Art Review: Backs to the wall

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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 barri 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, turnec 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 var 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 Mich Am, 42-year-old multidisciplinary artist Assaf Evron, 38-year-old French photographer Alexandre Guirkinger, 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. Guirkinger’s pri focus on the Maginot Line, named after the French minister of war André Maginot, and built in the 1930s to thwart any German attack on France. Like the line of defense designed by then-IDF chief of staff Haim Lev in the early 1970s, Maginot’s creation also meekly fell short of fulfilling its intended purpose. Guirkinger’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 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 photog showing the Israeli fortifications and a shot of an Egyptian outpost on the opposite side of the Suez Canal 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 celebrated Jewish Hungarian war photographer Robert Capa, who co-founded the elite Magnum photography 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 [Guirkinger] 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 h
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 Isreb-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 security perspective 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’s territory conundrums.

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

“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