Temporary Structures

Many emotionally and politically charged places appear in Nir Evron's work, among them Rawabi, the new Palestinian city, the Seven Arches Hotel on Mount Olive, in Jerusalem, and the Jamestown Settlement in Virginia, USA. What happens to the concreteness of the locations and the specific political stories when the works separate content and form? Hagai Ulrich reviews Evron's show, "Masad (Foundation)."

Critique / Hagai Ulrich December 4, 2016

“Masad," (Hebrew for foundation) is the title of Nir Evron's show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. *Masad* is the base of a building, anchoring it to the ground. However, the works in the show are raised on skeletal wooden structures that detach them from the floor. The detachment is apparent also on the content level. Evron's work refers to specific historical moments and stories or concrete places, and points to historical, social, and political injustices associated with those places, but they are still detached from time and place by editing, photographic manipulations, and positioning in space, which accentuates the detachment even further.

Evron creates tension between the political content and the concrete injustices - the starting points of the works - and the final works with their sculptural and aesthetic aspects. Form – the detachments that are aesthetically expressed through the photography, editing, and installation – overshadows and diminishes content rather than serve it. The separations stress the failure of Evron's artistic attempt (and perhaps of Modernism in general) to mediate political stories into a unified visual system as they highlight the abstraction and the disconnection from the ground.

Masad_general view_002.jpg



[1]Nir Evron, Masad, 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

Large close-up photographs of totem faces from the Jamestown settlement – a living-history museum in Virginia, USA – are hung at the entrance to the show. These photographs, from 2016, do not show the totems' bases, creating a sense of floating that is enhanced by the side-by-side hanging. Another work, the video *Oriental Arch*, from 2009, was shot in the Seven Arches Hotel on Mount Olive, in Jerusalem. The hotel was built before 1967 and has been only partially operational since then. The space the work's images are depicting is devoid of people or activity. The shots are slow or static, and the camera's gaze is passive. The energy that characterizes working, lively hotels – activities performed by hotel employees and their interaction with guests, behind the scenes or up front – is missing here, and the place is experienced as trapped in limbo, between action and inaction, between existence and inexistence. This space is somewhat reminiscent of the Jordanian royal family's summer palace, which appears in *A Free Moment*, from 2011, also in the show. In the video the building is shown surrounded by scaffolding; construction was halted after the war in 1967. The camera is set on a floating mechanism that can also turn upside-down, emphasizing the natural landscape beyond the never-built walls of the palace.

Jamestown (totems).jpg **[2]**



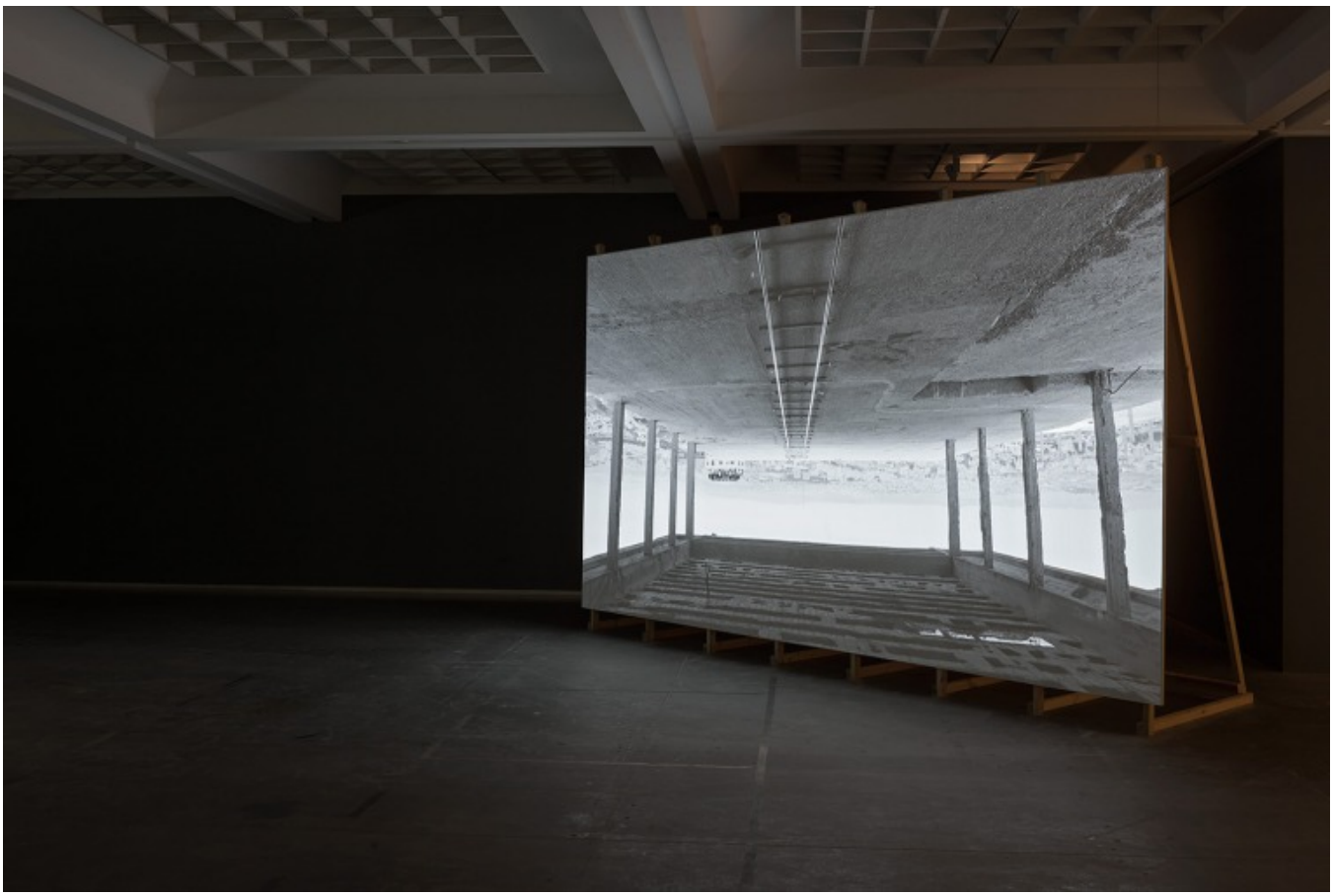
[3]Nir Evron, Jamestown (totems), 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

Oriental Arch.jpg **[4]**



[5]Nir Evron, Oriental Arch, 2009.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

A Free Moment.jpg **[6]**



[7]Nir Evron, A Free Moment, 2011.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

Endurance, from 2014, is a camera-less 16-mm film that is a simulation of a typical home in Rawabi, the new city in the Palestinian Authority, on the West Bank. Rawabi's construction began in 2009, but was not completed as planned, because of the many objections, mostly by Israel but also from within Palestine. Evron converted the measurements in an architectural plan for one of the neighborhoods into a movie sequence. Nissan Perez wrote about it: "For example, the length measurement of a wall in the plan determined the physical length of that part in the actual film representing that section, and consequently also the extension of the shot in time."1 The work shows abstract shapes in black-and-white, representing the interior of the apartment. Evron has turned the stationary images into a temporal action that creates an uncanny feeling because of the artificial relationship between space and time. The work shows a place lacking its tangible body, simulating a meandering among the non-existent walls of an elusive building. The actual existence of the place is undermined a-priori because "the hope it offers to the Palestinians is mixed with doubt."2

Masad_general view_003.jpg **[8]**



[9]Nir Evron, Masad, 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

In *Geist Und Blut* (2015), a 16mm film converted to video, we see a castle that used to be a hospital for the mentally ill near Dresden, Germany. Now it functions as a memorial site for victims of World War II. During the years 1940-1943 the castle was part of Nazi Germany's "T-4 Plan," under which people with mental or physical deficiencies have been sterilized and executed. The video is projected inside a large-scale wooden cube. The square is another form associated with Western Modernist art's call for abstraction. Evron has turned the camera by 90° so that the images lie sideways, and the viewers must tilt their heads to view them horizontally. Also, the camera moves lightly up and down, as if hanging from the swaying branch of a tree. The instability enhances the sense of suspension and detachment from the ground. In *Pangymnasticon* (2016), both sides of scanned pages are arranged on lightboxes. The pages come from a 19th-century book recommending a series of exercises. The pages are overlaid, creating doubled images and upsetting the practicality and concreteness of the act of exercising. The function of the instrument – the vaulting horse – to provide a foundation is cancelled out and the drawings lose their ability to teach.

Geist und Blut.jpg **[10]**



[11]Nir Evron, Geist Und Blut, 2015.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

Pangymnastikon.jpg **[12]**



[13]Nir Evron, Pangymnasticon, 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

Finally, L*a Solitude,* (2016), shows segments shot in French Guiana, which used to be a French penal colony from the 19th through the middle of the 20th century. The video opens with the cell occupied by Alfred Dreyfus, when he has been sent there in 1894, and moves on to other sites in the territory. The documentary-like framework shows the locals and their villages, the capital, Cayenne, and Kourou – a suburb where most of the residents work at the rocket launch center of the European Space Agency. The narration accompanying the images, written by Danny Yahav-Brown, muses poetically and abstractly about the early days of cinema and cinematography, and tells a story about an unknown photographer, described only as "the photographer." The text mentions some of the ancestors of Western cinema: the Lumiere Brothers; Georges Méliès, the pioneer of the silent film, who made an important film about the Dreyfus Affair in 1899; Francis Doublier, one of the first cinematographer, who in 1898 faked a documentary about the affair; and Felix-Louis Regnault, a forerunner of the ethnographic documentary cinema.3 The images in the video do not correspond to the text exactly; the narrator tells a intangible, vague story, with no references that might help understand the context that binds image and sound. This is another separation of form from content (between the narration and the images, but also between them and the stories behind the images and the text. A good example is Dreyfus, one of the local heroes, who is not mentioned by name). Therefore, the images are dragged into the incomprehensible, free-floating story of the narration. Grainy, blurred images appear throughout the video, the camera wobbles, hovering up and down while occasionally focusing on objects around Kourou.

La Solitude, 2016A.jpg **[14]**



[15]Nir Evron, La Solitude
Frame from a video. 2016

La Solitude.jpg **[16]**



[17]Nir Evron, La Solitude, 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

The images were made with cameras and computers to realize the visual forms Evron has chosen, by which to impart meaning to the places and the objects. The images have been processed in ways that emphasize detachment from concrete elements: the distance from the ground, the hovering, the blurring, the stretching of time, the subversion of gravity, the empirical conditions, stripping the sites of the content that normally makes them work, of their attributes, of their identifying details, and of their related human and social actions. Furthermore, the essential details that create the context for those stories are absent, and the reductive effects, in their aesthetic prominence, distract from the historical narrative.

The abstract formalism is evident also in the sculptural wooden installations. They create a unique experience in which space is perceived as empty, even though it contains large-scale structures. They suggest transience, lightness, and simplicity by keeping the works off the ground. The transience stands out against the complexity of the stories at the roots of the images.

The sense evoked as you wander through the show is that the complicated matters Evron deals with drift by no contemporary, clear, and concrete context, and their existence stands on timeless aesthetic scaffolding. The bottom line is that everything appears to stand on air, detached from the foundation. The sculptural forms and the computerized effects overpower the content needed to understand the origins of the images with their aesthetics and beauty, and the viewers must read about them to validate them. After the reading, the traumatic stories can only describe the logic of a story from the past chasing after the present.

Masad_general view_001.jpg **[18]**



[19]Nir Evron, Masad, 2016.
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016. Design: Dan Hasson. Installation photography: Elad Sarig

From this point of view, the way Evron treats the content, and the way the works are displayed, make the complex stories somewhat superfluous – the sites could be any number of other non-specific places. The reduction created speaks of the artistic experiences that try to mediate the stories into some formative, aesthetic, systematic unity, no less than of the inability of photography to present the truth about its subjects. Furthermore, it might point to the failure of artistic experimentation as a remnant of Modernism.

From this point of view, the works fail to evoke the injustices and the concrete events related to the sites, but the show succeeds – the detachment from the foundation and the "failure" to mediate the stories as an artistic, abstract form tell a larger story. This is the story of every-site and every-place where a political injustice has been perpetrated, which is impossible to mediate or to contain, to fully understand or to calibrate in the present. The show, then, succeeds in pointing to the attempts at coalescence and detachment as forms that go together, void the content, push away the concreteness and stress the mediation difficulty of Modernism, in which photography and film have taken a major part.

Nir Evron – *Masad*. June 22- October 24, 2016, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Curator: Ellen Ginton

- 1. Nissan Perez, "On the visual Enigmas of Nir Evron," Nir Evron – Winner of the 2015 Miron Sima Prize for the Visual Arts in the Field of Photography (exhibition catalog, curator: Nissan Perez, Jerusalem Artist House, February – May 2015), Jerusalem Artist House, 2015
- 2. Ellen Ginton, "Nir Evron: History, Architecture, and Cinema," Masad: Nir Evron, Video, Film, and Photography, 2009-2016 (Exhibition catalog, curator: Ellen Ginton, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, June 21 – October 23, 2016), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2016, p.203
- 3. Ibid. p.210

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Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Masad_general%20view_002.jpg
[2] https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/jamestown-totemsjpg
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Jamestown%20%28totems%29.jpg
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