

In Search of Lost Memory

In the exhibition “In Search of Lost Memory,” works by artists from Lodz, Poland; New Orleans, Louisiana, USA; and Israel comprise the third chapter of the Memory Project initiated by American artist Robin Levy based on her desire to create *tikkun* – repair and rectification – of traumatic childhood memories of her mother, a Holocaust survivor from Lodz.

The first chapter of the Memory Project took place in Lodz, while the second was exhibited in New Orleans in an encounter between local artists and Polish artists from Lodz. Together they referred to the orienteering coordinates of memory, generating a discourse on the function of art in preserving and recreating memory. The current chapter in the Bar-David Museum, Baram, Israel, “In Search of Lost Memory,” examines the way in which art produces a communicative and cultural memory through which collective memory is structured (Assmann, 2011). Personal experiences and stories, rituals, beliefs, traumas, imagination and contents from the subconscious arising from addressing nature and the urban environment are the raw materials in the artist’s toolbox. Using tools such as these, combined with practices such as deconstruction, destruction, and reconstruction, create a narrative of memory. Most of the works were exhibited in the past, elements from previous exhibitions that expressed a certain stage in the artists’ oeuvre – but here they form part of a new narrative enriching the interpretation of the works.

Similar to a memory conditional on time and place, concrete or fictional, the story moving between different eras, between the “here and now” and the “there and then,” as Assman stated, the narrative of memory depends on the sociocultural restructuring, and is thus a narrative of identity. The multilayered narrative forming through the exhibition blurs the geographical and the cultural borderlines between the artists to go past limits, reflecting their shared mood as part of the globalization processes. Reading the narrative calls out for an act of deconstruction and construction. Its beginning lies in the division into categories for the joint search and the attempt to define it, turning out to be an engagement in several territories serving as the point of origin for the creative act enfolding time and place. These territories are multileveled: some are concrete, like the parental home, or a geographic, cultural, and political conflict zone, while others are not concrete but exist in the subconscious or the virtual realm. However, they do have an associated to individual and historical memory. We can find artists whose works move between several territories.

One of the territories in which many of the artists have engaged is the realm of childhood memories, some of which are traumatic. One example is *Cave* (2012) by **Agnieszka Chojnacka**, an installation made of schoolroom chairs and blankets, as children make, looking simultaneously friendly and inviting, but which becomes

threatening as soon as the visitor watches the video. **Marik Lechner** (b. Czernowitz, Ukraine) weaves his childhood memories through traditional tapestry technique using wool and polyester, evoking Eastern European illustrations. The reincarnations of Pinocchio have numerous faces: a man, woman, fetus, and skulls creating a cycle of life between birth and death. His work leads to a discussion on the status of craft in the context of “high art.” The sound piece by **Marta Madejska**, *Nusia at the Crossroads* (2022), accompanied The Memory Project from Lodz to New Orleans, as she recorded the memories of Robin Levy’s mother Anne (Nusia) Skorecki Levy. The taping connected the past to the present acting to heal and repair the traumatic memory from Lodz. **Robin Levy**, crying out to repair her mother’s traumatic memory, has installed balloons as a representation of childhood. The balloons are pink, her mother’s favorite color as a child, imprinted with photographs of Nusia as a child. Relocating her mother’s memory from Lodz to Baram is an interpretive act. *Memory Project* (2012), the film by **Piotr Szczepanski**, engages in the attempt to define a time continuum of events from childhood to sift out memories that create the tension in the encounter with the present.

The childhood home is a territory which is the starting point for works by **Yael Efrati** and **Justyna Wencel**. Efrati refers to her childhood memory of encounters with Mrs. Thor, an elderly neighbor who used a cane to walk. The iron entrance gate to the yard and the cane become one in the video, as the gate is translated into ceramic material covered with graphite powder in a kind of relocation of memory in time. **Wencel**, whose work engaged in feminine identity, returns to her abandoned childhood home, treating it like an archive. Through ritual actions, it can be used for tracing the hereditary feminine traits in her family.

Deborah Luster and **Luis Cruz Azaceta** both made works on how collective memory of traumatic events is preserved. **Luster** followed the New Orleans Police Archive and documented crime scenes in which the majority of victims were African-Americans. Archives are a territory preserving the past from which the artists draw memories. For **Reuven Zahavi**, the archive serves as a pool from which to create images based on photographs of sex workers, some of whom are Jewish women, from the Bousbir Quarter the French established in Casablanca in the early 1920s. It was the largest sex tourism park of its kind in the world. Zahavi examines if and how the personal artistic arsenal of drawing and painting address historical-collective memory, raising ethical issues for discussion about the use of images from the colonial past. Zahavi’s oeuvre can be associated with the group of artists who use archival materials as the impetus for their work and as documentation, as do **Luster** and **Wencel**. **Dor Guez** creates a new association to images taken from albums of dried flowers in the archive of the American Colony, Jerusalem, in his series “Lilies of the Field,” and the photograph of his grandmother Samira taken from the archive of the Christian Palestinian Colony in Jaffa, also appearing in the video film *Sabir*. He extracts them from the context of scientific documentation of local flora (some of

which are not even local) and recontextualizes them, resonating the act of uprooting along with the yearning to a seemingly ideal place and time that are also threatened.

Courtney Egan & Anita Yeshe used data from the Land Records of New Orleans for their starting point in the examination of the social-demographic changes in the neighborhoods. The duo attempted to enrich the documented historical memory by adding the human voice and the viewer's active collaboration. **Hadar Gad's** territory is historical, individual, and collective memory extracted from archival materials. The territory is not a specific location, while the representations of the looting and destruction exist in memory only. The books, objects, events, and the location were erased by the Nazis but were preserved in collective memory; through the act of painting and scraping layers, Gad seems to recreate construction, returning in time by taking off layers, excavating and exposing archaeological layers of the memory.

Other works in the exhibition critical of cultural appropriation and its existence, which is conditional on the collective cultural memory. **David Adika** is exhibiting two photographs from his series "Black Market" depicting factory-fabricated figurines which he painted black and photographed in direct sunlight. The photographs arouse the cultural memory of the "bijou," porcelain figurines prized in European culture which Adika colors black. Adika places a "black mask" onto western culture, thus bringing up issues of cultural appropriation, taste, value, and the artist's role. **Eyal Assulin** refers to the cultural memory of Israeli art through his sculpture *Moti*, interpreting Yizhak Danziger's *Nimrod*, considered one of the pillars of the local art canon. *Moti* challenges the hegemonic western perception of cultural power relations, as it is made of cheap industrial material instead of Nubian sandstone like *Nimrod*. *Moti* has thus become Assulin's representation of the "other."

Territory can also be a specific location with a geographic definition. **John Isiah Walton** explores issues of identity in his home city of New Orleans and in Louisiana, comprising concreteness and invisibility, presence and absence, existence and emptiness. His paintings are encoded with imagery and symbols that can be decoded through getting to know the local cultural scene in-depth. **Carl Joe Williams** also refers in his work to his immediate environment – New Orleans. In the drawings for Cathy Z. Price's book, *Mardi Gras Almost Didn't Happen This Year, 2022*, Williams depicts the experience of reviving the Mardi Gras Carnival which was cancelled since Hurricane Katrina. The heroes are his African-American ancestors through which he challenges the discrimination and racism based on skin color and ethnicity. **Ashraf Fuhri** places his artwork in historical, cultural, and geopolitical territory - in Israel. The image of the donkey that he adopted as the representation of the individual and collective Palestinian, is threatened by hyenas who attempt to prey on it. The illustrated text, "If we remain without a memory, the hyenas will eat us," imbues historical and cultural memory with the protective power against assimilation.

Territory of another type exists only in the viewer's imagination and/or their subconscious. **Etti Abergel's** *Fragile Cosmic Love* is a virtual quest for lost love, taking place in the universe and in the viewer's imagination. The work expresses yearning to reach that place knowing that the action is accompanied by danger, vulnerability, and anxiety. On one hand, the materiality of the artwork stimulates the viewer's desire to peel, dig down, and reveal layers, while on the other hand it arouses in the viewer a sensation of the fragility and the fear of breakage, destruction, and loss. "Forest of Blindness" (2013), the series by **Orit Ishay**, displays digitally printed archival inkjet photographs of treated slides of eye operations in her research on the process of vision moving between the eye, microscope, and camera. The photographic outcome is a kind of image to which the viewer is connected as an individual memory. **Yehudit Sasportas**, in her series "Cosmic Rift No. 2" (2009) speaks through mapping, marking, and coding traumatic events from the past that exist solely in the territory of the language of art, since verbal language is unable to contain them. Similar to **Abergel**, the territory exists in the universe and in the viewer's subconscious. In the process of decoding the work of art, the act of drawing leaves the viewer helpless between the concrete and virtual, replicating itself again and again.

The range of territories points to various practices through which the artists refer to memory, forming the elements from which the narrative is built – the exhibition. The connections that the story wove between cultures reflect varied voices out of which different issues of identity, deprivation, racism, national conflicts, refugeehood, genocide, and emigration are critically examined. The pain that arises and floats up from within the works cries out for recognition and rectification, expressing a deep wish that perhaps art has the capacity to bring about its healing.

Sorin Heller
Exhibition Curator