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מוזיאון תל אביב לאמנות - 85111					

ART Shaul Setter

Tamir Zadok's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art centers around a new video work, "Art Undercover," which is impressive, clever and surprising. It succeeds in conducting a process that is exceptional, certainly in these parts, focusing on a lively and impassioned public discussion – the Jewish-Arab history of the Mizrahim (Jews of North African and Middle Eastern descent) in Israel. Instead of demonstrating its assumptions and directions using artistic means, Zadok's work demonstrates something that political discourse and intellectual discussion are unable to achieve, or perhaps suppress in favor of a clear argument and the closing of ranks. Here the creative act provides a unique opening.

In this work, Zadok follows Shlomo Cohen-Abarbanel, brother of the late Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohen and one of the heads of the Mossad from the 1950s to the 1970s. Before being recruited to the Mossad, Cohen-Abarbanel studied art in Paris; he later made intelligent use of these studies when he was sent to Egypt as a secret agent in the early 1950s and lived there as a promising young French painter named Charduval.

Charduval won considerable artistic success in Egypt, and even had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo. His paintings were sold, one of them to the museum itself. The video begins with consultations with experts on Charduval's art; continues with the reading of critiques of his exhibition in the local press; and afterward follows Zadok's journey to Cairo, where he looks for a painting by Charduval that apparently remained in the city.

He tours the city, meets with various contacts, visits the Museum of Modern Art, is photographed next to a mosque with local youth, and realizes that someone is following him. He and a family member who joined him on the trip are two Israelis with a "Mizrahi appearance," Arabic speakers who blend in, but who also have a secret mission, whose nature is no longer so clear.

Just as Mossad agent Cohen-Abarbanel pretended to be an artist until he became one, Tamir Zadok's work of art leads him to pretend to be a secret agent,



Tamir Zadok on a Cairo street. Searching for a Charduval painting.

Photos from video work "Art Undercover"

and raises the repressed Arab identity to the surface: Tamir Zadok comes to Egypt and discovers the Arab identity that was taken away from him. He blends into the space, speaks the language, looks like a local. He doesn't pretend to be Tamer Sadek; as Tamer Sadek, he stops pretending.

But the video work shows how the process of self discovery is itself a fabrication: not in the sense that it is false, that there is no truth to it, but that it is part of a search for an unknown person, identifying with him and pretending to be him – in other words, conjuring him up and while doing so, creating his own image according to it. In order to be Tamer Sadek, a Jewish Arab, he must go in search of a German Jew who came to Cairo as a Frenchman, lived there clandestinely as an Israeli, but was also accepted there, if only for a short time, as a local. He must travel as Cohen-Abarbanel and paint Charduval's paintings. His true identity is not revealed after he has removed his disguises; it is created by the simulation of the disguise. Tamer Sadek is the art of Tamir Zadok, not his secret identity.

The exhibition, which brings together several of Zadok's projects from the past decade, is drawn entirely from this video work. On the wall next to the video are four paintings by Charduval – done in modern abstract style with Oriental themes, familiar even if they are seen here for the first time. After watching the video, one can no longer say with certainty who created these paintings, and even if it was Charduval, who is their "composer," the "real" artist who combines them into a cumulative process.

Other works by Zadok are on the seam between documentary and fiction, and demonstrate how these are not two opposites that come together momentarily, but rather two sides of processes that include adapting materials, suiting them to a medium, framing and conceptualization that present pictures of a reality; staged photographs, enlarged pictures from the family archive, a stylized video of a drawing lesson.

Artist on a secret mission

A new video work by Tamir Zadok demonstrates something about ethnic issues that political discourse and intellectual discussion are unable to achieve

an artist-spy. Researching the impersonator creates an over-identification with him. He gets a haircut, buys a suit, comes to the museum and introduces himself as Tamer Sadek – an Israeli, a Jewish-Arab, an Arab, who wants to display his art in

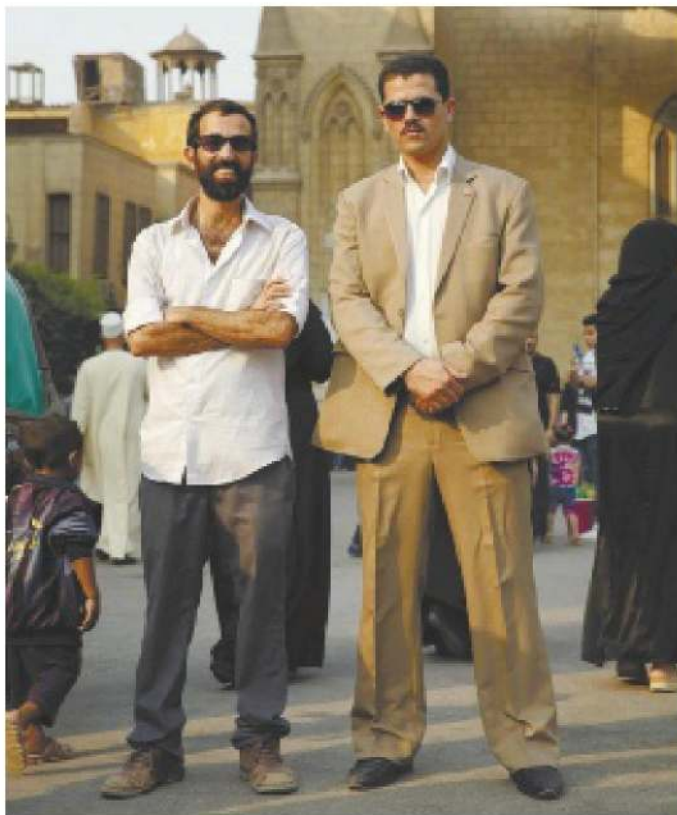
the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, just as Charduval did in his day.

The placard for Zadok/Sadek's solo exhibition is already posted on the museum's facade – and this is the exhibition we are invited to visit in Tel Aviv. The

entire video is surrounded by a veil of fabrication – a detective story edited in the format of a spy film, with familiar cinematic conventions and routine gestures (wandering the streets, phone conversations in empty rooms, random encounters in alleys). So it is actually unclear where the film was shot; which of the people in it are actors, even some who play themselves; whether the search is for the lost painting (which Zadok starts to paint by himself at a certain point), the lost artist (whom he investigates until he impersonates him completely), or for art as a journey to what was lost (so as to return and redeem it).

Self discovery and fabrication

The complex visual presentation and the narrative imbroglio are of far-reaching political significance. When Tamir Zadok becomes Tamer Sadek, one might think that he is reversing the movement of Zionism, which transformed the Jewish-Arab (Tamer Zadok) into a Mizrahi Israeli (Tamir Zadok), and in doing so tore him from the Arab space to which he belonged and harnessed him to a national story that is being formed in the face of Arab identity, and opposed to it.



Tamir Zado, left, in Cairo with one of the characters in the video.

Now comes the video work

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In all these works there is a strong and absolute masculine presence (there are almost no women in Zadok's work): The length and breadth of the exhibition presents frontal, glaring, erotic (Mizrahi) masculinity. But instead of it being a body that reveals a preliminary and natural identity, this is a body on display, preparing itself to be seen, aware of its sexuality, aware that it is active and passive, fabricated at all times. And that is actually the source of its strength.

At the end of the exhibition there is a screening of the video work "Gaza Canal" (2010), which has already become iconic: a mockumentary of the Rabin Visitors' Center at the Gaza Canal, which describes the digging of a canal between Israel and the Gaza Strip, as a way of achieving good neighborly relations between Israelis and Palestinians, the realization of a new Middle East in which raking in profits easily overcomes a hundred years of national hostility.

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The film investigates the fantasy of the peace industry: the utilitarian rationality and the social isolation, wrapped in saccharine marketing. Pretending to be a corporate film is here clearly critical, ironic, lacking in empathy, distant: Everything in it is staged. But from this work we can now go back to "Art Undercover" and see how the possibilities for impersonation develop: In the later work it is more ambivalent, revealed to be a movement of passion, closeness, identity and changes in identity; neither the thing that we find repulsive, nor the primordial thing that is revealed, but the creative force itself.