

A Mirror For Us All

The chief curator at the Haifa Museum of Art, Tami Katz-Freiman, has tackled a subject—the grotesque in contemporary art—that is difficult to engage at the best of times and often not easy for the public to confront.

By Gil Goldfine

Smack on the heels of *The History of Violence*, an exhibition where gloom and doom played a vital, if not an indispensable, role, the paintings, sculptures and video screenings that comprise a new show entitled *Wild Exaggeration*, at the Haifa Museum of Art, do not seem to be all that brutal. Although chosen for their chaotic and bizarre appearances, there is a wealth of information seething beneath the surface. Considering the options, the viewer can relate to these ultra-expressive works by considering the artists as either social critics who view the world in a state of destruction on its way to Armageddon or to assume that their definition of exaggeration comes from the subconscious and a reaction to decades of a heightened reality.

It seems strange, yet wonderful, that Tami Katz-Freiman, chief curator at the Haifa Museum, with her keen intellect and profuse awareness of the local and international contemporary art market, chooses to advance art from the dark side. At a recent viewing of the exhibition, accompanied by Katz-Freiman, I raised the issue of her recent choice of subject matter. Candidly, she implied that there was definitely nothing sinister in her personality or attitude, and certainly not in the displays she chose for *Wild Exaggeration*. After continued prodding she remarked that something grotesque, like something beautiful, is almost

impossible to define absolutely. There is no consensus on the interpretation of either and that an individual can be both elated and shocked either by a Raphael canvas or by Goya's horrendous condemnation of 18th-century Spanish society in his etchings for *Los Caprichos*.

Exhibitions devoted to articulating human forms in a grotesque manner have been part of the mainstream for countless years and the Haifa display is not something

revolutionary or even innovative, it merely investigates the contemporary zeitgeist for a community that is not often confronted by this manner of creativity with such intensity. The uncertain social and political arenas that cloud Israeli society push individuals, especially visual artists, to respond in the extreme. It is understandable then to draw a direct link between reality on the ground and Katz-Freiman's need to put forward the zeitgeist concept in

Wild Exaggerations in an attempt to produce a direct correlation here between art and life.

In his essay for the exhibition *Expressive!* at the Beyeler Foundation (Basel, 2003), Donald Kuspit's opening statement is "The notion is that art has more to do with expression than imitation and that art must abandon the outer world to follow the mysterious way that leads inward." And if one were to continue his thoughts, the obvious statement would read something like "... and as the expressive powers of an artist extend themselves beyond the understanding of pure matter, real forms become more grotesque and more bizarre, whose psychological powers are quite often inexplicable to the viewer." Further on, Kuspit states: "Expressionism attempts to liberate the living body from its social disguises, revealing it in all its expressive nakedness." To qualify his discourse on the subject he has assembled fiery works of art by an historical group that



Erwin Olaf, *Moving Targets*, 2005, video, 2:30 minutes.

includes, among many others, James Ensor, Emil Nolde, Egon Schiele, Max Beckmann, Jean Dubuffet, Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning, Markus Lüpertz, and Francesco Clemente.

More recently the lead statement in an exhibition *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque* (Santa Fe, 2005), curated by the eminent scholar Robert Storr, indicated "...from fantastic to farcical, unsightly to whimsical, the grotesque has many faces, all of which are the result of paradoxical combinations of imagery, form, and feeling," and to demonstrate its validity Storr assembled an eclectic group of artists that included Jenny Saville, Herman Nitsch, Peter Saul, Louise Bourgeois, and photographs of unusual people by Diane Arbus.

Wild Exaggeration is a display by 30 Israeli artists and five visiting from abroad. In the museum's foyer, two floors below the main galleries and divorced from the exhibition's core, visitors gets a taste of things to come as they are confronted by an outstanding video presentation, *Moving Targets*, by the Dutch



Assi Meshulam, *Ex Dance* (detail), 2009, plastic skeletons, plaster bandages, acrylic, and gouache, dimensions variable.

photographer and video artist Erwin Olaf. A dozen or more closely cropped colossal black-and-white faces, heavily made-up with prominent ruby red lips, meld one into another like play dough on a continual loop. Olaf and his camera create a chaotic scenario as the facial features are altered every few seconds as their expressions are like ever-changing masks overflowing with a full spectrum of contorted gestures from anxiety, fear, and desperation

to surprise, hate, love, and erotic glances.

A wall relief, *Ex Dance*, composed of several bright-red skeletons entangled in a bloody reenactment of a *dance macabre* is by Assi Meshulam, an artist who, in the past, has provoked his audiences with horrific installations of dismembered bodies, disemboweled organs, and dead animals. According to Katz-Freiman, Meshulam's work is "...meant to repel and disgust, sarcastic allegories of perversion and distortion." Meshulam himself, writing for the exhibition catalog, indicates that his figures are "...sinful, sexual, corporeal, violent, animalistic humans; their exaggerated qualities actually come from my deep identification with their mortification."

Another kind of skeleton takes the form of a fragile set of fragmented limbs, a pair of decrepit painted pillars on which a female body teeters. Sara Kahana's painting, *Speechless #2* (2008), is an *alla prima* exposé of a tortured being whose muddy black dress flares up above her torso exposing fleshy breasts, stomach, and genitals in swirling brushstrokes of viscous magenta, olive, and white pigment. Kahana says "...



Sara Kahana, *Speechless #2*, 2008, acrylic and varnish on canvas, 95 x 100 cm.



Marik Lechner, *Babysitter*, 2007, oil on canvas, 160 x 160 cm.

exaggeration, ridicule, ugliness, and vulgarity allow me to feel anxiety, anger and vulnerability as well as softness and innocence." Pretty much like Kahana and Meshulam, the majority of paintings and three-dimensional works in this exhibition share common ground with the human body pictorialized in the convoluting grotesque, monstrous, and distorted attributes. Several pictures, however, spin a web around and through the figures so that their identities become enmeshed and undecipherable in a mélange of color, shape, and line. But the turbulent compositions in works like *Babysitter* by Marik Lechner, *Abbb* by Gili Avissar, *I Gonna Live Forever* by Rakefet Viner Omer and, to a lesser extent, Ofir Dor's more subtle painting, *Artists*, are all subject to what Katz-Freiman calls a damaged reality and an anarchic, absurd world. I might challenge, however, her statement that the depictions of the grotesque body are both a parable and a criticism of the fluid, hybrid subject living in a postmodern society characterized by contradictory orders, by excess, and the lack of clear norms.



Gili Avissar, *Ahhh*, 2007, oil on paper, 100 x 65 cm.

The standard of motherhood is totally rejected and swapped by Robert Melee, an American video artist, with an eccentric old woman—his mother. Melee's 1998 clip, *Facelift Mommy*, borders on the degenerate. At an advanced age, Ms. Melee surrenders herself to the evil permeating the air around her and behaves in the most bizarre fashion. Her husky frame, fleshy and beyond rejuvenation, is stuffed into

garish attire topped by a wig and heavily laid on make-up. After her series of salacious gyrations and spontaneous dance steps, Melee assists his mother in removing the heavily applied creamy make-up and lipstick not as a mother and son but as two adversaries facing each other in battle. The Melee mother-son relationship is one that defies all conventions and, despite the normalcy of their bodies and their ages, (unlike most of the show's pictures and

sculptures), is one of the most grotesque works in the exhibition.

Three additional video screenings, one by the prominent Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra, a second by Nathalie Djurberg, and a third by the American Allison Schulnik, are not as provocative as the Melee work and in fact are riddled with a sense of wit and visual panache. Kozyra, a feminist provocateur, uses her 2005 video, *Appearance as Lou Salomé*, to parody a *femme fatale* in turn-of-the-century attire walking her two dogs, Rilke and Nietzsche, and showing, via her explicit sexual mores and general demeanor, a dominance over her gigantic, submissive male canines, played by adult actors. Using modeled Plasticine figures and stop-motion animation Djurberg creates short screenplays whose content views the world and its inhabitants as thoroughly amoral. Without torture or mutilation *Madeleine the Brave* tells the story of a young girl apprehended by a bear who makes her his pet (label it paramour). The role reversal theme, with its subterranean violence and its twisting the straight and narrow of authenticity, is presented in a fairy-tale mode, an approach that has its roots in earlier times from the Brothers Grimm to Mother Goose and whose symbolism has been studied and thoroughly researched by behavioral academia. Djurberg's video fits neatly into the mould, "and might act," as Katz-Freiman observes, "as a metaphor of human nature, even the way she handles the soft, malleable material, which can be seen as echoing man's coarse handling of the world itself." Schulnik says she doesn't



Shay Id Alony, *Smiler*, 2009, plastic, car-kit, artificial teeth, and paint, 29 x 26 x 50 cm.



Heidi Stern, *Soldier with Green Yarmulka*, 2009, oil on das, 25 x 25 x 28 cm.

seek to exploit her subject's deficiencies but rather to find valor in adversity. *Hobo Clown*, her high-color animated film, which is subjectively confusing and yet chromatically impressive, features a derelict figure who, as her vagrant drunken hero, continually metamorphosis between a formal celebrity and an abstract patch of luscious color.

The quartet, Netally Schlosser, Boyan, Zero Cents, and Galia Pasternak, view their subjects as abject beings as they hone in on their monstrous, grotesque, and bizarre qualities whether they be live models or figments of their surreal imaginations. Without being privileged to view their preliminary drawings or studies (if there are any) for the figures they portray, one can only assume, from observing the painterly results, that they rely mainly on the shock value, confronting their audiences with a sordid world by using the obvious: sharpened teeth, wildly psychopathic eyes, pronounced combinations of reds on whitish skin tones, skeletal illustrations with hanging flesh, and a general distortion of the anatomy.

Schlosser's painting *Woman with Gloves* is defined by the sitter's abnormalities. Her misshapen head, gross body, and exposed set of arched teeth that mirror a necklace hidden within the confines of her dress. The manner in which the woman nervously clasps her hands is an additional gesture that one can add to her psychotic appearance. In this picture art of the bizarre and the grotesque that Katz-Freiman aims to achieve is propelled into a different realm. It possesses a quality of outsider-art, art produced by non-professionals including persons who are mentally



Robert Mele, *Facelift Mommy*, 1998, video still

impaired—schizophrenics, bipolar cases, and other psychopathological syndromes. With her over-the-edge pictures, Schlosser consciously or unconsciously opens a Pandora's Box and uncovers the relationship between art and madness, genius, and creativity, fields Katz-Freiman might want to investigate at a later date.

Surreal images are what Pasternak makes the most of. *Albino and Racoon*, *Drunk Man and a Gorilla*, *Donkey Princes*, and *Hunter* are paintings that relate stories, they are plot driven in the sense the viewer might consider what caused the relationships to develop and where they were going; what was going to happen? Pasternak does not fully advance a concept of wildness as her paintings contain an undercurrent of black humor with a dash of anecdotal fables. Even *Hunter*, a single

portrait of a savage woman with honed teeth direct from Dracula, eyes that could pierce iron and a sharpened, dagger-like nose tries to control a benevolent smile as she scans her next victim. As mentioned previously, to establish good art, excellent painting techniques in application, composition, and color are essential, not only a flair for literary content and the scrubbing of sassy hues next to bland ones must be sustained. Unfortunately, this exemplary quality is not always the case in Katz-Freiman's choice of artists.

Zero Cents paints gory skulls with mellifluous red, white, and black pigment brushed on in a frenzy and cropped to tunnel the viewer's vision into the subject's empty ocular cavity or its row of innumerable teeth. More than any other image in the show Zero Cent's four mixed-media works on paper is a cinematic sampling of an alien being from a distant planet.

A range of inventive masks made from wood, plastic, and paint by sculptor Shay Id Alony tend to amplify anatomical features to the point of abstraction. Of his 11 pieces in the exhibition *Smiler*, with its clasp jaw, gasping fish-like mouth, implanted human teeth and lack of any other details, makes the greatest impact. Alony's carefully carved, sanded, and polished Venetian red surface elucidates the volume's sharp edges, arched planes, and curvilinear contours providing an immediate association with a demonic being linked to a netherworld cult.

Unlike Alony stylizations, Adi Nachshon's drawings and sculptures are sited on the peripheries of pornography and animalism. The mad dogs, wild beasts, and erotic descriptions of lesbian behavior associated with Nachshon are not included in *Wild Exaggerations*. Instead he has installed *Dinozox3*, three hybrid forms



Katarzyna Kozys, *Appearance as Lou Salome*, 2005, video still

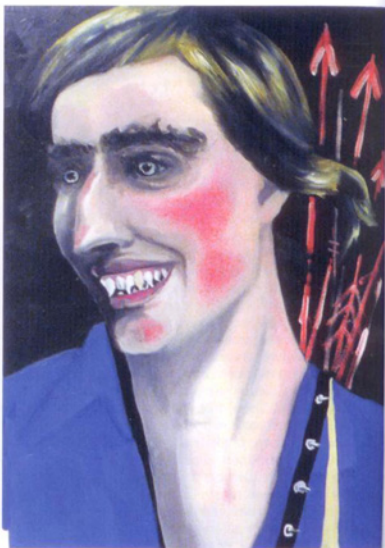


Netally Schlosser, *Woman with Gloves*, 2006, oil on canvas, 90 x 73 cm.

amalgamated from the bodies of prehistoric raptor mammals and the masked faces and hands of humans. They are terrifying creatures, brown, greasy, and crusty, brought up from the deep, born of the artist's imagination but nurtured by horror cinema, comic books, and medieval sources.

For Anan Tzuckerman's first solo exhibition at Tel Aviv's Givon Art Gallery, Naomi Aviv had this to say about him and his staged photographs from a series entitled *The Cave*. "Tzuckerman, like his theatrical photographs, is an isolated island breaking through darkness, through the 'void,' the 'pit,' the 'grave,' or the 'cave.' The scenes he stages exist in a space, which is found in the basements of life. A basement that functions as 'a dark chamber' (*camera obscura*) that each portrayed image in it is like a frightening flickering of the unknown..."

Aviv continues her monologue with the following: "In an era which has lost its belief in what pretends to represent reality 'as is.' He (Tzuckerman)



Galia Pasternak, *Huntress*, 2004, oil on canvas, 71 x 51 cm.

brings back to [the] stage what theater can offer: a processed capsule of a culture that distances itself from reality and prefers the metaphor. The metaphor, which successfully introduces itself into the heart, that grew estranged of the testimonies coming from out there. It seems that the viewer at [the] present time manifests a growing openness to the stylized, theatrical, structured statement. The over stylization, only intensifies what is received as a parable on the barbarism of the time we live in, and the retreat to a multileveled primitive phase."

Although Tzuckerman's photographs do not exploit the grotesque in its most "up front" graphic mode of expression his work does abide with Katz-Freiman's hypothesis for the exhibition, one that attempts to examine via a broad range of visual experiences the basic cruelty, brutality, and squalid side of contemporary life. **A**

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Zero Cents, Buk, Bullet, Creep, Him of Her, 2009, spray paint and acrylic on paper, 70 x 50 cm each.