

Down on the Valley

Young artists are pulling apart the myth of the Jezreel Valley - and with it the Zionist dream.

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Artist Adva Drori sat at the top of the old water tower at Kiryat Tivon, toasting sandwiches. On some she inscribed a red Star of David and on others the words "Numi emek" ("Hushabye, valley") - the name of her installation, presented a few weeks ago, to an audience of a few dozen viewers. One mother hesitated over a sandwich for her son. The boy chose his favorite, the red Star of David. Meanwhile other people gazed through their binoculars out from the water tower windows at spectacular Jezreel Valley landscapes. The vistas from the top certainly outdid what can be seen through the windows of a moving car.

Drori's installation took up all the space in the tower. The ground floor had dozens of toy bears with ribbons around their necks and saucers of red liquid at their feet. Alongside were white challahs and eggs on which the Declaration of Independence was written by hand. The spiral staircase was hung with blue-and-white and red-and-white bears attached to upside-down parachutes filled with cotton balls. On the third floor, an old bridal gown was displayed.

Drori herself sat on the top floor on a revolving stage, in a black dress, cutting and toasting slices of white bread. Around the stage were sacks full of cotton and little plastic figurines of simple laborers.

Drori was born on Kibbutz Sarid in the Jezreel Valley. The companion to her installation was an exhibition entitled "Here and there in the Jezreel Valley," shown at the art gallery at Kiryat Tivon's memorial center. Curated by Esti Reshef, the show featured three native Jezreel Valley photographers: Tali Cohen Garboz, Shai Aloni, and Ofer Shafrir. Each in some way reflected the geographic, visual and sociological changes in the valley in recent years. Aloni showed photos of old-time valley residents alongside photos of new immigrants who settled there in the early 1990s. Shafrir showed photos of bomb shelters and landscapes. Cohen Garboz showed two series shot against the background of valley landscapes: photos of young Russian Na'aleh immigrants (teens who came to Israel without their parents) and photos of trees.

The exhibition is part of a series dealing with the valley in recent times. About two weeks ago at Kibbutz Yizre'el (Jezreel) there was an installation by Ziv Ben Dov, who was born there and now lives in Tel Aviv. His "Jezreel, Jezreel Now" was exhibited in an outlying area of the kibbutz, against a backdrop of painted landscapes. Forty or so participants poured plaster on the kibbutz rugby team, whose members stood around for about 90 minutes in scrum positions, as if struggling over the ball. The plaster cast created will be exhibited at Ben Dov's show opening early next month at the Pyramida gallery in Haifa.

About three months ago, Herzliya Museum had a show by Gal Weinstein called "Jezreel Valley." Weinstein turned the valley into a colorful puzzle made of synthetic grass and cheap industrial carpeting. "The Return to Zion: Beyond the Principle of Place," curated by Dr. Gideon Efrat at Zman Lomanut in Tel Aviv featured a group of works on the changes in the Jezreel Valley myth, starting with the institutional Jubilee poster from the 1950s, through the miniature "Jezreel Valley" model by Weinstein and the large, realist painting of the Valley by Eli Shamir, who lives in Kfar Yehoshua.

Sick experience

Most of the artists are young people who were born in the Jezreel Valley and are now returning to explore their identity or come to terms with their past. The quest is part of a general self-assessment and a broader post-Zionist trend in Israel of late.

The Jezreel Valley is the ultimate symbol of the reification of the Zionist dream, and its continuing evolution reflects contemporaneous changes in Israeli society: from one that lived by manual labor, or at least that appreciated it, to a high-tech society; from a nationalistic society guarding its common values to a divided society that repeatedly deconstructs, sometimes almost without noticing, its founding myths; from a communally oriented society trying to maintain an egalitarian unity, to a privatized society. "The valley was the supreme laboratory for the Zionist dream, and this art somehow reflects the collapse of all that," wrote Reshef in the flyer for the exhibition.

The critique of the valley mythos began many years ago, particularly among valley-born authors like Yitzhak Ben-Ner, "who rendered the life on a valley farmstead as a sick human experience, and Meir Shalev, who examined the founding generation with a mixture of worship and ironic skepticism," as Efrat writes in the exhibition catalog for "Return to Zion: Beyond the Principle of Place." There were also some outstanding works of art, including an installation by Moti Mizrahi in Tel Aviv in 1994: on a green lawn, a statue of a man mounts a statue of a woman bending down to harvest wheat. "Vulgar sex cum Zionist eros," as Efrat put it.

In 1995, Guy Raz, who was born on Kibbutz Geva, showed photographs of tombstones of valley dwellers and photos of dead boars in Wadi Sidr. Raz noted that he thought it important to personify the valley, "to transform the mythology of the place to something human," as he put it: "to be disabused of the ideals of a bunch of half-crazy people." In Raz's work, as in other contemporary artworks, there's a conspicuous empathy on the one hand, and the revelation of deception, a certain distancing, on the other. The landscape, the myth, appears in some of this work as a stage set, a two-dimensional placard. This sense of flatness, of a form that has lost its substance and preserves mainly nostalgia, is very obvious in the work of Gal Weinstein, the only artist here who is not from the valley. Weinstein creates an estrangement up front by depicting the valley as seen in aerial photos.

The nearness to the earth in the photos, especially those by Cohen Garboz and Shafrir, also reveals its less attractive side, the decay, the barbed-wire fencing. The mythological people of the valley, heroes who tended the soil, have been replaced in these works by foreigners - a rugby team, young immigrants - detached from the Zionist ideology of the 1920s and '30s. In Drori's installation, the farmers are little plastic figurines, powerless, that stand on heaps of sacks filled with cotton balls. In the work by Shamir, a veteran artist who returned to his old kibbutz a few years ago, the valley is deserted, without cars, without people.

Eating the national symbol

Drori's installation was presented at the water tower a few times in recent months and drew a sizeable audience, from near and far. Some visitors responded to the notion of eating the national symbol, and saw it as a metaphor for the way the state is finishing itself off. Others had a hard time with this critique. The committee that oversees the memorial center and is supposed to approve exhibitions also had a hard time with some of the content. They didn't permit Drori to put blood in the saucers; she had to use red food coloring instead. Nor did they let her sew little bears from the nation's flag, so she finally sewed them from the cloth used to make the flag, before the Star of David is printed on it, before it becomes a hallowed symbol.

Drori says the committee rationalized that the installation as planned could hurt bereaved families,

which made her even more determined to exhibit the installation at a memorial site. "I want to oppose the sanctification of the dead that goes on in this country," she says. "We sanctify the dead instead of the living; we sanctify our suffering as a people. Bereavement legitimizes all sorts of things that aren't legitimate, like our attitude to the Arabs and our use of force."

Drori, in her installation, views these changes as she views the valley, and especially in terms of the fracture she experienced with the undermining of the values and ideals she was raised to believe in. "They tried to educate differently here and became captives of their own slogans," she says. "The kibbutz worked very hard to establish itself. Over the years, it stood for things like equality, a lack of discrimination or racism. But they couldn't make it happen in reality. They see Arabs and relate to them as inferior. There's no connection with people living right next door." Still, even in Drori's installation there's that ambivalence about the valley: the loss she reveals in the water tower against the scenery outside.

Ziv Ben Dov looks at the valley with a lot of nostalgia mixed in with the deconstruction. Deconstruction for him is the focus on rugby, a game foreign to the local culture that was adopted in the 1970s by local people. "Rugby became the leading sport of the valley with the absorption of Anglo immigrants from South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. The local rugby club today has an adult team, a youth and a children's team and is an essential part of kibbutz life," writes curator Yaniv Shapira.

Ben Dov, born on Kibbutz Yizre'el and living in recent years in Tel Aviv, was himself a member of the kibbutz rugby squad. He decided to present his installation in a huge storehouse on the fringes of the kibbutz, near the place where Kufr Zar'in once was. The installation is a team product, calling to mind the kibbutz values on which he was raised, hence the nostalgia. "I'm returning to a pacified kibbutz, in the sense that I accept it as it is today. Fifteen years ago, I needed to distance myself; I felt that the kibbutz was a promise that turned out not to be real, for all kinds of reasons."

The foreign game of rugby was adopted just as the Thai workers were adopted by the kibbutz, just as the immigrant kids were adopted in the photos by Cohen Garboz, who was born on Kibbutz Jezre'el. In her early work, the panoramic landscapes were thrilling, breathtaking. Now there's a rotten feeling about them. "The landscape was offered to my generation as a way to a profound connection with the land, to make it immediate and unmediated, but it was and always will be a two-dimensional image," she says. "The distant gaze reconstructs and defines the beauty of the landscape, and at the front of the stage is the reality: youth, rich dark soil, forgetfulness, chaos, and guilt. Simple, personal love is disturbed by powerful disruptions in the background, the 'missing history.' Somebody was here before us."