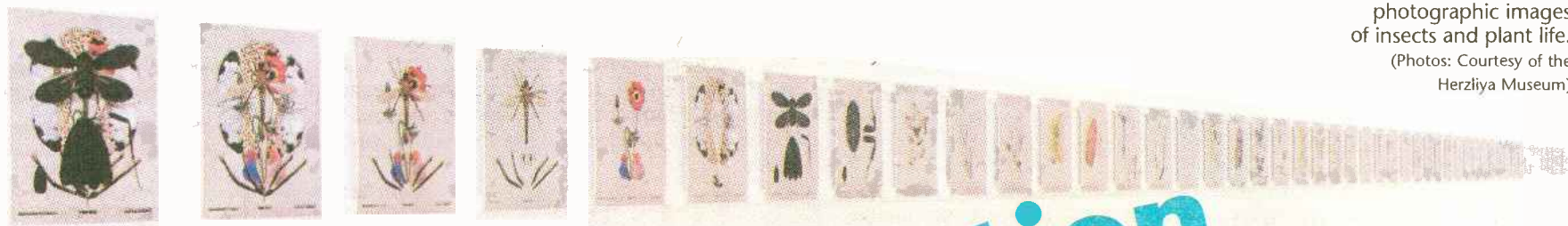


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Eliezer Sonnenschein's photographic images of insects and plant life. (Photos: Courtesy of the Herzliya Museum)



# The art of collection

## The new exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art is a modern take on the theme of what was once known as 'Cabinets of Curiosities or Wonder'

• By GRAHAM LAWSON

**T**he new exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art has moments of genuine charm and beauty and is at turns beguiling and fascinating.

Titled "Cabinets of Wonder in Contemporary Art - From Astonishment to Disenchantment," the exhibition presents the works of more than 30 Israeli artists in the media of painting, photography, video and mixed-media installations. The exhibition is a contemporary take on the theme of what were variously known as "Cabinets of Curiosities or Wonder," in German, "Kunstkammer" (art-room) and "Wunderkammer" (wonder-room).

These "cabinets," which evolved over time to reflect a collector's personal taste and were thus dependent on a patron's whims and fancies, first came to prominence in 16th-century Europe and were, in effect, rooms given over to diverse collections that housed natural history, ethnological and archeological artifacts to antiquities, artworks and extended to the downright strange.

Essentially the precursors of today's museums, the collections were amassed in an eclectic fashion - often during trading voyages and exploring expeditions - by royalty, those of the noble class, wealthy merchants and, if money permitted, by scientists and artists. In some ways, these collectors performed a task similar to today's curators, who sift through and gather works of art. The more significant of these "wonder cabinets" served to enhance knowledge and in some cases have been preserved and documented.

The idea of the "cabinets" has never quite receded from the artists' gaze

and the fascination with curios and oddities manifested itself again in the 20th century, in the "objets trouvés" (found objects) of the Surrealists, the "ready-mades" of Marcel Duchamp and most obviously in the works of

Joseph Cornell.

With all of this in mind, Dalia Levin and her co-curators Daria Kaufmann and Ghila Limon have made maximum use of the museum space from the outset.

Beginning with Yaron Steinberg's series of mixed-media "Journey Books" placed in the foyer, which can be perused at leisure, to Uri Shapira's framed installation works set against the museum windows creating a kind of stained-glass effect, and through to the main halls and numerous rooms and alcoves which, all considered, have conjured up some of the spirit that must have been experienced when first entering one of these "wonder rooms."

Also situated in the foyer are a set of seven photographic prints, titled *The Witches* and a video work, *V*, by Talia Link, both of which place the "curiosity cabinet" feet first in the 21st century.

Link's witches appear like multiethnic high priestesses, by dint of their multicultural and multicolored head-dresses and outfits.

The short video piece, a kind of pop-operatic melodrama, is a tongue-in-cheek glance at the demonization of female witches down through the ages. "All wickedness is but little compared to the wickedness of a woman," intones the narrator.

Exiting the foyer, one could say the exhibition proper begins and more traditional aspects of the "wonder rooms" present themselves.

A separate room is given over to Tomer Sapir's *Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index*. Arranged in glass cabinets are a varied selection of fossils, stones, plants and hybrids thereof. Some of the items appear to defy classification due to the fact that Sapir, by treating them with a variety of chemicals, has obscured any kind of identification process. Sapir's cabinets are both lovely and intriguing and seem to create some of the wonder we first experienced on those trips in our youth to natural history museums.

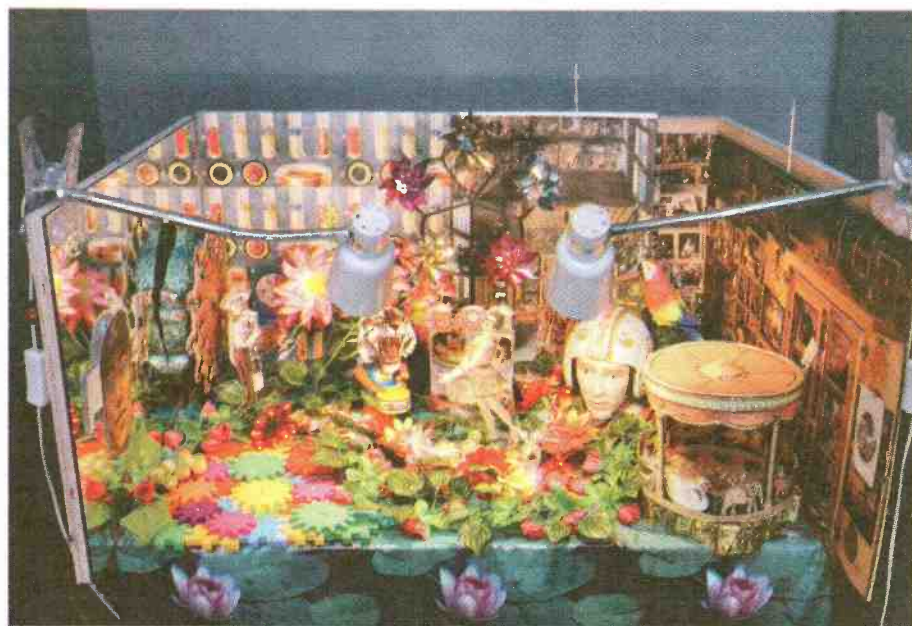


Etti Abergel's work is suspended from the ceiling.

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Alice Fleisher's work is of note.



Dina Goldstein's 'Wonderland' is a two-part installation that features a miniature puppet theater stage set.



A work by Noa Raz Melamed.



A separate room is given over to Tomer Sapir's 'Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermical Index.'

Sapir is one of several artists in the exhibition who have used materials from the natural world in their works. Housed in the lower hall of the museum, along with Eliezer Sonnenschein's photographic images of insects and plant life, is Ayala Serfaty's large-scale sculpture, *Paludes*.

An imposing 10 meters in length, the work seems to sever the space.

The sculpture is made out of hand-made felt and polyurethane, its shape suggestive of a large creature's shed skin unfurling. The work's cocoon-like appearance, its densely woven fibers and soft, seemingly moss- or lichen-like texture give the work a sensuousness that almost make one want to crawl inside, or at the very least to reach out and touch it.

Located close by and eliciting feelings of a more ethereal nature is Belle Shafir's installation, *Samsara*. Affixed to the museum wall are a myriad of delicately interlacing and entwined strands of horsehair, held in place by needles. What initially appear to be some quite lovely patterned abstractions take on a slightly more sinister aspect upon noticing what seem to be small creatures entangled in what could now be viewed as a vast insect-spun web. Similar to the Venus fly-trap, this web, for all its beauty of design, just might be lying in wait for its next victim.

FEATURES OF many curiosity cabinets were artifacts or "exotica" that originated in Africa and South America. Typical of these items were the carvings, later referred to as "fetishes," that were to capture the interest of artists of the modern era such as Picasso and Gauguin.

Works by Sharon Glazberg and Guy Raz present eerie and primitive scenarios. Strange little heads sit atop Glazberg's metal poles, arranged in

ring formation as of some tribal rite, while Raz's stark and startling photographs of animal hides and heads remind viewers that it was not uncommon to see such trophies in the curiosity cabinets.

Shay Id Alony appears to have constructed his very own "wonder room" in his installation, *Magis Cubiculum Curiositatibus* (Latin for "Magical Chamber of Curiosities"). Set on shelving units are a vast array of objects and statues of various colors, many of which evolved from readymades such as furniture and toy parts. As well as hollowed-out skulls and masks, there are many indefinable pieces and odd-looking hybrids with outsized body parts. Alony is one of several artists in the exhibition who have altered or disguised an object's original intention, in a way similar to

the "fakes" occasionally discovered in curiosity cabinets of old, which must have only added to their mystery and charm.

There is charm in abundance in Dina Goldstein's *Wonderland*, a two-part installation that features a miniature puppet theater stage set. The three-dimensional set is a vibrantly colored mass of retro-kitsch, effusively adorned with pictures, plastic flowers, cardboard cutout figures, a drummer with a tiger's head that beats out a rhythm and a moving carousel. Objects and figures move through the air, creating an effect that is pure carnival – or carnivalesque sideshow.

A video screen placed on the wall above the set enables us to view the work in a different manner, as we witness the performance through the camera lens, with close-ups of the set

and shots of Goldstein playing the part of puppeteer, moving her characters around the stage. For some, this work is sure to be a show-stealer.

There are many other works of interest on display in this large and wide-ranging exhibition. Suspended from the museum ceiling are a work by Etti Abergel and an installation by Michal Shamir, whose delicate, bird-like assemblages hover in space and appear like creatures from the spirit world.

Additional works of note are by Alice Fleisher, Sheffi Bleier and Asif Yassour. All contribute to a well-thought-out and thoroughly enjoyable themed exhibition.

The exhibition closes on December 29. For more information: [www.herzliyamuseum.co.il/english/homepage](http://www.herzliyamuseum.co.il/english/homepage)