

Meital Katz Minervo

The Sensitive Plant

Artist's House, Jerusalem

2016

The Sensitive Plant offers a reflexive look at aspects of sex and gender, drawing inspiration from 19<sup>th</sup> century poetic and visual sources, alongside themes from the world of science and botany. The Victorian Garden serves as a focal point in the exhibition, embodying a domestic space as well as a feminine site where women could work, learn, and expand their minds. The moralism that pervaded Victorian society and the rigid gender separation had kept women within the bounds of the domestic space, whereas botany and gardening were considered suitable occupations for women. The garden in 19<sup>th</sup> century England reflected the growing interest in fauna and flora. From the Darwinian revolution – the shift from positivism to observation and the study of the origin of species – the garden was an image of the British empire, of control gained through knowledge, classification, and research. The exhibition touches on the tension between the scientific ethos and the Romantic one, in which the observation of nature is emotional and contemplative; this brings to the fore the Gothic motif, like a reincarnation of suppressed Romantic sensibility.

The exhibition's title is derived from a poem of that name, written by the Romantic poet Percy Shelley in 1820. Shelley describes the love between a woman and the *Mimosa Pudica* that grows in her garden – a plant considered rare and very sensitive to touch. In a gender reversal, the poem gives the plant masculine traits; its anthropomorphic portrayal as a sexual being that responds to its environment is typical of Romantic literature and conjures up a grand metaphor for life and death: after the death of the Lady, the garden is forgotten and left to decay, and the mimosa plant is heartbroken. The exhibition's second source of inspiration is a charcoal drawing by the French symbolist Odilon Redon, *Cactus Man* (1881). Redon created the drawing after visiting a public display of natives of Tierra del Fuego. The *Cactus Man*, which depicts a native

man planted in a pot, spines protruding from his head, is associated with a fear of reverting back to primal instincts, alongside a yearning for a lost simplicity.

As though using the site-specific installation for a conceptual experiment, Katz Minerbo uproots the “cactus man” from its natural-wild habitat, and plants it in the domesticated Victorian garden in place of the “sensitive plant”. With this exchange she undermines seemingly “natural” orders, chipping away at cultural gender conventions. As she strips the “Cactus Man” of its masculine elements and empties its content, it becomes nothing but a slough, a husk – an attribute of power and strength that can contain the “other” as a symbol of difference and abnormality, empowering him in a territory of masculine conventions.

The elements in the installation interweave a series of disciplines – from visual art and botany to fashion design – channeling 19<sup>th</sup> century visual and conceptual values. It is a codified world, whose components look like ghosts put on display – objects of desire, simultaneously restrained and emotionally charged, which add up to a contemporary narrative of otherness and gender.