

ART Galia Yahav

Uri Katzenstein's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, titled "Backyard," marks his receiving the Dan Sandel and Sandel Family Foundation Sculpture Award for 2014. It consists of a rich sample of his work, ranging from early video works to sculptures from the past two years, in addition to works of animation and sound, documentations of his performance art and more.

There are two parts to the exhibition. One, a collection of video works beginning in the 1980s, includes "Panta Rai" (1991, documentation of a musical performance work), "Ritual Reality" (1993), "Love Song" (1995) and other works. The videos show Katzenstein's frequent use of his character as a persona of multiple roles, occupations and meanings: scientist, experimenter, soldier, physician, diction teacher, dictator, dissident, musician, sprayer of graffiti, priest performing sacrifices, victim.

These early works are infused with a stylized, aesthetic mixture, something between Hermann Nitsch and Abu Ghraib prison, and an atmosphere that's a cross between Dr. Mengele and Heisenberg, Hans Bellmer and clips from the 1980s. They are rife with mannequin-like, mechanical movements, rotation on an axis (by the actor and the camera) and many different types of hand gestures (hands with junkie punctures or medically bandaged, clasping as in a religious ritual, robot-like, caressing). The most amusing of these short works is "Hood" (2003), for which the artist invited people to a hotel room to undergo an "electrocution process." Katzenstein is lying on the bed in a white galabia, leaning on pillows, head covered by a curly wig, teeth blackened. He invites the viewers to hold hands with him in turn, to be electrocuted and close a circuit. "It's irreversible," he whispers in a sweet voice. "Next time I will



Photos by Revital Topiol

Doing it his way

The veteran artist Uri Katzenstein has developed a singular language, and in his new exhibition serves up a lexicon of materials, rhythms and inventions

teach you something new." "It will be good for you." The character of the seductive, charlatan healer is simply funny.

The central work, "Hope Machines" (2001), is a portrayal of humanity on the day after. Disconnected figures stand alone in a maritime world on improvised islands, ad hoc continents, towers, scaffolding, boats, in an environment that is the panorama of an apocalypse related to an atomic bomb, melting of icebergs or a plague. Each of the figures performs its actions in a type of movement language, as a mantra, a mental exercise or an experiment in functional communication. The diver, the

linesman, the disabled man, the child and others create a nation of the lonely, to a choreography and orchestration of disconnect. They wave their hands, brandish flags, look through binoculars, text-message someone, call for help in silence within a universe in which there is nothing but themselves.

At the center of the exhibition's second section is a kind of storage closet, large and elongated, containing an inventory of objects in no apparent order. It's a splendid placement of sculptures of various kinds and different artistic languages, some of which repeat themselves in different versions. There are polymers wrinkled

like compressed garbage in the style of the Futurist Umberto Boccioni, polished plaster castings that resemble the structure of a cell or a used handkerchief, a suitcase of cards (poker or tarot), a fire extinguisher, the silhouette of a German Shepherd crossed by the neck of a guitar, a chair in the shape of a swastika, amplifiers and shoes, pistons that are alternative drumming machines, cymbals, a jar filled with fingernail cuttings, decapitated heads, a white hand holding a black harmonica, brass knuckles and more. All of them have undergone stylization and deformation, emerging as sick or sci-fi versions of themselves. They are off-the-shelf products, accessories and decorative objects that are stuck in the Customs Department; something in their smooth and flexible shipping-and-handling has been truncated, their exchange value has been lost and they remain empty signs of their latent potential. They beg for usage and activity, but don't permit it.

Standing amid this panorama are figurines that bear the artist's likeness: small, androgynous, colorful doll-like castings that evoke worry-dancers,



Works from the exhibition "Backyard." Sincerity without pompousness or false modesty.

their frozen postures a fusion of tai chi and distress, coded and mysterious movement notations, accessible to handwriting experts or graphologists and users of cellphones. With their hands the figurines indicate estimates of size and distance, stability and leaning, climbing and dependence, listening and articulation – subject to attempts at amplification of the senses and of capabilities. The figurines are no longer "body art," Katzenstein is quoted as saying in the catalog, but represent a certain avatar-like form of existence. This character, he notes, which from the outset assumed a "Hitler-Chaplin-Katzenstein" visage and made use of the artist's body as a performance artist, is about to leap into space with a motion that recalls both tai chi and the leaps of Yves Klein.

Sound works and inventive robotics constitute another focal point of the exhibition. Katzenstein insists that his sounds also be seen, the curator, Varda Steinlauf, notes. The musical instruments he builds are experimental, and expand or alter existing instruments, she adds. In some cases, Katzenstein creates a new type of instrument, which operates as an extension of the body and produces different kinds of sounds.

Especially impressive are the works from the past two years, gray bronze castings of nude figures that stand or lie on fragments of magnets that are fused together and are engaged in enigmatic activity (related to the directing of movement and its measurement), eyes gaping.

Longing for continuity

In this exhibition Katzenstein reaches a peak of precision in his occupation with the body and with instrumentation, or with the body maneuvered and navigated within systems (regimens and others). He presents a universe of prosthetics, fetishes,

substitutes, copies and clonings, surrogate relations and tribal energy, gibberish communication and an atmosphere of disaster. All of these are simultaneously trapped in hyperactivity and suspended animation. The exhibition is pervaded by a dimension of powerful longing for continuity (of time, space, sentence, body) punctuated by its persistent violent truncation.

The exhibition displays voluminous creativity, ranges of artistic, emotional and intellectual coping, which are appropriate for museum-scale spaces. Not only because of the constant occupation with scale (on the one hand, reductions to accessory sizes; on the other, themes of

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catastrophe, plague, collapsing cultures and sinking continents, biotechnological syntaxes on the scale of evolutionary development or a transhistorical world of images), but also because "Backyard" is one of the most generous, most abundant, sexiest and violent exhibitions of a veteran artist who deserves full praise for his singular language. It's a language we might call narrative hyperrealism, so different from the abstract, minimalist language of Israeli sculpture.

What makes an exhibition generous? It's not only the number of works and the size of the display space. It's something less concrete, related to a correct fusion between meticulous professionalism – but of a kind that is not insular – and a spirit of experimentalism, the artist's inner readiness to expose himself and lead the viewer along the routes of his interests, the fields he is examining and investigating, as in a laboratory tour. It has to do with quality of dialogue, sincerity without pompousness and without false modesty. Katzenstein not only meets these challenges, he is a paragon of how to strike a balance between these values and others. As a result, though the exhibition is ostensibly cold, it is very moving.