



## On Imitation and the Art of Kidnapping: Yigal Nizri's "Tiger"

Ella Shohat

"History is object of a structure whose site is not homogeneous and empty but one filled by now-time [...] Fashion has the scent of the modern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been. It is the tiger's leap into the past."

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of history"

Richly evocative, Yigal Nizri's "*Tiger*" touches on a number of issues having to do with Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> history, identity and the body in Israel. A brownish rug, cut in the shape of a skinned tiger whose edges are framed in a light blue tape, the work is made out of the artist's childhood blanket that features an image of a living tiger storming out of a jungle background. The blanket, in other

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<sup>1</sup> "Mizrahi," literally denotes Eastern in Hebrew, but commonly refers to Jews of North African and west Asian origins.

words, is literally a piece of Mizrahi experience. Produced in local sweatshops, such blankets were once marketed in ways that bypassed the “blue-and-white”<sup>2</sup> establishment’s distribution networks such as *Hamashbir* and *Hashekem*. Within a kind of alternative economy, sold in open markets or from-door-to-door, the blankets were consumed en-masse largely by Mizrahim and Palestinians. Part of kitsch culture, the blankets featured “exotic” themes that conjured up the grandeur of other times and other places. Manufactured in cheap materials, its colors and tones only accentuated the paleness of the copy, while at the same time testifying to a consuming apparatus unconcerned with the lost aura of the original. Kitsch culture has organized the aesthetic economy of blue-collar Mizrahi households. It has injected an element of gayness, conspicuous against the background of small and crowded apartments in densely populated Shikunim (housing projects).

Minimalist architecture and visual uniformity of the Shikunim, where the residents’ meager means dictate a life confined within the limits of their “hood.” For a few decades the nationalist decree of “knowing the land” (“yediat ha’aretz”), expressed in such slogans as “sa ve’tayel berahave Israel” (“Tour and Travel Throughout Israel”), has represented for Mizrahim a kind of an alien culture associated with the folklore of the Kibbutz, the Youth Movements, and the Society for the Protection of Nature. Travel across state borders, furthermore, has been perceived an adventure beyond the pale, associated with the urban bourgeois’ ability to venture into a world without boundaries. Even for educated refugees or immigrants from Arab-Muslim countries, those who experienced themselves as citizens of “other worlds,” life in the segregated Shikun zone has anesthetized that cosmopolitan feeling of being “at home in the world.” Lower-Middle Class Mizrahi tourism, one must recall, appeared as an option only since the mid-to-late 1980’s, and was at first largely limited to Egypt and Turkey— a more affordable and culturally more familiar terrain. Given this context, the popular theme of an “elsewhere” adorning practical objects only brings to the surface the latent desire to escape an existence that is claustrophobic in architectural, social, cultural, and geopolitical terms.

The sense of “elsewhereness” triggered by the blanket’s image of the tiger-in-the-jungle, meanwhile, is also present in another geography implied by the “skinned”-tiger-rug. A three-dimensional object, designed as an imitation of a tiger corpse, the rug takes the viewer on a journey to the interior of an imaginary colonial house decorated by animals’ skins and heads, signifying the bravado of the hunter. Their bodies spread under his feet allegorize the sense of omnipotence generated by geographical domination—the colonizer’s mastery of elsewhereness. With the imperial “penetration” into the “dark continent,” African objects, goods, plants, animals, and people “traveled” across the seas, exhibited and paraded before the West’s bemused eyes. In a kind of topographical reductionism, Africa was imagined as an immense jungle, when in fact the jungle forms only a small portion of the continent, while the Safari-- that “innocent” entertainment designed within the frame of the colonial project-- has continued to attract pilgrims eager for safe and tamed adventure. Prior to WWII, travel within the empire was largely an upper class affair, vicariously enjoyed by the middle and working classes via the fetishistic and voyeuristic

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<sup>2</sup> Evoking the colors of the national flag, made-in-Israel products have been labeled “blue-and-white,” encouraging the consumer’s patriot act.

consumption of “authentic” objects as well as drawings, paintings, diaries, novels, photographs and later films. Institutions such as the museum, the zoo, the botanical garden, the exposition, and the freak-show were all premised on obsessive collection of the “exotic,” by definition that which lies outside (“ex-”), and yet that which is also domesticated, posing no danger, and charming in its “otherness.”

As a simulacrum within a simulacrum, “*Tiger*” cages, as it were, a “living” tiger within the skin of a “dead” tiger, generating several ironies, paradoxes and tensions. The tiger’s dynamic movement, flaunting an open jaw as if about to jump on its prey at any moment, is undercut by its fatal telos. The three-dimensionality of the “hunted” tiger lies in glaring contradiction to the two-dimensional image of the animated tiger-- itself a trace of the three-dimensional blanket. “*Tiger*” transforms the blanket of a Mizrahi apartment into an object of an English colonial house, bringing home, as it were, the blanket’s tiger. The work inserts the blanket’s erased genealogy so as to allow the viewer to “read” syntagmatically two seemingly unrelated worlds through and in relation to each other. In this artistic rendez-vous, the two tigers are made to encounter each other as delegates of two different, even clashing, genres and aesthetic visions— that of the colonizer and that of the colonized, or that of the haves and the have-nots. “Authenticity” and “originality” have all been markers of the economic value of “arts” and “crafts.” Whether an original Picasso painting or an authentic African mask, the aura of the “real” confers status on its “owner” and on the consuming viewer gazing at the hanging objects on white walls in art galleries or ethnographic museums. Kitsch aesthetics tends as well to favor the “real,” not only by imbibing the values of Mimesis in the arts, but also by deploying veristic representations— with the difference that that they are in “bad taste,” mechanically reproduced for wide consumption.

Folded in the blanket is an aesthetics practice that parallels other accessible decorative practices, including plastic flowers, “crystal” chandeliers, velvet-like wallpapers, golden horlogiers, posters of horses galloping against the sunset, and other symptoms of commodified romantic nostalgia. In Israel of the 1970s, the portrait of a blue-eyed boy with a tear streaming down his cheek, known as “hayeld haboche,” (the crying child)<sup>1</sup> — appealed to the maternal and even paternal instincts of parents whose own children bore little resemblance to the Dickensian child who was warmly welcomed in the homes of the oriental shikun. Goblenim’s embroidery too brought to cluttered apartments the smell of other places and times, with machine-made patterns of clichéd Western “high art” that copied 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings, portraying typical scenes from the life of the nobility: a French or English court flaunts the statuesque beauties wearing hooped dresses on their way to the dance floor, each one leaning on the arm of an aristocrat, while the queen watches. The illusion of space in the Goblen image stood in dramatic contrast to the modest room where the Goblen was hung, just as the royal style of the mademoiselles did not resemble at all the world of the Mizrahi woman whose labor provided the “living” tissue of an inaccessible world. Although produced on the assembly-line, Goblenim required the labor of a single worker to breath life into the patterns, and endow them with a personal signature, while the patriarchal framework of both Judaism and Zionism afforded her the opportunity to demonstrate her value as “eshet hayil mi yimtza” – a woman whose price is above rubies. Goblenim required the patient thread-and-needle female labor to “fill in” colorful patterns, and to follow in the steps the industry supplied. As an

imitation of the aristocratic world presented in them, Goblenim are also an imitation of the high art trapped in them, as well as an imitation of the concept of art as imitation. In this sense we witness a historical shift; the 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural hybridity of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries—hybridity which was intensified with colonialism and especially since the transition to Israel-- brought in its wake the destabilization of the anti-mimetic aesthetic tendency characteristic of the Judeo-Muslim culture. In fact, mimesis has not commonly typified the aesthetic conception of most civilizations, and thus the metanarrative that arranges art history as a linear march spreading from realism through modernism to postmodernism, is Eurocentric. “Tiger” is imbricated in this tension between mimetic art and abstract art. Along with its allusions to realism, especially its “quotation” from the tiger-imaged blanket, “Tiger” also shape a schematic form of a “skinned” animal, playing with the Hebrew word “mufshat” that signifies both “skinned” and “abstract.”

The very material that constitutes this postmodernist work-- the blanket-- was produced on a modern assembly line. “*Tiger*” plays with these complex relationships between a product of assembly-line work and artistic labor, deconstructing notions of “high” versus “low” art. A product of serial uniformity, the blanket is also the product of an anonymous seamstress whose labor lacks the glorified aura of “the artist.” In this sense the blanket would seem to have little connection to the artistic uniqueness of the cut rug, consumed within a gallery space, and subjected to the mercantile artworld’s rules of the game. At the same time, “*Tiger*” highlights the entangled relationship between the sewing-artist and the seamstress. The assembly line blanket is transformed into an artwork whose creative procedures partially mimic the very same process of cutting and sewing that produced the blanket itself. Injecting a piece of Mizrahi life into a largely Euro-Israeli art gallery space forces an encounter between these two separate cultural geographies. Reflexively this act points to the remains of a Mizrahi existence in the belly of the establishment beast. Rather than naturalize the presence of a Mizrahi art in a Euro-Israeli space, “*Tiger*” kidnaps that space, jujitsu-like, to reveal the blue marks, as it were, of the hidden and not-hidden injuries of class and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> A testimonial to the existential gap between the seamstress worker and the sewing artist, “*Tiger*” implies both their intimacy and distance. A kind of homage to an allegorical mother by an allegorical son, “*Tiger*” also suggests their common entrapment within an institutional apparatus over which they seem to possess little power.

A metaphor and a metonym of Mizrahi history, “*Tiger*” alludes to the negotiation of Mizrahi identities within the dominant Eurocentric vision of Israel as a kind of a Switzerland of the Middle East, populated by blue-eyed sturdy Sabras-- the ideal-ego of the New Jew. Since the rupture from the Arab and Muslim space, Mizrahim found themselves in a new situation on the ground, forced to shift their self-definitions in terms that had little to do with their previous sense of belonging. The perception of their very body was now subjected to a dissecting gaze that marked them as uncivilized, barbarian, savage, and indeed animalic—as in the slur “schwartz hayes” (black animals in Yiddish.) It is virtually impossible to look at the tiger of “*Tiger*” without associating it with the related synonymous animal-- the panther, and its symbolic power of resistance.

Borrowing their name from the African-American movement, the Israeli Black Panther<sup>3</sup> movement has represented a rejectionist front; no longer the sacrificial lambs of their parents' generation, but rather the agents of a protest with sharp teeth. "Tiger, 2001" was made by an artist born during the years of Black Panthers resistance, and offers a moment of reflection on generational continuity and discontinuity, especially since the "lion" is associated with the more recent leader of the Sephardic party Shas. As with the Black Panthers' name, the image and the title of a "brown tiger" can also be seen as kidnapping the original slur so as to boomerang against its users. The jungle is indeed here, not as a safari model of the world, but as an act of unchaining and revolt.

The simultaneous visualization of the tigers as both hunting and hunted, predator and preyed upon, with their heads literally facing in opposite directions, highlights a paradox regarding the "image" of bestiality (the two-dimensional blanket) and the "reality" of a crushed creature (the three-dimensional rug.) Not merely an echo of the Romanticism of Eros and Thanatos, or of the existentialism of life's absurdity, "*Tiger*" also offers a melancholy look at Mizrahi masculinity, trapped between images of prowess and emasculation. Within animalizing tropes Mizrahi men have been associated with hairiness and wooliness, leading – as with women-- to the internalization of demeaning images. The numerous ads for hair-removal for men in Israel bring another dimension to the mimicry of whiteness. The panther or tiger's tough bodily movement, his "cool pose"<sup>3</sup> signifies hyper- masculinity, but also reveals the fragility of a colonized body in search of an identity. In "*Tiger*" the very material that makes the tiger possible is lamb's wool; in other words the hairiness of the beast literally forms the body of the lamb. Here revolt and submission seem to co-mingle, dialectically feeding off one another.

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<sup>1</sup> The Italian Giovanni Bragolin who largely painted images of Gypsy children painted the picture. Prints of his painting wandered into flea markets in Europe, finding their way also to Israel.

<sup>2</sup> I further develop the notion of "jujitsu aesthetics," of kidnapping the mainstream to boomerang against itself in Unthinking Eurocentrism (coauthored with Robert Stam) Routledge, 1994.)

<sup>3</sup> On the term "cool pose" in the African-American culture, see Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, Cool Pose (Touchstone Books, 1993)

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<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the American movement, the Israeli Black Panthers movement launched a major revolt against discrimination in Israel in the early 1970s, calling for equal rights for Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews, viewed as the blacks of Israel.

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In her essay, “On Imitation and the Art of Kidnapping”, Ella Shohat attempts to articulate aspects of a resistant aesthetics, looking at Yigal Nizri’s artwork, “Tiger.” The article links seemingly distant geographies around the question of mimesis. In Israel, “kitsch” artifacts, such as tiger blankets and goblenim, are accompanied by a certain Mizrahi nostalgia that revives images of colonial exotica. Kitsch aesthetics tends toward mimicry due to the imbibing of mimetic values in the western arts, even when it is made in “bad taste” and reproduced mechanically for mass consumption. According to Shohat, the metanarrative that organizes art history as a linear march moving from realism through modernism to postmodernism is Eurocentric. Given the taboo on graven images Judeo-Muslim culture, for example, preferred anti-mimetic aesthetics. The essay points to a dialectic between Mimesis and its negation, recycled, in some ways, into popular visual culture.

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