

The Fabric Merchants: An elaborate and precise allegory

The story of Maimonides' Attire, and the relationship of the Jewish Sage with Saladin, serve Ido Michaeli to create an allegory of east and west, money, and how narratives change through time.

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Amit Cabessa and Ido Michaeli are showing two solo shows under the shared title, The Fabric Merchants; they even participated together in a photoshoot dressed as businessmen. Each one imitates a different demeanor, dress and corporate body language, but besides their shared pose, there is no similarities between the two shows.

In the front space, Ido Michael displays a sculptural video installation that is the complete version of a project he began in the Souvenirs exhibition, curated by Michael Gadliyovich. The project deals with a half historic, half fictional narrative about Maimonides' attire. The garb is an ornate jalabiya sewn especially for him in a show of gratitude by Saladin for his medical services.

The story is told in a 3:27 minute video narrated by Bilal Abu-Khalf, a Muslim fabric merchant from the old city in Jerusalem who exports fabrics from Damascus, Morocco and India. Abu-Khalf is a descendant of a family of fabric merchants and the story was passed down to him as a family ethos. In this instance, Maimonides is depicted as the good Jew, a doctor faithful to his oath, who was invited to care and nurse Saladin, the hero of Palestine, who liberated it from the Crusaders.

In this version of the story, the great thinker and adjudicator nicknamed The Great Eagle is seen as a minor character, as someone who acknowledged Saladin's greatness and importance and prepared for his meeting as one would when meeting a dignitary.

"When Saladin was in Jerusalem, (he) was a bit sick. All the doctors were summoned to heal Saladin," Abu-Khalf says. "(The doctors) weren't successful with their medicines. One of Saladin's guards heard of a doctor from Egypt, named Maimonides, and got in contact with him. (Maimonides) was one of (the heads) of the Jewish quarters and the most famous doctor in Egypt. So they summoned him to Jerusalem to treat Saladin."

Abu-Khalf recreated the attire from expensive fabrics made of gold and silk threads imported from Syria. It is displayed on a mannequin behind a glass display case built in the gallery. One can enter the display through a curtain in the back of the case—perhaps to take a photo with Maimonides, like one would do in a wax museum.

Inspirations and delusions

But that is not the end of the story. The mannequin's face recreated by Ido Michaeli is from an imaginary portrait of Maimonides most likely originated in "Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum" (A treasury of sacred antiquities), a 18th century Venetian book, painted in 1744 by Blasio Ugolino. The portrait garnered many imitations, each differed by the copiers' imagination, thus the portrait has a tenuous connection with the real features of Maimonides.

One of the subjects that arise from the issue of the authenticity of the portrait, beyond the question of the sideburns (shaven or curled), is Maimonides' attitude toward the Jewish commandment forbidding the making of images.

It turns out that Maimonides only objected to "Overt image making". He wrote, "It is forbidden to make decorative images of the human form alone. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This applies when the image is protruding - for example, images and sculptures made in a hallway and the like...In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted....portraits, whether on wood or tapestry."

In other words, Maimonides would be okay with his flat image as seen on notes, stamps, and coins, but not with the three-dimensional casting of his face created by Ido Michaeli.

Therefore, this is a story of an official, canonical, commemorative portrait that is in fact fictive, liken to a coat that is handed down, an artistic falsehood unifying the inspirations and delusions of its creators, the glory of the oral tradition of the Bible, the fractured message, revealing that which should not be exposed.

But even the ephemeral character of Saladin as portrayed in Abu-Khalf's story (who are both a substitute, or a contrary portraits to Maimonides) isn't the end of the story. "When he (Maimonides) entered the palace and was welcomed by Saladin, he gave him the salubrious medicines", Abu-Khalf continues. "After that, Saladin was healthy again and he gave him (Maimonides) a gift of thousand dinars and kept him in the palace to look after him and his family in case they should need care. And the son of Saladin gave him a room in the palace to enjoy his stay."

The exchange value of this labor is therefore angled and complex. The medical services that went into care and healing were exchanged for a fee described as a gift and lodging, to produce enjoyment. Was it a work relationship or an exchange of gifts between Maimonides and Saladin and his son? Did Saladin transform Maimonides labor into goods? What was the differential key activated here and what kind of power and dependency relations were established? The sewing of the suit as it were, initiates a complex relation between religious and national symbols that are intertwined in a murky relation of surplus value.

The value in use isn't simple as well. The Maimonides figurine is holding a note of a thousand NIS which features his (famous) portrait—a note issued in 1983 and was devalued to one Israeli NIS three years later, then to a coin in 1988. Thus, the symbol of the portrait

is one of decreasing value, and is presented in the space as if giving the narrator, Abu-Khalf, money for the suit, but not the equal sum that was given back then in dinars.

The artist as storyteller

Michaeli created a seemingly small project, even compact. A simple folktale, an allegorical homage. In fact, it is an elaborate and precise construct that in its forefront is about Jews and Arabs, East and West from the point of view of the Orient, which deconstructs the ethnographic narrative that creates a static conceptualization of the past, traditional stories and the progression of dynasties. He succeeds in dismantling exactly the foundations of the folktale and the concept of allegory, exposing the underlying tensions at their core.

There is also a statement about money, the way it makes the world go round, and the frequently-torturing question of the universal base for determining the value exchange of health, of life-saving.

The title, *The Fabric Merchants*, besides presenting the dynasty of fabric merchants, and beyond the reflexive statement about the value of art as it relates to raw material, also relates to the role of the artist as a storyteller. The fabricated stories that the artist weaves allow for imitation that dismantles the ethnographic display. This mimicry, with its alluring benefits and its cold-hearted disadvantages, becomes charged and gains here political power.

The placement of this narrative in a time long ago, together with the delightful narrative told as a fable or folktale, does not diminish from its political punch, but the opposite: Michaeli's pseudo-ethnography highlights the interchangeability of the occupying foreigners, whether it's the crusaders or the zionists. It gives rise to a possibility, even the hope, that these conquerors will eventually turn into a static and withered historical display or become a folktale filled with twists and turns.

The Fabric Merchants, HaKibbutz Gallery, 25 Dov Hoz St., Tel Aviv

Hours: M-TR 11:00-15:00, 16:00-18:00

F 11:00-14:00

Captions:

Ido Michaeli, from *The Fabric Merchants*

A detail from *Maimonides mannequin*

Ido Michaeli, *The Fabric Merchants*, detail from the *Maimonides mannequin*