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Art

Bleak house

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Gregor Schneider Videos, sculpture and photography, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

While complex and interesting, the exhibition currently on view at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art by German artist Gregor Schneider, one of the most prominent international artists in recent years, is not a wholly successful endeavor.

The point of departure for the first part of Schneider's show is his piece "Haus u r." In 1985, at the age of 16, the artist began remodeling the interior structure of a family home, an empty building in his native city of Rheydt-Monchengladbach, Germany, presenting it as a work of art. The piece received extensive coverage at the 2001 Venice Biennale, where Schneider displaced and rebuilt the interior of the house in the German Pavilion, under the title "Totes Haus u r (Dead House u r)." Schneider was awarded the biennale's Golden Lion prize and gained international recognition.

Walking through the piece is one of those experiences that becomes engraved in memory, a strange labyrinth bordering on the disturbing and threatening: rooms within rooms, illogically situated walls, doors that open into doors or sealed walls, pieces of furniture stained with unidentified liquids.

Fragments of Schneider's large-scale work, one of the most ambitious, ongoing projects made in recent decades in Europe, are currently displayed in the large, lower-level hall of the Herzliya Museum. These include portions of walls, sealed windows and other out-of-context pieces. Alongside these are mixed-media, silicon sculptures of bodies, the torsos of which are covered with black plastic bags. In addition, small, mostly black-and-white photographs, which document the "Haus u r" project, hang on the walls. The overall picture is difficult to view and triggers a string of associations – the image of piled bodies at the site of a mass disaster, building remains in the aftermath of a blast or earthquake. In this respect, the photographs on the walls, framed in identically sized black frames, resemble memorials from afar.

The upper floor features two video works – one was shot in 1996 and documents "Haus u r" in Rheydt, the city in which it was made, and the second documents the project in Venice. The exhibition has two other parts – an installation on a beachfront (which has already closed) and a catalogue "Gregor Schneider – Cubes," which mainly documents the artist's fascinating conceptual work, inspired by the Kaaba structure at the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca.

The video work that meanders through the interior of the house, accompanied by sounds of footsteps and opened-shut doors, evokes a sense of threat and suffocation in viewers, but its limitations stand out against the actual experience of the space. The film is certainly not a substitute, and for those who did not visit Schneider's house installation it may only be able to highlight just how much the current exhibition does not reflect the original installation.

The installation in Herzliya pales in comparison to the difficult feelings generated by "Totes Haus u r (Dead House u r)." The fragments are scattered in a way that recalls an archaeological museum, so that a drawing mapping the entire structure, integrating the parts on view into a cohesive picture, would only have been natural. The artist's use of bodies-dummies brings to mind works by many artists, including Americans Robert Gober and Joan De Andrea and Italian Maurizio Cattelan.

The installation at Acadia Beach is built of metal fencing, which makes up a complex of small, identical interconnected cells. Each cell includes a beach



SEA AND SUN: From Gregor Schneider's 2009 "Beach Cells" installation at Acadia Beach in Herzliya.

umbrella, an air mattress and a black garbage bag in the corner. From afar the piece looks like an area closed off for some kind of public work; while from up close it achieves a more ambiguous status – a cross between private, comfortable cells and prison cells.

There is something surreal about the beach umbrellas; they express a kind of concern that seems tinged with ridicule when considering the whole metal enclosure as a detention center. The complex looks portable, a quick solution, the product of an especially cynical mind. It brings to mind various types of detention camps – from Antzar to Guantanamo Bay all the way to detention camps for Jewish immigrants during the British Mandate period. In the context of the history of art, the piece recalls labyrinths in Renaissance gardens, landscapes by 19th-century French painter Eugene Boudin and surrealistic scenes.

There is also a surreal dimension to the catalogue, which forms part of the exhibition, according to curator Ory Dessau (an additional catalogue documenting the exhibition is Israel is forthcoming). The book features pieces made by Schneider as well as those conceived by him but not actually executed, like the erection of a white cube, a kind of white Kabaa beside the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, and the erection of a similar cube at St. Mark's Square in Venice. The latter is Schneider's most famous unexecuted piece. In an age when questions about immigration, including Muslim immigration, are raised against the continuous fear of Islamic terrorism, it is clear why the piece has provoked so much interest, and there is no doubt that Schneider offers an interesting conceptual take.

Since then, Schneider has erected a black cube copy of the Kabaa outside of the Hamburg Museum of Art, and is planning similar installations in additional places. His idea to duplicate a pilgrimage site in places around the world, together with his ongoing grappling with the utopian-conceptual art of early-20th-century Russian constructivist Kazimir Malevich and his embrace of nothingness as an existential state, offers what can be regarded as a kind of conceptual baroque. His almost minimalist aesthetic harbors a physical and theoretical torrent.

Schneider nears the edge of nothingness in his dealings with death through his sculptures and the revamped house emptied of its original meaning. In Herzliya he shows faint echoes, ripples of a much larger endeavor, but as a whole, this concept fails. While curator Dessau mentioned in a private conversation the desire of the artist to attend to the great distance between Israel and Germany, and the distance from the original work, this concept just doesn't cut it and actually serves to cast what is shown in doubt. If only an echo would be sufficient, one could certainly make due with visiting a Web site or viewing photographs.