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Man in the mirror

With 'Heaven,' Polish installation artist Miroslaw Balka has created for the viewer a gaze turned inward on itself

By Smadar Sheffi

“Heaven,” a work by Miroslaw Balka now showing at Hangar 2, Dvir Gallery’s space in the Jaffa Port, stirs more than a trace of irony. Sixty-eight Perspex rods, each wrought in a kind of open spiral, turn slowly, “flowing,” reminiscent of decorative objects sold at spiritual fairs or plant nurseries. In the middle of the week, when the space was entirely empty of visitors, the observer’s portrait was refracted in the rods and illuminated by an unearthly sort of light.

It is an experience in which the “I” is infinitely reduplicated, like in a hall of mirrors or in a dream. The duplication is one of solitariness, and its amplification creates an uncomfortable feeling.

The sight, which at first looks futuristic, is reminiscent of the optical illusions popular in circuses and 19th century chambers of wonder. The work gets more interesting as it becomes clear that the artist has wrapped an invitation to do some deep pondering in a terribly sweet package.

In 2009, Balka’s “How It Is” was displayed in the lobby of the Tate Modern in London, one of the world’s leading venues for installation art. The series of installations sponsored there by the Unilever company has expanded the way people think about installation art, establishing the medium in which the body of the observer in the space as what is most important; the viewer participates in the installation simply by virtue of being there.

The exhibit by Balka, a Polish artist born in 1952 whose father and grandfather built tombstones, included a huge, intimidating metal box which stood on poles a bit taller than a person, with one side open as a giant ramp. As one walked up this ramp, the sound reverberated throughout the space (and was clearly heard during peak visit-

ing hours at the Tate, one of the most popular museums in the world). The immediate associations ranged from the giant whale who swallowed Jonah, to Noah’s ark, to shipping containers where immigrants seeking a better life in Europe might stow away. Another inevitable association was to the Holocaust, mainly to the gas vans, but also metaphorically, because of the sense of being wrapped in blackness, the alienation, the impossibility of seeing the world outside.

Spatial disorientation

Balka has used materials in the past which drew more immediate Holocaust associations, like ashes and hair. In the exhibit at the Tate, the Polish artist made a kind of ontological declaration – “This is how things are,” this is how the memories, the information and the fragments of experience are – and he built a bridge to the past.

In “Heaven,” which will be on display until tomorrow, Balka has creat-

ed for the viewer a gaze that is turned inward on itself. He has also succeeded in creating a sense of a very large space, larger than the actual space at the Hangar. After staying there for a while, one becomes spatially and temporally disoriented.

Treatment of the gaze has come up repeatedly in Balka’s works in recent years, operating between total blockage and locking the gaze on the self. In “Heaven,” the observer is like an animal whose gaze locks onto the headlights of a car threatening its life. Balka’s use of very simple materials is a kind of declaration of the gaze’s inevitability.

Mirrors, as we know them, were invented relatively late – in the 15th century, in Venice – and until then, looking at oneself was a lot less common. It’s interesting to think about Balka’s work in the context of the “mirror stage,” a phrase coined by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in the 1930s. Lacan discussed the stages of life in terms of the develop-

ment of the ego and suggested that the final stages of early childhood, during which the baby sees himself as part of his mother, arrive when the child identifies his own image in a mirror. Such an interpretation reinforces the sense of irony upon entering the exhibit space, in a day and age when we renounce responsibility precisely when our image is reflected to us everywhere, all the time.

Our image becomes distorted in the long Perspex lines, alternately shrunk and elongated, evading us and not enabling us to see the way we imagine ourselves. Speaking of distorting mirrors, the history of art brings to mind Parmigianino’s “Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror” (c. 1523-1524), a work in which the aim of looking in the mirror is not to confirm the existing, or to reinforce the experience, but rather to provide amazement and a play on identity.

When you step back from the twisting Perspex rods, which move at every slight breeze that comes through the door of the Hangar, they look like lines of light, like suns imprisoned in the structure, the industrial appearance of which contrasts their slipperiness.

Balka surrounds his viewer, speaking about emptiness and fullness, and deconstructing and biting into the essence of the perception of Paradise. Here the viewer is given quiet, and light. But into this beauty that can remind us of the great Gothic cathedrals, where the illuminations of the stained glass windows play, the artist plants a feeling of discomfort, a trap of the limited gaze.

The Dvir Gallery’s hours are especially stingy. And it’s website, like that of many other galleries in Israel, is written entirely in English, which gives it a provincial feel. Regrettably, this is characteristic of a great many Israeli art venues.



Elad Sarig

“Heaven,” now showing at Hangar 2. The “I” is infinitely reduplicated.