

Bleak, yet sometimes lovely

By Smadar Sheffi | Oct. 5, 2009 | 2:45 AM

Tweet

Unintentionally, the Biennial in Herzliya has provided a lesson in the seen and invisible, two of the more popular topics of discussion in art. On the floor of the entrance to the passage of the new cinemathèque at 29 Sokolov Street in Herzliya (Station 5 on the Bennial map), a legless homeless man slept, his wheelchair next to the blanket - or was it a large plastic sheet? - he had spread next to the glass wall.

Inside, films by Amit Berlowitz, Tai Shani and Nir Evron were screened. None of the artists or curators is to blame for the condition of the vagrant's plight or for the economic and cultural system that allows one to fall to this depth. Still, one cannot help but think sad thoughts about the gap between him and the talk about "emptiness and loneliness" in Berlowitz's four-channel film, what apparently is supposed to be "sensitivity" in Evron's film about a hotel that hosted the founding convention of the Palestine Liberation Organization or the intellectual talk about the cinematic perspective in Tai Shani's work (which was inexplicably marked as unsuitable for children).

There is nothing like being sensitive or talking about the other and the different in beautiful new halls.

The Biennial that opened in Herzliya on Saturday is somewhere between an event for the whole family and something addressed to art insiders. Between these two extremes it is a nice show - worth seeing if you are in the area anyway but not something that justifies a special trip.

The opening evening a small audience congregated on the corner of Ben-Gurion and Sokolov Streets, where the Li-Ron Choir and DJ Assaf Amdursky performed from the roof of a building.

Other events - like the cavalcade of horses "Ararat Express - Autumn 2034" by Beni Efrat or the opening performance at the Sha'ar Ha'ir building by the Pil and Galia Kollektiv - did not arouse much interest.

Many of the venues displaying the works, especially the commercial arcades along Sokolov street, stood almost empty.

The curating by Adi Englman, Meir Kordevani and Toony Navo tries very hard to be light and up to date - and the feeling is that they did everything to satisfy the rather obvious goal of the Biennial, which is to show off Herzliya's downtown. As Mayor Yael German put it in her greeting in the Biennial brochure: she wanted "the public realm of shops, arcades and building facades rediscovered in new and original ways, through a variety of images, performances, sounds and colors."

Under this umbrella there are video screenings, most of them quite mediocre. The display of videos in empty shops has already been done innumerable times here and abroad as a wonderfully cheap solution for showing art and it is hard to think of many instances when these works left a lasting impression or became more than another piece of a colorful puzzle that constituted one event or another.

At the Apcot Arcade, one of the many arcades with which downtown Herzliya is endowed, Shachar Freddy Kislev's "Death and the Maiden" is on display. This one of the best works in the Biennial and one that is even worth making a special trip for.

Three robots comb long hair endlessly in what looks like a kind of torture. The hair looks like a head seen from behind but the head has no face at all. The title of the work relates to a complex iconographic topos rooted in the Greek myth of Persephone abducted by Hades to the underworld.

Young women in representations of death became common in European art starting in the Renaissance and continued through works by artists like Edvard Munch at the end of the 19th century. The theme became familiar and the title "Death and the Maiden" was nearly a figure of speech after it became the title of a famous song by Franz Schubert (who also wrote music for a string quartet with that title). In the 1990s it was the title of a play by Ariel Dorfman about the repressive regimes and torture in South America, which was also made into a film.

The identity that Kislev has created among robots, death, the monsters and the absurdity in the scene that he sets up is fascinating. This is also a work that gets an extra dimension from its location, which is across from a beauty salon.

It is hard to say this of a work by Dani Gal, "Seasonal Unrest," which is shown on two screens, on one of which is a soundless report from Gaza by Mordechai Kirschenbaum in 1970 and on the other documentation of a vocal effects artists fitting the sound to the report from Gaza.

Kirschenbaum's words have been replaced with English dubbing and the sound in its entirety has been produced by artificial means. The idea of the possibility of shaping a reality, history and therefore the present as well is transmitted in a very clear way.

What isn't clear is why this work is shown in the arcade and why there isn't a text alongside it explaining it to people who aren't looking through the catalog.

Gal is one of the outstanding artists in the Biennial with this work and another work "Historical Record Archive," on display in the Lev Ha'ir hall, Number 18 on the Biennial map and one of the more successful spaces. The archive includes recordings of radio segments, declarations, documentation of discussion and speeches by 20th century figures from Adolf Hitler to Abba Eban to Prince Charles, displayed one on top of the other.

Gal gives presence to the trickiness of history, the sense that we know and understand the past, at least the relatively recent past, while at the same time the past rapidly becomes inanimate and a curio, like the vinyl record.

"The Talking Mountain of Israel," another work by Gal, is also fascinating as a contemplation of history. Gal shows a sequence of 32 photographs from a forgotten broadcast from 1966 - two years before Channel 1 was born.

The broadcast was aimed at staking out a presence on the broadcast frequency and intended for television sets already owned by many Israelis and for the neighboring countries. The photos by David Harris are of brave, agricultural Israel the way it liked to see itself and also include scenes of East Jerusalem - a combination of "reality" and what was only a wish at the time.

Alongside Gal's works in the Lev Ha'ir hall there is an exhibition of works by modernist abstract artists from the Israeli Graphotec Print Library, among them Michael Argov, Pinhas Eshet and Alima and Buky Schwartz. This is a stroke of curatorial genius in the way it brings the past to the present and talks about the subterranean currents in the contemporary.

On display in the Sha'ar Ha'ir building, Station 20 in the Biennial map, is the work "Lilies," a lovely piece by Shahar Yahalom. She has used two concrete basins that were made for a decorative pool at the facade of the city hall that was never completed - the main structure at Sha'ar Ha'ir and Herzliya's "white elephant." With the poetic title that harkens back to Claude Monet's "Water Lilies," among the most beloved works of the early 20th century, against a backdrop of the ghost building whose construction was stopped and whose architecture looks like a cliché of post-modernism, Yahalom has created a lovely and bleak work.

In the black water float what look like parts of white boats made of Styrofoam and string. The word "aground" comes to mind again and again.

The Biennial has a rich program of performances and installations which can be seen at <http://www.herzliya-biennial.com>.

