

# HAARETZ

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**And so to bed...**

**The 'Good Night' exhibition at the Israel Museum is the stuff of dreams. We share some pillow talk with its creators.**

By [Tamar Rotem](#) | Apr. 11, 2012 | 1:02 AM



David Polonsky's illustration for Etgar Keret and Shira Geffen's 'A Moonless Night.' Photo by Israel Museum



Wang Fu's 'Beneath the Stars' (1999) Photo by Israel Museum

When Kobi Ben Meir was working on the Israel Museum's new "Good Night" exhibition, he constantly had the song "Layla, Layla" playing in his head. In the end, the curator chose to sing

the song on camera, in a hesitant voice and with a very embarrassed expression. It's now part of the video artwork "Lullaby" and displayed as part of the exhibition.

In this marvelous video work, artists Hadassa Goldvicht and Anat Vovnoboy filmed visitors and the museum staff - from the director and the curators to the security guards and the sanitation workers - singing their own private lullaby: The one that their mother sang to them in childhood. The two artists set up a small room in the museum, and for months invited people to enter and be filmed. The enclosed space gave the participants a sense of privacy and allowed them to surrender to both the camera and their feelings while singing.

From the beginning, Ben Meir sang the song that was stuck in his head rather than his childhood song - because he was convinced there was no such thing. Only after a while, after he asked his mother, did it transpire that she had sung him a lullaby, and that said lullaby was indeed "Layla, Layla." "That proved to me how strong this work is," he says.

"Good Night" - in the Weinstein Gallery of the Ruth Youth Wing and running until next January - is the first exhibition curated by Ben Meir, and as we can see from the little story about his song, it's a very emotional exhibition. The transition between day and night is the subject he decided to work with. Not necessarily sleep itself, or dreams and nightmares. The focus is on moments of falling asleep and the sleep rituals preceding them. "It's about what happens in the few minutes from the time you put your head on the pillow until your awareness becomes foggy," he explains.

### **The twilight zone**

Among other things, the exhibition includes about 150 books about how children handle sleep and nightmares; almost half were written in Hebrew. According to Ben Meir, "There are so many books for preschoolers that deal with the same monster under the bed, which represents the fear of falling asleep. But they didn't place any emphasis on the preceding moment, which I consider more critical. I personally was interested in those twilight zones."

The exhibition is also reinforced by items from the museum, some of them ritual items from various cultures, which present the preoccupation with sleep as death, or as a chaotic time that gives rise to creativity and dreams. Ben Meir, 33, says the idea for the exhibition came to him from observing friends who have children. "Psychologists talk about the fact that children's fear of falling asleep stems from separation anxiety. The fear that they won't see their mother in the morning, and that they themselves won't wake up. The fear of death is present in falling asleep, and we don't talk about it much. I think that we have to talk to children not only about balloons and teddy bears. You can talk to them about everything in a sublimated way."

Another subject arising from the exhibition is the preoccupation with getting ready for bed. "Parents want their child to go to sleep because it's his bedtime; but sometimes they're eager for the children to go to sleep because that's when their private time begins," Ben Meir says. "I remember myself, before bedtime, envying the adults who were sitting in the living room watching 'Dynasty' on television. I could actually feel the magic of the program via the ray of

light that infiltrated through my door, and from the voices that erupted through it. It was exciting to encounter artists who translated such feelings into various means of simulation."

"Lullaby" probably speaks more to the exhibition's adult visitors. After all, these are films of talking heads, on a uniform white backdrop. The songs of those filmed - in several languages - may attract the children's attention at first, but they will run ahead to the exhibition's more youthful attractions. Such as the large mattress on which they can fool around; the fluorescent works; and the books that can be browsed.

But "Lullaby" is one of the works that's really worth lingering over. The work took over 50 hours, and deals with memory and vulnerability. Some of the singers waver and seem to be cradling themselves while they sing, momentarily returning to childhood. "I have an obsession with lullabies," explains Goldvicht. "I'm interested with the initial encounter with language; the moments when you turn language into material and to a connection with people."

Additional works in the exhibition also deal with the blurring of nighttime, with the twilight of hallucination and the penetration of the outside to the inside. More than one of them displays an open door, which presumably invites the night and the forces of nature.

For example, in the video installation by Tom Pnini ("Bed, Boy" - 2007 ), the artist is seen trying to fall asleep on the side of a standing double mattress. He is in a space that looks like a room, with one open door, but the moon is hanging above him. The more his body twists and turns in a desire to fall asleep and to find a comfortable position - a situation familiar to everyone - the higher the mattress becomes, sliding higher and higher; water covers the floor and the moon becomes full. "The work is actually a visual externalization of a somnambulant situation in which consciousness weakens," Ben Meir writes in an exhibition catalog article. "The artist sinks into the water as though sinking into his consciousness and approaches his reflection in the water in a narcissistic process, at the end of which he merges with it."

The sleep area and the sight of sleeping children are also on display at the exhibition. In the work "Beneath the Stars" (1999 ), Chinese artist Wang Fu presents a row of babies sleeping on mattresses covered with beautiful sheets. This is a sweet pop art-style work, combined with prints of wooden toys, flowers, parrots, giraffes and more.

This work has a connection to the series of photos by Naomi Leshem, "Sleeping," which hang on the opposite wall and depict sleeping teenagers. Leshem photographed these adolescents, including her children and children from Switzerland and Germany. The works manage to catch the transition between childhood and adulthood; it is evident that when they are without their defenses and their cynicism, the subjects are still children. That is also evident from the accessories in their rooms, such as teddy bears that they are embracing, or a childish pillow case.

Calming down before sleep that depends on parental warmth, on the one hand, and the fear of falling asleep when the parents aren't around, on the other, are presented in various works. For example, "Alma's Blanket," created especially for the exhibition by sound artist Julianne Swartz. She wove a kind of electronic blanket from colored electrical cables, according to the dimensions

of her daughter Alma's blanket. Soothing, compassionate sounds emerge from the work, which at the same time are also haunted.

### **Kibbutz mythology**

Another work dealing with fear of sleep is "Rain of Stars." Ronit Agassi hung upside-down umbrellas that move on the ceiling, and beneath them she placed two iron children's beds. On one there is a mirror instead of a mattress, with another mirror is placed on the floor. The umbrellas are perforated with images of fairies, angels and other figures - for example, a baby lifted in the air - and they are reflected in the light screened on them.

The lifted baby is a figure from a painting by Yohanan Simon. "We grew up with this myth," says Agassi, who spent her formative years on Kibbutz Merhavia, "but the mothers who lift up the babies weren't with us at night."

In her work, Agassi repeatedly returns to communal sleeping arrangements. "The work is taken from a childhood world that was locked inside the dark and frightening building of the children's house," she explains. "In our imagination, we were convinced that we were surrounded by ghosts. I turned that into almost a mythology of childhood, which ranges from a frightening to a heavenly experience. But paradoxically, the starry heavens represented by the umbrellas also create an appearance of a flock of bats. I range between enveloping and embracing - the curve of the umbrella is a kind of blanket. But actually, this blanket is an illusion of protection, and not the real thing."

The work presents the two extremes of danger: "The fear of danger, and a lot of courage," according to Agassi. "Staying alone without parents on a dark night is a frightening thing." She says her work presents "a hallucinatory picture that is reflected inside itself, to some dream." As for the mirror between the beds, "In the light of the reflection it looks like a puddle of peepee. The light throws the images on the umbrellas onto it." Urinating was one of the side effects of fear.

The umbrella is also reminiscent of Mary Poppins' umbrella, which flew to magical worlds. "The handles are something that it's very tempting to grab and then to fly to your imagination; they're also like the handles of a door that maybe you can open and Dad or Mom will come in. On the visual level, the curved handles are supposed to create a rhythm inside the space, like a lock on a door. Their movement creates a dance of closed locks," says Agassi.

The moments before falling asleep are a journey in search of calming images on the ceiling. "That was our means of protection, searching for fairies and angels, characters from the stories," she continues. "Peter Pan and Wendy, all those characters in the stories that our caretakers read to us in the afternoon. It moves on a sequence between frightening and protective, because the characters from the fairy tales protect and the characters from the stories are frightening." "As an artist I'm always working with these materials," adds Agassi. "I like to go back to childhood on the kibbutz. To that world, which today as a mother seems even stranger to me. There were reservoirs of fear there, but alongside them there were also reservoirs of spiritual strength."