

into a shadow. The three works are black, that is: blackened, erased. Signs of blackening/erasure also appear on a page of sketches, visible from both sides. One side reads: “Do not accuse, lawbreaker, fear is what it brings out” in reference to a situation imposed on Mizrahi Jews: do not accuse, do not criticize, for you will be identified as an outlaw. Fear paralyzes Mizrahi identity from positioning itself in a critical position toward social-change.

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The tension between “mother tongue” and “father tongue” informs and perpetuates the deferral of language. Even the gesture of recognizing the mother tongue comes with a hierarchy between s/he whose mother tongue exists alongside the canonical language of the establishment, and s/he whose mother tongue expresses alienation from and resistance to it. In Israel today, one must investigate the tension and concord between “Ashkenazi” mother tongues and Zionist-Israeli speak, and the different ways—both overt and covert—that the tension between the Ashkenazi private sphere and the Hebrew-Zionist public sphere has diminished. One must also investigate the exploitation of Arab-Jewish mother tongues in order to create a “poetic” difference that supports the Westernized modernity of Israelis on the one hand, and marks the “backwardness,” alienation, and estrangement of Mizrahi Jews on the other. In light of Sami Shalom Chetrit’s poem, which serves as an epigraph to the above discussion, we must also investigate the “way [of this exhibit] to `Ayn Harod.” In other words, the choice to exhibit in a museum central in character but marginal in location. The loss of the het and `ayin (as described in the poem)—like a heavy tax paid along the way—resonates with the reading I have offered about the ways, albeit different, most of the works in the exhibit avoid evoking the Mizrahi mother tongue explicitly. The variety of Mizrahi identities—as articulated in the Mother Tongue exhibit—make for an important case study of how Israeli culture ought to think about, and define, itself.

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*No. 1* (1997), two photographs of Keligman's parents, as they appeared in their immigration cards issued by Zionist emissaries in Agadir, Morocco upon departing to Israel, can be seen. Keligman's camera shifts between the two pictures, looses focus, and finds it again. By filming the two-dimensional photographs, Keligman attempts to create movement where movement has been frozen for good. Keligman's movement, stripped of its spatial possibilities, keeps returning to the single moment trapped in the junction of the possible fates of the photographed subjects. "Generational Loss" can also be found in Keligman's triptych *Left Over* (2002). The first image consists of El-Al [Israeli national airlines] hand wipes sewn together with red thread. The second image is of a tangle of red and white strips of cloth, and the third image is of a tangle of white strips of cloth—the remains of another of Keligman's works. Keligman makes use of what one system might forbid, but another system might find useful. The space she offers the spectator is dense, without center, and overflowing with leftovers that, at the moment they were captured, lost their ability to act.

Distancing from the original in favor of a discourse of difference can also be found in the works of Mosh Kashi. *Double Via* (1997), consists of two almost identical paintings—like a "spot the differences" test—of a prickly bush. The bush has neither roots nor ground in which to grow. Its branches appear to have developed as though the painted object's internal codes dictated the logic of their gravity. A similar logic can be found in the painting *Whipping Willow* (2002)—a life-size painted etching located in the Judaica section of the Museum of Art Ein Harod. The painted object looks like a bramble—perhaps living plant, perhaps dry thorn—on whose axis an endless branch rotates, unifying the other branches and thorns in realistic detail with exact movements of shade and light. The cone shape is suggestive of the ambiguous shape of the burning bush that would not catch fire. The placement of Kashi's work in the Judaica section raises the possibility of

relating his work to the ornamental imagery of synagogue curtain adornments and their affinity to arabesques and other modes of visual expression in Muslim material culture.

With esthetic means of erasure, writing, and blurring, Tal Matzliah constructs class-consciousness, Mizrahiness, Black identity, and Jewish motifs. In the piece *Untitled (The Revolutionary Colored with Easternness)* (2002), Matzliah sketches words from the chapter "Communists" in the book *The Teachings of Mao Tse Tung*. Citing the words strips them of their ideological content. The work exudes cynicism, especially the most prominent sentence in the piece: "The Revolutionary Colored with Easternness." These words connect revolution with Easternness [Mizrahiness], while the intermediary "colored"<sup>17</sup> undermines the connection and its feasibility. The sentence, composed like a conscription order, relates to codes of belonging to artistic, political, and ethnic institutions. At the center of the work is a figure whose body is painted in the colors of the Palestinian and Israeli flags, but whose face is black and white. The work links ideological consciousness ("Communists") with "colored" people and "black and white" people. The third-world vibrancy of the painting, and its deviation from the rectangular canvas, threaten to dirty the white walls of the gallery and defile the compartmentalization it has been entrusted with enforcing.

Works from the series *Untitled* (1999) express a desire to connect with Moroccan culture un-mediated or influenced by Israeli culture. In the first piece, Matzliah writes: "Greatest of liturgical poets and father of the Hebrew language, our teacher Rabbi David Buzaglo, blessed be his memory." In another piece, a painting based on a folktale from the book *Morocco's Righteous Men and the Wonders they Worked*, Matzliah depicts a righteous man, a donkey, and an ugly man. Yet another work is a photograph of an older painting by Matzliah, copied from a book on Byzantine art in which a group of people hovered together turn

<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew word for colored also means "hypocritical."

Moroccan cleaning lady. I also enjoy it in the context of being a Moroccan painter. ‘She does floors.’ I don’t know from where I derive this pleasure. I don’t come from a house where my mother was forced to work as a domestic [...] my mother is what you’d call a Moroccan Queen [...] it doesn’t come from home, it comes from my identity. To pour paint instead of soap. It’s a victory of sorts.” (*Plastica 2*, 1998, pp.142-152). Cabessa plays with the possibilities inherent to identity politics by adopting a continuum between “mopping floors” and “replicating Picassos.” Original and copy, high and low, Western and Eastern, Black and white—these are the binaries that inform a double consciousness, enabling one to draw pleasure from the “margin” and the “center” simultaneously.

### **Generational Loss—Disruption, Duality, Erasure, and Reproduction**

The disruption of the image and its reproduction take place in a number of works. Paradoxically, the common denominator between the notions “second generation” and “generational loss” can be found in the visual techniques of photography, reproduction, parallax, and copying—all of which entail distancing from the original object and causing erasure, blurred areas, blind spots, and detail loss. Representations of copied faces can be found in the works of Yigal Nizri, Tal Shoshan, Erik Bokobza and Adi Nes. However, a “process” of transformation or reproduction stand at the center of works by Rami Maymon, Eli Fatal, and Tal Shoshan. In these works, it is as if the viewer were asked to decipher the change, but kept from uncovering the process behind this meta-morphological identity game, a game that resides in the tension between the artist’s “original” face and their likeness as it appears in the work.

Rami Maymon’s *Untitled (Agent)* (2001) is made up of two self-portraits. In a graphic manipulation, he inverts the left and right sides of his face to create two perfectly symmetrical whole faces. When confronted with the two equally realistic faces, the spectator grows uncomfortable, as neither face is real. The reproductions

emphasize the small differences between the portraits: the brow, the bridge of the nose, the lips. The work creates a discourse of difference wherein the little details make it impossible to fix someone and render them one-dimensional in the framework of identity politics.

In *Untitled* (2002), close-up photographs of wood-like Formica surfaces, David Adika stops to reflect on the material essence of a surmised object—probably a table—of which we only see the photographed outer layer. This pause is reinforced by two prints of the same material, a repetition that requires the viewer to find almost indiscernible differences. The curlicue pattern of the surface echoes both concrete and abstract “Oriental” decorative styles. The photographed Formica is actually a wood-patterned silk print which has been reduced to a thin, smooth, and wipe-able surface; an accessible surface in a non-hierarchical domestic setting. The idea of the wood has been lost to the point that its essence cannot be extracted from its image. The hyper-realistic photographic technique and large format aggrandize the Formica surface, creating an image that relies on touch or memory, more than on immediate recognition.

In Meir Franco’s paintings, memories of migration from Izmir, Turkey congeal like paint stains on glass plates: orange, red—bloody. It is a “Mizrahi” esthetic that appears to be decorative, useful, colorful, sensual, but also misleading, liquid, fragile. His portraits are peopled with Westernized figures that look as if they came from “over there”—extracted from old family albums. Immaculately dressed are a man in a hat, two older women in black, and a mustachioed man with a child seated on his lap, all foregrounding colorful floral decors that sever them from realistic memory. Franco painted one black work, unlike the others, in 2001. An image of the sentence: “God pauses but does not forget.” Pausing God’s memory does not amount to forgetfulness, but attests to states of migration and moving, of being in between identity, time, and place.

The works of Alice Keligman deal with “Generational Loss” as a form of distancing from the original, as well as from biographical memory. In the video piece

that assumes power relations between lying subject and standing spectator. In the work, a parallel is drawn between the figure's skin color and the degree to which s/he is passive and subjected to violence. In the first painting, a white woman lies on a bed, and stares back in accordance with the Orientalist/masculinist tradition. In another painting, a dark-skinned woman lies on the ground with her arms spread in victimization. In a third painting, a Black man lies on the ground, the barrel of a gun pointed at his head, and the white hand of a woman keeping him down. The paintings create a feeling of "thirdworldist" magical realism. The works ridicule the Black identity versus white identity binary by detangling this paradigm with a misleading colorfulness. Opposite these three large paintings stands a small picture of a woman's face: the image of a mother looking head on. She represents a private, anonymous position (known only to its painter) that functions as an anchor in a violent, hierarchical public space.

The Black mother stands at the heart of Zamir Shatz' *Nothing Like Mom* (2002). Shatz constructs an imaginary biography for himself using family footage and archival materials from Kibbutz Kineret to create a violent, oppressive, and racist narrative. The film tells the story of "Woman Comrade Day" during which the women go on an outing and the men take their places. The domestic realm, abandoned by the nurturing mothers, is handed over to the exclusive control of kibbutz masculinity: "Woman Comrade Day started off just fine, the women all went to a hotel, spa, and casino in Syria [...] Mom went too, but in a separate bus for Blacks. Dad didn't play the game," explains the narrator in Shatz' voice, over images from the 1950s and 1960s in which children participate in athletic and agricultural competitions, men wear aprons and perform kitchen duties, take care of babies, and clean bathrooms. Narrator: "The children were led by force to their afternoon nap [...] One adult came and twisted my arm until finally it broke [...] Blood poured out of my shoulder, another adult suggested that we paint with my

blood which was blue, narcissus, and red [...] At that point I started to laugh from the pain like a madman [...] One of the adults came to me and told me that my mother is a whore from Afghanistan and that she should be killed. They tore my clothes off and raped me [...] To my surprise, I loved it, I felt liberated. I woke up to see the enormous breasts of a nurse named Levana."<sup>16</sup>

The unrestrained, ferocious violence reflects a border area undergoing continuous change, offering an alternative to distinct national territories. The abandonment of house, emotional, sexual, and physical ruptures, and the eventual return to the status quo epitomized by a closing shot of a family dinner, creates a third, temporal space, one that is neither "here" nor "there." Shatz' strategy is to adopt a Mizrahi identity that names the system's lies, its whitening, eagerness for modernity and secularity, the cracks and incongruities. By using documentary materials, he deconstructs the cultural system from within.

Miriam Cabessa's paintings *Untitled (Mummy)* 1998 are dark traces of acts of erasure. Damp paint spread on a Masonite surface that remains unabsorbed. The congealed image is a kind of mummy. Cabessa defines these paintings as "Color stripping." In the past, she covered Masonite boards with wood paint and pigment after which she ran them over—in her capacity as a cleaning lady—with various implements: a mop, a garbage can lid, a floor rag, a plastic cup, and her fingers. In the mummy piece she uses an iron. Cabessa says: "Figurative painting also has to do with proportions and preparations. You need to come with some knowledge about the painting. I want to come with information about longing, memory, imagination, not information about technical capabilities [...] my father copied Picasso's paintings. When he was young, he left Morocco for Paris where he was a very successful jazz musician [...] Picasso was the closest thing to jazz. I grew up with replicas of Picasso and they looked to me like the originals." Further on, Cabessa, a native of Casablanca, admits that "I love telling people that I'm a

<sup>16</sup> Literally White or Moon in Hebrew, akin to the name "Blanch."

peacocks, feathers, and birds of paradise. Its roundness suggests spirituality and mysticism. Like works of art, it is a non-utilitarian object. Shohat found it in the home of her parents who migrated from Libya and Iran respectively. In another black and white photograph, a woman descends a set of stairs in her underwear. The work triggers associations with Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912)—an image well entrenched in the history of Western art and referenced often in relation to formalism, movement, and composition. Both photographs are objects of encoded beauty. Their readability depends on one's familiarity with a given cultural body of knowledge. The un-readability of the Mandala photograph, both as icon and as a color photograph of a black and white object, creates a distance of sorts, one that does not allow for immediate appropriation.

### **Blackness—Recoding Mizrahiness**

Reference to Black identity in general, and African-American identity in particular, can be found in a number of critical Mizrahi texts. In keeping with critical Black discourses in the United States, it can be said that "Blackness" is the invention of a culture that chose to define itself as "white." According to Toni Morrison, white-skin consciousness exists and is justified only in light of non-whiteness, including all of the fetishes attributed to both skin colors.<sup>14</sup> Non-whiteness is common to men and women alike, and binds them into a single political state of "Blackness" because they are members of a society whose hegemonic consciousness is white. In the field of African-American cultural criticism, the concept "recoded Blackness" has been instrumental. By extension, one can characterize the strategy of several artists in the exhibit as recoding Mizrahiness. That is, undermining modes of representation that fix identities and attempting to define new visual and

linguistic codes. In short, a consciousness that responds to the way "Mizrahiness" is perceived through "popular" imagery. Comparing Mizrahi identity to Black identity points to color as the principal stereotypical marker of cultural and ethnic difference, a stereotype that continues to inform Ashkenazi-Mizrahi tensions in Israel. Black (or "Blackened") skin, as well as an identification with Black identity, is addressed in the works of Zamir Shatz, Netta Harari, Tal Matzliah, Eli Fatal, and Miriam Cabessa.

In the photograph *Negative Portrait* (2002), Eli Fatal leads us through the traditional photographic process of development to the negative, where the lightest parts of an image look the darkest, and vice versa. Fatal bleached his hair platinum blond so that in the negative it would appear dark, and painted his face black so that in the negative it would appear light. The result: a print of the negative. This manipulation creates an odd, hybrid, anomalous face. The sheer magnitude of the print forces the viewer to assume an inquisitive gaze and confront its making. Fatal's eyes can be read in two ways: one normal (that is abnormal, negative)—with a soft glance to the right, and one abnormal (that is normal, a positive, i.e. a guy with dark eyes and hair)—with a harsh, dissatisfied, even angry glance to the left. Upon re-examination, it is clear that his skin has been painted. Fatal's blackface corresponds with American minstrel shows. Applying black paint to a white face and assuming an imaginary Africanized self released the white entertainer from his cultural mores, giving him license to act out otherwise taboo content.<sup>15</sup> Fatal's negative portrait, however, is not about prohibition, except in one sense: the public visibility of Blackness. The appearance of Black identity in relation to Mizrahi Jews rather than the African "Other," undermines the predominance of the white face in Israeli artistic representations.

In her paintings, Netta Harari brings together the "white" world and the "Other" world marked by dark complexion. Harari exhibited three paintings from 2002 of male and female figures which, together, depict a continuum from force to restrained violence. The supine position expresses a passive position, one

<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage Books, 1993

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

a *Lufthansa* bird. By bringing them together, Maymon enables the graphic images to exist outside their commercial context. But this “nature” scene only appears to be romantic. Really, it’s been frozen into lifelessness denying the possibility that its constituent images be experienced concretely. The logo expresses an indexical language that makes for a culturally dependent relationship between signifier and signified, one that is known in advance. Its deconstruction and reconstruction disrupt the very environment it seeks to create. Maymon’s visual language offers a closed system of signs that point to the inability of saying or representing anything without the mediation of language. Against the limitations of representation, the piece suggests we imagine as if, an imagining that requires a certain degree of blindness, for the flower will never bloom, the couple will never fall in love, the plane will never take off, etc.

In the series *Reading From: Desert* (2002) Tal Shoshan presented 16 works in which her likeness appears. Making the works entailed photographing herself using the screen of a digital camera, printing the photographs with an inkjet printer, and drawing on them with colored pencils. The retouching covers the photograph in an attempt to emphasize the contours of her face and body. Shoshan begins with her eyes, moves to her cheekbones, then to her wrinkles and laugh lines, and finally to her lips. She renders her expressions more severe, tries to extract a new person, to release herself from her physicality. Photographing herself by tracing “movement” expresses a kind of distancing of speech. The work bespeaks a lack of faith in existing systems of signs; an attempt to invent a language through gestures. It is a physical language that corresponds with, as well as confronts, a conception of Mizrahiness projected onto the body, hand gestures, and animated expressions of emotion. Shoshan’s body turns into a political battlefield in the struggle between control and containment on the one hand, and disintegration and liberation on the other.

Deferring and blindness are the subjects of Irit Hemmo’s work. The pieces in the series *Jeff, 1-5* (0000) are a direct citation of the photograph *Eviction*

*Struggle* (1998) by Canadian artist Jeff Wall. Wall’s photograph depicts a man being evicted from his home as passersby and neighbors look on. Making the pieces entailed sketching copies of Wall’s photograph directly onto white Formica using coal paper. The process is “blind”—one in which the maker cannot anticipate its results since the coal paper covers the white Formica until the copying has been completed. Hemmo eliminates some details and adds others—like rendering the background dark but leaving the image’s original contours so that it is reminiscent of positive/negative interchanges in photography. The pieces raise questions about photography as a practice, the obsession over the “original,” the socialization of the artist, and his/her work in a field where a body of knowledge is transmitted “signed, sealed, and delivered” as language. The name of the series, “Jeff,” is the same as that of the Canadian photographer, and points to an imagined familiar/familial relationship—an ironic commentary on kinship between artists. The fact that many Israeli artists think of themselves as branches in a family tree of (mostly German) Western artists, lends credence to Hemmo’s point: an affinity that does not express a position toward the adopted family, but rather assumes a genealogy by virtue of geography (Ashkenazi countries of origin) and culture. Perhaps such a connection exists, but there is little evidence to substantiate the claim, as the family albums have been destroyed. With Hemmo, there is no sense that she is trying to adopt an available artistic identity. Hemmo takes only the photographer’s name from the original creation, not the representation. Taking control of the name is like activating a code that allows entry, and once she enters, she does whatever she wants with the image. It doesn’t become hers, but rather echoes in the memory of an image that is fading over time.

In an installation by Tal Shohat, representations of Eastern esthetics are confronted with those of Western art. The installation *Untitled* (2002) consists of two photographs. The first, a color photograph (that looks black and white) of a Mandala tray. This is an object of Persian or Indian “Oriental” beauty about 1.5 meters in diameter meant to be hung on the wall. The tray includes images of

exhibit was held at the Museum of Art Ein Harod, and includes the portraits of most of the artists who participated in the exhibit. These photographs were presented as a separate body of knowledge that corresponds with the themes of the exhibit. Like the biography, an artist's visibility is also uncommon in the field of Israeli art. Being seen is limited to the tradition of "Self-Portrait" as painted or photographed object, or accentuated subject positions in specific works of art. The would-be typological nature of Adika's series is undermined by a lack of uniform composition and distance/proximity games with the photographed subjects. Indeed, the photographs share certain features such as size, format, and time of capture, but these are but a means for Adika to avoid stylistic unity and convey the heterogeneity of the fractured Mizrahi experience. Facial expressions are highlighted so as not to portray the subjects as passive. Exhibiting the artists' portraits alongside, albeit apart from, their works of art, points to a desire to go beyond the "artistic." It suggests seeing the artists' subjectivity as expressive of social and cultural relations beyond the creation of "works of art," as expressive of their biographies and actual lives.

### **Spaces of Language—Mother Tongue, Spoken Language, Artistic Language**

The tension between "mother tongue" and "father tongue" informs and reinforces the deferral of the "mother tongue." While most of the works in the exhibit avoid making the Mizrahi mother tongues present, they nonetheless dictate different approaches to bringing forward/pushing back the language by various means: silence, disruption, stuttering, and the interference of spoken and written language alongside the creation of artistic languages/signs—practices that delimit and define the systems of representation.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend – Phrases in Dispute*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

In light of the silences that accompany many of the works, I draw on the term *Differend* used by Jean-Francois Lyotard. A Differend is a gap or irreconcilable difference between two kinds of discourses: "A case of Differend between two parties takes place when the "regulation" of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom [...] What is subject to threats is not an identifiable individual, but the ability to speak or to keep quiet. [...] The Differend is the unstable state and instant of language, something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible."<sup>13</sup>

Khen Shish's video works deal with the inanimate—that which passed in silence—as options of resistance in the realms of Arabic, French, English, and Hebrew. In the piece *King Solomon* (2002), Shish filmed a Japanese Sumo wrestling match on the TV screen of a Parisian home. In the background, chatter in French and Tunisian Arabic can be heard. It is the home of Shish's uncle, who immigrated from Tunisia to France. Shish is searching for a third biographical option along an axis of time and space that has converged at a critical junction: France or Israel? The tension between Tunisian "Easternness" in France and Tunisian "Mizrahiness" in Israel is channeled into shared spectatorship at another, distant Other: the would-be strange East Asian. But the Sumo wrestler also has no voice. His audio is muted in favor of the conversing spectators. In another piece, Shish wired a TV monitor to a video player with no tape in it. Thus, there is no image, other than a quivering line running up and down a blue screen. On another monitor Shish pinned a picture of a wild black horse on its hind legs. Other monitors are turned on but not connected, echoing their silences to one another. On the wall behind them, hangs a Bruce Lee poster, signifying yet another combative Easternness.

Rami Maymon depicts "nature" using an index of signs. The installation *As If* (2000-2001) is a scene made up of logos: the *Macintosh* apple from the tree of knowledge, the *Adidas* flower, a couple seated back to back fashioned by *Kappa*,

different socio-cultural situations), Mizrahi identity contends with dark skin as a cultural, social, and psychological barrier.

The correlation between identity and being sentenced to an identity can also be found in Yigal Nizri's *To This Day People Know Me as Victor. Yigal Nizri in his Living Room* (1998). Nizri the artist searched for other people with the name "Yigal Nizri." The photograph is of the only other Yigal Nizri he found, a Beer Seba resident who works as a foreman at the Dimona Nuclear Plant. How does a name, given to a person by his/her parents, affect the trajectory of his/her life? In a conversation with Nizri the depicted, it turned out that in Morocco his name had been Victor. Upon arriving in Israel, it was changed to Yigal.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, the piece corresponds with post-holocaust searches for missing relatives and the notion "Every Man has a Name"—a cultural concept commonly used by institutions such as Yad Vashem: the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority and the commemorative departments of the Israeli army. But unlike searching for a name in an official framework of memorialization meant to honor the dead, Nizri the artist sought to find his name in another living person who, according to the dominant cultural codes, committed no brave acts in the service of the nation. The nature of the work itself, a simple print on yellowing newspaper, points to a deliberate effort to skirt the heroism associated with finding missing persons. Instead, Nizri pays tribute to daily survival in the face of subordination and erasure, and relies on memory by seeking out details such as the geometric pattern on the cloth cover that has slipped off the shoulder of the couch, or the checkered pattern of Yigal-Victor's shirt.

Questions of class fate and choice also inform Dafna Shalom's work in the series *53 Moshe Dayan Street* (1998-2002). By documenting the life of Natalie, the neighbors' daughter who is growing up in the same building where Shalom grew up, the artist constructs her biographical counterpart. For three years Shalom

photographed the Namer family at 53 Moshe Dayan Street in the Yad Eliyahu neighborhood of Tel Aviv, following Natalie's place in the social-familial order. The photographs depict a girl in the intimacy of her home and family: the living room, her father shaving, watching TV together, the children's room. The photographs do not fake reality, nor do they produce it; the pictures are not staged. In all of the photographs, one can feel the body language of mother, father, brother, and Natalie. The expressionistic gestures in the photographs appear to be conscious of their visibility—gestures that are not poses, but actions laden with socio-cultural meanings. Consciousness about gaze and the cultural significance of signs inform the subdued inner-cultural and inner-familial body language of the depicted. There are no external shots save for one at Natalie's school on Memorial Day. Natalie's identity is formed within the confines of her home and immediate family. Her Mizrahi identity finds expression in an enclosed domestic space, away from the public sphere of Israeliness.

In a staged shot, Tal Shohat dialogues with the quasi-colonial fantasy of an illustrious past, large houses, and large women. In the photograph *Untitled* (2002), a tall woman dressed in bridal white appears with her feet caked in a dry white mud. At a closer glance, it appears to be a whitening of the skin. Around her, a group of men are seated with teacups in hand. On the right is Shohat's father, Yohanan, who was born in Iran. Beside him sit friends and family from Kurdistan, Iran, and Tunisia. The "woman" stands amid a row of men, perhaps bridegrooms, perhaps fathers giving-her-away. The large courtyard cites the biographical cliché of a rich and illustrious past: "In the old country, everyone was well-off..."

An elaboration on the biographical dimension in the economy "identity vs. imagined community" can be found in David Adika's *Portraits* (2002). The series was presented at the Hagar Galley in Jaffa at the same time the Mother Tongue

<sup>12</sup> Literally "will redeem" in Hebrew.



camouflage shirt, has a blond “Oriental” mustache. Where the Arab maid stood in the other painting, Bokobza placed his own mother, this time in a maid’s outfit, standing behind the “Ashkenazi” family. Here too, Bokobza created a repetitive ornamental background pattern: half Rachel’s Tomb and half Bauhaus building—signifying “local” Ashkenazi-German architecture.

The second painting was actually commissioned by an Ashkenazi family. Bokobza was asked to depict this family in an imaginary setting similar to the way he depicted his own. The reason for the commission (purchase for a collection) and the construction of the artist as “craftsman,” reflect a subversive class-consciousness in relation to the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi binary. Despite the fact that Bokobza’s biography spans Paris (where he was born) and Tel Aviv, and the fact that he comes from an upper-class background, he prefers to adopt an imagined communal class identity, one that associates his parents’ country of origin (Tunisia) with the working class. This chosen identification did not find expression in a published critique of his work that sought to “rescue” Bokobza from the clutches of the working class: “Bokobza does not belong to the category of discriminated Mizrahi Jews. He is another kind of minority, closer perhaps to the Levantines à la Jacqueline Kahanoff; a minority whose cultural estrangement stems from its proximity to a place and time when Europe and the East mixed more naturally.” (Smadar Shefi, *Haaretz*, April 24, 2002).

In a series of works by Adi Nes recently exhibited in a one-man show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2001), “Mizrahi” youth foreground housing projects in a so-called “development town.” The depicted scenes are easily decipherable with a familiar index of imagery: people sitting on the exposed concrete slabs of a neighborhood bomb shelter or sleeping on mattresses spread across the floor of a single room, and so forth. In an interview published just before the show opened, Nes supplied the biographical context for his work: “What is pronounced in my

personality, and visible in my photographs over the years, is my homosexuality—but not only. There is the Kiryat Gat<sup>11</sup> in me, the Mizrahi in me, the Israeli Jew in me. I have many facets and my story isn’t singular, but composed of many complementary and contradictory layers.” (*Haaretz*, April 6, 2001).

Nes assumes a complex and variable identity politic. However, the Tel Aviv Museum catalog focused solely on the homoerotic. In the texts that accompany his work the terms “homosexuality,” “homoeroticism,” and “queerness” abound, while terms like “Mizrahi,” “Mizrahiness,” and “East” are nowhere to be found. The authors of the catalog describe the youths depicted in Nes’ photographs thus: “A young darkish boy, with a somewhat brown complexion” (Ellen Ginton), “Adi Nes liberates the local boy from the frontier town where he was born” (Yehuda Shenhav), “A collection of [dark-skinned] boys in an exterior [housing project] whose figures shift from total paganism and lack of consciousness, to a piercing subjectivity that looks you straight in the eye” (Doron Rabina). The absence of the term “Mizrahi” is a pathology that attests to cultural blindness. Throughout the catalog, references are made to Greek mythology (Narcissus or Dionysus the God of Wine) in order to explain the fate of the depicted. However, unlike myths—where Gods determine the fate of mortals (how convenient)—the sense of fate conveyed in the photographs is of an actual Mizrahi fate, one based on the construction of Mizrahiness in class terms. The youths’ dark skin converges with the poverty of the housing projects to become one in the same. In one photograph, a teen embraces a child and both appear glued to the wall behind them, as though they had no way to disengage from it. In another photograph, boys sitting on a bomb shelter look imprisoned by the jumble of concrete around them. Staged photography, like documentary photography, defuses any questions about the boys’ real identities by fixing them as dark-skinned people in a “sociological” setting, somehow leaving them behind like relics. Privileging homoerotic discourse over Mizrahi discourse bespeaks a would-be desire to liberate the depicted from their fate. In contrast with sexual identity (which entails a discourse of “performance” and “passing” in

<sup>11</sup> A so-called “development town” in the south of Israel.

Certainly when compared to biographic narratives understood to relate to Zionist-nationalist history like holocaust survivors, pioneers, and immigrants. In the 1990s, biographical narratives having to do with sexual identity worked their way into the heart of Israeli arts discourse—as long as the biography was sufficiently reduced to its sexual dimension only.

“Imagined biographies” refers to the fact that, except for Cohen Gan, all of the participating artists in the exhibit were born in Israel or immigrated as young children. Thus, the fictional story is a means to awaken the parents’ memories, or to tell their story in other terms. In some of the works the artists cast themselves and in others, family members and relatives appear. And just as the act of casting points to control over an artist’s image as “befitting” a predetermined “occasion of invitation,” the artist—as an agent of different representational gazes—constructs his/her biographical image in relation to various occasions of invitation by assuming an ironic position or eliciting emotional identification. In some of the representations, the biographical dimension is only hinted at and distanced to the domain of culture at large: geographic, familial, or communal. Such allusion is based on signs encoded into the work, and the personal biographical stories artists disseminate by means of interviews, or, as Pinchas Cohen Gan does, by including biographical material in his catalogs and books. Disseminating one’s biographical context via the work of art and other means is essential to Mizrahi discourse, which relates to questions of presence/absence and being ignored, muted, appropriated, and erased.

Khen Shish presented an installation that documents an ongoing project titled *Khen-Djamila* (1999-2002). In this project, identity politics are employed in order to test out the various definitions Shish, “a Tunisian Arab-Jew” living in Israel, can embody. The project began in 1999 with a journey to London, where

Shish moved into a primarily Arab immigrant neighborhood, presented herself as “Djamila from Tunis,” and collected fragments of random encounters with second-generation Arab exiles. Some fell in love with her, gave her photographs, and wrote her letters. In 2002, she traveled to London again, as well as to Paris, this time documenting the journey. She declared Djamila dead “in the Twins” (9/11), but was forced to contend with her Arab persona when people spoke to her in Arabic. Shish assembled her identity—born of these journeys and the gaps between them—into an installation. Postcards, objects, papers, collages, and stickers tell the story of the deconstruction and reconstruction of an identity. Together, they form a powerful Mizrahi female “Self.” Postcards of Arab movie stars bought at the Arab World Institute in Paris, were cut up and reassembled. In one collage, Muhammad Abdel Wahab can be made out sitting on the legs of a Moroccan woman whose feet are decorated with Henna designs. Other works are based on papers photocopied at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Shish photocopied pages out of art books, and scribbled on them in Hebrew: “Kusit from Tunis”<sup>10</sup> and in English: “Tunisian” and “Tunis.” The photocopied images have no accompanying text that might attest to their origins, nor do they bear any explanatory captions or artists’ signatures. Thus, Shish appropriates art history in the service of her personal narrative.

Contradictions between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi identity are a theme in the work of Eliyahou Erik Bokobza. In two paintings from 1999 presented side by side, two families are depicted. The first is of the Bokobzas at a family gathering: the father wears a “Tunisian” caftan and a tarbush. The artist appears as a boy, and beside him stands a girl holding a doll. The mother wears a revealing dress with a bright, colorful floral pattern. Behind them stands a figure identified as the Arab maid. The background is composed of a repetitive ornamental pattern: half blue eye (to ward off evil) and half architectural print suggestive of Rachel’s Tomb. In the second painting, the mother wears a star spangled top, two of the three daughters wear public school uniforms, and the father, wearing an army

<sup>10</sup> Literally a diminutive feminized version of the Arabic word for “cunt,” in Israeli slang it denotes a good-looking woman.

likes of Joseph who was imprisoned in Egypt or Rabbi Akiva and the ten martyrs incarcerated by the Romans. The iconographic absence of imprisoned righteous men compared to the prevalence of Christian victims emphasizes, paradoxically, the degree to which “Aryeh Deri” the image is a stranger to the representational space of the museum.

Dafna Shalom locates her biography in a space exterritorial to secular Israeli identity. The series *The Women’s Gallery* (2002) was photographed in the Ramat Gan synagogue where Shalom’s parents and grandparents used to pray. This is how the synagogue looks from the women’s gallery. The perspective, from high up, emphasizes the worshippers’ skullcaps and the overhanging chandeliers. Such a perspective would appear to be advantageous in the relations between photographer and photographed because of the spatial control it affords. Shalom’s reproduction of the female gaze expresses, in this context, empowerment and the formulation of a female Mizrahi Jewish identity. Shalom attempts to reproduce the spatial position and point of view held by her grandmother as she worshipped. The spiritual domain is captured by Shalom’s camera as a luminous and familiar one.

In his photographs, Baruch Shacham deals with inter-generational continuity in contradictory spaces. The series *Dead Sea* (2002) includes eight photograph-objects. The space where they were captured, and the space they depict, is of an abandoned structure. Shacham, naked and exposed, positions himself against his parents’ photo albums amidst the structure’s neglect. The viewer’s exposure to his body is gradual and un-seductive. Shacham both lies and stands, motionless. The light is bright, emphasizing the contours of his body and the darkness of his skin. In one piece, continuity is created between Shacham, who lies beneath a window in a pool of light, and his mother, whose photograph sits in the window like an x-ray. In another piece, Shacham stands naked holding a cloth: a translucent prayer shawl or white scarf, while behind him hangs a large photograph of his father wearing phylacteries. In another photograph, dry twigs

have been placed beside a wall, evoking the image of a burning bush that will not burn. Opposite hangs a photograph of his father sitting on the couch in his pajamas listening to Cairo radio. Locating the scene in an “abandoned” building (Palestinian structures in the Jericho area) advances a narrative of traversing the desert to retrace the steps of his parents’ generation. The photographs are understood as a biblical journey to an extra-cultural, inter-geographic frontier.

### **The Maze of Identity Politics—Employing Real or Imagined Biographies**

The biography, be it real or imagined, can be found in many of the works. The disproportionate attention to class, which can be found in many of the participating artists’ pieces, stands out in relation to its absence in canonical cultural representations. Expressing class-consciousness through the biographical narrative demonstrates that Mizrahiness is not only a cultural identity in crisis, but also a vehicle for social-political representation. Beyond the entrenched artistic interpretations, I will offer additional readings anchored in actual biographical narratives. When an artist’s biography—real or imagined—is loaded with signs of cultural struggle, his/her work will inevitably bear the mark of struggle, though its visibility may depend on the interpretive discourses about such works.

Where shall we “locate” the beginning of an artist’s biography? In the field of Israeli art, such beginnings usually correlate with, and are constructed around, the ceremony marking the end of one’s training by “prestigious” institutions such as the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design or Hamidrasha School of Art. An artist’s class and community background has very little bearing, if any, on the narrative attributed to him/her. This is reflected in the founding discourses of Israeli art, which are modernist and based on an ideology that assumes the autonomous status of art and privileges inner-art-world emphases. Even if the biographic dimension is not altogether absent from this discourse, I contend that class, Mizrahi, Jewish, and Arab discursive formations are underrepresented in it.

from inner-art-world associations. In the catalog *Remaking of History* (1994) he writes, “much has been written about Orientalism and the cultural Imperialism of the West which has been interpreted as a conquering of Eastern culture. However, as an Israeli citizen today, who migrated to Israel from an Eastern country, I was forced to undergo a double process of humiliation: on the one hand, humiliation at the hands of Jews, and on the other hand for being Mizrahi. This humiliation was also what my parents endured upon arriving to Israel from North Africa to Israel in 1949 [...] A similar fate continues to plague my father, who lives in a coastal town in the north of Israel; living the fate of a Mizrahi-Israeli-Jew.” Part of the book Cohen Gan devotes to rejections letters he has received from “the conventional art world” over the past 25 years.

Cohen Gan devotes the book *Art, Law, and the Social Order* (1999) to the “law suit against the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem for defaming—with the sanction of the state—the person and work of Pinchas Cohen Gan; an independent, contemporary, and total artist.” According to Cohen Gan, the lawsuit is meant to prove that “preconceived notions and social stigmas exist in educational institutions [...] and are propagated by Eurocentric academic tone-setters that lend credence to the philosophical thesis on the universality of

evil. According to this thesis, the Jew of Mizrahi origin is perceived as having an inferior humanity, and his natural abilities (by virtue of birth and descent) are cast in doubt. I personally experienced, as an art instructor [...] the defamation of my person and work, with the sanction of the state.” It is a scathing political charge-sheet officially addressed to “the State.” The unofficial addressee is the Israeli art field and those who formulate its discourses. His last book, *The Architecture of Evil in the Third Reich* (2000), deals, paradoxically, with German culture. The book includes works that address the connection between Nazi ideology, modern art, and Judaism. This discussion links the oppression Ashkenazi Jews faced in Germany before the war with the oppression Mizrahim faced at the hands of Ashkenazim in the years following their mass immigration. The collection of Cohen Gan’s publications, beginning with conceptual art in the Dead Sea and Alaska and ending with Nazi Germany, makes for a historic retrospective that in turn contours consciousnesses, beliefs, and identities.

In Yaacob Ronen Morad’s photograph *Untitled* (1998), Aryeh Deri<sup>7</sup> is depicted at a public gathering in Saker Park in Jerusalem during the holiday of Sukkoth, 1998. His hands are spread. In one palm Deri holds a red piece of paper reminiscent of a bloodstain in Christian iconography equating him with Jesus—the ultimate victim. In another work, the panorama *Untitled* (2001), Deri is only present by association. The photographs that make up the panorama were taken during Slikhot<sup>8</sup> outside Ramleh Prison around the time Deri began serving his sentence. By placing two photographs of explicitly Jewish events: receiving the Rabbi (Rabbi Ovadia Yosef)<sup>9</sup> and worshippers seeking forgiveness, Morad advances a narrative wherein “Mizrahi” and “Jewish” are interchangeable. The worshippers outside the prison would define themselves first as “Sons of the Torah”—their Mizrahiness is understood to come with their Jewish identity, not to precede it. By juxtaposing a photograph of Deri in his hey day with one taken outside the prison several years later, Morad expresses a critique of Deri’s jailing as a threat to religious Jewish culture. In the Jewish historical mirror, Deri’s figure corresponds with the

<sup>7</sup> The former political leader of Shas, a religious Mizrahi political party. Deri, who served as Minister of Interior under Rabin, was charged with corruption, an accusation that translated for many Mizrahi Jews as a political witch-hunt, and for which he served a two-year sentence. Shas is derived from the Hebrew Sephardim Shomrei Torah, literally Sephardi Torah Guardians. Shas is also another name for the Talmud, which is short for the Six Orders of Mishna.

<sup>8</sup> Penitential services held during the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashana—the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement.

<sup>9</sup> The spiritual leader of Shas, one of the most powerful figures in Israel’s political and cultural scene. Aside from organizing Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews politically, he has sought to gain equality or even superiority for Sephardi religious interpretations.

as exterritorial to Israeli identity.

Meir Gal's *Nine out of Four Hundred (The West and The Rest)* (1997) was placed at the entrance to the exhibit. In the photograph, Gal holds up a book by nine of its pages. The book, *A Chronicle of the Jewish People in Recent Generations* was in use as a history textbook in Israel's public schools during the 1970s, when Gal was a student. "The nine pages I am holding are the only pages in the book that discuss non-European Jewish history [...] these books helped establish a consciousness that the history of Jewish people took place in Eastern Europe and that Mizrahim have no history worthy of remembering" writes Gal in the text accompanying his work. This false consciousness is central to the field of Israeli art in that it formulates the identities of artists, as well as the available interpretations of their work. Nine out of 400 pages of official historical narrative stand against the historical memory of more than half of Israel's Jewish population.

National discourses are examined in another of Gal's works titled *Untitled (Arms Pit)* (2001). In a photograph, the nude upper half of Gal's body is visible. Beneath his raised arm, in his armpit, there is a black stain shaped like the map of Israel/Palestine. The word play in English is obvious. "Using my own body and imprinting the map of Israel in my armpit is a means to illustrate how Israelis are branded in the flesh like cattle and forced to relinquish values like personal freedom and self definition," writes Gal. The position of Gal's body is reminiscent of journalistic images of Palestinians raising their arms to reveal scars that would otherwise remain invisible. Though in Gal's work, the raised arm does not disclose the position of the body at the moment of branding/imprinting. Rather, it can be seen as an active position of marking one's self in protest or in an attempt to belong, or as a passive position of marking by the political order. In this spectrum of possibilities, Gal's work disrupts the category active-passive etched into the body by the state.

Pinchas Cohen Gan was a "guest artist" in the exhibit. For years his work has advanced radical critical discourse about power relations between Mizrahi

and Ashkenazi Jews not only in the Westernized field of Israeli art but also vis-à-vis the Zionist institutions of state. Cohen Gan presented a number of his published writings and works in the exhibit: *Activities* (1974), *Metaformal Art* (1981), *Pinchas Cohen Gan* (1982), *Pinchas Cohen Gan* (1983), *Atomic Art* (1986), *Dictionary of Semantic Painting and Sculpting* (1991), *Prints: Ramat Gan Museum* (1988), *And These Are the Names* (1992), *Works on Paper* (1969-1992), *Remaking of History* (1994), *Art, Law, and the Social Order* (1999), and *The Architecture of Evil in the Third Reich* (2000).

These publications made for a retrospective overview of his work, which can be deemed a tireless effort to track the footprints of "the state" in the artistic work. The catalog *Activities* (1974) documents his conceptual art projects from the 1970s such as *Exhibition of Etchings in the Cowshed at Kibbutz Nirim*, *The Dead Sea Project*, *Journey in Alaska*, *Touching the Border*, *Action in the Jericho Refugee Camp* and more—actions that dealt with mapping and delineating the borders of the state, as well as the art field. The questions he posed dealt with exhibiting outside the museum, moving away from the artistic object, as well as refuge, migration, adaptation, and changing living environments. In the catalog *Metaformal Art* (1981) Cohen Gan dealt with linguistic systems, which he presented in his work as scientific, universal, and philosophical. These being formulaic systems of mathematical signs that deviate from any specific political-cultural-geographic space—themes he elaborated on in later works during the 1980s and which, in retrospect, can be understood as "Deferring Language." In the catalog/encyclopedia *Dictionary of Semantic Painting and Sculpting* (1991) Cohen Gan composed an index of 200 entries in six languages, thereby universalizing the language of art.

During the 1990s, in exhibits and public appearances, Cohen Gan addressed definitions of Mizrahi identity, East-West relations and, by extension, his own place as a Mizrahi artist vis-à-vis the establishment. This work criticizes the racist and oppressive side of deferring language by assuming a position that deviates

and commercial life were conducted). Upon migrating to Israel, Hebrew as the language of worship was subsumed under Israeli-Zionist Hebrew, reducing and erasing the Jewish world it represented, and Judeo-Arabic dialects were inhibited and excluded to the point of being pushed from the public to the private sphere.

In the field of Israeli art a battle is being waged over the power to control images, their production, the way they are exhibited, and the discourses formed around them. According to art historian and cultural critic Sarah Khinsky, the logic of this field, like the struggles it contains, is borrowed from the West: “The field of Israeli art is based on the mythic notion of the “West,” which serves as its organizing principle, and is, [therefore], modeled as an exact replica of the field of European art.”<sup>5</sup> The unending aspiration for “Westernness” entails cultural self-fashioning, and the fashioning of others. Thus, certain cultural representations are deemed negative and “Other” in direct relation to prevalent power relations in Israeli society. In the face of these power relations, Mizrahiness, as I understand it—from the personal to the political to the social—is a worldview that aspires to formulate representations of Mizrahi identity within the existing system of identities as a tool for political struggle and a means to establish a visual presence in the public sphere, that is: the cultural sphere.<sup>6</sup>

While curating the exhibit, I was not concerned with questions of representation so much as the nonappearance, denial, and/or erasure of the

artists’ Mizrahi background upon being received in the art world. Focusing on the Mizrahi biography as central to the artists’ identities brought into focus my own position vis-à-vis them as an Ashkenazi curator. My intention was to curate an exhibit from within the critical Mizrahi discursive sphere, which has influenced me greatly. However, in this critical sphere my Ashkenaziness aroused opposition; an opposition which conflates institutional Ashkenazi power (which I oppose) with my own Ashkenazi background (seen as the only place from which I assume the right to select and interpret the works). In retrospect, it would have been better had the exhibit, which deals with Mizrahi identity, been curated by Mizrahim. Overlooking questions of representation in favor of context, came to be the central issue, redrawing the boundaries between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, and Mizrahim and Mizrahim—boundaries that attest to the important and complex difference between identity and identification.

In the exhibit it is possible to identify five paradigms for seeing and reading the works, and discussing them accordingly: Outside the Camp—assuming a position vis-à-vis Israeli power structures; The Maze of Identity Politics—employing real or imagined biographies; Spaces of Language—mother tongue, spoken language, artistic language; Blackness—recoding Mizrahiness; Generational Loss—disruption, duality, erasure, and reproduction.

### **Outside the Camp—Assuming a Position vis-à-vis Israeli Power Structures**

In this section, I address the works that deal with Mizrahi historiography and its attendant political discourses. Three of the participating artists created works that assume a critical position toward the art field, its dominant discourses, and power politics. Meir Gal, Yaacob Ronen Morad, and Pinchas Cohen Gan make use of extra-artistic contexts, both in the content of their work and in the texts that accompany them. Jewish identity is addressed in the works of Yaacob Ronen Morad, Dafna Shalom, and Baruch Shacham. In their work, Jewish space is created

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Khinsky “Eyes Wide Shut: on Acquired Albino Syndrome in the Field of Israeli Art.” *Theory and Criticism* 20, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> The exhibit *Mother Tongue* is the product of years of discursive and material acts, of a history—both individual and collective—of struggle for social, political, and cultural change, including the exhibits: *Block* 1997, *Bridge of Gold* (1998); *Mizrahi Women*, curator: Shula Keshet (1999); *Mizrahi Library*, curators: Zion Algharbeli and Yaacob Ronen Morad (2000); *Sister: Mizrahi Women Artists in Israel*, curators: Shula Keshet and Rita Mendes-Flohr (1999-2000); *Women Making a Difference* (2002); *Mizrahi Reading*, curator: Shula Keshet (2002).

I didn't really lose it –  
Guess just swallowed it.

— Sami Shalom Chetrit, 1988.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibit *Mother Tongue* dealt with representations of Mizrahi Jewish identities. Most of the 22 artists who participated in the exhibit were born in Israel. However, the experiences faced by their parents when migrating from Arab/Muslim countries to Israel is integral to the way they define their identities, the way they negotiate the art world and the world beyond, and their modes of expression—a fact that might help the viewer to read their respective works.

Discussions of identity (not only Mizrahi) and questions of biography and self-representation in the field of Israeli art are held/posed in a system loaded with perspectives, assumptions, and political accounting. Artists are subjects who operate in the art field and various other multicultural private and public spheres. In both domains knowledge and experience are acquired and designations, signifiers, and encounters are absorbed into the body. In both domains the artist

is a subject who is subjected to surveillance and interpretation—an overt/covert agent who moves between realms, expresses approval, criticism, and more. The works of art exhibited in *Mother Tongue* seek to reconstruct their subjects (be it artist, viewer, or curator)<sup>3</sup> using visual and narrative strategies employed within and against a history wherein Mizrahiness has been constructed as Otherness, while recognizing that Mizrahiness also permeates all facets of Israeli culture.

The origin, identity, and history of most of the people living under Israeli rule is “third world”—a term that functions as political topography in Ella Shohat’s analysis: “European hegemony in Israel [...] is the product of a distinct numerical minority, a minority in whose interest it is to downplay Israel’s ‘Easternness’ as well as its ‘Third Worldness’.”<sup>4</sup> Arabic, it can be said, was and is a mother tongue for many Israelis, including second generation Mizrahi Jews. Some of the artists who participated in the exhibit have spoken Arabic since childhood, as it was the language spoken at home. But for most of the artists, Arabic is like an absent-presence that informs their biographies and lingers in their memories on the familial and communal levels. The tension between mother tongue (exercised in the private spheres of home, neighborhood, and synagogue) and father tongue (public speak or the language of the state, the law, the canon) defines and reinforces the deferral of the mother tongue. She is marginalized in both space and time, exiled to the provinces of reminiscence and dream. Father tongue pushes mother tongue aside, imposing inconsistencies in the freedom-of-speech. The disparity and dissonance imposed on the two languages triggers resistance to the wholesale adoption of existing Israeli systems of representation, inviting critical examinations of familiar cultural positions and social definitions instead. The division between “mother tongue” and “father tongue” is the product of post-migration and nationalization in the Israeli-Zionist context. Judeo-Arabic dialects, which I position here as “mother tongue,” also constituted for their speakers in various Jewish-Arab communities a “father tongue” (including Hebrew as the language of worship and Judeo-Arabic dialects in which religious, communal,

<sup>1</sup> Mizrahi, literally Eastern in Hebrew, denotes Jews of North African and Central-West Asian origin.

<sup>2</sup> From Hebrew: Ammiel Alcalay. *Keys to the Garden*, New Israeli Writing. City Lights Books, San Francisco. 1996. The Hebrew letter ‘Ayin sounds like a guttural A. Chetrit’s poem refers to the imposition of Ashkenazi pronunciation on Mizrahi Jews, at the expense of a wider range of sounds such as the “trilled” Resh, the “breathy” Het, the “guttural” ‘Ayin, and the guttural Quf.

<sup>3</sup> Tal Ben Zvi was born in Kibbutz Alumot, 1966. Her mother was born in Argentina and her father in Israel. Her father’s parents were born in Serbia.

<sup>4</sup> Ella Shohat “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims.” *Social Text*, Vol 19/20, Fall 1988.

Tal Ben Zvi

# Deferring Language as a Theme in the Work of Mizrahi<sup>1</sup> Artists

On the way to 'Ayn Harod  
I lost my trilled resh.

Afterwards I didn't feel  
the loss of my guttural 'ayin  
and the breathy het  
I inherited from my father  
who himself picked it up  
on his way to the Land.

On the way to 'Ayn Harod  
I lost my 'ayin