

Meir Gal

Artists of Minor and Average Talent

It must be forbidden for artists of minor and average talent to exit the borders of the state, since they may debase the honor of Israeli art in the Diaspora and damage the reputation of the state. Can the state, which administered supervision and control over all walks of life, both for its own good and ours, see to it that art will not become an open field which anyone can enter and plough it?"

This quotation was taken from a text originally published in an editorial in Israel in 1951. As the text speaks to a widely prevailing attitude in the state, attribution was deliberately withheld, allowing the viewer to conjure a multitude of possible authors.

Untitled (Erasing the Major Museums)

Every aerial photograph taken in Israel must be submitted to an army censor for inspection in order to see whether state military secrets have been disclosed. The censor then erases from the photographs the areas used for military purposes, as well as facilities and institutions meant to enhance and protect state security. Photographers are forbidden to show these erased areas, and failure to comply is considered a violation of state security.

Museums in Israel have ignored the political realities within which they are operating. Not only have they not offered any resistance to or critique of the state ideology, but for the most part they have supported and collaborated with government offices and the army. As such, museums are nothing but a disguised function of state apparatus and therefore should be officially perceived as military facilities. I therefore decided, in compliance with army regulations, to erase museums, like

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Figure 1. Artists of Minor and Average Talent. Paint on cement wall, 24 x 7 ft. Ein Charod Museum of Art. Color photograph of wall installation, 1994. All images courtesy of Meir Gal



Figure 2. Artists of Minor and Average Talent (detail)

Figure 3. (Untitled)
Erasing the Major
Museums. The
Israel Museum.
Aerial photograph,
color, 1995–96



Figure 4. (Untitled)
Erasing the Major
Museums. Ramat
Gan Museum
of Art. Aerial
photograph, color,
1995–96





Figure 5. (Untitled) Erasing the Major Museums. Haifa Museum of Art. Aerial photograph, color, 1995–96



Figure 6. (Untitled) Erasing the Major Museums. Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Aerial photograph, color, 1995–96

other security-sensitive institutions, so that their location will not be disclosed and state security compromised.

Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev

In 1995, during a visit to Israel, I forgot to pick up my return plane ticket back to New York. Because Israel is an informal country, the travel agent took the ticket home with her to Pisgat Ze'ev, a relatively new Israeli settlement built in the West Bank as part of the ever-growing "Greater Jerusalem," a place I had never been to. Following her instructions, I set out from central Jerusalem to the northern outskirts, passing through two well-established, prosperous settlements, Ramot Eshkol and the French Hill, dominated by gray and white concrete edifices, built twenty years earlier. I thought about all the people I knew in these settlements, completely



Figure 7. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev 10 (The 6th Regiment Street). Color photograph, 1995–96



Figure 8. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev 12 (General Moshe Dayan and General Yekutiel Square). Color photograph, 1995–96

unaware of the political complexities of the land they were living on. Lost in my reveries, I drove into Pisgat Ze'ev and soon realized I was completely lost. I stopped and asked for directions. The answer went something like this: "Turn right on Patrol Street, take a left on Air Force Street, and you'll come to the General Bar Lev Junction. Make a right onto Armored Corps and you'll hit the Jerusalem Patrol Street. From there you want to find the Jerusalem Tank Platoon . . ." and so it went. I drove around, forgetting I had a ticket to pick up. While all Israeli towns and villages have some streets associated with the military, I realized that here, all the streets had names derived from the current and past history of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Pisgat Ze'ev had been built on lands confiscated from the Arab village of Beit Hanina, conquered in 1967 during the Six-Day War. Most of these villagers still live nearby, in view of their old land, under occupation.

Low- and middle-income Israeli families have been and continue to be lured to the occupied territories

by monetary incentives, low real estate prices, large apartments, and spectacular views. Over the years, the inhabitants of Pisgat Ze'ev (not unlike the rest of the population) have constructed their identities, consciously and unconsciously, according to military lore. I contemplated the multitude of levels on which the military had penetrated into the civilian psyche. On some of the doors, I noticed, people had put the name of the street and, right above it, their own family name, for example, The Steinbergs, Golani Commando, 17A. I tried to imagine what it would feel like getting mail with the name of an elite army unit attached to my name on the envelope.

During the following two years, I made several trips to the area to visually document the layout and design of the settlement and interview the Israeli families who lived there. It soon became clear that they had internalized the hierarchy that pervades the Israeli military. According to these civilians, those who live on Air Force Street or Commandos Street (two famous Israeli elite units admired and valorized by the Israeli public) are perceived as superior to those who live on Armored Corps Street (a unit perceived as composed of inferior soldiers).

The project was exhibited at the Ami Steinitz Gallery in 1997, titled after a famous Israeli pop song, “I Love a Guy in the Carob Commando” (“Yesh Li Ahuv B’Sayeret Haruv”).

A second project was exhibited a year later at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, titled *Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev*. I struck out the Palestinian name in order to illustrate the village's actual erasure.

The exhibitions consisted of photographs as well as actual street signs on small walls arranged in the form of a grave monument (in Israeli Jewish cemeteries, a rectangular monument of stone is built over each grave).



Figure 9. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev 14 (The Four Fallen Soldiers and the Duhifat Commando Square). Color photograph, 1995–96.



Figure 10. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev 16 (The Golani Commando Street). Color photograph, 1995–96.



Figure 11. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev (The Schwartz Family and the Four Fallen Soldiers Street). Gallery installation photographs (actual metal street signs on sheetrock walls), 1997



Figure 12. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev (The Cannoneer Street). Gallery installation photographs (actual metal street signs on sheetrock walls), 1997



Figure 13. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev (The Six Day War Street).
Gallery installation photographs (actual metal street signs on sheetrock walls), 1997



Figure 14. Beit Hanina/Pisgat Ze'ev (The Jerusalem Tank Regiment).
Gallery installation photographs (actual metal street signs on sheetrock walls), 1997

Nine Out of Four Hundred: The West and the Rest

Since the establishment of Israel we have heard mostly from and about its European (Ashkenazi) Jews. Numerous books and articles have depicted the State of Israel as a country that has successfully managed to bring together people of different ethnic origins. Unfortunately, these publications have created a perception that is far from the realities non-Ashkenazi groups have had to endure. Mizrahim (Jews of Asian and African origins, and Arab Jews, commonly referred to as Sephardim) who have written extensively about the discrimination against Mizrahim in Israel and who have documented the history of Mizrahi resistance have been censored and criticized. To this day, Mizrahi activists in Israel are marginalized and often excluded from public positions and funding.

The official textbooks on the history of the Jewish people used in Israeli schools are dedicated almost exclusively to the history of European Jewry. For decades the Ministry of Education systematically deleted the history of Jews who came from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. These books helped establish a consciousness that the history of the Jewish people took place in Eastern Europe and that Mizrahim have no history worthy of remembering. The origins of this policy date back to the mid-1800s, to the Ashkenazi treatment of the Mizrahi diaspora prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. Both Jewish European communities and the Jewish Eastern European leadership in Palestine (and later in Israel) categorized non-European Jews as backward and primitive. Cautionary measures in the form of selective immigration policies were enacted in the 1950s in order to reduce the “dangerous Levantine influence” of non-European cultures on the new Israeli entity.

Mizrahim historically suffered no contradiction between being simultaneously Jewish and Arab. The advent of Zionism and the establishment of the Israeli state drove a wedge between Mizrahim and their origins and replaced their Jewish-Arab identity with a new Israeli identity based on European ideals as well as hatred of the Arab world. From the moment of their arrival in Israel, Mizrahim were forced to deny their Jewish-Arab identity, which they had held for centuries in Arab countries and in Palestine. The inevitable outcome was an irreconcilable Mizrahi denial of its own past, which gradually evolved into self-hatred. The severe racial conflict within Israel, its resulting class division, and its impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are absent from most discourse on Middle Eastern history and politics.

The book shown in the photograph is the official textbook of the history of the Jewish people in recent generations that was used by high school students (including myself) in the 1970s. The nine pages I’m holding are the only pages in the book that discuss non-European Jewish history. Hence the title: *Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest)*. My intention is to put an end to the speculative character of the argument about whether or not Mizrahim have experienced discrimination in Israel. Today the Ministry of Education continues to erase the history of its non-European Jews even though they comprise more than half of the Israeli population. This is only one example of how the State of Israel continues to marginalize its non-European majority.



Figure 15. "Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest)." Color photograph, 1997

Armpit

In *Armpit*, the geographical maps of Israel and the Palestinian occupied territories were painted with black ink on my body. The piece concretizes the psychosexual relations between the state and its citizens, the internalization of the state's memory and priorities over personal history. It illustrates how the state infiltrates, hides, and ultimately brands itself using its citizens' bodies.



Figure 16. Untitled (*Armpit*). Color photograph, 2001

sacrifice	עקידה	purge	טיהור	perishable	אבד
vulnerable	פגיע	persecution	טירוף הרדיפות	destruction	אבד עליו כלח
accident	פגע; תאונה	assimilation	טמיעה	obsolete	אבדון; חורבן
pogrom	פוגרום; פרעות	tragedy	טרגדיה	oh	אבי
dread; fear	פחד	terror	טרור	loss	אבדה
wounds; injury	פציעה; פצעים	despair	ייאוש	casualties	אבידות; הרוגים
trouble; hardship	צרה	pessimist	ייאושן	to mourn	אבל
cut, truncated	קטום	morn; howl	ייבב	obsession	אובססיה
amputation	קטיעה	suffering	ייסורים	oy vey	אוי ואבוי
killing	קטל; קטילה	pain	כאב	enemy	אויב
fatal	קטלני	extermination	כיליון	disaster	אסון
curse; misfortune	קללה	blood soaked	ממולך בדם	treason; betrayal	בידה
end	קץ	depressed	מדוכך; מדוכא	urgent, anxious	בהול
tearing; laceration	קריעה	bad to worse	מדחי אל דחי	panic, great haste	בהלה
feud	ריב דמים	expelled, dismissed	מודח	treachery; perfidy	בוגדות
evil; bad; harmful	רע	repressed	מודחק	decay	בלייה
crushed, worn out	רצוצ	troubled	מוטרד	ghastliness	בעתה
homicide, murder	רצח	beaten, afflicted with	מכה	grief, pain	דאבה
genocide	רצח עם	all out war	מלחמת חורמה	worry, concern	דאגה
rotten; decay	רקב	fall; defeat	מפלה	fretful	דאגני
broken; injuries	שבר	distress	מעוקה	painful	דאוב
fracture, disaster	שבר	mourner	מקונן	scarce	דחוק
tearing asunder	שוסף; שוסע	crushed, broken	מרוסק	rejection	דחיה
paralysed	שותק	cut up	משוסף	fear, phobia	דחילה
slaughtered	שוטח	dead, deceased	מת	urgency	דחופות
beat into powder	שהק	tension	מתח	stress	דחק
bereavement	שכול; שיקלון	to fight; struggle	נאבק	depression	דיכאון
torn apart	שוסף	groan	נאנק	suppression	דיכוי
survive	שריד	oppressed; depressed	נדכא	repressive	דכאני
rout, defeat	תבוסה	broken, crushed	נדכה	dejective	דדוך
weak, beat	תשוש	desperate	נואש	decline, extinction	דעיכה
asphyxia	תשיק	despair	נואשות	defeat	הבסה; חיסול
		scattered, fallen	נידח	banishment	הגלייה
		neurosis	נירוזה	subdue, destroy	הדברה
		demolition; shattering	ניתוך	dismiss, repulsion	הדחה
		to perish; disappear	נכחד	to be sacrificed	הוקרב
		erased, destroyed	נמחה	hysteria	היסטריה
		wiped out	נמחק; נהרס	eulogy, obituary	הספד
		rotting	נמק	to terrify	הפיל את חיתיו
		to die	נפח את נשמתו	ruined	הרוס
		to pass away	נפטר	massacre	הריגה; טבח
		defeat; death	נפילה; תבוסה	wailing	התייפחות
		killed; torn to pieces	נקטל	abuse, maltreat	התעללות
		to be cut, amputee	נקטע	to abuse; ill treat	התעמר
		murdered	נרצח	wounding	הבלה; פציעה
		to be slaughtered	נשחט	desecrated	חונל
		to be worn away	נשחק	morbid	חולני; מבטית
		castration	סירוס	destruction; ruin	חורבן; הריסות
		to the bitter end	עד הסוף המר	dislocation	חורג
		spasm, convulsion	עווית	emergency	חירום
		tortured	עונה	nothingness	חיתית
		noose	ענבת חנק	panic; anxiety	חלחלה; חרדה
		mishap	עסק ביש	suspicious	חשד
		sorrow	עצב	slaughter	טבח
		sadness	עצבות	impurity	טומאה



Figure 17. Concise Israeli Lexicon (first ever). Ink on canvas, 2006–7

Concise Israeli Lexicon (first ever)

Issues of holocaust, abandonment, destruction, loss, illness, death, and persecution typify Jewish lore. These themes underlie the lethal, aggressive, militaristic Israeli reaction in the present. As such, in this piece history is divided into two parts: the Jewish past and the Israeli reaction in the present. These words are used frequently and distributed through the education system and culture, becoming omnipresent to the extent that they dwarf and contextualize the rest of the language.

In order to essentialize and concretize what I experience as the dominant determinant in Jewish Israeli daily life, perception of the past and future outlook, I

scanned every word in the Hebrew dictionary. I isolated words that function as fundamental pressure or trigger points, shaping identity and ultimately directing Jewish Israeli behavior and attitude. This assiduous linguistic exercise reduced the language to its bare symbolic essentials, emphasizing their unfortunate cultural importance.

Note

Special thanks to writer and filmmaker Laura Lau for assistance with the preparation and editing of the text.

Curated Spaces, by *Conor McGrady*, focuses on contemporary artists whose work addresses social, historical, or political subject matter.