

An Ethiopian Curtain for a Double Agent

“I wanted to create skepticism towards ethnographic displays and to provoke the viewer to question the work’s authenticity.” Boaz Arad talks to Ido Michaeli about mimicry, disruption and play as artistic elements that break down the unifying qualities of sacred symbols.

In the installation, Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark, currently on view at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Ido Michaeli is displaying a replica of the Ark of the Covenant wrapped in a Parochet, a holy curtain, housed in a large scale glass display cabinet. The Parochet is embroidered with illustrations depicting the love story of King Solomon and Queen Sheba. According to the Ethiopian epos Kebra Nagast (The Glory of Kings), the famous king and queen had a short lived affair in Jerusalem from which they had a son. Their son who was born in Ethiopia and became the first ruler of the Solomonic dynasty. With help from his entourage, the Ark of the Covenant was stolen from The Temple in Jerusalem and smuggled to a church in the town of Axum, where it is supposedly still resides today.

Alongside the glass cabinet display, there is a video that was shot in Almaz, a factory in the city of Lod specializing in traditional Ethiopian embroidery. The video features Aviva

Almaz Rachmim, the factory owner, who is telling the famous love story, with the embroiderers working on the curtain in background.

Tell me about what brought you to this project.

I accidentally stumbled upon a Hebrew translation of The Glory of Kings translated by Dr. Ran HaCohen. I loved the way the Jewish tradition and the Ethiopian Christian tradition are intertwined. This lead me to look at other canonical Ethiopian manuscripts. They are rich with expressive and colorful illustrations. I started to draw chapters from the text, trying to learn and absorb the particular Ethiopian painterly language. Aviva Almez Rachmim taught me a lot about the traditional craft of Ethiopian embroidery and I adjusted my work according to those methods. My aim was to create a blending of points of view, to blur the line where traditional embroidery ends and my aesthetic begin and vice versa. I was happy with the result mainly because it was vastly different than the preliminary sketches. The embroidery gave a new interpretation to the work.

Can you expand on your interest in ethnography?

In ethnographic wings of museums, there is a wide array of simulations: sketches and illustrations of characters, display cases and videos. In every attempt of representation there is a preference of one narrative over another, thus there is always an aspect of fiction, or falsehood. However, these political, economic, and social considerations are withheld from the viewer. The impression is always that of an objective historical truth. Behind a Picasso painting there is the painter as a subject, but behind an ethnographic display there are a whole people

or a nation. Although Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark seems at first like an ethnographic display, it instantly raises questions about the identity and motives of its creator. I wanted to create skepticism towards ethnographic displays and to provoke the viewer to ask questions about the work's authenticity. Is it authentic Ethiopian art? Is it a false narrative? I hope that the next time the viewer visits a history museum, he or she will speculate on the network of interests that are at play behind the display in front of them.

Why Ethiopians?

The project is influenced by modernist movements of the early 20th century like Arts and Crafts or Bauhaus, groups that aspired to erase the hierarchical divide between craft and fine art. In Israel, Boris Schatz adopted this attitude by opening a school and a factory for Judaica products which today is known as the Betzalel Academy. The teachers of Betzalel, who were of European descent, participated in the collective creation by designing the blueprints for the products, while laborers manufactured them. Many of the laborers were Yemenite, skilled in goldsmithing and embroidery. Therefore, these products were a hybrid of European design and Yemenite craftsmanship. To your question, I chose to work with the Ethiopian myth and the Ethiopian community because I felt that Ethiopians in Israel today are a bit like the Yemenites of a hundred years ago. For example, the way we perceive Aviva is the same way people perceived my grandmother when she immigrated from Kurdistan. As opposed to the Judaica

produced in Betzalel aimed to create new Hebrew symbols to the regenerating Jewish people, thus helping the Zionist movement collect donations and encourage migration to Israel, the Ethiopian curtain tells a counter narrative—Israel's loss of the Ark of the Covenant and with it, the glory of Zion.

Just like in your previous project, Maimonides' Attire, you take away from us one of our canonical Jewish symbols. Then it was Maimonides who was portrayed as a Muslim hero and now it's the Ark of the Covenant transformed into an Ethiopian narrative.

In Maimonides' Attire I reconstructed Maimonides through the eyes of Bilal Abu-Khalf, a Muslim fabric merchant from Jerusalem. Even as a child the image of Maimonides on Israeli currency sparked my imagination: a green, oriental phantom, as if a character taken out of One Thousand and One Nights. As I researched the image, I came to realize the character was imaginary: the Fez hat he is wearing is from the Ottoman period that rose a century after his death; his sideburns are shaved, in contrast to the Jewish law; his subtly slanted eyes make him look Mongolian or Kurdish. Just as in Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark, in Maimonides' Attire I am dismantling the unity of the sacred symbol to show how it is constructed from different, and in some instances divergent points of view. I am undermining the didactic display tactics of historical and ethnographic museums that claim to portray the orient. My grandparents came from Muslim countries so I can relate to the Mizrahi (Jews of Middle-Eastern descent) laborers in Bezalel. On the other hand, I studied at Telma Yalin (a private art high school) and hold two degrees from Betzalel so I can easily imagine myself in the role of the European professors. I am trying to show the complexity,

and at times the conflicts and contradictions behind the flat symbol that represents a unified identity.

Issues of deconstructing symbols come up in your previous works.

My works mostly do not look like fine art; it is important to me that they be similar or imitate everyday objects.

For instance, in my stamp series, *Urban Legends* (2005), I created stamps that closely adhere to the legal format of stamps, but they are dotted with nearly imperceptible errors, like IS REAL as the name of the state. I issued stamps for stories of dubious origins, then put them on envelopes and sent them in the mail. The forged stamps made it through the officials of the post office. It was an achievement—getting a stamp of approval from the Israel Postal Company. The imitation functioned just like the original.

Symbols interest me because usually we don't notice them. We read them like script, as something functional, intended to get a message across, meaning, to give out known content, therefore they remain unnoticed. The post office functionary looks at the stamp for a split second for identification and validation purposes. We don't linger and scrutinize stamps and other symbols the way we do museum pieces. The symbols of the sovereign state are a form of agitprop similar to Medieval art: art that is meant to educate and teach, to present an undisputable truth. These symbols operate as sacred icons, expressing the

religious dimension of the state. This is the reason why the concept of falsehood interests me: it is a critical tool used to undermine conventions and expose the arbitrary nature of those symbols.

You talk about stamps as symbols of state power, but their function is not merely symbolic. The stamp is not only an interface of the state, it is the state itself. Its value is real, not only symbolic. The stamp functions like money, and the action you're taking is forgery, an action that might even be criminal.

Plato identified artists as dangerous to the state and mockingly called them "coin forgers". He claimed that artists might deceive and defraud and therefore they are a threat to the state. Stretching this boundary interests me. Yes, stamp forgery is akin to money counterfeiting, but as the money counterfeiter spends the least amount of time to produce the maximum amount of money, my mode of operation was the exact opposite: I worked on the stamps for a long time and only sent few letters; It was hardly profitable. The felony is related more to the symbolic act, to the mimicry of the symbols of the sovereign. The offence—if there is any—is not in property but in the abstract symbol. It lies in pointing out that the symbol is arbitrary. The question that arises is why does one myth is considered sanctified while the other turns into an urban legend? The difference between them is not an essentialist one, but a formal one, and is related to the way they are told.

Forgery, like money counterfeiting, is to copy a thing the way it is. The

challenge in counterfeiting is mainly a technological one: how one goes about building a machine for forging coins, finding the right alloy, etc. Mimicry on the other hand is a cultural act: children imitate their the way their parents behave and cultures imitate different ones. In the same way, a work of art always imitates what is deemed as “art” in its particular culture. The same as in a conversation, where the speaker tries to follow the logic of the preceding sentence. This mimicry will always add on something new, another thread. In this regard, mimicry augments while forgery exploits. Culture and art are built on mimicry of ideals and values and multiplying them in different ways. The multiplication of forgery on the other hand, does not increase the value of the original, but disrupts the process of calculating its value and eventually causes inflation.

Mimicry manifests in the area of play while forgery infiltrates reality and tries to take advantage of the forged object’s flaws. You operate as a lone partisan against institutions.

Maybe more like a double agent, because I also operate from within those institutions. We are all double agents, working for cultural institutions against our own will. My strategy for resistance is actually to certify them in an exaggerated way, to be overly conformist, to appropriate institutional rhetoric and even to speak on their behalf. It requires that I learn how these institutions communicate, but also to create suspicion and criticism towards them and the work itself. A

casual authoritative rhetoric naturally becomes an historical fact. I am interested in creating the opposite, for instance, giving an urban legend the status of a national myth.

Captions:

A detail from Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark, traditional embroidery technique from handmade cotton threads, white Ethiopian cloth weaved in a hand loom, colorful fabric in ethnic pattern weaved in a machine, 2012

The Ethiopian Parochet, display, from the show Rooms of Wonder in Contemporary Art —from astonishment to Disillusion, (Curators: Dalia Levine, Daria Kaufman, and Gila Limon), Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

Aviva Almaz Rachamim, Stills from video The Love Story of Queen Sheba and King Solomon, Full HD 6:46 minutes, DP: Or Even-Tov, 2012

A detail from Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark, traditional embroidery technique from handmade cotton threads, white Ethiopian cloth weaved in a hand loom, colorful fabric in ethnic pattern weaved in a machine, 2012

Maimonides’ Attire, display, from the duo show The Fabric Merchants (Curator: Yael Kinie), HaKibbutz, Art Gallery

From the stamp series, Urban Legends, Indigo Press, 2002