

Tel Aviv: Urban Landscapes of Presence and Absence

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The University Art Gallery is pleased to celebrate Tel Aviv's centennial anniversary with an impressive selection of Maya Cohen Levy's urban landscapes. These works, which were all created over the past six years, include both oil paintings on canvas and peeled, manipulated photographs. The two techniques are simultaneously employed by Cohen Levy in her recent series, which are based on different themes (stairs, electric poles, towers, bridges and intersections).

In her peeled photographs, Cohen Levy penetrates the photographic support with a paper knife, removing parts of the printed surface in order to expose the white expanse underlying the emulsion. As Moshe Zuckermann has remarked, "Maya Cohen Levy produces a visual appearance by physically penetrating what is commonly regarded as a material element that one must avoid injuring due to its thinness and ephemeral nature: she 'carves' in what seems to be devoid of layers, generating a real physicality in something whose plastic quality lies rather in its illusory element – she sculpts a photograph."¹ Zuckermann further elaborates upon the iconological significance of the peeled photographs featuring the Azrieli Towers in Tel Aviv: "It thus appears that the act of subtraction – in itself the source of a new visual image – is not merely physical; it also embeds the symbolization of an associative realm that re-signifies the dominant images of the towers presented in the photograph. This is especially conspicuous when the physical subtraction in the photograph generates the silhouette of an airplane within the uncut sections of the tower expanses: the threatening-dramatic association inevitably invoked since 9/11 by a link between 'tower' and 'airplane' is reinforced and more forcefully felt, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that the silhouette of the airplane appears in the photograph as an empty image, a phantom of sorts, a constantly present catastrophic possibility, or if you will: as a potential of destruction dialectically embodied by the seemingly solid firmness of the tower."² Alongside her large-scale photographs of the Azrieli Towers, Cohen Levy presents other urban corners – including city streets and intersections. Arbitrarily changing traffic lights, surveillance cameras and clocks that have lost control over their dials appear repeatedly in these works and bespeak a sense of anxiety stemming from the loss of dependable standards. These images seem to give concrete form to what Paul Celan so masterfully described in the following poem:

Illegibility of this world.
All things twice over.

1
Moshe Zuckermann, "Sculpted Photographs," in: *Maya Cohen Levy*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv: Alon Segev Gallery, 2005), p. 9.

2
Ibid., pp. 9–10.



Journey After the Raven, 1990-2005, railway wooden sleepers and painted aluminum, height: 330

מסע בעקבות העורב, 2005-1990, אדני רכבת ואלומיניום צבוע, גובה: 330

The strong clocks justify the splitting hour hoarsely.
You, clamped into your deepest part, climb out of yourself for ever.³

Cohen Levy's large-scale oil paintings of Tel Aviv landscapes bring together different present, past and future perspectives, and form an expansive panorama that further enhances the fear of dissolution: the traffic lights that ridicule passersby with their commands to stop or walk, the ghostly airplanes alluded to in the empty white spaces between the passages of painterly action, the broken lines created by black, orange and light-blue brushstrokes. Presence and absence are woven together with astounding meticulousness – as if Cohen Levy were attempting to harness the surrounding urban energies, if only momentarily, so as to discover their motivating force. Although these paintings bespeak the impossibility of attaining such a form of liberating insight, they are imbued with the beauty – and perhaps also the optimism – embedded in the very possibility of a dialogue between art and world. As Dalia Rabikovitz wrote:

A small woman made
That large sphere, the Earth
 Into a cradle
And the Earth was not unaware
Of the small woman
Resting on its back.⁴

3
Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*,
translated by Michael Hamburger
(New York: Penguin Books, 1972),
p. 35.

4
Dalia Rabikovitz, "Isha Ktana" (A
Small Woman), in: *Ahavat Tapuach
Hazahav* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat
Hapoalim, 1991), p. 46.

It is interesting to note that Cohen Levy's three-dimensional works similarly feature structures on the verge of collapsing. Her monumental sculpture *Journey After the Raven* (1990–2005), which is located in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's Lola Beer Ebner Sculpture Garden (acquired with the generous support of the Dan Sandel and Sandel Family Foundation Sculpture Award), is a tilted pillar shaped by the struggle between vertical elements – which stabilize it and underscore its upward thrust – and between detached elements that bespeak a state of imminent collapse. In this manner, Cohen Levy alludes – either directly or indirectly – to Alberto Giacometti's description of *The Palace at 4 A.M.* as a structure that is half built and half destroyed. The ravens hovering in a ritual circle at the top of the pillar – birds that once carried an iconographical charge associated with the unconscious – are transformed into a symbol of a restless reality, which constrains the viewer to come to terms with a heterogeneous and unstable ensemble.

If we turn back to the images of the young Tel Aviv in the paintings of Reuven Rubin or Sionah Tagger, we will notice that they too did not easily accept the city's development and industrialization, and saw even the introduction of novelties such as electric poles as a discordant element that threatened the White City. In Rubin's paintings *Tel Aviv Seashore* (1920) or *Yona Hanavi Street* (1928), the cargo ships and electric poles appear as a black, intrusive

stain against the golden sand, blue sea and cloudless city sky. In Sionah Tagger's *The Railway Crossing on Herzl Street* (1921–1922), the dark black electric poles and wires bisect and rupture the landscape's continuum and infuse it with both sorrow and hope – the same emotions that Nathan Alterman describes as resonating throughout the city as night falls:

A summer night.

As darkness descends the noise of Tel Aviv begins to increase, gathering strength and tone. It is as if the day's cascade of light has silenced and suppressed it. The honking of horns, the scraping of tires, the hissing of radios – all are joined together and swallowed, separated and swiftly bounced from wall to wall and street to street, like a ball, the city raises ears like roofs, opens yellow rectangular eyes without lashes or lids, and watches and listens.

A summer night. At night the flow of time gradually slows down and loses momentum and is more strongly felt. Time spreads over and around the inclined head and body of the night. The night grumbles vaguely, and is then filled and overcome by its complaints. Suddenly – no more screeching of wheels, or blaring of radios, or blasting of car horns – only the rush of time, the ticking of the clock, turning like a mill wheel.

"One by one and unobserved," the eyes of the city are closed, but those that stay open look out with both insight and wonder. The roofs like ears also continue to catch sound.

Who was it that said there is nothing more exalted and wonderful in the world than the silent conversation between large city buildings and the stars!⁵

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Nathan Alterman, *Little Tel Aviv*, translated with an introduction by Yishai Tobin (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1979), pp. 13–14.