

Metamorphoses

Doreet LeVitte Harten

Eli Gur Arie's works emerged on the Israeli art scene toward the late 1980s. As far as the local scene was concerned, they came out of a cultural nowhere, and were regarded with suspicion. They stood for everything that established taste abhorred, and did not follow the running list of peculiarities attributed to what was defined as "good art" in the Israeli cultural sphere. At the time—and woefully even now—good taste, as far as high art is concerned, was characterized by a certain daintiness, a *noli me tangere* (touch me not) reflex, due, one might say, to the scopophobic strain that ran through the local cultural DNA. That quality was later brilliantly dubbed "the disempowered" by Roee "Chicky" Arad in an essay published in the digital journal *Ma'arav* in 2009.¹ Arad pointed out a general symptom of stasis or stupor, also understood as good taste. In less genteel manner, the adequate metaphor would be an elderly dame in a catnap state.

I have great sympathy for Arad's way of tagging Israeli art, but I am not sure that "disempowered" (as in restrained tastefulness) covers the territory of visual cultural production made in Israel. Arad presupposes a characteristic laid on a given visual culture, but it is the visual culture itself that should be called into question. This is not to say that what was done was good or bad, but rather—that the very conception of visual art here should be understood as quasi-culture, namely—something forever borrowed. It is not surprising that Israeli art's models and

idols were not from here, because the place had no capacity to produce them.

Gur Arie never adhered to that taste, and the morphology of his art attests that he did not believe in the authenticity of the art created here either. I think he realized the erroneous conception of art being of universal value early on (and I distinguish here between art and visuality, which is universal), and therefore he needed a different context where universality resides. He found it in the realm of advertisement aesthetics (in this I refer to such an aesthetic as defined by Russian filmmaker and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein when he discussed film as a "montage of attractions," which is what advertising aesthetics is all about).²

Indeed, advertising is a true universal phenomenon because it aims at a common denominator of all human desires. Unlike art, which needs a local context to nourish its highest achievements and to indicate its authenticity, advertisement aesthetics ignores locality, which is akin to a death sentence as far as it is concerned. Universality in the form of commercial aesthetics is a hidden treasure; a possibility of reading art against the grain.

This is the strategy that makes Gur Arie's works what they are. Perfect in execution, sleek and lustrous so as to suggest the presence of the uncanny, they turn what advertisements promise, namely utopia, on its head, introducing a dystopian vision, implemented through the agency of false promises, that provides the context for his works.

Gur Arie, however, goes one step further in exercising the monetary aesthetics of the market. Not only does he use the allure of advertising, that is commercial aesthetics, but he also places the context of that aesthetics in

1 Roee "Chicky" Arad, "On the Disempowered in New Israeli Art: Intuitive Review," *Ma'arav* (Aug. 2009), <http://maarav.org.il/archive/?author=162> [Hebrew].

2 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions" (1923), trans. Richard Taylor, William Powell, in Richard Taylor (ed.), *The Eisenstein Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p. 30.

which is considered to be a grotesque acquires a decorum, a certain dignity projected in so many of Gur Arie's works.

It is this strange kind of grace that keeps the artifacts and animals from becoming caricatures of what they were or what they imitate. By definition, they imitate natural processes, but they also keep their own identity, so that the sense of "uncanny valley," the revulsion felt by human beings toward artificial entities that display too close a resemblance to human morphology, is never reached.

Due to the hybrid nature of most of Gur Arie's environments, one tends to ascribe his work with surrealist practices. Indeed, there is much in the physiognomy of the objects to remind us of that style. Surrealism employs juxtaposition of objects as a device intended to reveal the hidden treasures of the subconscious; by manipulating morphological qualities of the object it aspires to obtain deeply buried knowledge, hence it is informed by a constant contradiction in enacting depth through obsession with the surface.

The seeds of the advertising industry, too, are deeply rooted in surrealism, for both, in addition to using the same strategy of juxtaposition, strive to touch upon desires embedded in the human psyche. Both use priming—the implicit memory effect in which exposure to one stimulus influences response to another; by manipulating and anchoring images, both surrealism and the advertising industry achieve their goals, though I am quite certain that André Breton, who was well aware of that affiliation, would turn over in his grave, realizing the impact surrealist method had on consumerist aesthetics. Breton and his peers set out to create art beyond the real, which would stand up to what they conceived as the stagnation in early 20th century Paris. There is more than an inkling of tragedy in realizing the backlash effect

created when advertising uses the same methods employed by Surrealism to achieve goals that could not be farther apart. Gur Arie's works, as we have seen, lean heavily on market aesthetics, which I identify here with advertising aesthetics. His surfaces and juxtapositions mirror the same strategy used by the market in priming a client, but he introduces a new perception. Whereas Surrealism was keen to discover a certain hidden depth, a value unto itself in the field of art, and whereas market aesthetics backtracked on this concept by manipulating this depth, translated to an unconscious desire, and turned it to nothing less than a commodity's auxiliary on its way to gain monetary profit, Gur Arie recognizes both aims as false declarations, all the more so in the postmodern era. Depth ceases to be relevant in a culture suffocated by its surfaces, and it does not hold any value once legitimate proclamations are emptied of their original claims or manipulated by market strategies. In a way, Gur Arie restores the Surrealist vision, but this act comes at a cost, for the hybrid phenomenon he visualizes via narration, by its rhetoric, ethics, and aesthetics, is a profound understanding of the end-time sensibility, which characterizes our period. There is hope, says Gur Arie, but its price is immense, since it involves a new perception which is as hurtful as it is aspiring.

This may explain the title of the exhibition, "Growth Engines," which, despite its organic sound, is an economic term denoting the means and mechanisms that create impulses of economical growth. The idea of growth is central to the capitalist system, and subject to criticism by its opponents. In the context of this exhibition, growth engines are not a metaphor, but the *raison d'être* behind Gur Arie's environments, artifacts, and hybrids. In the wake of catastrophe, they emerge, like engines of God, to create a brave new world.

Mimesis of nature, or its simulation through technology, raises additional questions. Unfolding before us is a scenario of end times when nature ceases to exist, so what technology imitates is not only a bygone thing, but also its chronicles. What comes back from the dead cannot be an active part of the nature-technology dichotomy, because the dichotomy itself is no longer of any significance. In this scenario, nature becomes technology, and this shift, paradigmatic in its grandeur, raises a question about the meaning of technology itself, the same question posed by Martin Heidegger in the second of his four lectures in Bremen held in 1949 under the title “The Question Concerning Technology.”¹⁵ Heidegger’s answer was surprising in its simplicity. After a long and winding path, he concluded by saying that the essence of technology lay not in technology itself, but may only be revealed through art. Heidegger affiliated the term *technē* with technology, thus bridging the two concepts of culture and technology, which is subsequently explained through its rival—the arts.



Eli Gur Arie,
Water Wings, 2015

Indeed, it seems to me that this term, *technē*, suits the works and provides them with a framework much in accordance with their overt and covert issues. *Technē*, as used by the Greeks, denotes a knowledge of practical implications in craftsmanship, but also in art; a capacity devoid of theory, but revealed through objects and the ability to imitate nature. It is more the knowledge of doing things than of contemplating them abstractly. *Technē*, according to Gur Arie, is manifested, for instance, in the meticulous proficiency of the hybrids, or the fluidity by which different orders of materials, textures, and patterns are fused together. It is more of an act of morphing than of binding that takes place in their creation. Morphing, which is the interconnection between disparate entities, is known as a special effect in motion pictures, but I use it here, in the context of the works, because of its seamless quality. Morphing differs from metamorphosis by its total artificiality. It is always man-made, and once completed, it carries within itself a dual existence of previous and present histories. In this sense, morphing is the ideal form of the hybrid, its highest achievement. Its fluidity lends its objects a graceful existence, so that even that



Eli Gur Arie,
Harpoonist, 2002-2016

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays [1936–1953]* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).



Eli Gur Arie, *Growth Engines*, 2016
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

dystopian society—a society that leaves nothing to accident.

Also ironic is the fact that the technology replacing the mother in her role as life giver is the same technology previously used for destruction—a technology of death, since most of the ersatz apparatuses appearing in these environments are residues of what was at one time in the service of military systems, e.g. monitors, drones, parabolic antennas, satellites, and communication systems, now employed to preserve life. This means that, although nature is deemed to be dead, it is nevertheless artificially ventilated, so that a simulacrum of nature, of the mother, can reinvent itself through various technologies. The mechanisms are always based on the biological example and imitate all fertilization modes. Gur Arie's artifacts, animals, and hybrids are products of biomimetics.

Biomimetics is a fascinating field. It spans the substances, equipment, mechanisms, and systems by which humans imitate natural systems and designs, especially in the fields of defense, nanotechnology, robotics, and artificial intelligence. It is the attempt to imitate, by means of technology, the ability of bees, turtles, and birds to navigate without maps, or the bats' high-frequency transmitter, which is far more efficient and sensitive than man-made

radar systems, to name but a few examples. That technology imitates nature was already noted by Aristotle in his second book of *Physics*.¹³ Although Aristotle did not develop this idea into a doctrine, he relied on the premise that a structural analogy exists between natural and technological production, an analogy also found in the doctrines of the Hippocratic medical school as well as Democritus. We also know that in Western visual art tradition, the idea of mimesis is central in theorizing the essence of artistic expression. Mimesis can therefore be understood as both imitation of nature and an artistic representation. To wit: imitation reveals the unique nature of art. Addressing the mimetic faculty, Michael Taussig described it as

“the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy, drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power.”¹⁴

This is the second instance in which the meaning of Gur Arie's work goes beyond the specific theme in which he engages, offering an insight into the field itself, namely art. The first was the presence of the hybrids, whose immanence and refusal to stand for an idea allegorized the essence of art. By the same token, if mimesis indeed constitutes the essence of art, and if it is indeed the mimetic action that takes center stage in the narrative of Gur Arie's environments, then it may be wise to consider his works as research into the question of what constitutes a work of art.

¹³ See: Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.2.ii.html>.

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. xiii.

when all will return / to the warm
black color / and the water will descend to
the light [...] ¹²

Avidan's metamorphosis, applied to the words themselves as well as their meaning, yields a circular existence where the warm black color—a womb, a Chora, a primordial material—begins and ends the process of change. In other words, the dynamic he describes is encircled in a static, mythical, almost archaic modus, despite the futuristic vision he unfolds. Reading the poem, one is reminded of M.C. Escher's drawings, although there is nothing in the poem of the mathematical sterility that typified them.

Avidan's mutations, influential as they may have been on Gur Arie, differ from the latter's metamorphoses on a critical point. For Avidan, it is the metamorphosis itself, the dynamic it produces, that justifies the ongoing change, whereas for Gur Arie the variations are not a thing unto itself—neither aesthetic, nor poetic—but act under one rule of survival and the vehicle of that survival-fertilization.

Indeed what the eye encounters upon looking at Gur Arie's environments is a bacchanalia of fertilization, insemination, pollination, breeding, fecundation, and conjugation; an excess of things impregnating and being impregnated. But in this great orgy of fertilization, the main protagonist is missing: the mother, who is dead, yet omnipresent without being presented. Her absence seems to have seized the subjects, making them captive in their mourning over her. The Great Mother, Gaia, failed her job.

¹² David Avidan, "Something for Somebodies: Five Psychokinetic Observations in Manmutations" and "Moment After the Last," in *Shirim Bilti Efshariyim [Impossible Poems]* (Tel Aviv: Thirtieth Century Press, 1968) [Hebrew]; free translation: Doreet LeVitte Harten.

The motif of the dead mother, who embodies the sacrifice made to effectuate the shift is, therefore, a central motif connecting all the environments. It is represented by the Bambi-like animal that appears repeatedly in them. Bambi is the ultimate orphan. You may remember the heartbreaking scene in the film, when the mother is shot; heartbreaking because the mother's death takes place off screen. No other film has managed to articulate the death of the mother as Disney did, thus rendering Bambi an arch-orphan. Like Bambi, the animals and artifacts residing in Gur Arie's environments acquire the status of orphanhood, and hence are in need of a guardian.



Eli Gur Arie, *V-Day* (detail), 2016
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

This guardianship comes in the form of total control, achieved through the military paraphernalia now put to different use. Life, or what is left of it, is monitored, nourished, and kept in line. Nothing can be left to chance. The environments are hubs of modulators, live stream PACs, a multitude of eyes, and communication systems. This ongoing monitoring, acts as a surrogate for the role of the mother as guardian, but at the same time enhances the grotesque form of that role. It is a mother who mercilessly controls her offspring, like a dictator, and as such, also meets the aforementioned definition of a



Eli Gur Arie, Strawberry, 1996-2016

same morphology that designates hybridity, are primarily functional creatures that obey a rigid regime despite their morphology. Unlike the traditional grotesque, they are not quite so subversive to a system, but rather attempt to save it by introducing different variations. Each of them could be understood as a scientific experiment. In this sense, the environments created for the current exhibition are variations on the same theme, namely—survival in post-catastrophic times. Another difference is that the traditional grotesque presupposes an ur-form on which to make variations, while Gur Arie's hybrids are mostly constructs devoid of a genealogical lineage to trace them back to their origin. They differ from traditional grotesque in that they have no history but that of the future. The metamorphosis thus begins at phase one of their existence, from where the variations proceed.

Gur Arie's use of a technique of variations which ostensibly mirror scientific trial-and-error experiments in an imaginary laboratory has a literary source that may be traced to David Avidan, an Israeli poet whose work had great impact on Gur Arie. Avidan was a man of many personae. Other than being (in my very humble opinion) Israel's finest poet, he was also a man of the future, who acquired

the iconic status of a "Mad Scientist" through his attempts to enact dialogues between computers and humans, namely—to provide evidence for the ghost in the machine. In his poem "Something for Somebodies" (Mashehu bishvil Mishehem), subtitled "Five Psychokinetic Observations in Manmutations," Avidan coined new words, portmanteaus of sorts, by fusing words from different orders and meanings. It is not clear why Avidan introduced the idea of psychokinesis in these variations, for their subject is metamorphosis and not the ability to influence physical objects through mental processes, unless one regards poetry as a metaphor for influence. The five variations in the poem correspond with the five environments installed by Gur Arie at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, not in terms of narrative, but in the nature of the metamorphosis manifested in both the poem and the visual works. In both cases, lines and works stand as metonymic parts of a greater whole. In Avidan's poem, the metamorphosis proceeds in five variations according to the poetical logic:

[...] and then light fish in the water /
grew wings, and in the cold light /
the eagles grew gills.

[...] and then light fish in the water /
stretched wings, and in the cold light /
the eagles opened gills.

[...] and then vultures at waterlevel /
folded wings, and in the bitter cold /
the birdflying shut gills.

[...] and then light fish in the water /
sealed gills, and in the strange light /
the eagles ceasedflying.

[...] and then lightfish in the water /
stretched gings, and in the lange stright /
octopodeagles opened wills. [...]

[...]

only do they arouse horror, but they also produce disgust. Hybrids live well within the grotesque realm. Not humble in their appearance, they possess a Baroque physiognomy, an exaggerated form of the imagination, and therefore—are melodramatic by nature. As in the Baroque, they are accommodating units, subservient to a greater whole, to an absolute system.



Eli Gur Arie, *Growth Engines*, 2016
Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Concerning the grotesque as applied to hybrids, we must remember that the concept of what constitutes the grotesque has in postmodern times undergone a revolution; and since hybridity is welcome, the monstrous becomes the norm. Describing this state, Geoffrey Galt Harpham wrote:

“In more innocent times it was possible to create a grotesque by mingling human with animal or mechanical elements; but as we learn more about the languages of animals, and teach more and more complex languages to computers or robots, the membranes

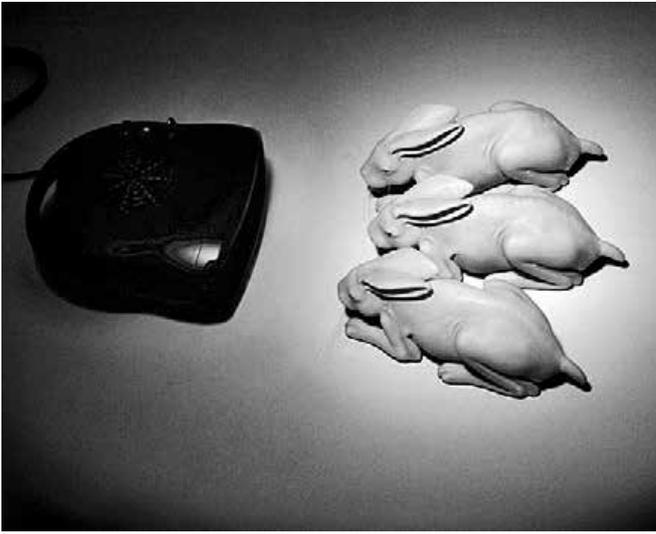
dividing these realms from that of the human begin to dissolve, and with them go the potentiality for many forms of the grotesque. In short, the grotesque—with the help of technology—is becoming the victim of its own success: having existed for many centuries on the disorderly margins of Western culture and the aesthetic conventions that constitute that culture, it is now faced with a situation where the center cannot, or does not choose to, hold; where nothing is incompatible with anything else; and where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical. Thus the grotesque, in endlessly diluting forms, is always and everywhere around us—and increasingly visible.”¹⁰

This awareness is also mirrored in Donna Haraway’s cyber-feminist *Cyborg Manifesto*: “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”¹¹

Despite the affiliation of Gur Arie’s hybrids with the grotesque, they differ from the latter in several respects. Excavations in ancient Rome reveal that, by the end of the 15th century the traditional grotesque repeated decorative patterns in which vegetal and human elements formed hybrids, as an antithesis to the Renaissance sense of order. *Prima facie*, it used an unending loop to attack classical notions subversively. By virtue of its fluidity, it introduced an element of disturbance into any given hierarchy under the guise of folly. It is, by definition, non-functional and always ironic, whereas Gur Arie’s hybrids, which share the

¹⁰ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), pp. xxvi–xxvii.

¹¹ Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 150.



Eli Gur Arie, Untitled, 2002

book Concerning the Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky uses the word “spirituality,” but his background hints at the occult. In fact, many of the founding fathers of modernity, not only those who employed abstract practices, but also those who remained faithful to figuration, take the occult as the bedrock of their art. Among them are Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich, Marcel Duchamp, Edvard Munch, Frantisek Kupka, Jean Arp, the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group, and the Bauhaus’ spiritual trend represented by Theo van Doesburg, among many others. One may say that the birth of modernism originated in the occult—theosophy, anthroposophy, and other occult tendencies—and that by its cradle stood such figures as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Rudolf Steiner, Henry Steel Olcott, and Charles W. Leadbeater, rather than the ghosts of what was vaguely described later as a new spiritual understanding, in all its various manifestations. That the occult was catapulted out of the field and reintroduced as spiritualism has various explanations, among them the occult’s poor reputation and the changing semantic use of the word over the years. Its pejorative overtones, however, came much later; in the beginning of the 20th century, the term was respectable enough to be used as a cornerstone concept.

If we agree that the spiritual in an artwork is the discourse or the rhetoric cloud surrounding it, but never a part of its immanent appearance, and that it is always that immanence that constitutes its value as art, then the hybrids are almost allegories of what art is in their refusal to be road signs of the spiritual. That their thematics create figments of the imagination, kin to Henry Fuseli, Hieronymus Bosch, Francisco Goya, and Odilon Redon, does not contradict the fact that in the last instance, it is the monstrous that stands for beauty, since beauty is understood as a part of art. As a matter of fact, no other conjurations can provide more pleasure, can let the eye revel more than the dazzling impact a hybrid can produce.

Since we have reached the domain of evocation, it would be valid to address spiritualism, as far as art is concerned, by its true title, namely the occult, for practices of the latter (differing from the grandeur of the spiritual) are being enacted in Gur Arie’s hybrids such as alchemy, mutation of the natural, and even the death of the idea of death via zombies and ghosts who, associated with that discipline, are being exercised and exorcised here in the gestalt of the hybrids (this is not to say that they have the aura of the occult). But what exactly is it that makes the hybrids—mechanic, organic, or digital—monstrous?

A whole literature engages in hybridity, which was a key theme in the 1980s and 1990s. Hybrids were given the opportunity of a lifetime, to become what the Germans call *salonfähig* (presentable, respectable), gaining a venerable home as part of post-colonial studies. Academia politics aside, hybrids, even if you assign them the role of art’s allegory, are initially perceived in the collective imagination as a thing impure and unclean, a contaminated zone. They are what Julia Kristeva called the abject because they respect neither borders nor laws. In them, meaning collapses and categories are broken. Not

the lament be described as communicative. Rather, it is a sound outside the communicative structure. Since it is a language on the verge of disappearance, dwelling on the border between silence and revelation, it designates the death of language, its destruction, and as such—reveals itself to be the principle of eternity. The lament, according to Scholem, is language exactly at the moment of its disappearance, and therefore at the moment when that which is not expressed is given lament. It is the death wish of language.

The monster—in its hybrid form, in its location on the border, in its capacity to hover between that which cannot be seen and that whose visibility blinds us in its radiance—resembles the lamentative mode. Both are outside cultural categories, defining them from the outside; both are spectacular expressions of what should or could not take place within cultural categories, yet influences them with inconceivable force.

I stress the monstrosity of Gur Arie's objects and call upon Levinas, Freud, and Heidegger, who frame it within a transcendental dimension, because given the monstrous, an existential explanation will save my face in turning the monstrous against itself, that

Eli Gur Arie,
Untitled, 2002–2003



is—in trying to explain its manifestations in the works without subordinating its presence to the sublime. In the sense that a urinal is a urinal until it becomes an idea, hence art, the monstrous in Gur Arie's works refuses metamorphosis. His hybrids are not elevated to the level of ideas; they remain immanent, and thus, declare war on one of high art's most beautiful deceptions: the incongruence between modern art and spiritualism. Had Gur Arie's hybrids made it clear that they are vehicles of an invisible hand, on their way to become an idea, I suspect that even Israeli taste could have accommodated them and found the right apologetics to reenact them within its set of values, but this is not the case here. The monstrous remains immanent and refuses spiritual redemption. This is going against the grain, an anathema and a heresy. To proclaim an art work purposely devoid of its spiritual content is a demolition of a decent part of what constitutes meaning in the modern. This is so because art, especially in the abstract, demands to be understood as a spiritual experience, and this connection between spirituality and art goes back a long way. In modern times, its origin as doxa may be ascribed to Wassily Kandinsky's 1911



Eli Gur Arie,
Arctic Spring, 2003

underscored. The surface of the octopus is slimy and lustrous so that no one value can be affixed to the creature: is it an object or an abject, a living form or a mechanized unit? These constant identity shifts establish the object-abject as an intermediary entity which in a better world would correspond with that hallucinatory “Third Space” proposed by Homi K. Bhabha eons ago.

But the octopus, like the arsenal of hybrid creatures and artifacts erupting from Gur Arie’s imagination, is not the dream subject of post-colonial ideas. Essentially, these creatures are monstrous. Being monsters, they call for a different approach to the concept of what a monster is, because in these works, it is the monstrous that will save the world and is humanity’s last chance at survival; as such, it should be respected accordingly.

I am applying the term “monster” not only to the living creatures in Gur Arie’s oeuvre, such as the *Tadpoles* (2003), but also to the “transactions” found in *Arctic Spring* from that same year—namely, the whole ensemble of hybrid phenomena that establish the nature of his art and which also span the crossing of inanimate objects.

Amidst the monstrous figures there is always the element of horror, which differs from the element of evil. This is a differentiation elaborated by Paul Santilli,⁸ stemming from his understanding that evil is still comprehensible within cultural coordinates of the symbolic system, and can therefore help define the cultural norm, whereas horror has no place here because it does not make threats within the frame, but rather threatens the frame itself; hence horror has no definition or place in the spectrum of values. If we accept Santilli’s logic, the



Eli Gur Arie, *Tadpoles*, 2003

opposite of culture is not nature, but horror, namely—the unnatural.

That the monster as the iconic figure of horror has no place within cultural categories means that the spawned creature is an entity that cannot be represented, yet is nevertheless present, something comparable to Kristeva’s notion of the chora, to Freud’s *unheimlich* or uncanny, to Heidegger’s *angst*, and to Levinas’s *il y a*. That the monster drifts by the borders of cultural categories but is never a part of them reminds me of Gershom Scholem’s definition for the act of lamentation.⁹

In one of his diary entries from 1916, entitled *Über Klage und Klagelied* (*On Lament and Dirge*), intended as a prologue to his translation of a collection of biblical lamentations, Scholem addressed the essence of the lament, which he understood as a language outside its natural domain. All languages, he maintained, transpire in-between silence and revelation, but the lament reveals nothing, because the entity revealed in the lament has no content and does not keep silent, as its essence resists it. Nor can

⁸ See: Paul Santilli, “Culture, Evil, and Horror,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 66, no. 1: *The Challenges of Globalization: Rethinking Nature, Culture, and Freedom* (Dec. 2007), pp. 173–194.

⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, Karlfriedrich Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner (eds.). (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995–2000), pp. 128–133; see also: Ilit Ferber, “A Language of the Border: On Scholem’s Theory of the Lament,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 21 (2013), pp. 161–186.



Eli Gur Arie, *Andromeda's Rock* (detail), 1999–2005

heart of the installation, is a huge shell, almost identical to the one in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, but it contains a creature lying on a bed of pearls. This entity resembles an octopus, but at the same time, its physiognomy corresponds with the vaginal parts of the female body. Half natural, half man-made, it uses two tentacles to nourish (or be nourished by) the big diamond ring crowning the top of the shell; three columns around the shell carry hands with rings and tongues of flame. The association with the Andromeda story will give the octopus the role of Cetus, the sea monster to whom Andromeda was sacrificed, while Andromeda herself may be represented by the diamond ring.

Andromeda is an odd myth. It tells the story of Cassiopeia, wife of King Cepheus of Ethiopia, who bragged that her daughter Andromeda was more beautiful than the Nereids. When Poseidon sends the sea monster, Cetus, to ravage the kingdom as a punishment, the only way to avoid the catastrophe is by chaining Andromeda to a rock, offering her as a sacrifice to appease Poseidon's wrath. Andromeda is saved by Perseus who slays the monster, and marries her to the joy of all the tale's participants.

Since Andromeda, although saved, is the sacrifice par excellence, she also stands for the origin of money from sacrificial practices, that is—she represents consensual value more than

any other mythological figure. In *The Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel maintains that:

“The sacrifice does not in the least belong in the category of what ought not to be, as superficiality and avarice would have us believe. Sacrifice is not only the condition of specific value, but the condition of value as such; with reference to economic behavior, which concerns us here, it is not only the price to be paid for particular established values, but the price through which alone values can be established.”⁷

Andromeda, the princess devoid of personality, who is not even the heroine of the myth, the archetypal passive damsel-in-distress in that she is a pure reward for Perseus's heroism, symbolizes value as such through her iconic status as sacrifice. Thus, Gur Arie in his *Aphrodisiac* > the *Wealth of Nations* establishes the connection between sacrifice and money, between capitalistic practices and their aesthetic values. Subsequently, he ventured into another area: post-apocalyptic environments, which are now being realized as a consequence of that early work, and it is here that he introduces the idea of hybrid identity as the main concern of his work.

Hybridity, as manifested in Gur Arie's works, is a domain where contradictions graciously coexist. Already in the octopus-Cetus, two aspects of the same phenomenon could be discerned. The octopus is always composed of two things, often antithetical. Partly natural and partly man-made, its surface is both alluring and repulsive. Its form resembles a vagina, and since it nourishes or is being nourished by the diamond, the notion of the *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina as a source of castration, is

holds a great promise? Or, lastly, can the end be simply a form of entertainment?

The yearning for the catastrophic, however, is only half the story; a type of down payment for what really attracts artists such as Gur Arie, beyond the spectacle of destruction. It is the possibility of a new order where man and nature can re-invent themselves. It is a sad end envisioned as a happy beginning, thus containing within itself the grain of a deep discontent with the present. Under the guise of market aesthetics, the subversive elements aim at modes of survival which carry possibilities of mutations, alternative existence, within themselves, and are therefore optimistic in nature.

It is not, then, the apocalyptic as the post-apocalyptic which interests Gur Arie. Part of science fiction literature relates to post-apocalyptic societies as rural societies, almost Luddite in nature. In these societies, all that can lead to destruction—machines, computers, or atomic energy—is prohibited. These stories follow a structured cycle of agrarian-industrial-agrarian economies, and in so doing resemble biblical promises.

This bucolic desire presupposes the existence of nature. In fact, it reinvents it in a Humboldtian tradition; meaning that this desire does not take into account the possibility of a paradigmatic shift, an existence which has eliminated the notion of nature and replaced it with something else. Herein lies Gur Arie's difference and uniqueness. In his post-apocalyptic sphere, nature is not reinvented; it has simply disappeared. Instead we have fragments of reality, latifundia of survival, a reality at once nightmarish and revelatory. His works suggest a new kind of hybrid existence where machines and biological forms can live together and support one another, something in the spirit of "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb."

Gur Arie's post-apocalyptic visions have their own evolutionary path. They started out by combining the monetary aesthetics (imbued with neo-liberal ideologies) with a mythological past, and continued with a shift, using that aesthetic as a remnant in the post-apocalyptic works. This could have been noticed as early as *Andromeda's Rock* (1999–2005), featured as part of an exhibition titled "Aphrodisiac > The Wealth of Nations" after Adam Smith's influential book from 1776. *The Wealth of Nations* articulated, for the first time, the very foundations of modern capitalism and the "invisible hand" theory, which claims that the pursuit of profit, egocentric as it may be, ultimately leads, as if by an invisible hand, to do what is best for society. This dictum by Smith was given numerous interpretations, and could be the only *mysterium tremendum*, namely—a kind of religiosity which the market can afford and enact.



Eli Gur Arie, *Andromeda's Rock*, 1999–2005

When Gur Arie adopts the title of this revolutionary book, he does so not to illustrate how capitalism works, but rather, to indicate a process of corruption. *Andromeda*, which is in the

the works. Gur Arie's work is a morality tale more than exercises in narcissism. At this point we should bear in mind that the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the belief in progress which reframes its ideology. Franco "BIFO" Berardi, in his book *After the Future*, formulates the future as a historical invention affiliated with the rise of capitalism. Reading Berardi, Dom Narkomfin elaborates:

"This hoped-for future would thus seem to have been the outcome of a specific historical experience. Any disruption to this experience, if possessed of a sufficient magnitude or duration, threatened to undermine this futuristic orientation. Just as the future historically came into existence, so might it also historically pass out of existence."⁵

As far as I know, the future does not and never played a significant role in the visual arts in Israel. This may be because the future in Israel was integrated into the present as part of the ideology of the place, and visual art served that ideology, knowingly and unknowingly. "We were the future," writes Yael Ne'eman in a novel thus titled, specifying the factors that led to the future's residing in the present. Within this mental framework two possibilities present themselves: either the future is dissolved into the present, so there is no need for future scenarios, or, following the logic of messianic Zionism, it is better avoided, for it would designate an end, and as such, it is a taboo theme, the Sandman of all possible nightmares.

Whatever the reason may be for the future to disappear as a topic, whatever discontent it induced that it had to be avoided, it was Gur

Arie who introduced it as a narrative and used it as a matrix for his tales. This future is framed as post-apocalyptic, and here I distinguish between post-apocalyptic and dystopian visions. The first stands for anarchy, for total disintegration of all social systems, whereas the latter can only exist within a rigid order. But before going into such subtleties, I would like to dwell on the general idea of the future as also manifested in Gur Arie's work. Post-apocalyptic visions hold a fascination of a perverse nature; otherwise, why do we celebrate all kinds of end scenarios, in all forms, whether cinema, art, or literature, in a compulsive manner? Why, on the other hand—as Slavoj Žižek suggested—is it easier for us to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism?⁶ Is it a death wish or a certain beauty already seen, for example, in John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath (1851–53)*? Could it be that the family resemblance between the catastrophic and the sublime triggers a religious response, so much amiss in secular spheres, or is it a practical instruction list of those survivalists preparing themselves for doomsday, framed also as a cozy catastrophe in the arsenal of end times that



John Martin, *The Great Day of His Wrath*, 1851–1853

5 Dom Narkomfin, "Memories of the Future: After Krzhizhanovskii" (2011), <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2012/08/10/memories-of-the-future/>; see also: Franco BIFO Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), p. 18.

6 On October 9, 2011, Slavoj Žižek delivered a speech at Liberty Square to the Occupy Wall Street movement protesters, saying: "Look at the movies that we see all the time. It's easy to imagine the end of the world — an asteroid destroying all of life, and so on — but we cannot imagine the end of capitalism. So what are we doing here?"

the future. That is to say, he doubles the risks by introducing the works into the realm of science fiction, which sadly suffers from an undesirable status in the hierarchies of literature and from an image problem. This future, narrated as a science fiction text, is not only unreliable; it also takes its toll on the present. It is a future that elicits blackmail in the sense that, like a tight-lipped mentor, it points out what should have been done to prevent a disaster. I think that this double strategy—of using a specific kind of aesthetics and putting it in the futuristic context of science fiction—was reason enough for a certain discontent, which made it difficult for local taste to admit Gur Arie’s art into its bounds.

But art’s affiliation to this genre is not a new phenomenon. Modernism, considered a 20th-century style, is directly aimed at the future. Art’s symbolic as well as monetary value resides in the future. These two cultural fields have more in common: bearing in mind that science fiction’s main goal is to create a *novum* which functions, in the words of Darko Suvin, as “cognitive estrangement,” this is specifically what (good) art does.³ Reality is depicted in both fields as dubious, suspect, and the observer/reader is offered a new perspective which disrupts the prior consensual perception. As an example of such cognitive estrangement one need only think of Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), where the anamorphosis in the lower section of the picture—a stain pointing at the possibility of perceiving reality differently—may demonstrate the presence of Suvin’s “cognitive estrangement.”

At this point I would like to dig a bit deeper into art’s relations with the future, viewed as a metaphorical anamorphosis in relation to the field of science fiction. The idea of the future in



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

both fields is not so much a temporal factor, but rather a potential. To wit, in both fields the future is constantly collapsing into the present. This collapse was aptly described by J.G. Ballard in the introduction to the French edition of his novel *Crash!*: “What our children have to fear is not the cars on the highways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their death.” Ballard perceives the future as a psychopathic dream, one scenario among many others. “One implication is that the priority of the imagination to the Real has been reversed. ‘The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent reality’.”⁴

It is this kind of invented reality that we witness in Gur Arie’s works. The collapse of the future into the present is perversely invoked. The future is denied, and at the same time elaborated, as a present state. It indicates a time whose temporal junctions are irrelevant, and yet, there is virtually no indication of narcissism which characterizes such futureless presents in

³ Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” *College English*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Dec. 1972), pp. 372–382.

⁴ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., “Futuristic Flu, or, The Revenge of the Future,” in George Slusser and Tom Shippey (eds.), *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 28; for a short version of the introduction to the French edition, see J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 2005).

Foreword

Tel Aviv Museum of Art is pleased to present Eli Gur Arie's new exhibition "Growth Engines." The show, whose preparation took some eight years, features new works which make their debut here. Gur Arie is not affiliated with any school of Israeli art. His works display a unique social, material, and conceptual register. His presentation at Tel Aviv Museum of Art is thus all the more significant, as he represents a different facet in the local cultural-visual landscape, being "from here" and "not from here" at the same time.

Gur Arie is one of the few artists to whom the concept *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) applies, namely art which strives to create a synthesis between different media. At first sight, his oeuvre may be regarded as an allegory on consumerist culture obsessed with a smooth surface and a seductive façade. Beyond the subversive use of strategies taken from the world of advertising to criticize this culture, however, the major concern of Gur Arie's works is the possibility of an apocalyptic event; total destruction that will be brought about by a systematic ravaging of biological, ecological, and geographic fabrics by entire societies. His works are akin to "survival proposals" in a post-apocalyptic world. He constructs closed systems, essentially mechanical, introducing options, mutations, and rescue strategies.

Aesthetically speaking, these "rescue proposals" range from surrealism to hyperrealism, but they also belong in an ancient tradition which regards the hybrid as a fantastic realm, a place where the organic and the mechanical create a Third Space. Gur Arie employs the genre of science fiction, especially the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic visions, and the way in which it harnesses the future to discuss

the present. The growing awareness of a possible ecological catastrophe on a global scale renders the exhibition topical and timely.

Sincere thanks to Eli Gur Arie, and to the curator of the exhibition, Doreet LeVitte Harten, for conceiving this unique vision and for its embodiment in matter and spirit, in the exhibition halls and in the catalogue essay.

Heartfelt thanks to Sharon Shenhav, Yaacov Gueta, Yotam Sivan, and Tucan Design Studio, who assisted Gur Arie in mounting the exhibition with patience and proficiency. Thanks to Zaki Rosenfeld, Diana Dallal, Adi Goldner, Nitza Eshed, and Adi Kaizman for accompanying and supporting Gur Arie throughout the years. Thanks to Ziporen Lotem for generously granting us permission to use David Avidan's cycle of poems in the exhibition and catalogue. Thanks to Noa Rosenberg, Associate Curator of Israeli Art, for her professional work. Thanks to Ellen Ginton and Anat Danon Sivan of the Department of Israeli Art for the invaluable support. Thanks to Michal Sahar, Gil Givoni, and Dana Elkis of Studio Michal Sahar for the spectacular catalogue which opens another peephole into the artist's oeuvre; to Elad Sarig for the sensitive, professional photographs of the works; to Daria Kassovsky and Orna Yehudaioff for the meticulous translation and editing of the catalogue texts. Profound thanks to all the Museum departments for their contribution to the successful realization of this project.

Suzanne Landau
Director and Chief Curator

Tel Aviv Museum of Art



**Eli Gur Arie:
Growth Engines**

17 May – 10 December 2016

Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Pavilion, Main Building

Exhibition

Curator: Doreet LeVitte Harten

Associate curator: Noa Rosenberg

Head of Curatorial Wing: Raphael Radovan

Assistant to the Head of Curatorial Wing: Iris Yerushalmi

Lighting: Lior Gabai, Asaf Menachem

Mounting: Sharon Shenhav, Yotam Sivan, Yaakov Gueta, Tucan Design Studio

Registration: Alisa Friedman-Padovano, Shoshana Frankel, Hadar Oren-Bezalel, Sivan Bloch

Conservation: Dr. Doron J. Lurie, Maya Dresner, Hasia Rimon, Rami Salameh, Karla Eyal-Kralova, Noga Schusterman, Sarita Marcus

Catalogue

Design and production: Michal Sahar

Text editing: Orna Yehudaioff

English editing and Hebrew translation: Daria Kassovsky

Photographs: Elad Sarig

Printing: A.R. Printing Ltd.

English cover: View of the exhibition, 2016

Hebrew cover: The Seven Good Years, 2006

All the works: mixed media, variable dimensions

Copyright © 2016, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, cat. 8/2016

ISBN 978-965-539-130-5

Eli Gur Arie

Growth Engines