

Roni Ben Porat

## DON'T FORGET I WAS SOMEONE

P8 Gallery, Tel Aviv

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Loss and mourning, along with the human yearning to preserve and commemorate the dead, are the cornerstones of Roni Ben Porat's new solo exhibition **DON'T FORGET I WAS SOMEONE**. Ben-Porat addresses the rhetoric of commemoration, characterizing the numerous memorial sites that have become an inseparable part of the landscape on roadsides or public spaces in Israel. In the current exhibition, she focuses on the monument as a sign of grief, joining a long line of artists preoccupied with this subject.

The monument, as an enclave of secular sacredness, serves not only as a site for communion with the dead but also as an element that connects past and present, individuals and communities, death and life. It is a symbolic sign that serves as a constant reminder of the series of values that structure the national identity of Israel. More than anything else, it attests to a collective agreement and awareness that the defense of the land is inextricably bound up with heroism and sacrifice, even of life itself.

Ben Porat examines the monument's aesthetic, formal, and symbolic values and the duality characterizing it as a sphere where the private and the public meld together. She is interested not in the politics of the monument (as an arena of struggle over the shaping of identity) but in its poetics and the possibility of creating a space for mourning that provides an outlet for sadness and longing.

In the work Untitled, the massive stone, one of the most distinctive features of the monuments, is translated into a delicate screen made of dozens of processed papers that cover the gallery wall. Despite its lack of mass and the fragility of the paper, the screen exudes the immense power of the monument. The 173 drawings that make up the screen were created in the act of covering and discovery. Soil, soot, and dust were placed on the papers and covered with coal powder. After exposure and degradation of some of the materials, the remains were removed. Organic materiality tattooed the paper, leaving vibrant, abstract marks that take the place of the stone's stillness. In a process that looks like burial and rising from the ashes, each sign serves as a unique memory of what has been and is no more.

In front of the screen is the mound of stones, apparently abandoned in the landscape. DON'T FORGET I WAS SOMEONE is an eclectic assortment of fragments of stone and marble, of the kind used for tombstones and monuments. In contrast with the stateliness that seeks to envelop the monuments, the mound of stones looks like a makeshift random grave by the roadside. Words are chiseled on some of the fragments, the combination of

which makes up the work's title. The combined sentence does not indicate individuality (as is customary for gravestones, which usually display names, dates, and sometimes nicknames) but emphasizes the anonymity of the dead and reads as a universal lament. The commanding plea of the dead to the living: "Don't forget, I was someone too," points more than anything to the human weakness of keeping the memory of the dead.

The works in the exhibition make use of materials that are inextricably bound in the rituals of death: coal, ash, earth, and stone, organic materials with symbolic meanings that attest at the same time to processes of degradation and decomposition alongside preservation (embalming) and burial.

A short text complemented Both works, written by Ben Porat on a piece of paper in which she devotes herself to her private grief over her father's death and to the lament she sounds in his memory. In this intimate gesture, she seeks to carve a boundary between individual and collective grief and point out that the agony of loss is always the individual's personal property. Ben Porat sets aside the act of social appropriation for the sake of the national ethos and reclaims the place of private mourning. She dedicates the sphere of mourning she has created to anyone who also wishes to devote themselves to their private loss.