

About the work "**Katrina**", 2006-2007, in the catalogue *The Space Between* (Curator: Drorit Gur-Arie), Petach-Tikva Museum of Art, 2007, pp. 154-159.

Tal Amitai addresses the domestic sphere, operating as a shaman attempting to "rectify" and "rehabilitate" crumbling house skeletons hanging by a thread. Her fetishist archive of images contains photographs of house residues that collapsed due to natural catastrophes or wars, images which she collects from websites and magazines. Amitai transpires along a dissonant axis of deconstruction and construction, putting together an entire unit from a shattered, crumbled image and/or deconstructing the structural unit into various parts. It is a bidirectional route that may be read both ways.

In *Katrina* (2006-07) she "inscribes" an architectural image of a house in New Orleans crushed by the hurricane Katrina with black sewing thread, via an obsessive industrious act. Amitai processes and enlarges the digital image in Photoshop; as in needlework, she gradually infuses it with new life, constructing it line by line (as if she were laying brick on brick) from strips of fine thread attached to a transparent Plexiglas surface. The assemblage and construction masquerade as an act of sewing, yet Amitai exposes the artistic manipulation by leaving a ball of unstitched thread on the surface, like a broken brick wall. The demanding, intimate labor spawns an enigmatic space infused with life, where the memory of the house that was, with the totality of its physical and metaphorical strata, is at once present and absent.

The house, writes Gaston Bachelard, is our first corner of the world. The phenomenological study of the house strives to seize upon the germ of the essential, sure, immediate well-being in every dwelling, the original shell. We build walls even from the slightest hint of shelter, and the imagination creates the illusion of protection. The house represents continuity, without which man is but a dispersed being.<sup>1</sup> "When I grew up / I took dad's ladder / the one that almost reaches the sky / I tried to pluck the moon / and hang it on the ceiling / so it illuminates the house with great big light," Amitai wrote in a naïve, child-like style in one of her works (*Untitled*, 1999). In another labyrinth-like mosaic work made of toy bricks (*Untitled*, 2000) she concealed a text by Paul Auster

exploring the definition of the concept "house" and the moment in which the house ceases to be a stable, embracing space: "At what moment does a house stop being a house? When the roof is taken off? When the windows are removed? When the walls are knocked down? At what moment does it become a pile of rubble?"<sup>2</sup> The house's shedding of its various organs – the roof, windows, walls, door – metaphorizes a crashing soul and the cracks that gradually open, separating its dwellers.

The quote from Auster is a formative thematic nucleus in Amitai's oeuvre. The living body, especially the warm one of childhood, turns out to be a dilapidated, fickle locus where ill winds blow. Amitai exposes the far-fetched nature of the home, house, and family as a solid foundation of security, stability, and happiness. The house is an illusive, thin and fragile cover where memory casts a heavy shadow and where fears are concealed. It is a castle in the sand to be wiped away in the twinkling of an eye with the first wave (*Sandcastle*, 2001); a soaring tower of Playmobil dolls that will collapse if we move even a single one (*Atlases*, 2000-01); or the glamorous appearance of the Versailles wedding hall in Jerusalem that collapsed during a wedding celebration and became branded in Israeli consciousness as a nightmare (*[Temporary] Happiness*, 2004).

In *(Temporary) Happiness* Amitai created a real objectal sphere that marked the exhibition space as a site of a refuted promise. Citations from the tragic testimonies of the celebrants were planted into a floor painting reminiscent of a decorated carpet. The glass installation, with the red wine as the undrunk blood, hints at the terrible moment when time stopped, before the conjugal celebration ended. The decorated nuptial car also remained as a static, hollow and emptied body whose interior seems to have been ripped open as in a terrorist attack.

Similarly, in *Katrina* the house becomes a ruined, empty shell populated by memory and horror. The object of yearning remains a vulnerable, bare residue. Unlike *[Temporary] Happiness*, where Amitai created a three-

dimensional space translated and refined in relation to the real event, in *Katrina* she employs the documentary raw materials of the actual catastrophe, the absent-present, that unfold the story in their fragile language. Amitai's work oscillates between the language of traditional drawing and a current, unique artistic language of drawing in thread, which lends it a sculptural dimension.

Bachelard names the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives "topoanalysis." The space, within its thousand cells, preserved compressed time. "Faced with these periods of solitude, the topoanalyst starts to ask questions: Was the room a large one? [...] Was the nook warm? How was it lighted? How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence?." <sup>3</sup> Amitai's works offer a type of topoanalysis. In the act of emotional mapping that they mark, in-between the fine glue work and the thread's progression on the surface, Amitai's space calls for action, striving to enliven the dream of the home. The closed internal space of the industrious artistic act is typified by search for and discovery of that which will be eliminated and erased from amidst the domestic interior as well as that which will be stitched for eternity with the threads of memory.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) pp. 3-37.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Bachelard 1958, p. 8.