

## Horizontal Standing On the Installation Left Shoulder Hadara Scheflan Katzav

Employing delicate, brittle and sparse workmanship, Hilla Ben Ari creates a formidable theoretical tract on cracks in the dominant culture. It has to do with the demise of a culture fundamentally alienated from Nature, and its accompanying relation to the Body and to Nature as two Others. These have merely functional roles, and any relation toward them hinges upon the degree of their 'correct' behavior. Any hint of an imbalanced nature – any mark of bodily deficiency – is perceived as a transgression threatening the goodly order of things, prompting the culture to take policing and regulatory action.

One of the most striking motifs in Ben Ari's installation is her use of graph paper as a compelling vehicle of a mathematical order of representation. Operating out of an insubordinate stance however, the artist refuses to build a rigorously organized system of signs upon it, but rather lays it bare – as a ruling, classifying and policing material. Its mere use acts to deconstruct its organizational value, exposing it as an Other, a unified mold.

By the same token, the laborious, obsessive manual craft techniques the artist employs can be viewed as a rejection of the capitalist economy, the origins of which lie in the idiom 'time is money', and according to which, what can be mass-produced by machine conveyor belt shouldn't be carried out by hand. In this fashion, and like medieval metal-smiths and craftsmen of wood and gold, the artist revisits a laborious production method that could have been circumvented by simply purchasing the finished products or by their mechanical reproduction.

The space of the gallery has become a scared space, or at least a space signified by our culture as such. One end of the rectangular installation area, reminiscent as a whole of a Christian basilica, is designed so as to bring to mind a Gothic church façade; its other end, where we usually find the Apse, features a depiction of a mature female figure lying on a hospital bed. Ben-Ari constructs a cultural space whose extremities are organized by two polar conceptions: Christian thought on the one side, vis-à-vis a perception with much more ancient roots, symbolized by the looming female figure, the Great Goddess. The decline of the Culture of the Mother hinted at in the depiction of the patient's figure signifies above all else the rise of a later culture which has organized Consciousness in terms of division and alienation. It is a cultural reading of an historical moment where human consciousness seeks a renewed connection with humanity's real foundations, from which the cultural signifiers are adamant to distance it.

Formulating the substance of Patriarchal culture through a division between Spirit and Material, Jung's disciple Erich Neumann claimed in his essay The

Meaning of the Earth Archetype for Modern Times, that the spirit is represented by god and the sky, while matter is represented by the body and by the earth. Neumann further claimed there that we have lost the connection between the spirit and the earth, and hence that all spiritual phenomena, stressing as they do by their very nature the connection to higher, celestial foundations, perceive the earth, the body and nature as obtrusive elements; according to Neumann, this kind of conception of a baser quality in matter is the outcome of a weak consciousness that violently reacts to the body.

Ben Ari indeed demonstrates the culture's distorted relation to the body. She does so in diverse ways: through images such as that of a legless female gymnast in a 'horizontal' pose, of a female figure standing on one leg or a donkey confined to a stand too small to hold it; and through the use of techniques that allude to strenuous physical acts. The insistence on a persistent reworking of these acts has brought her to the edge of insufferable pain; to the testing of borders that has allowed her to touch the Real – a Real that emerges as an alternative option to classical spiritual consciousness.

The link Neumann draws between the weak consciousness and the devaluation of the earth – with the latter perceived as feminine, material and mundane – may be seen in the figure of the mature woman represented on the gallery's right-hand wall. Ben Ari's choice of placing that vague memory of Matriarchal culture there, directly opposite the wall representing Christian being, alienated as it is to the corporeal foundations of being, may be seen in kinship to Neumann's claim that the archetype of the Earth had merged with the archaic image of the Mother-Goddess.

A further glance at the images characterized as 'Christian' points to the complexity of the artist's stance. Appearing through golden arches is an amorphous image that hangs on chains with pulleys. The image's basic amorphousness seems simultaneously to clarify and challenge Christianity's relation to the body. On the one hand, it can be regarded as the Christian deconstruction of the body in favor of the spirit; on the other, it represents the cultural stance that regards any amorphous material as threatening. The sparse, amorphous lump carried by the chains is the fruit of modern, Western consciousness that seeks safe standing amid a constant fear of the unconscious, the mere organizational impossibility of which might devour consciousness itself. The culture deals with this amorphous lump by trying to elevating it upwards, into the conscious, towards sky and spirit.

The central structure of the exhibition space, a sort of confessional booth, is fundamental to Ben Ari's stance. Peering into this cubicle, where we can supposedly be absolved of our sins, we are however not met by a 'priest' who would console us. In this fashion, Ben Ari uncovers the policing mechanism by which any confession of sin or deficiency is met with a listening ear and a consoling response of forgiveness and atonement, and therefore the promise

of spiritual salvation. The artist refuses to award the viewer with the signifiers of mystery and consolation so needed by believers.

The structure is furthermore placed in what would be, within a Greek temple, the Adyton, which would have held its namesake's god or goddess' statue. The gaze, searching for an object to hold on to, alights only on emptiness here; the artist seems to be informing us that even the sacred is lacking. It is the void point around which human culture revolves, and for which countless religious and scientific answers have been postulated; answers that always offer the possibility of filling the void. It would seem that Ben Ari is showing us that this option is in fact nonexistent as long as the cultural perception of the body posits it as its other.