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Art

# Enduring wonder

**S m a d a r S h e f f i**

Group exhibition "Cabinets of Wonder in Contemporary Art – From Astonishment to Disenchantment," Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

"Cabinets of Wonder in Contemporary Art – From Astonishment to Disenchantment" is a charming, dense and colorful exhibition that is at once playful and disturbing. Cabinets of curiosities are addressed by the show in the largest sense of the term, requiring some rhetorical acrobatics to justify the inclusion of the pieces "Externsteine," a video by Karen Russo, and "Untitled (Ongoing Research Project)" by Paulo Tavares and Eyal Weizman (which are interesting artworks in and of themselves.)

Precursors to the art museum, cabinets of curiosities are examined by the present show, which consequently meditates on the role and character of the contemporary museum. These encyclopedic collections emerged in European culture in the 16th century, following the discovery of America. Disparate objects from the New World were collected and shown by monarchs and aristocrats across Europe. Some of these were beautiful and taken from the natural world, while others were horrifying, like preserved body parts. These rooms exuded a sense of dread intermixed with wonder, but also expressed the authority and pretension inherent to the colonialist project. Today we know how the story ends: These rooms gradually took shape into museums as we now know them, and the interdisciplinary collections of the time were subsequently divided into the categories of art and science, arranged chronologically and usually geographically as well.

Expressing innocence and awe, secrecy and fantasy (conceptions of the New World prompted a mix of fact and fiction), these rooms represent an exceptional point of departure for a close examination of art, and the curators of the present show, Dalia Levin, Daria Kaufmann and Ghila Limon adopt an expansive approach. Despite the decidedly tenuous relationship between the exhibition's theme and some of the works on display, this is an overall remarkable and eclectic show. In contrast to so many group exhibitions which lack a solid theoretical-curatorial basis, this time, with over 30 participating artists, an underlying



Shay Id Alony, "Magic Cubiculum Curiositatibus," 2012.

thread connects a number of interesting pieces.

Maya Attoun's installation, "Abacus" (2012) is one of the works displayed in the hall whose perspective on cabinets of curiosities is far-reaching and interesting, as well as the dialogue it enacts between past and present. The installation features 240 skulls made of wood-patterned linoleum, arranged according to shade on simple shelves. Attoun lays her cards out on the table: the synthetic linoleum neutralizes the physical repulsion induced by the sight of the bones, allowing viewers to observe the display with a particular emotional detachment.

Attoun's work first raises the association of "chapels of bones," like the famous one

at St. Catherine's monastery. What also comes to mind are investigations into atrocities that have occurred around the world (from Rwanda to the murder of 4,000 Kovno (Kaunas) Jews during World War II, the site of which was recently unearthed in one of the city's many historic forts). The skull has been employed throughout the history of art to symbolize transience and human fragility, and served as a central motif in the memento mori ("remember your mortality") genre, which flourished from Medieval times to the Baroque period.

To the best of my knowledge Attoun showed a skull years ago, in her graduate exhibition in 2006. Of course, today Attoun's work cannot avoid being linked



Maya Attoun, "Abacus," 2012.

to other contemporary works, namely "For the Love of God" – the diamond-encrusted skull made by Damien Hirst in 2007, which became emblematic of the financial bubble and consumer culture of those years.

"Wonderland" is a fascinating work in which Dina Goldstein presents video documentation of an original puppet theater performance. The work appears like a crossover between Joseph Cornell's boxes of surrealist assemblages and Alexander Calder's circus. Goldstein is not wary of kitsch or sentimentality, taking viewers to the point where "cute" borders on the revolting.

Shay Id Alony's installation "Magic Cubiculum Curiositatibus" (2012) can be described as a generic cabinet of curiosities: It appears to have been drudged up from somewhere in the past, chock-full of objects, some uncannily familiar, others entirely undecipherable. Most of the objects are not large and resemble souvenirs. Some bring to mind East Asian art, others recall native cultures from North and South America. Id Alony transforms toy parts, furniture and work tools into new composite creatures. This work continues his previous pieces, which addressed themes of myth and memory.

Additional standouts in the show include the untitled installation by Michal Shamir (relating less to the theme of the exhibition). It shows what appears to be a flock of birds in flight, but which upon closer scrutiny turns out to be a horrifying display of bird parts; "Hurricane Kit" by Omri Zin, a kinetic sculptural installation, a machine that performs an amusing and rather absurd chain reaction, recalling the work of the Swiss duo Fischli/Weiss.

Belle Shafir also displays a beautiful work entitled "Sam-sara," what may be described as drawings with strands of horse hair, and Ayala Serfaty shows "Paludes," a canoe-like structure made of felt on a polyurethane surface. These are featured in the museum's impressive lower level, and the two are only loosely related to the exhibition's larger theme, but their elegance and beauty (alongside the works by Etti Abergel and Eliezer Sonnenschein) easily justify their display.