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Assaf Evrons Untitled (San Diego, Prototype of a Wall).
(Photo by: Courtesy)

Art Review: Backs to the wall

By BARRY DAVIS
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What constitutes a boundary? Demarcation lines come in all shapes, sizes, materials and spirits. There is patently physical ilk, such as barbed wire fencing, massively fortified walls, and our very own security barr and then there is the more ephemeral type which is harder to pinpoint.

All of the above are patently conveyed and displayed in “Defense Lines: Maginot, Bar-Lev and Beyond,” currently up and running at the Tel Aviv University Gallery, under the guiding hands of curators Galia Gur and Dr. Sefy Hendler. The curators’ blurb notes that “the exhibition examines the origins and implications phenomenon of fortifications from a historical point of view, and shows how impressive and ostentatious fortification structures were destroyed, forgotten, abandoned to the forces of nature and, over time, turned monuments to failure, a basic example of human fear.”

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The exhibitor spectrum takes in a broad spread of creative attack pathways, including feted and equally disparaged performance artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay (aka Frank Uwe Laysiepen), who weigh in with a couple of video works charting their 1988 work *The Lovers*, *The Great Wall Walk*, the world's largest engineering project, taking in over 21,000 km. of construction. The wall was primarily built to keep China safe from various marauding tribes; and, like Maginot's and Bar-Lev's attempts to create an impregnable barrier, eventually crumbled.

The exhibition also takes in works by 89-year-old preeminent Israel Prize laureate war photographer Michal Amichai, 42-year-old multidisciplinary artist Assaf Evron, 38-year-old French photographer Alexandre Guirking, fiftysomething Jerusalemite painter, photographer and ornithologist Amir Balaban and Bezalel-graduate photographer Netta Laufer.

The subject matter is as varied as the age groups and the exhibits' philosophical subtext. Guirking's primary focus is on the Maginot Line, named after the French minister of war André Maginot, and built in the 1930s in an attempt to thwart any German attack on France. Like the line of defense designed by then-IDF chief of staff Haim Bar-Lev in the early 1970s, Maginot's creation also meekly fell short of fulfilling its intended purpose. Guirking's images underscore the failure of French man-made efforts to stymie the enemy by showing the triumph of Mother Nature over the decaying gargantuan sentinel. There is beauty and high drama in his pictures, and they are sure to draw the eye and the heart.

The other titular barricade is presented, "in real time," in Bar-Am's two monochrome and one color photographs showing the Israeli fortifications and a shot of an Egyptian outpost on the opposite side of the Suez Canal from the Israeli enemy.

Despite the obvious similarities between the French and Israeli buffers, the two artists approach the project from very different angles, on both artistic and historical levels. "Bar-Am is our Capa," notes Hendler, referencing the celebrated Jewish Hungarian war photographer Robert Capa, who co-founded the elite Magnum photographic cooperative, of which Bar-Am is a member. "Bar-Am's photographs were taken at the time. On the other hand, you have a young man [Guirking] who was not even alive when the Maginot Line was built. Now, 70 or so years later, as a photographer, he reveals the poetic element of the place, which was forsaken. He took his

pictures from a temporal distance, compared to Bar-Am, when nature has overrun the construction. You see the beauty of the ruins of such lines. You can also see that in a lot of other locations around the world.”

HENDLER SAYS he and Gur Zeev harbored an ulterior motive, and were looking to shake us out of our Israel-centric view of the world’s interest. They also want us to go to the exhibition with as open a mind as possible.

“I don’t go along with the approach of telling the public what they should think even before they have seen the exhibits. That’s wrong. We are presenting a variety of approaches, which are not only from a security perspective but also show a range of approaches to examining this phenomenon [of fortifications] in general, from close up. There is a wall in the making – Assaf Evron’s photos [of a prototype of Donald Trump’s proposed barrier between the US and Mexico]; a wall built many years ago, the Great Wall of China; a wall that is very close to us – the second intifada barrier; something more remote, time-wise – the Bar-Lev Line; and something further away in time and geographically, the Maginot Line.”

Clearly, we are not the only country to consider enhancing national security through constructional means. “We are not the center of the world,” says Hendler. “This is an issue that has been tackled for hundreds and thousands of years, and not only here.”

Hendler adds that the impediments in defense lines are not only physical. “You can look at this in security but also from a psychological standpoint, as you see in the work of Marina Abramovic. She asks whether defense lines separate us or connect us. Is it something on a grand scale, of the world’s biggest wall, or a smaller scale story of a man and a woman meeting on the wall?”

The intangible mind-set comes across in Balaban’s Playmates, Mountain Gazelle, The Checkpoint Herd and The Wall.

“We don’t even see the wall in his pictures,” says Hendler. The animals are purely focused on their own navigation and territory conundrums.

“This [man-made defense fortifications] is a very wide issue,” the curator adds. “The bottom line is that no defense line has ever provided hermetic protection, and every defense line will eventually collapse.”

The exhibition provides a feast for the eyes and food for thought.

Defense Lines: Maginot, Bar-Lev and Beyond closes on June 6. For more information: (03) 640-8860 and www.arts.tau.ac.il/gallery



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