

Ilan Baruch | "*Beneath The Foliage Awaits The Fall*"

A new solo show, Hezi Cohen Gallery

05/03/2020 – 04/04/2020

To Restore a Sabra to its Sabrieness, by Elhai Salomon

Ilan Baruch restores a sabra to its sabrieness. Similar to V. Shklovsky's essay about restoring a stone to its stoniness through the technique of artistic defamiliarization, Baruch instigates a contrary move, albeit with an analogous outcome: he rebels against the cultural symbolisms and conceptualizations of the sabra, both in the context of the Zionist ethos and the Israeli-Palestinian discourse, using a rich sensuality to obviate them and reinstate the unmediated, initial encounter between man and environment.

The sabra, oftentimes asking to jolt itself in our culture, using various cultural and art agents, from its Zionistic-Israeli tag of his, towards a local Palestinian nativity, as a plant representing the rudimentary agricultural culture of this country and its Arab fellahs, is an immigrant itself: a native to central America that was imported here from Spain a few centuries ago. It has no mentions in ancient essays, Jewish or otherwise, that were formed on the soil of this land. The sabra's first appearance on the Hebraic cultural stage was apparently by the journalist Uri Keisary (Keizermann), who objected to the deprecation of the native Israelis, children of the first immigrants to do Aliyah, whom he calls "leaves of the sabra" and their preference over the second and third Aliyah immigrants, "The Yekkes and Shiknuzes" ('Mail Today', 1931). Thus the sabra is a veteran immigrant and wondering symbol that actually represents rootedness and perseverance under harsh conditions, spiky and rugged on the outside but soft and sweet from within, and which is a newcomer from close by, and already appears to be the archetypal metonymy of the place.

Baruch looks at Israel and sees the sabra. The view of the land, with its panoramas stretching here in additional images, amongst the mountains of Shomron to the burning fire in a dystopian space of a torn fallow field, or an outpost in which a faulty, wounding vehicle is parked. The painter gazes into the materialism and thorny sensuality of this country and reflects them with his brush. Baruch's pine tree ascends the symbolic Jerusalemite

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concreteness and morphs into a free spiritual symbol as it is extracted or apparated from its colloquial lateral dimension onto an impressive and delightful spread of branches and skies. Thereby the pine is disapparated from its political stratum, and it turns out that this maneuver is aimed from the conceptualized inside outwards and into the materialistic and wounding, sensual, independent dimension of the sightings, preceding to their settlement in the social discourse. The sabra's intimidating thorns, the thick layers of paint, and the wooden decks on which several of the paintings are drawn, all retrieve and connect the beholder to the place in its primacy. A primacy that is naked of outlook or ownership. Only the creator's look is added to the actuality of things, and in its own way represents proprietorship; of the Arab native person lying among the shifting shapes of the sabra leaves, of the configurations of Israeli occupancy in the area.

Sabras are easily found in Israeli art. At Asim Abu Shakra's, for example, we will happen upon an uprooted sabra, placed in a flowerpot – but here with Baruch we will find no other inclinations of the sabra, as a representative of immigration or nativity, but beyond those terms and conceptualizations we will find an attachment to the motif itself, as a motif asking to resymbolize its own image, a symbol that disturbs us, before it is utilized and contextualized. Abel Pann, Ludwig Blum and others who have painted the sabra throughout the history of Israeli art, were not natives of the land and by that, perhaps, tried to make a connection, to identify the essence and nature of this place. Opposite an expanse of contemporary abstract applications of the symbol of the sabra, such as in the works of modern-day artists Nati Shamia-Ofer or Benny Woodoo, Ilan Baruch turns back to extreme realism in order to maybe convene us with things in themselves, with the plant and the harsh reality as they are, and with the sabra, which is used in Israeli agriculture to outline plots and territories, borders and fences, that irrupts into its savageness as a representative of this unsown land, and the result is both enchanting and bruising. We are now left to observe the sabra beyond the realm of the specific, socialized times and places, beyond its recognition as an overseas visitor or as a contextual symbol of the earth, and are exposed with limitless intensity to its mere existence, its different shades, tastes and elusive visage, here and now, to its sabriness.

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