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Detail from Jonathan Goldman's exhibition, "No Land," 2016. *Ouzi Zur*

The science of art, or the art of science

A group of exhibitions at the Tel Aviv University gallery reveals different facets of the present-day infatuation of art with science

A crucial feature of contemporary art is its turn to science, a development that appears to be in competition with the social thrust of art in recent decades. Indeed, this development is related to the dead end reached by socially oriented art, including the deterioration of cooperative projects and the need "to be political," but in the most predictable and routine manner.

Art's affinity for science actually possesses a much longer history, reaching back to the roots of visual exposition as an act of observing, recording and examining the world, this as part of a joint effort to explore reality – even before the division into different, and often mutually hostile, realms of knowledge (philosophy, science, art). That said, art's current reliance on science is bound up with the latter's renewed aura and dazzle: the technological eruption of the present era, the preference for confident, muscular empiricism over biased speculation, and above all, scientism, namely the demand to vest all of reality with meaning, using the tools of experimental science.

We may be at the threshold of a new scientific revolution, that of artificial intelligence, which will change the way of life on Earth and even beyond. Or, possibly, we are confronting an ecological catastrophe that science will not be able to cope with. Whatever the case, everyone, even the artist, wants to be a scientist.

The exhibitions curated by Irit Tal, currently on show at the Tel Aviv University gallery, reveals two different aspects of the rush to science. One exhibition, titled "Migration," consisting of projects in which three artists, each separately, follows the migratory routes of animals (birds, fish), materials (threads, tissues) and, together with them, of people, traditions and histories.

Keren Benbenisty follows the "Lessepsian migration" of fish – a route that was formed by the new maritime channel created by the construction of the Suez Canal, whose developer was the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps. The artist maps the various species of fish that passed through the canal, differentiates them, examines each according to its shape, skins them, places them on a Japanese-paper base, studies their color and assigns them a name and a code number. It's all done very meticulously and displayed immaculately.

Sari Carel tracks bird migration in Israel's skies. She sketches flight paths, examines landing areas, plays bird sounds and reads out data about the birds' movement. Here, too, the workmanship and precision are notable.

These two projects, which were created on the basis of scientific research carried out in Tel Aviv University's Zoology Department, ostensibly recapture the glories of the past by recreating the connection between art and science as an interwoven project of knowing the world and exhibiting it. However, the artistic act is here performed in the service of scientific research and for its purposes; the art functions only as an illustrative means, as the tool of visual perception. It invokes insights already achieved, not developing them or arguing with them, but only presenting them, like the diligent assistant in the researcher's lab.

Sari Carel, "Sky and Earth," 2017. *Elad Sarig*

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The result is a kind of enhanced nature museum, featuring greater display space but no stunts. Its high point is the scientific explanations – absolute, definitive, unchallengeable – that are provided. In Benbenisty's exhibition the researcher himself appears in the video, explaining terms and demonstrating experiments. It's not a video work but an authoritative lesson in the heart of science-based exhibitions mounted with depressing modesty.

At the edge of existence

Something different happens in Jonathan Goldman's exhibition, "No Land." Goldman craves the role of the scientist himself – but not the highly precise, orderly scientist who seeks to attain exhaustive proof and is finally aided by a meticulous exhibit of findings. Goldman is a simulated scientist, speculative, a conjurer of visions who lapses into delusions. In the past he created a laboratory to produce MDMA, the drug commonly known as ecstasy – as a service to the public, not to science. In the present show he sets forth the foundations of a post-apocalyptic world through a process of "growing" inorganic materials, "embryos of continents" made of Styrofoam and silicon or from gypsum castings. The "embryos" – amphibious objects, disintegrating rocks – float in a large, transparent aquarium that's a fusion of a breeding laboratory with a display medium. In this case, the display does not take place after the knowledge has been obtained, but parallel to the processes of its development and study.

The entire exhibition exists in a constant state of fluidity, of repetitive and meditative flux, shifting forms and developing mutation – the motion of the water, the sound of the waves. It's in a kind of non-breaching cosmic womb: an incubation of configurations of life that have not yet burst into the world, or the seafloor burial of the remains of a ruined world.

This materiality also assumes human form, ranging from a water-soaked cast head to a chain of heads that are bound by belts to old loudspeakers and ammunition crates, creating complete bodies. These forms, though, rather than populating the new civilization, are blocking the way to it. They wear death masks and exude a hollow look – nothing will be born in them or from them.

Goldman thus does not create a world, but presents a series of experiments under laboratory conditions. Instead of the sterile character of the isolated, conclusive, always post-factum placement, this is a laboratory that's tempting to be swept into, to be in close proximity to these blocs of matter that do not coalesce into an image. No record of nature is made here, nor is culture created; the effect is of a cyclical, recurrent movement at the edges of existence, before the birth or after the crash. But precisely as such, this magical laboratory does not invite lingering before it, opposite its essence, but motion toward it until one is caught in its tangles. It does not offer a study of the world of nature and of external, objective knowledge about it. It demarcates the entry into that world, unknowingly. As A.J. Baker writes in his classic nature book "The Peregrine," the 50th anniversary of whose publication is now being marked (including its translation into Hebrew): "I have always longed to be a part of the outward life, to be out there at the edge of things, to let the human taint wash away in emptiness and silence as the fox sloughs his smell into the cold unworldliness of water; to return to the town as a stranger."

"Migration" and "No Land," Tel Aviv University gallery, Fri 10.00-14.00, Sun-Wed 11.00-19.00, Thur 11.00-21.00; until July 7.