

Avital Cnaani

Holding to Edges III

Minshar Gallery, Tel Aviv
2013

Holding to Edges, a three-part exhibition project by Avital Cnaani, is shown simultaneously in three exhibition spaces: the gallery at Kibbutz Lohamei HaGeta'ot, the gallery at Kibbutz Be'eri and the Minshar Gallery in Tel Aviv. All three installations combine work in drawing and sculpture, together forming a whole. The project at large tackles the medial boundaries of drawing while pushing them further to monumental proportions. This shift in format, evident both formally and conceptually, reflects Cnaani's current preoccupation with notions of scope, scale and surface; by these she targets the physical and metaphorical boundaries of the self as well as the artistic framework, stretching the limits of both over and beyond.

With her monochromatic and minimal graphic expression, and through her evocative use of broken-down and recomposed forms suggestive of vitality and death, Cnaani creates symbolic-like territories that map the Israeli terrain. The installations are connected by an imagined bee line, an axis extending across the geographical stretch deployed between its three enclaves: a domain too vast to be grasped and taken in all at once. This outline, too great for our sense-perceptions, inevitably evokes a fragmentary and unsatisfactory viewing experience. This 'failure' on the part of the artist resonates in the viewer's experience, as he is unable to attend all three exhibition spaces at once.

Each space spawned an installation of thin, airy and minimalistic qualities, its imagery vacillating between dominance, power and control on the one hand and frailty, subtlety and intimacy on the other. Cnaani tackles the dynamic and mutual dependency inherent in spatial dimensions of volume, movement and space – a trio embodied by the art object itself, the exhibition space containing it and the viewer as well, who also inhabits the space. As an artist working in both sculpture and drawing from the start of her artistic career, symbiotic relations of medial interdependency had always stood at the basis of her installation work. The two mediums seem to flow into each other organically, engaging as it were in a tight, fruitful dialogue. Their mutual dependency informs Cnaani's formal and medial objectives – stretching the boundaries of the conventional exhibition platform, achieving a new inter-medial balance, defusing the immediate distinction between mediums, and offering a new interpretation to the materiality of each, but without forgoing their innate qualities.

In a sense, sculpture and drawing exchange roles here. The drawing, by breaking away from the traditional sheet format, adopts what are clearly sculptural properties: it disengages itself from the wall and overtakes the center of the room. The lengthwise graphite blackening of the elongated paper sheets betrays drawing's deep-seated aim of gathering substance, enough so as to command three-dimensional presence and effect a sculptural impact. At the same time, her sculptural works demonstrate a sketchy and lightweight materiality, evoking drawing-like characteristics or a body depleted of its former volume. Cnaani's neat sculptural line is achieved by using delicate slivers of raw wood – a material whose frail consistency commands more of a subdued presence.

Cnaani's work process, however open-ended and intuitive, spawns a unified and hermetic sculpture-drawing syntax. Her visual-material idiom is the product of a continuous work process; both spontaneous and meditated, it is informed by an awareness to the physical dimension of an action in space. A repetitive hand gesture, the motions of the body, its weight and the amount of pressure applied on the materials and support – all these imprints themselves on the finished work. But it is evident that the physical gesture that generated the work does not disappear in it nor stop at it, but rather continues to resonate through it even in its finite form.

The Minshar Gallery presents the third and final part of Holding to Edges. Large structures combining wood panels and papers are laid throughout the space, disturbing its enduring silence. They lie hushed and motionless, as if emptied of matter, weightless. Slivers of raw wood and sheets of paper, stained with marks of graphite, form seemingly abstract formations the contours of which nonetheless betray, at times, the lines of a dead animal. The mark of death was imprinted into the work so that it no longer can be shaken off. But Cnaani's pristine and minimalist environment does not even presume to subdue the air of despair, sickness and decay it exudes. The work freezes a moment in time, but not the dramatic and heroic moment one would expect, rather the aftermath of it, a time of submission and existential despair. The work offers itself as a poetic allegory open to myriad contexts of the socio-political, individual and collective situation, awakening in us feelings of helplessness, fear, and reckless violence.