



An Art Show Casts the Zionist Project as Science Fiction

'Things to Come,' an exhibition at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art, is charming, funny, concrete, detailed and accessible, despite its curatorial thesis.

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A scene from Till Nowak's video, 'The Centrifuge Brain Project,' 2012. Petah Tikva Museum of Art

1.

And then the children burst into laughter. I did, too. When suddenly the flying arms of the monster thrill-ride contraption hurtled into the air and spread out like an electrified arthropod, and people yelped with pleasure, their screams borne aloft like a resonant song. The idea that this was an amusement park ride, despite the clip's obvious fabrication, only heightened the Wows! and the Amazings! and the Incredibles! at Till Nowak's terrific video, "The Centrifuge Brain Project," which is on view in the exhibition "Things to Come" at the Petah Tikva Museum of Art. Well, art finally made me laugh.

Before we went to the museum, on probably the hottest day of the year so far, I told the children and my sister repeatedly that there were no activities – it’s art! That it’s not a science or nature museum. Art! What I didn’t expect was how charming, funny, lovely, direct, concrete, detailed and accessible the exhibition would be, despite, or maybe because of, its curatorial thesis and perhaps also a certain pretentiousness in comparing the literary and cinematic genre of science fiction to the Zionist project. Not that I have any objections, mind you: The one is utopian and so is the other, and there’s also the conquest of the wilderness, as the Zionist establishment described the pre-state, socialist-style settlement movement. And yes, as in science fiction – Imaginary Palestine was thought of, even by people who were living in it, as an “empty” territory – while its natives were treated with an often-oxymoronic mixture of admiration and contempt. Jewish pioneers dressed as Arab sheikhs, while they regarded the Arabs as aliens or strangers in their own land.

The curator, Doreet LeVitte Harten, prefers the word “imaginative.” But “fictional” is fine for me, “bidyoni,” as opposed to “dimyoni,” in Hebrew. Out of the corner of my eye I saw, in a glass case, a copy of Herzl’s “Altneuland” from 1902, the cover of which bears the image of a bearded Herzlian figure in profile. The thesis of the exhibition only hovered in the air, above our heads. And anyway, the subject – the future, science, the human body (too little body, as long as we’re on the subject, possibly only a frightened woman tied to a bed in a silent film about the conquest of the moon) – translates into colorful works, rich in detail, illustrative. Many comic books.

The “sense of wonder is central to the idea of Zionism, and with it – the element of terror so central to the definition of the sublime. Embedded in Zionism, it is the referential framework within which Zionism is comprehended, meaning that the practical outcome of Zionism is regarded, first and foremost, as an act of wonder which should be regarded with awe,” the curator writes in the exhibition catalog, sourcing a well-known book by Fredric Jameson. But my smart 12-year-old nephew, who perused the comic books with great interest, remarked that the common denominator is the word “stories,” and thereby evoked the principle, mentioned in LeVitte Harten’s essay, that the genre is also a form of self-awareness, a type of discourse. Or haggadah, which literally means “a telling.”

The works of art, despite a few video simulations of galaxies of light, are not from the realm of the abstract, and certainly are not minimalistic, because the story requires as many details as possible. And yes, there’s a concreteness that’s related to the invented world, which seems to resemble ours but is parallel to it. Resembles it enough. And the children laughed. And I did, too. Out loud. As soon as we entered the darkened space, their eyes filled with light.

2.

In Nowak’s film, the chief engineer of the Centrifuge Brain Project, Dr. Nick Laslowicz (played by a hot-cool actor named Leslie Barany), who has thick gray hair, a lab coat and dons a hard hat when he is out in the field, talks with straight-faced seriousness about his inventions in the realm of centrifugal thrill rides at amusement parks. He’s capable of

rising to the heights of absurdity: “There was a level of undefined brain activity around 30 percent higher than the kids who stayed on the ground,” he intones. In connection with the device called the Spherothon (seen in the photo), “the difficulty was in stopping the rotation without people coming crashing down in the upper levels.” The kids erupted in rolling laughter. With the ride called “Wedding Cake,” “some of the test results were a little too extreme to be published, so for the next phase we shifted our attention to height instead of acceleration.”

That led to the High Altitude Conveyance device, but people didn’t realize it was going to be a 14-hour ride – “some fell asleep, missed their stop and had another 14 hours” of hurtling through the air. Finding that people wanted control over what was happening to them, Dr. Laslowicz and his team invented a ride that allows the passenger to decide when he is catapulted into space. Another contraption was the Dandelion, which “simulates the prenatal experience” – “for example, when the mother is walking the baby would kind of move around.”

Speaking the language of informative films guided by Nobel-laureate scientists, he’s filmed walking in real amusement parks. The children simply couldn’t get up from their viewing benches and marveled at the marvelous un-realistic inventions. The centrifugalist went on to say that in time they came up with the Steam Pressure Catapult, in which the subject has no idea which track he will be hurtled onto. For many people, the experience of that ride “resulted in the readjustment of key goals and life aspirations.” All in all, though there were “setbacks,” he says, emitting a deeply emotional sigh, “but it was not a mistake. If anything, the mistake is in nature: Gravity is a mistake.”

3.

On Till Nowak’s site, I see that he is German-born (1980) and now lives in Los Angeles with his wife and their daughter. He’s a graduate in media design from the University of Applied Sciences in Mainz. A digital artist, he’s an expert in transforming images of objects – cars, towers, oil rigs – into iron animals by means of Photoshop and other tricks. In a short film on the site, he talks about his childhood as an inventor in cooperation with his brother, who also became an artist, and relates that his mother bought him a computer, even though the household did not have much money. On another page, I see a 2013 shot: Nowak and Cindy Sherman, the photographer, who served on a committee that awarded a prize to a young artist in Munich. Not Photoshop. The real thing. Genuine him and genuine her. No costumes.

4.

It’s been a long time since I laughed at video art the way I did in the Petah Tikva Museum, on holiday, with the little one and her cousins. Before we left, they stood in the flickering light of the projection of Yuval Litani’s fine work, “The Cities that Were Not.” It’s computer animation related to an architectural thesis: a series of simulations – images of monumental structures of the past, such as the Great Pyramid of Giza, and artistic references to them – such as the glass pyramid at the Louvre – and others, as well as

sculptural structures, like those of Anish Kapoor, and also some that never existed, were never built.

It all flashes by without past or future on the wall of a room to the right of the museum's entrance. The children adjusted their steps to the pace of the film, then checked out each building according to the text on the wall opposite the projection. When we emerged into the sun, I vowed to myself that I would not let them climb the T-62 tank that apparently saved Petah Tikva in 1973 and now stands in the garden of the Yad Labanim soldiers' memorial. But in the end, in the pleasant garden, we went to see it. The tank. Notwithstanding.

Petah Tikva Museum of Art, 30 Arlozorov St., Petah Tikva; phone 03-928-6300; Mon., Wed., Fri., Sat. 10-2; Tues., Thurs. 4-8; until Aug. 20



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