

Aleph for Ohel [tent]; Bet for Bayit [house] / Tami Katz-Freiman

Excerpts from a review on Tal Amitai's one-person exhibition at Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. Originally published in *Studio Art Magazine*: 131, February-March 2002, pp. 67-68.

The common denominator linking all the images in Tal Amitai's exhibition is childhood games and toys: a sandcastle, a tower made of Playmobile action figures, toy bricks, a ring of cards, an origami boat, pick-up sticks, a memory game, and an origami fortuneteller ("cootie catcher").

The return to childhood as a source of inspiration in contemporary art can stem from nostalgic yearnings for the past, from exorcism and violence, or may emerge as an infantile act. In any event, it is implied by either the form or the content, and is always associated with memory. Only a few artists nowadays truly succeed in extracting a new and original statement from childhood-related contents. Tal Amitai does so with both sense and sensibility, masterfully introducing accurately measured amounts of the pleasure inherent in reminiscing and the piercing torture inherent in memory, without reverting to nostalgia or opting for a strategy of childzation.

Her success results partly from her intricate, ambivalent position regarding Childhood, a position that is manifested in the contextual stratification of the works, the camouflages, the acts of concealment, and their intrinsic links. It begins with a quote from Paul Auster that functions as an anchor: "At what moment does a house stop being a house? When the roof is taken off? When the walls are knocked down? At what moment does it become a pile of rubble?" (from: *The Invention of Solitude*, 1982). When Auster asked these questions, he also referred to the "house" in its metaphorical sense, as an abode for the soul. His story is about a family, relationships, the father's stubborn denial of his daughter's shaken mental state. The house is the body, and as long as there is a door through which to enter, one can ostensibly deny the internal crushing, the psyche that has collapsed. Rather than blindness, Auster maintains, this was a case of frail imagination.

Amitai manipulates the viewer's frail imagination, leading us to think about home and family, rather than about body and sickness. She conceals more than she reveals. Auster's text emerges in one of the key works (*Untitled*, 2000), comprising a labyrinthine mosaic made of black and white toy bricks. The text is supposed to guide the viewer towards the thematic nucleus of the show – the memory capsule called “home,” “family,” “childhood.” If there is a discussion of anxieties or a shaken psyche here, it is implicit, virtually ciphered, very subtle, as in the work containing a frail paper boat floating on the waves, bearing the inscription: “Something is going to happen,” or in the tiny, translucent sandals abandoned by the sandcastle, or in the images of structures hanging on a thread. Discussion of that which is threatening seems to be pushed under the carpet, yet something rotten is nonetheless exposed through the cheerful coloration.

Amitai's works seem to make a brave attempt to shed light, albeit momentary, on a nightmarish memory, only to extinguish it right away and put on a happy childhood face. The present absence of the games and the toys' magnification to monumental dimensions no longer befitting a child's scale, add to the sense of enigma and disconcert. Thus, for example, the sandcastle that rises to a height of two meters, the tower of Playmobile dolls (*Atlases*) that practically supports the ceiling, and the gigantic inscription *Happyending* made of giant toy bricks.

The works' strength lies in the pretense of naivete, in the far-fetched nature of the happy ending illusion, in the fantasy of fulfilling the promise that has evaporated, and the realization that it will never be fulfilled. Amitai's fictive texts, masquerading as banal texts drawn from children's books, are infused with the motif of illusion and disillusion. Thus, for instance: “When I grew up / I took dad's ladder / the one that reaches the sky / I tried to pluck the moon / and hang it on the ceiling (*Untitled*, 2000) so it illuminates the house with great big light.” or: “In the shop window / I saw a thistle dress / I put it on / and felt like a queen” (*Untitled*, 2000).

In Henrik Ibsen's play *The Master Builder*, 1892 (English translation: Edmund Gosse and William Archer), the playwright describes the relationship between a successful contractor/architect and a mysterious highland girl called Hilda. The girl, who is already a young woman, enters the contractor's gray family life, demanding that he fulfill a promise he gave her ten years earlier: "You'll be a princess and I'll construct castles in the air for you." Their illusive encounter, verging on eroticism, is founded on the mutual urge to incite each other's imagination and daring to go all the way. Toward the end of the play, with the girl's encouragement, the builder overcomes his fear of heights and scales a church steeple to crown the spire with a wreath. Quite expectedly, he ends up falling to his death.

By the same token, the waves will crash onto the sandcastle, the cards will collapse, and the tall tower will fall if we move even a single tiny *Atlas* doll from its place. Everything attests to the frailty and evaporation of the stable home illusion. Amitai's objects are akin to "castles in the air," they demand a great deal of labor to run on neutral, so to speak. Her earlier works too, exhibited in the Kibbutz Art Gallery, Tel Aviv (1996), dealt with relationships within the family. Already back then, there was something menacing under the light veil of humor. Under the title "We are a bound family," she exhibited a "cannibalism of an inter-generational and intra-familial power struggle," as stated by curator Tali Tamir.

Camouflage and masquerade are manifested in Amitai's technique as well. The objects appear real, but in fact they are ostensible, a perfect imitation. The casting, the handicraft, the painstaking realistic coloring are reminiscent of works by Israeli artist Gil Shachar, the manipulation of scale calls to mind British artist Ron Mueck. It is Marcel Duchamp's spirit, however, that inspires her works. The contingency, the humor, the playful quality, the irony, the puns, the preoccupation with banal images and hackneyed clichés, the issues of control, fate and fortune – all these allude to Duchamp's heritage.

Beyond all the technical and formal connotations, Amitai's uniqueness lies in her fresh, refined statement embodied in the question: "At what moment does a house stop being a house?"

