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Artists Absorb Israel's Six Decades, and Move On

By Ethan Bronner
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Image credit: Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times

"The Boy From South Tel Aviv," a work by Ohad Meromi at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

JERUSALEM — At first glance it seems a straightforward if animated photograph of Israeli soldiers in a mess hall: uniformed young men chatting, pouring, laughing, smoking at a set of utilitarian tables bearing metal bowls and nondescript food. But it doesn't take long to sense that the scene is spiritually and sexually charged. The men are a little too handsome and draped a little too casually over one another, and their group pose is a little too evocative of a certain iconic meal.

Adi Nes's untitled work is widely known as his "Last Supper," and its homoerotic challenge to Israeli machismo and its reference to the Christian message of looming betrayal and death have made the photograph one of the better known pieces of contemporary art in Israel. Along with 59 other works, including videos and interactive installations, it is featured in an ambitious, sometimes macabre and often witty show at the Israel Museum here.

Called "Real Time: Art in Israel, 1998-2008," the exhibition is one of six to be rolled out over the

coming months to mark Israel's 60th anniversary. There will be one show for each decade of the country's existence, each in a different museum across the country.

The Israel Museum, which, under its director, James S. Snyder, likes to think big and make waves, chose the most recent decade for its show. And while it can be hard to gauge the durability of new art, Mr. Snyder and a curator of the show, Amitai Mendelsohn, say that Israeli artists are undergoing a rare flowering, gaining international recognition for works that make universal statements about very Israeli phenomena.

"We have entered a kind of dream-come-true period, meaning Israeli art has turned very international without losing its Israeli feel," Mr. Mendelsohn said.

A soaring number of Israeli artists are enjoying solo exhibitions in the United States, including Sigalit Landau, whose eerie, dreamlike installations are on view at the Museum of Modern Art; Barry Frydlander, whose large digitally compressed color photos of daily life here were shown at MoMA last year; and Yael Bartana, whose videos will be at P.S. 1 in Queens in the fall. All are represented in the Israel Museum show.

"I think this success is partly about artistic maturation, absorbing their heritage and moving on," Mr. Snyder, who was hired from MoMA 12 years ago, said on a recent walk-through of the show, which continues through Aug. 30.

"There has been a kind of synthesis into modernity," he added. "These artists grew up here and absorbed 60 years of history and integrated it into their worldviews." Some of the strongest pieces are digital and video works, he said, "and this too is very representative of Israel, which is undergoing a high-tech boom."

All of those trends are reflected in a video by Ms. Bartana of the two minutes of stillness observed on the country's Memorial Day for the fallen in Israel. Each year, in April or May, a piercing siren is heard across the land, and Israelis of all stripes stop what they are doing — including driving — and stand in a haunting, unitary silence.

Ms. Bartana's video is shot from a bridge above a Tel Aviv highway. At first cars whiz through a tunnel. Suddenly, a few stop, and their doors open. The drivers emerge. Others follow. The drivers stand, their minds doubtless caught between their individual concerns and their collective identity. Some parts are shot in slow motion and manipulated so that vehicles vanish or pull along ghosts of themselves, forcing the viewer to contemplate what the ritual means. The piece is called "Trembling Time."

Most of the 40 artists in the show were born after the 1967 Six-Day War, a watershed in Middle East history. It is hard to know what that suggests about their perspectives. But the artists are relatively young and seemingly less burdened by the need to embrace or reject Zionist history or by the sense of isolation that typified life in Israel until the 1990s, when the Arab boycott against the country collapsed, cable television arrived and the Internet took over consciousness.

Artists react to artistic tradition, speaking across generations to, and of, their colleagues, but also often to the specific moment in which they are creating. The decade this group represents, 1998 to 2008, was seemingly event-filled — the attacks of Sept. 11 in the United States, the war in Iraq, the second intifada (or Palestinian uprising), Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the war between Israel and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. Yet there has been little serious art focused on those events in this country.

Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, a sociologist at Hebrew University who wrote an essay on the decade for the show's catalog, says the period being addressed was one of indifference — "with nothing new to say, no new song, no refreshing or exciting project, no youth, nothing innovative or original in Israeli society."

How can that be, given the rush of events? Ms. Vinitzky-Seroussi offers two explanations. One is that many of those major events, at least in Israel, were simply sequels — the Palestinian uprising was the second one, the Persian Gulf war of 2003 was carried out by the son of the man who carried out

the first, and Israel's war in Lebanon in 2006 is known here as the Second Lebanon War.

The result is a kind of second-child syndrome, she said: "The parents' hands no longer tremble, and their hearts no longer pound as they did the first time around."

Her other explanation is the growing triumph of what she called "piggish capitalism," meaning the triumph of the culture of money in Israel, even as it witnesses growth in the number of working people living below the poverty line there and a proliferation of guest workers from across the globe.

This provides the backdrop to one of the most powerful pieces in the show, Ohad Meromi's "Boy From South Tel Aviv," a colossal, towering sculpture of a naked and beautiful African adolescent.

The piece was originally exhibited in Tel Aviv in 2002. As Mr. Mendelsohn, the co-curator of "Real Time" (the other was Efrat Natan), put it in his catalog essay, "This African giant had made his way from the city's southern neighborhoods, home to many of Israel's third-world foreign workers, to the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion located in the heart of a cultural precinct frequented by the city's well-fed, white bourgeoisie."

"The erotic image of the naked boy — his air of childlike innocence notwithstanding — dominated the center of the museum space like a fantastic dream (or a nightmare) come true," he wrote.

When it was originally displayed, the sculpture included a structure representing a border-crossing barrier to make the point about his illegality more explicit and, doubtless, to comment on the shift from the country's egalitarian early years.

In the current show, there is no border barrier, but there is an innovation: at the upper floor where the boy's head reaches, an open window has been cut into the wall so his face can be seen and his figure viewed from above, as well as from the floor below.

Making the hole in the wall was possible because the building is soon to be torn down as part of an \$80 million renovation and expansion of the Israel Museum intended to make its sprawling pile of buildings more inviting and easier to navigate. Mr. Snyder predicted it would be completed by the end of 2009.

Until then, "Real Time" provides only a little relief to a country that lives with a sense of existential dread. A number of the works have an apocalyptic quality — notably "Iranian Atom," an installation by Sigalit Landau featuring humans apparently stripped of their skin after a nuclear attack. At the same time, the show does offer humor. Among the more amusing pieces is a video by Boaz Arad, who filmed himself with a chicken on his bald head, which resembles a just-laid egg. The chicken tries not to slip off.

Whether this video is a commentary on the agrarian past of Israel or a suggestion about surprises yet ahead doesn't much matter. It's awfully funny just to watch.