



Asam Abu Shakra, **Sabra**, 1989, oil on paper, 120x80,
Collection of Yonatan Kolver

Molds of Their Homeland – Symbols of Identity in the Works of Asam Abu Shakra and Tsibi Geve.

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“Molds of Their Homeland” is an important exhibition and catalogue initiated by the course in Curatorship and Criticism at the new department of Art History in Ben-Gurion University. The exhibition was hosted in a small gallery situated at the entrance to the library of the Ben-Gurion University campus. The large sized canvases and their impressive colorfulness created a condensed, enigmatic environment offering a fresh interpretation of the personal positions of two artists: Asam Abu Shakra, a Palestinian citizen of Israel who passed away 10 years ago, and Tsibi Geva, a Jewish-Israeli artist.

Each artist is committed, on one hand, to his own individual daily life and personal identity, while on the other hand, each one uses these as a vehicle to question his collective identity. The curators provided an opportunity to examine some crucial aspects concerning the (re)presentation of individual and collective symbols of identity within the Israeli social, political and cultural arena. By doing so, the curators linked themselves to a wider trend that criticizes the lack of social perspective, and the tendency to concentrate on the artist as an autonomous individual. This approach, according to Fernie (1996), also doubts the limited set of methods that concentrates on the analysis of style, iconography, and the canon. It is important to note that such a critical perspective is rare in Israeli art discourse, as in other fields of knowledge, which are trapped within their commitment to the reproduction of the hegemonic “collective” Zionist narrative (Chinsky, 1993).

Adopting a critical perspective of analysis demands taking an approach towards the artist as a member of a given society, hence shaped by social power. Chinsky (1993) has presented such a disposition in relation to the Israeli art discourse, while shifting the focal point from the analysis of objects towards the examination of social context and ideology, the structures of social power, politics, and questions of identity. This attitude enables one to relate to the role of art in the creation of national identity, and thus to examine landscapes, objects and symbols not just as nouns, but rather as verbs (Mitchell, 1994).

The curators have managed to compose an imagined dialogue between Geva and Abu Shakra giving the spectator an opportunity to understand the paintings as presentation and representation, signifier and signified, frames and their contents. Thus, the exhibition embodies a potential to go beyond questions of “what is there” and “what does it mean”, and ask, “*how it works as a cultural practice*”. Accordingly, I will argue that the artists' works are not just objects to

be decoded or texts to be read, but rather invite questions about our “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990), i.e. the way in which our forms of knowledge, our structured beliefs and everyday symbols are socially structured.

Is Nature That Natural?

Both Geva and Abu Shakra portray fragments of their “*homeland*”. The symbols on their canvases invoke challenging questions, since the objects they describe have been displaced from their “natural environment” and re-planted in different surroundings, often characterized by artificial or alienated space. However, both artists use the same conceptual tools, and this fact accentuates their different personal positions within the Israeli fabric of identities.

In several objects presented as uprooted from their ecosystem, Geva tries to awaken the observer from what has been described as “colonialist hallucination” (Chinsky, 1993: 108). Through this series - including “The Jay” (1996), “The Bird” (1999) and the remarkable “Ascrub Daisy” (1999), drawn on a used round table surface, Geva examines Israeli hegemonic educational messages. The scholarly knowledge, à la Geva, determines the way in which we relate to “our country’s nature”, not just as flora and fauna, but rather as *subjects of authentic ownership and longing*.

Such a statement must be viewed in a wider context, since Jewish national identity in Israel, as in other countries, has been assembled around *images of places* (Kaplan, 1999). The Zionist attitude perceived the land as an empty space, and structured its Judiazation through what has been defined by Foucault as “games of truth” (Danaher *et al*, 2000). These “games” are sets of rules and practices by which a narrative of truth is constructed, and the participants in this “game” include the Israeli educational system, mentioned by Geva, as well as the military service, the “sciences” of history and archeology, and the arts.¹ Their roles, which are questioned by Geva, were to *mold* the invented sense of place into “*our*” nature and “*our*” historical, imagined landscape.

Similar to Geva’s, Abu Shakra’s work is represented in a series of paintings done at the end of the 80s, of the uprooted-displaced sabra cactus plant. As already argued by the curators, the sabra is not just a cactus plant or a fruit, in the Zionist “habitus-language” it has been adopted as a symbol of rooted nativity as opposed to the diasporic detachment. Obviously Abu Shakra was very conscious of the meaning attached to the sabra, and therefore the sabra series can be interpreted not only as a personal symbol of the artist’s terminal illness (as suggested in the catalogue), but as a Palestinian collective nationalist sign as well.

In Abu Shakra’s eyes, the meaning of the sabra appears to be twofold, and this is most significant in two of his outstanding paintings. The first painting is “Sabra” (1989), a dark colored drawing in which the cactus is planted in a pot

¹ Donar (1989) gives a rich visual overview on the role of arts in the construction of Israeli national identity.

which is situated in the focal point of a perspective space. The second painting is "Sabra" (1988) where the plant is in a pot situated on a windowsill, with Shenkin Street in Tel Aviv in the background - a symbol of the apparently progressive and liberal Israeli cultural and social milieu. However, Abu Shakra's solitude, foreignness and exclusion as an Arab living within the Israeli-Jewish society, is emphasized in this painting through the sabra, symbolizing the abandoned Palestinian villages uprooted and then replanted in an anonymous, alien place. Indeed, Tel Aviv beyond its cosmopolitan image, is still "the first *Hebrew City*"², that could not genuinely integrate Abu Shakra, an Arab citizen, the "other".

The Presence of Invisible Places

Abu Shakra and Geva grew up in the same geographical region, however the way in which their identities were molded differed. Tzibi Geva comes from Kibbutz Ein-Shemer, which is not visible in his paintings at this exhibition. Neither is Um El-Fahem, Abu Shakra's village and childhood landscape. Nevertheless, in the collection presented by the curators, both artists prefer to introduce themselves through the place of the "other". As mentioned above, Abu-Shakra chose Tel Aviv as the place symbolizing his position in relation to the "other", while Geva chose Abu Shakra's village, Um El-Fahem, for the theme of one of his pieces (Um El-Fahem, 1984).

The interrelations between representations of places and the construction of national identity have been theorized as national *spatial identities* that incorporate discursive landscapes (Kaplan, 1999). These landscapes contain layers of symbols, metaphors and images, used as scaffolding for the construction of people's collective and national identities (Anderson, 1983; Paasi, 1999).

The Israeli context attaches a significant symbolic importance to the landscapes created by the different existing settlements, namely: the "*Israeli city*", the "*Arab village*" or the "*Pioneer Kibbutz*". These are not just physical typologies of settlements, but rather they are attached to assembled mythologies, perceptions, biases and meanings that "frame places" (Dovey, 1999), and thus justify the transformation of the actual territory into "*our homeland*". When such a transformation occurs, "instead of the group defining the territory, the territory comes to define the group" (Kaplan, 1999: 45).

In this context, a more careful and critical reading of both artists' work is necessary, since creating the "sense of one's place" is also the definition of a "sense of the other's place" (Bourdieu, 1990: 113). Thus, I suggest that when Geva describes the "sensuality" of Um El Fahem, as "calligraphy" (Raved, 2000), he is defining the place of the "other", referring to the Arab village, as constructed within the Israeli social, political and cultural discourse (Eyal, 1993).

² Tel Aviv is presented historically and culturally as the first *Hebrew City*. As such, it has been presented by many Israeli artists as the modern-Zionist cultural center (for a wider discussion and images see in Donar, 1989).

Similarly, Abu Shakra's representation of the "other", mainly through objects such as in "Bludgeons" (1988), "Necktie" (1988), or the "Sabra" series, cannot be seen as disconnected from the "historical, monolithic, great and heroic story", described by Maor in the catalogue (2000).

Not 'molds of their homeland', but *molded into it*

The exhibition examines the biographies of the artists "which have grown out of and within the press of a politically charged collective identity that addresses itself up in narrow cliché-type definitions" (Maor, 2000). Thus it opens up some new possibilities to understand the role of art in the creation of a "sense of place" within Israeli national discourse. It seems that within the richness of themes presented in the exhibition, one could conclude that the connection between the personal stories and the collective 'monolithic' narrative is inevitable. The heroic collective story effects and is affected by the personal and vice versa.

Furthermore, nature, as presented in our collective and personal imagination is not that natural, and the places we know, love, or ignore are a reflection of our social position. Indeed, as Said argues:

...[N]one of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (Said, 1993: 6)

Hence, deconstructing the meaning of these images enables a deeper understanding of the way in which our geography is socially constructed.

Finally, it seems that in search of the "private story [that] seeks to be precise in its details, to contain [the artists'] complexity and their inner contradiction" (Maor, 2000), the curators could have taken their challenging initiative one step further. Instead of using the name "Molds of Their Homeland",³ which has become one of the canonic phrases in the process of the creation of the Israeli hegemonic national narrative, they should have used the name *Molded into Their Homeland*.

³ Broad use of this quotation taken from a poem written by Shaul Tshernichovsky is made within the Israeli national discourse. However, according to Arfelly (1976), the interpretation of this poem is not so deterministic and narrow as interpreted within the Israeli-Zionist sphere. Rather, he claims that this poem presents an ironic view towards the deterministic approach in general, and to the romanticist ideas concerning the relation between nature and culture. Moreover, he suggests that the landscape of the poet's homeland has been constructed into his conscious according to his national and historical collective feelings.

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