

Nevet Yitzhak

Permanent Exhibition

Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

2018

Permanent Exhibition, an immersive installation by Nevet Yitzhak spanning two floors, goes in the footsteps of “Beit HaNechot Bezalel,” the first Hebrew Museum in Palestine (the Land of Israel). Opened in 1906, it gained recognition as the official museum of the New Yishuv in 1925. Yitzhak explores the eclectic array of the museum’s holdings and its curatorial strategy in its two first decades of activity, as it evolved from a mostly zoological and archeological display to an institution of national aspirations. Set up by Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel School for Art and Craft, Beit HaNechot’s display rooms were part of the school’s tripartite format, alongside its workshops and curriculum. Already from the start, it served as a platform for ideological tenets in line with its founder’s utopian-practical vision, who sought to connect old and new so as to offer a new visual typology to the nascent Zionist project.

The initial display at Beit HaNechot included local fauna and flora, archeological finds and traditional Jewish artifacts – an eclectic array meant to provide a visual database for the elaboration of decorative motifs in the school’s workshops. The following years saw the collection grow and expand together with several overhauls of the display, which reflected an increasingly focused curatorial strategy. After World War I, as the country went under British rule and

Bezalel reopened its doors, it already espoused the mission of consolidating the nation's material legacy, ethnographic conservation and commemoration, as befits a national museum in the making. Typical to Bezalel, the combination of biblical themes, Judaica, Hebrew typography and contemporary art was meant to reaffirm and vouch for the Jewish people's claim to the land. However, just as it aimed to showcase the Jewish material legacy across generations – in Diaspora as in the Land of Israel – it excluded all those who had no part in the Zionist narrative, such as the Palestinian people and centuries of Ottoman rule.

In its two combined installations, Permanent Exhibition spans a range of display modes that had been in practice at Beit Hanehot during its first 20 years, from the initial format of a haphazard collection of zoological exhibits and other curiosities – a time when the display was largely closed to the public – to an institutional site of educational and commemorative capacities. The sight we encounter at the CCA's ground floor revives the eclecticism that dominated the display rooms of the museum in its first years, with its jumbled, crowded and disorderly display bringing to mind an erstwhile cabinet of curiosities.

The inventory of the exhibits on view reflects some key topics in the Bezalel's iconography, and as extant in its museum: the "old," diasporic Jew and the ethos of Jewish victimhood; the "new," pioneering Jew and the ethos of building the land; holy places; biblical and mythical themes; Zionist symbolism and the cult of Herzl. Despite Yitzhak's reliance on visual and other precedents, it is a fictitious environment, the product of direct and indirect referencing,

reconstruction, subverting and amalgamation. In this compositional feat, involving originals, animated works, copies and forgeries, she elaborates a synthesis that targets the workings of Bezalel's display mechanism.

In the installation on view at the CCA's first floor, "Jewish Types," the display is neatly and generously spaced, as that of a designated picture gallery. The cycle of portraits on view, encompassing nine large-scale animated projections, connects ethnographic representations of traditional Jews from a variety of ethnic groups with a wide array of objects from Bezalel's craft industry. Each figure is placed within in an intricate composition of objects in black and white, something of an assemblage in motion of elements carefully mounted one on top of the other. The work evokes Bezalel's blind spot as regards Mizrahi Jews and Jews of the Old Yishuv as both subject to Orientalist fascination and available work force. At the same time, it raises questions on the essence of objects as encapsulating the relationship between humans and things – how the former produce the latter, but are objectified by them in turn.

Permanent Exhibition recovers from oblivion this forgotten museal site, both present absent from the history of Israeli art, to subject it to a reexamination. By intertwining real and fabricated, historical and apocryphal, Yitzhak brings to the surface the themes and agenda built-in to the display as an ambitious project of identity-shaping on a national scale. In doing so, she reflects on the significance objects and artifacts as the product of their time and on the power yielded to them to determine mentalities and mindsets.