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Sharing a National Identity, Emerging Artists Engaging in a Visual Language

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Small though it is, Israel has been providing more than its share of artistic talent to the global art circuit, especially where video and performance art are concerned.



Courtesy of Lesley Heller Workspace

Oded Hirsch's "50 Blue," part of "The Young Israelis" at Lesley Heller Workspace.



Courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace

Rona Yefman's "Pippi at Abu-Dis," features Tanja Schlander.

Over the past decade Guy Ben-Ner has become known for what might be called home videos, starting with a version of "Moby-Dick" shot in his kitchen, starring himself and his young daughter; Tamy Ben-Tor has startled the art world with scathing depictions of a cast of characters ranging from a pretentious art theorist to an aging Nazi; Mika Rottenberg has created a genre of disorienting video installations centering on women enacting strange tasks; Ohad Meromi, another sculpturally inclined video installationist, has revisited "The Odyssey" and Brecht.

And the redoubtable Omer Fast has alternated between rapid-fire sampling of existing material and elaborately staged works, making some of the most gripping, astutely political videos of the moment.

"Greater New York," the current survey of emerging artists at [MoMA P.S. 1](#) in Long Island City, Queens, has at least three memorable contributions by young Israelis, and the summer show at the Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side is using those very words as a title, supplemented by a portentous definite article. "The Young Israelis," which closes on Saturday, presents 16 videos and several related photographs by 10 artists, including the three Greater New Yorkers.

Organized by the critic and independent curator Lilly Wei, ["The Young Israelis"](#) is not without weak points or generically familiar inclusions. Nonetheless, for the most part it suggests that a certain chemistry often exists between Israel — its history, landscape, politics and cities — and young artists wielding video cameras.

Several of the pieces are standard emergent video work, including Karen Russo's 2005 "Economy of Excess," a micro-video-camera journey through the sewer system of Essex, England. Despite the sense of trippy abstraction resulting from manipulations of color and plunging space, it is overly indebted to a video excursion through the sewers of Zurich from the 1990s by Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

A similar derivativeness plagues Nira Pereg's "And Melancholy," which visits the balconies of the different buildings in Tel Aviv where she has lived. At each site the view is surveyed, and the camera then plunges to the ground, creating the effect — suggested by the title — of a series of suicide jumps.

In "Volcano Demo" and "Sunset Demo/Sonya," Tom Pnini simulates natural events using hand-built mock-ups — a papier-mâché volcano on top of his parents' apartment building in Tel Aviv, a large orange circle attached to an ocean pier — but they don't add much more than an endearing footnote to the history of set-up video. A much better impression is made by Lior Shvil, whose comic "RoughCut" shows him in a symbiotic if sometimes violent relationship with a life-size cloth puppet of a dark-bearded male figure in a keffiyeh.

As for Gilad Ratman, I recommend seeing his recent video of disembodied faces and hands emerging from and sinking into an expanse of gray sludge in “Greater New York,” which runs through Oct. 18. His contributions at Heller are earlier and not as convincing, although they provide a baseline of his artistic growth.

Israel as a place of strange vistas and fraught history is intensely present in the work of Oded Hirsch, whose task-oriented videos are among the show’s most haunting. Shot on or near the kibbutz where he grew up, and cast with people who live there, both works depict oddly pointless physical feats in spectacularly isolated landscapes. In his “50 Blue” (2009), he pushes a wheelchair holding his paralyzed father in a yellow slicker up muddy paths to a rocky palisade that evokes the battle of Masada. He then takes his father to the edge of the Sea of Galilee, where six more slicker-clad men hoist his father, wheelchair and all, to the top of an old watchtower.

In “Tochka,” from this year, a group of men in blue clothes and white caps wheel a large rusty spool across the landscape, ultimately using it to construct a rickety footbridge over a small ravine that could easily be crossed without it. A medieval yet timeless mood prevails; the fragile predicament of Israel is enacted in terms that Bosch or Bruegel would recognize.

Operating in a more contemporary mode, Rona Yefman’s “Pippi at Abu-Dis” (2008) shows a latter-day Pippi Longstocking (played by the performance artist Tanja Schlander) futilely but energetically trying to dismantle the towering Abu-Dis wall that divides Israel from the [Palestinian](#) territories. In the similarly seemingly improvised “2 Flags,” a battle to the death between two fairly hapless gangs — the Hoods and the Stripes — on the streets, rooftops and beaches of Tel Aviv. A result is a loopy mixture of fact and slapstick that brings together ninjas, nerds and several elders, including two who recall evading the Nazis in Poland.

And Deville Cohen backs up his impressive contribution to “Greater New York” with “The Wall,” another video mixture of performance, installation and appropriation dominated by large grisaille photocopies, this time of buildings and brick walls. A group of actors — whose faces are covered and whose genders are ambiguous — change outfits, introduce brightly colored objects and interact with their flimsy setting. It is as if some avant-garde troupe of performance artists has been relegated to dressing store windows and is making the best of it.

These last three works, expanding on ideas generally at large in the art-world atmosphere, are by artists who just happen to be Israeli.

“The Young Israelis” is on view though Saturday at the Lesley Heller Workspace, 54 Orchard Street, near Grand Street, Lower East Side; (212) 410-6120, lesleyheller.com.