

# **In Tel Aviv show, an artist exposes the room inside her**

## **This fine exhibition offers an elegant experience of fraught sadness, a searing situation report about all-embracing loneliness.**

By [Galia Yahav](#) | Jan. 11, 2016 | 6:41 AM

The whole interior space of the Givon Art Gallery in Tel Aviv has been transformed for "Half Full," a masterly exhibition by Maya Attoun. By building walls and creating small rooms and narrow corridors, the Jerusalem-born (1974) installation artist has turned the gallery into a kind of house. The effect is powerful: We navigate an empty apartment, someone has left or died; the person's belongings have already been removed, but there are still a few remnants. Someone is still talking somewhere, his voice resonates. We have entered a melancholy region of traces, of signs both fraught and vague, all of it drenched in a funereal atmosphere.

On the lower floor is a living room, accessed via a narrow, dark corridor. Its contents consist of only three sculptural elements. One is a kind of record holder on which are arranged square, double-sided, plastic-wrapped prints that can be pulled out and perused ("Soundless System," 2014). Across the room, stretching over the full length of the wall, is an ambitious neon sign that forms the word "hypertextualization" (in Hebrew), evoking a declaration about verbosity exaggerated to the point where it becomes a dominating, blinding sculptural presence (a 2015 work). The third element is a large curtain decorated with a print of the gallery's floor plan ("Plan B").

On the upper floor, small rooms branch out from another narrow corridor. Here there are four areas: the corridor itself, which leads to an open, empty space, two exhibition rooms and a dungeon-like space that is also a de facto white cube. This last, disturbing zone, stripped of meaning and function, is essentially the heart of the exhibition, the void around which it coalesces. Adjacent to it is a room containing a yellow neon sign that spells out "ghost" (in English) but the "g" is extinguished, leaving "host," and the two words play off each other ambiguously and ambivalently, like a linguistic fault, an intentional fallacy.

Attoun has covered the bathroom walls with 300 pencil drawings that look like ceramic tiles, their geometric pattern creating a wrap-around effect. "The continuous pattern shows the signs of a tedious and monotonous labor, presenting its obsessed repetition of epilepsy-inducing units throughout the surface," the curator, Tali Ben Nun, writes, adding, "Despite the realistic veneer, in their interstices the fallacy of the illusion slowly shows through, pointing at the gap between an outer layer and the menace it purports to enclose underneath." The round mirror on the wall multiplies the pattern, emphasizing the symmetry, the mathematical precision and the artificiality, creating an Escher-like trick of perspective. In the background a voice is heard reading Mary Shelley's famous 1818 work, "Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus," about a scientist who

creates a monster by replicating body parts to which he imparts life. Each of the elements is installed separately, by itself, within a vacuum.

### **Masochistic copying**

Along the staircase between the two floors are more small pencil drawings ("Milky Way," "Box of Chocolates," "Magritte," "Open Window" and more), forming a dense domestic decoration. Most of them are based on photographs taken with a cellular-phone camera, largely of monkeys, along with passages from books (for example, in Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morality" the lines are truncated both lengthwise and widthwise, producing a bloc of non-sequential words). There are also drawings and meticulous explanations of different kinds of knots.

The investment in the realistically detailed drawings is seemingly disproportionate, dictated by a logic of a waste of resources or of pathological obedience. They are executed as the fulfillment of an inner imperative, as a monotonous, dumb task that has to be done, like a punishment. They are not grounded in enjoyment or self-fulfillment; there is only masochistic copying of "literature" onto small pages, a laborious, time-consuming process that mandates a slowing down and generates a talismanic effect. In the holistic interior design they have been shunted to the sides and function as decoration. Thus, what is perceived as art in the sense of handicrafts, labor, originality, with their inherent creativity or expressiveness, becomes mechanical, a marginal accessory or part of a collection.

The exhibition can be said to deal with drawing, the living-dead art form of the 21st century, as a poetical apparatus that illustrates the failure of technology; or it can be defined as revolving around the stress of "theory" and "culture" and the feeble efforts to forge private sensitivity under their radar; or it can be seen as addressing the symbolism of the uncanny, the tension between identity-alienation and the unity-duality it encapsulates. Another option is to impose on it the Borgesian model, in which every text is nourished and derives from its predecessors, which it invented, thus giving rise to the rich play of language known as magical realism. These, among others, will afford appropriate keys – the exhibition is rich enough to encompass them all.

The house is constructed also as consciousness or as thought. Though it is concrete (tiles, towel, pictures, records, curtain), it also represents versions of thought, the branching trails of consciousness. In an article accompanying the exhibition, the essayist and translator Oded Wolkstein quotes Kafka's famous dictum, "Everyone carries a room about inside him," from "The Blue Octavo Notebooks." (This article and the curator's text are available in English at [givonartgallery.com](http://givonartgallery.com).) Indeed, in large measure the exhibition is a searing situation report about all-embracing loneliness, piercing and despairing, which knows everything about the world and is alien to it; loneliness that is experienced as a provable fact (just like a monster or a spirit), for which language is the torment – "the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall," as Kafka puts it in the same quote.

In fact, everything is based on mathematical precision, on equations whose parts are one exaggerated, omnipotent neon sign and another that is lacking, disabled. Sound precision above and a hint at sound below, patterned surfaces on both floors, two modes of installing drawings and prints, open and closed regions of emptiness, both stressful. It's a demonstration of control of materials and meanings, of artistic stratagems and of rhythm; meticulousness that recalls

weighing something on scales, which demands experiment, waiting and precise data to produce the balance that is sought, which is a congealed interim state.

Also in balance is the relationship between minimalism void of sentimentality and the excessive prattle (in listening and in reading) that abounds in the exhibition. The balance between icons, symbols and indices, between disconnect and hyperlink.

The blocked room, the vault of the exhibition, the inaccessible, mysterious, painful region that exists smack in its center, both physically and conceptually, is also in balanced affinity with the screening on the lower floor – when the large curtain is pulled a wall is revealed, as close as a slap to the face. Equal weight is also given to conceptuality ("hypertextualization") and to the labor-intensive physicality of the copy-drawings, which, in turn, are a form of blind mimetic repetition of letters that accumulate into words and sentences that do not so much create meaning as constitute its potential.

This is what remains gaping and open amid this superbly organized and carefully calibrated exhibition. The potential meaning resides in Frankenstein's monster-victim, made of diverse body parts and organs, beautifully organized but producing ugliness – the various patchworks from which the exhibition is created. Maya Attoun's take on the exhibition is that it is like an organism, a marginal esoteric event of eccentric mumbling, evoking "pataphysics," the literary invention of the French writer Alfred Jarry, or fantasy. Its creation is a magical work; it possesses a superfluous existence, an opportunity eternally missed. Everything, it emerges, can be copied and replicated, other than the spirit.

*"Half Full"* is on view at the Givon Art Gallery, 35 Gordon St., Tel Aviv, Mon.-Thurs. 11 A.M. – 6 P.M., Fri, Sat. 11 A.M. - 2 P.M. Until Jan. 16