated to Israel after the war, and joined Kibbutz Hatzor. He was inspired by the European avant-garde, by his charismatic teacher Rudi Lehmann, who had introduced him to ancient Egyptian myths, and by workshops on conceptual art, offered by Yoav Bar El to the Kibbutz artists. His early *modus operandi* was action: in 1976, he buried tomato soup cans, signed by Andy Warhol, in Alaska and the Dead Sea, and dug 20-meter-deep holes in the ground to stash documents he collected at the Israel museum, with the idea of creating "contemporary archeology." In the famous *Metzer-Messer* action of 1972, he mixed the belongings of Arabs and Jews and created an

archeological concept that is based not on monumental structures but rather on daily life. Or-Ner was the first artist who dealt with recycling in Israeli art (*Recycling*, 1975, Israel Museum), the first to engage in "mail art" (*Project Orange*, 1973), and the first to refer to solar energy (*Solar Sculptures, 1960s-1990s*). He was also the first – and so far the only one – to bring a cow to a gallery in Tel Aviv, place it in front of a TV screen, and, while milking the cow and sleeping there, protest against indifference and the decline of Socialism and equality values in the Kibbutz movement (*Paravisia*, 1980).

Already in the 1970s, the idea of peace had been central to Or-Ner's work, and he initiated dozens of actions concerning the concept and the dream, long before we had known that the word 'peace' marked you as perfidious. In the work *Peace Cage* (1979), he locked himself up in a metal cage at the intersection of Dizengoff and Gordon streets in Tel Aviv, claiming that the Israeli government was imprisoning the peace and refused to free it… This work has gained relevance over the years, and it still awaits a brave young artist who would carry the torch. In the last decade, since he turned eighty, Or-Ner has been revisiting the Holocaust. In his radical, uncompromising manner he has redesigned his persona, and, like an inside-out sock, invented "Bad RenRo," a reversal of the letters of his name in Hebrew. The new persona reveals surprising features: a black mustache, and hair parted in the middle – Or-Ner has turned himself and Hitler into the protagonists of a surreal-pornographic drama in which he does not hesitate to include the chilling possibility that the victim might become the hangman, or at least would alarmingly appear to resemble him.

jpg.rea3_A_andy_bury_דב אור-נר **[4]**

Campbell's
SOUPE AUX
TOMATES
CONDENSED
CONDENSÉE
TOMATO
SOUP
10 oz fl
284 ml

[5]Dov Or-Ner, Homage to Andy Warhol: Burying a Campbell's Tomato Soup Can, Alaska, 1976

jpg.דב אור-נר, פסלים סולריים **[6]**

[7]Dov Or-Ner, Solar Sculptures, 1969

Several years ago, Gil Yefman, a young Israeli-born artist who was interested in the Holocaust as a metaphor for macabre evil, became fascinated by Or-Ner and soon declared him his mentor, despite their 50-year age difference. Their joint exhibition at Dana Gallery in Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, curated by Ravit Harari, opened in January of 2016. Despite being one of the most original and astonishing shows of the year, it received little coverage in the press and had no resonance in the Israeli art discourse. Or-Ner and Yefman addressed the history of the structure where the gallery resided, which used to be the workplace of the local seamstresses, and created a project titled the *Third Dress*, combining all the topics that interested them: the Holocaust, Hitler, bi-sexuality, masquerading, dark humor, locality, diasporic mentality, theater of figures.

They created an amazing play, at once funny and unnerving, forcing the viewers to rub their eyes in disbelief: a splendid, alien-looking couple strolls throughout the Kibbutz, among the Mordechai Anilevitch memorial statue and the solid concrete structure housing the Holocaust and Revival Museum, the rock gardens and the green lawns. Or-Ner appears as "Bad RenRo," his hair parted on the side as in Hitler's notorious "do," the little mustache leaving no room for error. Yefman sashays alongside as a beautiful black woman, somewhat inspired by Josephine Baker, wearing a hat in the

shape of a golden tooth. Both are dressed in long, colorful gowns that reveal their true nature only upon close examination. Or-Ner's dress is patterned with images from his obsessive paintings from the last decade, which had centered on the figure of "Bad RenRo"/Hitler in various positions. The fabric of Yefman's outfit is printed with a dense image of bodies in Holocaust-era mass graves (similar to the fabric work he had presented in 2015 in the "Temporary Relocation" exhibition at the Herzliya Museum).

And so they strolled through the Kibbutz, strutting, refined, the young Yefman kindly supporting the elder Or-Ner, assisting him up the stairs, being very humane in the close relationship between them while bearing the mark of cruelty and evil. Or-Ner and Yefman – the older man who had experienced the Holocaust and the younger one who accepted it as his burden – address the Shoah not through blame or self-righteousness but rather through self-incrimination and the imminent role reversal that lurks in the heart of their work. The principles of reversal, absurdity, and disruption sustain all that is anti-bourgeois, non-normative, and improper. A true Dadaist spirit emanated from the duo's stroll through the Kibbutz and from the theatrical series of photographs of the two personalities that are displayed in the gallery. On the one hand, a riot of everything that is banned from speech or expression, and on the other – superb elegance, kindness, gentleness. A masculine/feminine beauty that is swarming with sexual and moral pornography, like maggots in rotting flesh.

VIDEO STILL 7.jpg **[8]**

[9]Dov Or-Ner and Gil Yefman, the Third Dress, still from a video, 2016
Dana Art Gallery, Yad Mordechai Curator: Ravit Harari

VIDEO STILL 5.jpg **[10]**

[11]Dov Or-Ner and Gil Yefman, the Third Dress, still from a video, 2016
Dana Art Gallery, Yad Mordechai Curator: Ravit Harari

While the refreshing Yefman has received his well-deserved recognition in winning the 2017 Rappaport Award for a young artist (a surprisingly bold choice, admittedly), and is soon to have a solo show at the Tel Aviv Museum, the courageous Or-Ner, aged 90, continues to depict, day in and day out, the colorful and twisted mischief of "Bad RenRo," his double, still awaiting the museal curator bold enough to deal with what he has to say today and his radical actions in the distant past. And while in England the works of John Latham and Gustave Metzger – both conceptual artists of Or-Ner's generation – are being celebrated, in Israel his work remains in his old studio at Kibbutz Hatzor, unappreciated and misunderstood.

dov-installation-sml.jpg **[12]**

[13]Dov Or-Ner in front of the gallery's façade, which is covered by dress s made at the Kibbutz's dressmaking workshop
The Third Dress, Dana Art Gallery, Yad Mordechai, 2016

Dov (Dovale) Heller, a member of Kibbutz Nirim, the younger of the two 'Dovs,' turns eighty this year. His work was on display at the Negev Art Museum until recently (July 8, 2017), in a show curated by Dalia Manor. This was not a retrospective, despite having been misperceived as such. It lacked the range of his works from the 1970s and 1980s, which Gideon Ofrat described in his excellent book *Dov Heller: 50 Projects*. Heller, a Marxist farmer, born to a devout communist, knew how to embed ideology in his work in a challenging, persistent, and principled manner. In 1975 he transferred a ton of potatoes to the Israel Museum and sold them, at cost, in the museum's signature bag (as part of "Open Workshop", curated by Yona Fischer and Serge Spitzer). To this day he celebrates May Day at the print workshop he has established at Nirim, and hands out herring and borscht on May 9th, the day of the Red Army's victory over Hitler. "In my next incarnation I want to be an inducted artist," he says, knowing full well how anachronistic this sounds.

In 1995, I presented a startling, game-changing work by Dov Heller in the opening show of the Kibbutz Gallery, a work about his life's story and the story of his parents, about the Holocaust and abandonment, emigration to Israel, alienation, and adaptation. Shaul Setter, the art critic for Ha'aretz daily, has seen an official narrative in this tale, one of "catastrophe and revival," while Heller's truth lies elsewhere – his own private Shoah being his abandonment by his parents, who could not help it because of the war. He followed them to Israel ten years later and had to tell himself over and over that those "man and woman" were his parents and the children next to them were his siblings. The Communist ideology of his father, a dedicated workers' leader, became the

bond between father and son, and Heller inducted himself into the Kibbutz out of loyalty that can be explained only by a biography of alienation and belonging, such as his. What Setter had perceived as 'official' I interpreted as a deviation from the norm – rather than focus on the Kibbutz collective ideology Heller turned to the personal, the private, and the biographical. Instead of automatic association with a group, he speaks of outsiderness and estrangement. Instead of health and fecundity, he talks about sickness and lunacy. In *Mother Loved Cinema* (2006) he addresses the chronic depression of his mother, which could only be alleviated through Hollywood stars. Her son, the Kibbutz farmer, always in blue work clothes, joined her in her mute adoration of the glamorous stars. Dov Heller's turn to the personal story carries, to my mind, the legacy of Arie Aroch's *Portrait of my Father* from 1955 – a denial of the forgetting, of the repudiation of the diaspora, of self-congratulating Israel. When he showed a series of prints in the cowshed in Nirim, in the early 1970s, together with his school-mate from Bezalel Pinchas Cohen-Gan, the two were attempting not only to break down the walls of the gallery and the museum but also to introduce questions of alienation and defamiliarization, themes that were central to both.

דב הלר, תפוחי אדמה, סדנה פתוחה, מוזיאון ישראל, 1975. אוצר יונה פישר jpg. 1
[14]

[15]Dov Heller, Potatoes, Open Workshop, 1975
Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Curators: Yona Fischer and Serge Spitzer

[דב הלר, איש עם דגל אדום.jpg](#) **[16]**

[17]Dov Heller, Man with Red Flag, 2005

[18] האניה אסטיר, צבע על צלחת קרמיקה , 2015.jpg

[19]Dov Heller, the Ship Astir, paint on ceramic plate, 2015

דב הלר, תערוכת פתיחה,אובייקטים של המהפכה, גלריה הקיבוץ, 1995.jpg **[20]**

[21]Dov Heller, installation view, Objects of the Revolution, 1995
Hakibbutz Gallery

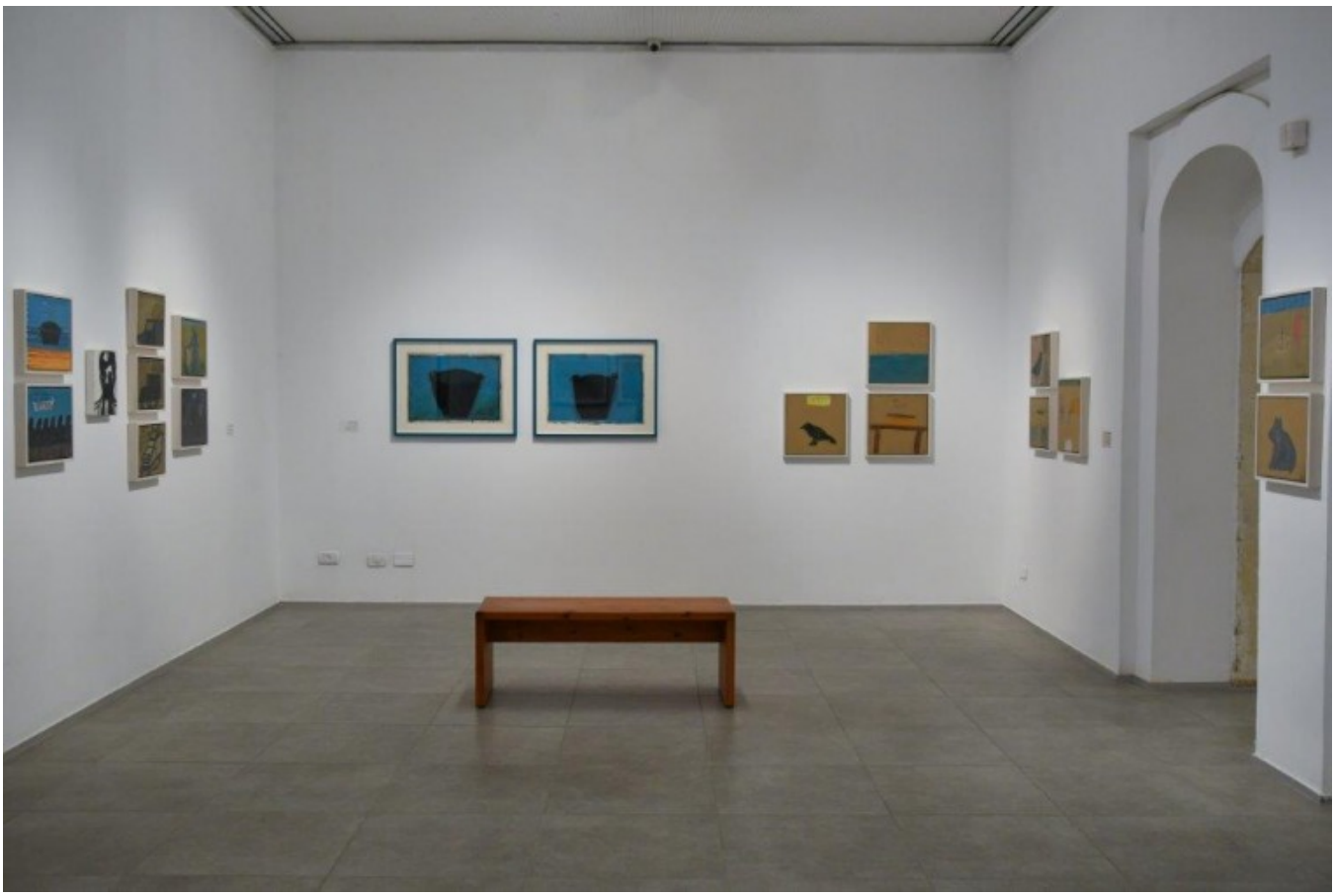
The show at the Negev Museum that Dalia Manor had curated included mostly works made at Arik Kilemnik's Jerusalem Print Workshop, which had been supporting Heller over the years. It also showed parts, perhaps too small, from series of paintings related to Negev landscapes and the proximity of Gaza, to Wadi al-Salqa, and to his homage to his parents. The series "Bougainvillea" (1993-1997), with its sheets of paper filled with purple and pink, corresponds to Rafi Lavie's geranium as a critical presence in landscape and consciousness alike.

The small installation Heller has placed in the museum's project room is particularly important and echoes his previous projects (for example, *Rainfall Region* from 1978, made in collaboration with Yaakov Hefetz, reconstructed in 2015 for the exhibition "Agro-Art" at the Petach Tikva Museum, under my curation.) The installation is a distillation of Heller's formal inventory, which needs to be studied: a builder's black rubber satchel, a well (water, desert), troughs, flowing water, devices for collecting rainwater, a cement or porcelain dove, a statue of Lenin with a Russian inscription. A language of the desert and of waiting for rain, of Marxist syllables and personal references (the dove). Heller is not a state artist because the state has long forgotten the things he is talking about – a distant resonance of the extinct revolution, which had demanded unimaginable personal prices of its followers. For Heller, depression and revolution march hand-in-hand in a parade. And inside the builder's satchel, a fig: an amalgam of a sensual bacchanalia and work tools – not quite the perfect match.

דב הלר, הצבה במוזיאון הנגב, 2017.jpg **[22]**

[23]Dov Heller, "Journeys," detail from the installation, 2017
The Negev Museum of Art. Curator: Dalia Manor

דב הלר, פרט מהצבה, מוזיאון הנגב, 2017.jpg **[24]**



[25]Dov Heller, "Journeys," detail from the installation, 2017
The Negev Museum of Art. Curator: Dalia Manor

Setter was correct in saying that the small display halls of the Negev Museum of Art cannot contain Heller's work to its fullest. A museum of that proportion, as important as the exhibition has been, cannot support a retrospective covering forty years of work. The portrait of the artist as an old-young man, in the Israeli art world, is not an optimistic one. Instead of illuminating the work of Heller and Or Ner, with its depth and rich experience, and turn it into a leader, the chase after young new stars continues, and no foundation for a meaningful perpetuation is ever laid down. The radicalism of these two veteran artists, who had known how to merge the avant-garde with social values, and how to cross lines and dissolve conceptual and geographical boundaries, faded away and evaporated without ever receiving its proper dues in the mainstream. It is time to return to their humble studios and expose the penetrating conversation they are having with the rigid ideological loads they are still bearing, with eyes wide open.

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