

...might be good

Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin
Through March 5
by Ali Fitzgerald

The videos included in *Out of Place* at Lora Reynolds Gallery seem more cinematic than D.I.Y., with sweeping panoramas and slick accompanying stills. Curator Noah Simblist told me later that "none of the artists wanted their art reduced down to a blanket political statement," but rather sought to dodge political cliché through attention to the works' physicality, a strategy repeated throughout the exhibition's works in various mediums.

Yael Bartana's work *Mur i Wieza* (Wall and Tower) (2009), constructs a revisionist narrative in which a group of Israelis return to and reclaim their Polish homeland by erecting a small settlement in Warsaw. In *Wall and Tower*, Bartana crafts a seductive homage to Zionist propaganda films and the mechanics of nationalism. The actors, mostly strapping young Israelis, build wooden structures using the same wall and tower method employed in some concentration camps. Bartana's camera sweeps across the expressions of vacant idealism on their faces with loaded glee, reminding me of the 1960 movie *Exodus* starring Paul Newman as an embattled Israeli fighter, imploring his brothers and the audience to cheer for a new Jewish homeland. Bartana borrows from this sexy Hollywood vocabulary to great effect, even stamping the entrance to the black-box video space with a personally derived icon: a powerful merger of the red Polish national crest (which is eerily similar to the Nazi eagle) and the Star of David.

Where Bartana repurposes symbols of might, Jan Tichy presents paper monuments that are striking in their frailty. With *Dahania* (2006), Tichy memorializes the short-lived Palestinian airport with two black and white models, easily collapsible and sad, perched on a small bank of sand in the middle of the gallery. In describing this work, Simblist notes an "efficiency" of gesture. Tichy's small melancholic moment is echoed by Tom Molloy's hanging cut paper recreation of U.N. Security Council's Treaty 242, which is nearly impossible to read thanks to the machinations of a nearby fan. As I attempted in vain to read the text, I had to laugh at such a perfect little metaphor for the obliqueness of legal language and the slippery nature of multi-state solutions. The fan was actually intended for Nida Sinnokrot's *West Bank Butterfly - Kite Project* (2009) across the room, which billows in reference to the shifting topography of modern Palestine. The kite is shaped from the contours of dueling West Banks, and, when presented alongside Sinnokrot's endangered butterfly native to the region and a small Gaza-shaped paper butterfly pinned to the wall, it exudes an ephemeral preciousness, clear and plaintive.

Possibly the most compelling piece in *Out of Place* is Oded Hirsch's absurdist epic *Halfman* (2009), in which he pushes his wheelchair-bound father through the muddy flats of North Israel. After a Sisyphus-style journey through the muck, a group of faceless workers hoist his father onto a wooden platform perched above the ocean in an act that seems equally perilous and pointless. Hirsch's imagery is haunting and primordial: swollen feet, mud, rippling endless waves and a solitary wooden fortress. Referencing Hirsch's clear admiration of absurdist theatre, Simblist informed me that contemporary Israeli fiction is characterized by an interest in the absurd and surreal (see the short stories of fiction writer Etgar Keret).

Out of Place focuses on the Israel-Palestine conflict, but speaks more generally to ideas of displacement and physical otherness. I found a particular resonance in this, as I feel

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somewhat distant both from my American and quasi-German identities (although my waistline is repatriating quickly).

When I met with Simblast for coffee, we spoke of his interest in artist-led political projects because they aren't " beholden to facts " the way journalists or historians are. We also talked about Egypt, Joe Sacco's Notes on Gaza and the visual hallmarks of Simblast's own work, which investigates the aesthetics of signage and propaganda. In discussing the panic-inducing mainstream news machine, Simblast stated that his show " should be displaced from the language of mainstream media. " And thankfully it is. Ali Fitzgerald is an artist and comics writer living in Berlin. She contributes regularly to the PBS blog Art:21 and recently started a visual travelogue for The Huffington Post.