

The Sorrow of Your Great Playthings

Of the disassembled body and the mechanization of passion

in Nadav Weissman's installations

Never shall the sorrow of your great playthings

Be plucked from me, O our God.

(Nathan Alterman, "Moon"; Translation: Lewis Glinert)

The emergence of the human body in Nadav Weissman's sculptural installation is marked by a radical imbalance: the head is enlarged, blatantly distended, while the body tapers down towards the tips of the feet. The disproportionate "tadpoles" are no aberrations of nature, no freak show of human genetics, but rather human bodies that formally react to the shaping, disturbing power of inner processes: excessive ambition, thoughts and passions. Unlike the Freudian move, these impulses are not repressed away in the "dark chamber" of the subconscious, but rather operate actively, growing into an extreme display. The "head" acquires its own independent, intensified existence, which drives the plot, similarly to the heroes of David Cronenberg's films, one of Weissman's sources of information. Referring to his heroes, with their inability to switch off their mind and excessive addiction to thought processes, Cronenberg once said that maybe it's a transformation, rather than a disease. Weissman's heavy-headed creatures navigate through an urban space that has neither focus nor aim, naked, holding on to attributes that attest to their origin in the modern bourgeois culture: a rifle in the man's hands, a purse and red boots for the woman.

Unlike the metaphysical void marking the Beckettian space of the absurd, Weissman positions his characters in inhabited spaces, wherein they are engaged in an ongoing activity: some are immersed in a game around different playthings, while others march to nowhere. Weissman builds urban landscapes made of modernist icons of housing projects, garages and trains, but nevertheless, all these arrangements have a medieval allegoric undertone to them, in the spirit of theological morality plays, with an "everyman" character at their heart. Weissman seems to weave a narrative of sorts

around his naked heroes, played out in some “landscape”, yet despite the fact that the landscapes, seemingly, sample reality, the narrative functions as a Trojan horse in the plot: it unravels it from within. Weissman’s *Man without Qualities*, the modern incarnation of the medieval *everyman*, watches over life as if it were a game board, as he casts a bundle of huge pick-up sticks, gambling on his fate. Due to the changing scale between man and his playthings, the pick-up stick is converted into a spear, leading to a change in the figure’s characterization – the playing child transmutes into a fighting adult, yet both are wrapped up by the same bodily shroud.

The visions in Weissman’s installations seem like a toy theatre made of cardboard sceneries, or a dissembled childhood world with a surreal, orange-pink or yellow-blue colour plate. Wondering about among them, one gets an ambivalence sense of part dream, part reality, producing a consciousness divide. A pulsing daytime activity makes way for landscape moonrise paintings. Medium-wise too, Weissman employs the dual tactics, combing together two-dimensional painting and 3D sculptural arrangements, hybridity of style that condenses his divided thinking. Zigzagging between times and scales, between one consciousness to another, this fantasy further distils the insight into Weissman’s arrangements: they are founded on the principle of allegorical thinking that has a child/adult playing/marching at its heart. The Sorrow of his Great Playthings hints at his end: his LEGO blocks, which he piles onto his truck to build his home from, are scattered bones and teeth.

“For the only diversion the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory”¹, Walter Benjamin wrote in his discussion into the difference between symbol and allegory. In his renowned *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, composed in the late 1920’s, Benjamin sheds light on the twofold, dual-layered structure necessary for allegorical expression to break forth; allegory is a multiplicity of times and consciousness, it dredges up the ghost of the past into the presence, floating an “arousing instant, which claims our entire being...”. Allegorical sense surfaces from the “depths which separate visual being from meaning”, stirring, with the valour of a trespasser venturing foreign territories, a “violent dialectic movement” between the two territories. Benjamin attributed to allegory a particular affinity with

moments of destruction and death, tracing in it a fundamental attraction to fragmentation and imperfection. Modernism rejected the allegorical impulse, yearning as it did for transcendental unity and identifying allegory, derisively, with “historical painting”, carrying didactic import. Yet the “allegorical impulse” resurfaced in the postmodern age, from the 1980’s onwards, as comprehensively articulated in the two-part article by American theoretician Craig Owens. Owens viewed the “allegorical impulse” a characteristic sign in the artistic thought of his time, as a shaping force that affects political and social perceptions as well.²

In the allegorical state, “the fragment does not constitute a defined piece which adjusts itself to the overall pattern, puzzle-fashion, but rather as a piece in its own rights, unbound by synthesis.”³ The absence of continuity, the reflection of the past (childhood) in the present (adulthood), fragmentation and hybridity – all these attributes are reflected in Weissman’s complex installations, which call for an allegorical reading. Rather than joining together in a decipherable plot or narrative, the upside-down trees, the landscape segments, buildings, posts, lawns and figures are left to themselves, standing for a world deprived of its illusion of unity. In Weissman’s inventory of images, based in the 2000’s, the original, complete copy does not exist. The world he constructs is fragmentary, straddling reality and delusion, as a product of an onslaught of images in a technological world that no more distinguishes narrative from script.

Trauma and the absence thereof

The postmodern allegory’s uniqueness lies in the suppression of its traumatic dimension. Similarly, the transition in Weissman’s installations from bodily integrity to a state of disassembly occurs as a metaphor for play, with neither bleeding nor pain. Unlike Cronenberg’s “horror aesthetics”, Weissman opts for formal tidiness and elaborate constructions. In his films, Cronenberg dreams up gory flesh pistols that spit sharpened human teeth (eXistenZ), while Weissman builds cogwheels made of filed human teeth or the contour of a house weaved together from strings of bleached bones. Cronenberg perforated the human body, creating within electronic joints, while Weissman carves a ladder or staircase into a sculptured head or fuses body and multi-

story building together. Nevertheless, the “metamorphosis” in Cronenberg’s films or in Weissman’s sculptures is never a complete, mythological one, like Kafka’s human-beast “metamorphosis”. The transformative process stops at the intermediary phase: a human body embedded with a mechanical mechanism or hardened into an architectonic setting. It is in fact no interim metamorphosis, but rather a fateful mutation, incurable hybridity.

Despite the pronounced melancholic aspect and the constant engagement with morbid “death playthings”, Weissman refrains from any forthright illustration of trauma, leaving it as a subtle allegory that subsists in the depth dimension. His approach to the human body circumvents the pain of tearing and fragmenting, adopting tactics of distancing, playing and mock-diversion. This mechanical/playful spirit is all the more evident in his animation films (2011), where the body features as a mechanical site with independently operating organs, far-removed from their original function: the teeth, like the bones, form strings that move through space, the nails alternately grown and clipped, while the ears become pregnant and the mouth turns into a tunnel of surprise. The body is perceived as an autonomous functional system that runs commands between organs, tunnels and cavities, with products issued from their ends: secretions, organs, children.

The body as a mechanical site is a lonely one, indifferent to its sexuality. With no erection, ovaries or orgiastic outlet, whole babies are emitted, conveyor-belt fashion, as long as they have the right cavity to be issued from. The feminine uterus is rendered all but superfluous. Even the aural cavity in the man’s head is a possible birth canal for the babies, just like his oral cavity. The body and its cavities produce a full circularity between construction and disassembly: the ear emits bones, while the mouth issues teeth. Cue another cycle: the mouth issues babies, while the ear emits teeth. Rather than chewing and grinding, the teeth cheerfully materialize from the mouth, lining up in a long, rolling caravan. Perhaps an archetypal nightmare-dream, perhaps computer game.

A female head and a male head, babies issued from the ear, together creating a family unit. Individual bodies built anew as a family body, creating a primary “civilization unit” – a monad ready to be duplicated. Rather than a romantic-sentimental fabric, Weissman offers the “family machine” as a mechanical joint by which civilization regulates and sorts the human natural increase. The “family machine” hovers like a cloud in an open undulating space, calling for a reference to Duchamp’s “bride”, floating as she does in the *Large Glass* (1917), watching the “bachelors” and teetering chocolate grinder from her lofty position. Duchamp’s renowned mechanistic metaphor, translating erotic passion into a system of pipes and tunnels, is referred to by Moira Roth as “aesthetics of indifference”.⁴ Roth applies this definition to Duchamp’s general treatment of objects, referred to as “readymades” – reducing meaning to nought, in order to extract a new associative stream and fresh poetics thereof. Duchamp’s early “bride”, oil on paint (1912), is but a cluster of well-lubricated pipes, just as *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a mechanical mechanism of the human skeleton’s progression through space. Weissman’s *Nude Marching through Space* similarly moves about with resolve, while the production mechanisms of the family unit hold within the sexual tension, passion and love. The family is “produced”, computer game fashion, as circular mechanism that cannot be stopped. In his poem *Moon*, delivered from the observing wayfarer’s point of view, Alterman refers to the cypress, sky, pool and city as “great playthings” in God’s world; Nadav Weissman’s great playground teems with playthings and humans alike – children/ adults who have never left behind the game of life.

References:

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, NLB, London 1977, p. 185.

² Craig Owens, *The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Post-Modernism*, part I, II. In: *October*, vol. 12, 13, 1980

³ From *Encyclopaedia of Ideas*, co-edited by David Gurevitch and Dan Arav, Babel, 2012 [Hebrew]. Entry: *Allegory/Symbol*, p. 120.

⁴ Roth Moira, *The Aesthetic of Indifference*, In: *Dancing Around The Bride*, Ed. Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013. Pp. 209 –224