

The White Light / A Sculptural Installation by Artist Eitan Ben Moshe

Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv

Curator: Dr. Aya Lurie

A large-size mirror-plated table is situated in the center of the gallery. On it, Eitan Ben Moshe has set up a sculptural installation that invites the audience to take part in a surrealist carnival, steeped in mystery and a brittle, abrasive sense of anxiety. The sculptures, placed in organized disorder on a table whose base is a mirror, like a structure poised between stability and downfall, project into the darkened gallery space a glittering mirage of light refractions, a repeated echo of shadows and reflections. Like a celebration that has ended badly, collapsed onto itself, drugged and intoxicated; like Venice, Atlantis or Jerusalem's Versailles wedding hall, site of the worst civil disaster in Israel's history. Yet at moments the fantasy seems to re-establish itself, grappling with illusion, provocatively mixing pleasure and pain. Like the complexity also present in Ben Moshe's video work, screened in the gallery near the installation.¹

The sculptures – hybrid creations, made of parts melted together – fuse glass, plastic and crystal, like the remains of different functional worlds, representing various states of matter and cultural spaces and times. They are elements originating in a biological or chemical laboratory, a living room cabinet, a display hall catalogue or a three-dimensional printer. At times we may recognize a spindly glass flower, a crystal star or an overflowing champagne tumbler, but for the most part we sense the refusal to form a unified, concrete and organized narrative. The same goes for the mutable materials and states of matter: plastic looks like luxury crystal, melted glass seems like ice or a falling drop, what appears hand-made was actually produced by a digital printer. The glittering sand powder brings to mind the primary origins of glass as a material prior to heating and blowing, yet also recalls states of dream and nightmare, fairy dust or a mind-altering narcotic arranged on the mirror in lines ready for consumption.

¹ The film on which the video work is based was shot about three years ago, documenting swans in a muddy area near a lake.

Ben Moshe's array is reminiscent of the 1946 work of French photographer Marc Foucault (1902-1985), called *Untitled* (fig. 1). Foucault's photograph is associated with Surrealism, visiting the exhibition like a phantom whose echo is present in the objects comprising the installation. In Foucault's work we discover a prophetic nightmarish vision, in which vegetal and animal, human and beast, seem to be surgically joined, in an act both horrifying and amusing, creating a new hybrid entity. The boundaries between healing and injury, natural and artificial, reality and illusion are not only transgressed and subverted, reflecting the hybrid praxis applied in the sculptural array, but become, now more than ever, the characteristic and visible features of our time.



Marc Foucault, *Untitled*, Photo Collage, The Collection of The Shpilman institute for Photography.

Here, you won't find Leonardo's religious-theological hymn of praise *The Last Supper* (1498-1494, the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan), nor Judy Chicago's defiantly feminist *Dinner Party* (The Brooklyn Museum, 1979). Or are both perhaps present in some sense? At times we seem to see an illusory vision of some ancient banquet, glorious and deserted, futuristic ruins or a misused science lab. We are reminded of fragmented celluloid scenes, flickering back and forth in disarray: The tragic figure of Miss Havisham (*Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens, 1861), the abandoned bride grown old and worn in her wedding gown, refusing to be consoled at the set table that has long been covered in layers of dust and spider webs; Krypton (*Superman*, Jerome Siegel, 1938), the ultimate superhero's home planet, devastated and deserted as a crystal ruin following the triumph of evil over good; and the gothic horror story telling the downfall of the House of Usher ("The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe, 1840), which draws a connection between the horror of human loss and the physical collapse of the family home.

Like these contexts, the exhibition's title, *The White Light*, outlines a praxis of fusing together different associative spaces. These include the "white light" often mentioned in testimonies of people who have undergone clinical death; the phrase also appears in the title of the Velvet Underground's second album (*White Light/White Heat*, 1967), referring to the blinding light experienced on the "morning after" a wild night of drinking, drugs and sex. It is also the title of a novel by mathematician and science fiction writer Rudy Rucker (1980),

telling the story of a scientist who ventures beyond his own mind and body through the use of drugs, seeking to explore scientific theories dealing with the limits of matter and the real and spiritual spaces of infinity. The white light also evokes spiritual doctrines that find in this phenomenon an amazing holistic healing energy. The latter may explain the silver jacket embroidered with an enigmatic geometric sign, hung upon a hanger on a side wall, suggesting a mysterious shamanic ritual taking place beyond the space of rationality in which we take refuge.

Ben Moshe's work presents a fusion of hedonism and debauchery, possessiveness, chaos and destruction, the consolation of scientific-technological progress alongside a promise of spiritual salvation.

In *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, based on the notebooks written by Franz Kafka in addition to his diaries, the author traces a painfully accurate simile for the hopeless human condition:

Seen with the terrestrially sullied eye, we are in the situation of travelers in a train that has met with an accident in a tunnel, and this at a place where the light of the beginning can no longer be seen, and the light of the end is so very small a glimmer that the gaze must continually search for it and is always losing it again, and, furthermore, both the beginning and the end are not even certainties. Round about us, however, in the confusion of our senses, or in the supersensitiveness of our senses, we have nothing but monstrosities and a kaleidoscopic play of things that is either delightful or exhausting according to the mood and injury of each individual. What shall I do? or: Why should I do it? are not questions to be asked in such places.²

I shall conclude with a quote from the postscript to the Hebrew translation of Kafka's *Octavo Notebooks*. It seems to offer not only an interpretation of the Kafkaesque state, but also, to a significant extent, an illuminating analogy for the installation discussed here. So writes the translator, Shimon Sandbank:

The representation is that of an end, but nevertheless (and here we see a typically Kafkaesque unexplained reversal) it may represent a new beginning (according to Blanchot, "Kafka and the Work's

² Retrieved from the internet at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gD981HZ190BUJF-3czZNX3DsFWvqp3cq-Z4QS4d-9gw/edit?hl=en>.

Demand," in *The Space of Literature*) [...] For Kafka "there is no possible world, only otherness, the flow of constant otherness." His new beginning is "esoteric knowledge, Kabbalah," which would have developed and grown were it not for the interference of Zionism (diary entry from 16 January 1922). This secret knowledge, Kafka's ultimate truth, can only be defined in terms of "otherness," of a basic and unbridgeable break from everything we know [...] the break with comprehensive meaning, with the truth, is in my opinion at the basis of Kafka's famous fragmentariness [...] this fragmentation is not arbitrary. It is part of the meaning it smashes; it represents absence, which is neither accepted nor rejected [...] and we may also add the impossibility of art. For art that seeks to depict the truth, admits, in its very interruptedness, its inability to achieve its goal. At most it can be said to expose itself to the truth and thereby be "blinded" by it. Blinded by the light shed on its "twisted, recoiling face" – like a spotlight from another world – "which alone is true." But art itself remains twisted and recoiling.³

³ *Kafka's Eight Octavo-Notebooks*, translation and postscript by Shimon Sandbank, 2007: Am Oved, Tel Aviv, pp. 138-141 [in Hebrew].