

Trapped in Words

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Masha Yozefpolsky is showing a 30-minute-long video at *Hazira* (interdisciplinary art space), Jerusalem, comprising several independent works and the documentation of several installations she has created during the last six years. The works are projected on a small screen installed in the space's foyer about an hour before the start of the performances in the main hall, with the soundtrack transmitted over headphones. It is a small, crowded space, and it is extremely hard to concentrate on the works, to immerse one's self in them, to follow the words and texts as they flicker by. There is no way of following all of their nuances and meanings.

However there doesn't seem to be any necessity to do so. The unfriendly screening-mode allows the viewer to view the pieces as one unit, to extract from it a glossary of Yozefpolsky's complex artistic idiom. A series of recurring motifs flesh it out: combinations of image and text; a monochromatic color-scale, almost always a somber black and white; Yozefpolsky's appearance, in almost all of her works, looking as if embalmed in a white, hermit-like shroud; several speakers reiterating the same text in different languages; and more. It's a shame the installations were documented in a way that renders their original set-up illegible.

Art critic Naomi Aviv has written of Yozefpolsky that she is "an expressive, stubborn video-poetess with a uniquely sensitive inner eye." Sigal Eshed characterized her in *Studio* (Israeli art magazine) as "the lace-maker of some the most beautiful video works I've seen in Israel." These definitions cut to the heart of the poetic, gloomy and mysterious feel of her work. Yozefpolsky's oeuvre is characterized by a clear distinction between a surreal internal world and an exterior, communicative one, between reality and dream, stillness and cacophony. The works are usually opaque, with the compensation taking the form of strong images and lyrical texts. There is no shred of humor in them. They are extremely serious, "heavy", and they generate conflicted feelings of freedom and claustrophobia.

It's hard to avoid the comparison between the feelings generated from Yozefpolsky's work and her biography. A native of Leningrad, she immigrated to Israel in 1974 when ten years old, and to this day she still feels like an outsider. "I have a lot of problems accepting this place. A lot of criticism. Because it's such a small place, it siphons into it all the ills of the world. It's very violent and supremely intense," she says, but hedges with, "I guess I'd also feel that way anywhere else." The longing for an abstract, surreal place, permeates all her works.

The exhibit comprises eight works. *Golem* shows Yozefpolsky's face, mainly her moving eyes, battling, trying to wrest free. The image is continuously interjected with single words: "port", "shame", "snow", "belt", "sometime", "soon", "gift", "frog", "train", "hole", "violence", "going". The text, at first seemingly meaningful, is drained of significance as one watches work after work using the same technique, the same font – sometimes the same word.

Mission, a precise conceptual work created in 1995, shows Yozefpolsky cutting a loaf of bread and laying its crumbs on a table. She is then seen cupping the crumbs and putting them back into the loaf and sealing it.

Yozefpolsky's works deal with issues of politics and locality, as well as with mythology and spirituality. She says they try "to establish a place that is between the temporary and sensual and the cultured, verbal and conceptual." *Hold On*, an installation exhibited at the Jerusalem Artists' House, comprises several screens, each representing, according to the artist, "a refuge from the status quo": religion, ecology, mysticism, insanity, meditation etc. In *North-Cut*, which she exhibited at the Kibbutz Gallery in Tel Aviv, she exhibited political and personal texts drawn from her dreams, which she then tried to sort; she also asked people where they would want to be and presented a picture of a pastoral place on a bed of reinforced glass. In another work, she is seen licking the screen; among the texts in this work is the phrase "trapped in words", which could be seen as a distilment of her relation to the mediation of language.

Yozefpolsky warns that she has an ambivalent relation with words. She wants to neuter their meanings, turn them into raw material, yet still open them up to interpretation. “I think it’s important that people understand that they can understand reality without the mediation of words,” she says. “We’re trapped in words, and subsequently our attentiveness is whittled away, evaporates. I’m a victim of this, too, but I’m trying to go back to the stillness, the source, the beginning. I treat words as raw material, as poetic stuff, as the possibility of opening new meanings to the viewer – as opposed to the dictation so prevalent in contemporary visual culture.”

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