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PROJECTS

SHORTCUTS – Notes on Shai Azoulay’s Exhibition

By Nicola Trezzi

Shai Azoulay is the ultimate visionary. His works—large and small paintings, as well as drawings and “painting installations”—are the manifestation of the artist’s mind, a mind that is always at work, always full of visions that take the history of art and the context of Jerusalem to create a unique mix that is at times ironic—such as in the painting *Believers Track* (2016)—and at times poetic—as seen in *The Golden Me* (2015). In this work, the artist portrays himself as a goldfish; while the fish and its environment are painted in vibrant colors, the rest of the scene is rendered in black and white, perhaps a reflection of Jerusalem, the city in which the artist lives and works.

Indeed it is not easy to be an artist in Jerusalem. The city is an artwork in itself, full of contradictions, complex to the extreme, impossible not to love, but very hard to take. And yet Shai Azoulay has made Jerusalem his home, and for the artist, Jerusalem and its rich context is an essential element of his work as seen in the aforementioned work *Believers Track*, as well as the work entitled *You, Me and the Holy Spirit* (2015), previously exhibited at the gallery. Here, through a very peculiar composition, a wedding scene becomes almost a detail, pushed to the background in order to give space to the real protagonist of the painting: the Holy Spirit. The third element of the trinity is here represented – as if we are confusing the New Testament with a modern art history manual – with Matisse’s famous cutouts.

As referenced in the painting entitled *The Wings of Matisse* (2015), the French painter Henri Matisse (1869-1954) is the leitmotif of this exhibition. *The Golden Me* is informed by Matisse’s domestic spaces, as well as his famous cutouts – which the French artist created in the late stage of his life when he was no longer able to paint. For Shai, these cutouts have become the true protagonists of the painting. This is visible in almost all works, including *Layers* (2016), *Orange Wave* (2016) and in particular, *Magic Stick* (2016) which appears to be a direct reference to Mickey Mouse as The Sorcerer’s Apprentice in Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940). In this painting, the artist depicts a very small man – perhaps himself – standing on a large staircase and trying to command, with his (magic) stick, “magic,” here manifested again as large Matisse’s cutouts.

The last work that deserves mention, perhaps the pivotal work in the show, is *Owl* (2015) because this specific one gives the opportunity to present Shai Azoulay’s main space for creation: the studio. It is here that the artist not only creates the work we see, not only has his visions, which then appear in the painting; here the artist exists

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in full bloom and this special state of mind (and body) is reflected in many previous works which depict the artist's studio. In this regard *Owl* continues a position taken by the artist long ago, a position that aligns him with such artists as Dana Schutz but also connects his work to artists such as Jules de Balincourt, Barnaby Furnas and Nicole Eisenman, who have all been using figuration as a way to create a parallel reality, dominated by recurring figures, political and yet away from any direct reference to the current state of reality.