

Recreating That moment, The Invention of Israeliness

Victoria Hanna sings at the opening of Yigal Nizri's "Living Growing," Dvir Gallery, Tel-Aviv, 3 Oct. 2002

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The gallery walls at Yigal Nizri's exhibition are brown, and giant forms float over them, like mutant Seven Species; flat, as though naive, as if they were taken from a kibbutz dining room. Vocalist Victoria Hanna sang in that space on the opening night. Calling it 'a concert on the opening night' would be an injustice to the moment of her performance. It was really a shared creation: a performance sung-acted by Hanna, directed by Nizri into the space he had designed; a unique, chilling occurrence of voice within place.

Hanna circled around a few songs with a Yemenite/biblical scent of the old Zionist school. She began with a shattering version, an ironic, playful and 'artful' performance, a savoring and testing singing of "Look not upon me, Because I am dark." Dark, in a shining green satin dress, embroidered, 'second hand,' 'ethnic.'

Her singing then became orderly, serious and more calculated in songs such as "The Pomegranate Tree." And then she switched on a cassette player and drank some water, listening with us to one of the 'sources' to which she had just added her own version (after the late Ofra Haza, and after Esther Ofarim and Illana Eliya - may they live long), following all the Yemenite women singers who ever performed this song and its likes - an old original recording of an Israeli-Yemenite woman singer. (I later learned her name is Hanna Aharoni).

Nizri's work speaks blatantly, poster-like, of the way the living national religious memory had turned into a still object in the dining room of the dominant Israeli-Jewish experience in the Land of Israel. Thus the forms became abstract, graphical, modernist, minimalist. Ghosts of the fruit of the land.

Hanna was the Mizrahi girl in the recreation of that moment: the invention of Israeliness. An Ashkenazi Israeliness, inspired, for example, by Yemenite cultural assets that it assimilated into itself with selectiveness that mixed interest with orientalism to a degree that is as touching as it is revolting (Ashkenazi-Zionists, artists including, also found inspiration and interest in the "figure of the Arab"). The shared Nizri-Hanna speech actualized the moment wherein thousands of years of religious consciousness in general, and Mizrahi consciousness in particular, had reached their end (until further notice: see Shas) in favor of another consciousness. Nizri and Hanna, together more than apart, wrote and sang this consciousness.

In a space where "Illu fat, mat" (that which has passed is dead), sat Hanna the Mizrahi woman, and listened to that which remained from that past in the familiar regional space. It was not a narrow "post-Zionist" parody on Yemenite-feminine-"biblical"-Zionist singing. Hanna was both that Yemenite singer who sang some decades ago and a young Mizrahi woman today, examining the remains, to see if they still have life and a space for action. As if in a time tunnel I was

momentarily transported for the first time to a moment where, historically, I could not have been present. The moment Nizri, Hanna, and the members of our generation were born into as a fait accompli, inviting excavation and examination.

Particularly, I felt I was participating in a scene close in spirit to a scene in Antonioni's *The Eclipse*, created in a different place (Italy) before I was born (1962): Elegant people in a cocktail party mood, having a good time and expanding their horizons with an exotic feminine performance. I went back to this film after the opening, and found one of the most beautiful anti\colonialist scenes I have ever seen. Sharper than I had remembered. The film was made into the moment when most colonies in Africa were liberated from Europe's burden (well, not really, says the film), while in Europe - gourmet, bored, but also bubbling with unrest - objects of African presence began to be seen, enchanting and horrifying.

Israel looking up to Europe, Modernism, African masks, darkness. The last century's twenties, the fifties, the sixties, two thousand and two. Next to a corner Nizri placed a model of the gallery (white walls), covered by palm tree branches. A certain interpretation seems to present itself: In a gallery named Dvir, meaning temple, a reminder of the ephemerality of this story. A sense of proportion.

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Victoria Hanna opening Yigal Nizri's solo exhibition *Living Growing*, at Dvir Gallery, Tel-Aviv, 10 Sep. 2002.