

iniva ●

Roe Rosen: Vile, Evil Veil



Live and Die as Eva Braun / Out (Tse)

Introduction by Grant Watson, Senior Curator and Research Associate

Iniva is delighted to present the first solo exhibition of **Roe Rosen** in the UK. Rosen's work in media such as painting, film, installation and text, combines an unexpected mixture of different elements including the investigation of history and politics and the experience of various sexual and psychological states. These elements are held in place through a precise formal language, finely tuned by the artist into works which are distinctive and deliberately provocative.

Rosen's inclusion in Iniva's programme sits alongside past projects by artists who have made a statement about contemporary politics through works with affective as well as discursive impact. By exhibiting these projects, the intention has been to show how complex political processes can be filtered through subjective experience, and how the expression of this by artists gives audiences new points of entry into a subject.

Rosen has been an outspoken and long-time critic of Israeli government policy, a fact evident in the film *Out (Tse)* which frames the words of ultra-nationalist

politician Avigdor Lieberman within the context of a sadomasochist relationship, to disquieting effect. A more elaborate understanding of the artist's position in relation to these questions can be gleaned from the following interview. Iniva has a practice of working with associate curators, and this exhibition is curated by Hila Peleg who has in-depth knowledge of Rosen's work and a long history of working with the artist. Peleg has chosen to juxtapose *Out (Tse)* (shown in PS2) with a restaging of the seminal 1997 work *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (shown in PS1), collaborating with the architect Kuehn Malvezzi to present this immersive installation which, using images and text, takes the viewer through the imagined last moments in Hitler's bunker.

A new artwork from Rosen in the window of PS1 creates an interface between the gallery and the street, simultaneously screening the content of the exhibition from passers-by and advertising its presence in a series of elaborately designed vinyl posters. The different layers in the exhibition allow for heterodox forms of interpretation and in this spirit Iniva has invited Adrian Rifkin to respond to the work through a series of talks and screenings entitled *Blasphemy and Redemption*.

Artist Roe Rosen in conversation with Curator Hila Peleg

In his solo show *Roe Rosen: Vile, Evil Veil* the artist and writer Roe Rosen addresses some of the ethical paradoxes and dilemmas underlying the social reality in his native Israel, and beyond. The two pieces presented at Rivington Place, *Out (Tse)* (2010) and *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995–1997), exemplify the artist's unique critical approach of staging political and ethical problems rather than offering descriptions or attempting resolutions. Each of the two pieces is a 'troubling' spectacular experience, consisting of complex hybrids of explicit images and texts. The works encompass a rich scope of visual and literary documents referring to historical as well as contemporary events and cultures. Formulated as narratives in a film and exhibition display, the works profoundly challenge their respective environments.

During the preparation for Roe Rosen's first solo show in the UK we discussed the installation and the filmwork:

Hila Peleg (HP): *How would you describe the sociopolitical environment in which the film Out (Tse) was produced?*

Roe Rosen (RR): I experience the present situation in Israel as a dichotomy. On the one hand, there is a

feeling of continuous deterioration, with new red lines being crossed daily, and on the other hand, there is absolute stasis. This polarity is best explained by concrete examples. Just recently the Israeli parliament approved a proposal brought forth by Avigdor Lieberman's party to initiate a witch-hunt inquiry into human rights and left wing organisations, one of a series of events through which xenophobia becomes the norm and freedom of speech is put under threat (in that very same week a left wing activist, Jonathan Polack, began serving a three-month prison term simply for participating in a demonstration).

The state of stasis, on the other hand, can be demonstrated through the killing of a Palestinian woman, Jawaher Abu Rahmah, who died after the army shot tear gas at her during the weekly demonstration held in the village of Bil'in against the separation wall. This shocking killing of a passive woman was immediately embedded in shameless lies propagated by the army and the Israeli media, culminating in the claim that she had died of cancer! Crucially, the army is supposed to use non-lethal means in those demonstrations (so far causing the death of 21 people). And while the incident felt unprecedented, I recalled chronicling similar atrocities in a script I wrote years earlier. This killing and the cynical rhetoric that followed is part of an ongoing calamity that is becoming

the norm. In that sense, of course, the dichotomy is the very fabric of the occupation expressed through oxymora: illegal law, insane normalcy. Stasis and downward movement are, in fact, the same state.

HP: *In Out (Tse) the Israeli foreign minister and deputy prime minister of Israel, Avigdor Lieberman, is featured as a demon, who possesses the body of a young female participant in a Bondage Domination Sadomasochism (BDSM) session. What actual realities are at play here?*

RR: While there are supposedly three distinct parties in Israel, they actually represent interests similar to those of Lieberman. The provocative and undisguised rancour of his claims allows his collaborators and their voters to pretend that they are substantially different from him. The danger, in other words, is not Avigdor Lieberman but rather those who perceive themselves as sane, peace loving, humane, even as they vote for the politicians who will legalise Lieberman's ideas. In that sense, to use the terminology of the exorcism, the demon turns out to be its hosting body.

The central scene in *Out (Tse)* presents a BDSM session that is performed rather than acted (being that the pain is real and that in their actual lives both participants pursue the meeting points between pleasure, pain, and domination scenarios). But instead of gasps and

cries of pain, the blows cause the Sub, Ela, to spew out sentences, and these sentences are someone else's — Avigdor Lieberman's. The blows release verbal expressions from within the body as if the words and the voice were secretions, fluids, uncontrolled or foreign iterations. Thus, in a way, the session not only becomes an exorcism, but it also suggests a speech-machine (that is, voice and words that subvert our customary perception and categorisation which, for me, is one of a series of speech-machines in other works I have done).

This scene is preceded by an interview with the two participants. It begins as a seemingly straightforward documentary wherein the two women talk of their own experiences with BDSM, but soon dissolves, revealing one as an exorcist and the other as possessed. Lieberman is inserted into the text — through a supposedly encyclopaedic description of him — even before this happens, so that he is immediately rendered as belonging to the private sphere of both women. In fact, being that the Dom, Yoana, is a political and queer activist while the Sub grew up in a right-wing home, this indivisibility of the private from the public, the erotic from the political, is persistently substantiated by particular details. For example, the fact that Lieberman was born in Moldova brings forth the possibility that he possessed Ela over there, because she did visit Moldova as an infant. The scene also sets the exorcism's strategy: the



Above:
Out (Tse), stills from the video, 2010

need to be armed not only with hostility to the demon, but also with empathy and a sense of identification.

HP: *The work we chose to present in 'Roe Rosen: Vile, Evil Veil' is blatantly confrontational. What kind of dialogues did you envisage when making the pieces?*

RR: There is an evident spectacular dimension to BDSM in that it wilfully addresses and stages the power relations that are always there, and at its best can do so through a dialogue that is both sensitive and transgressive. I don't know if I succeed, but I certainly hope that there's a process of self-implication in what I do that extends to the viewer. That viewing a certain staging of power relations as a spectacle circumscribes the viewer as a participant, assigns him or her an active role. To put it concretely: if the declared political persona discussed is Lieberman, I hope it is experienced as if you and I are no less present as political subjects. Yoana says as much when she speaks of a sense of identification as necessary so as to lure the demon out, and that the demon, in fact, moves from one surrogate to another, and 'belongs' to them all; he is ours, in other words. This process of self-implication is always on my mind when meddling with the pleasures that art offers (beauty, desires, fantasies, aesthetics) and linking them to politics (power, discontent, reality, ethics).

HP: *Did you have similar ideas, in relation to the memory and representation of war and genocide trauma, when making Live and Die as Eva Braun?*

RR: I do not wish to overdramatise matters, but until that point in 1995 I felt that the traumas of World War II and the annihilation of European Jewry were at the crux of my identity and my work — but could not be represented or worked through. The trauma was perceived as an absence, a void around which, at most, encrypted hints and disguised signifiers could be scattered. I was, at the time, an Israeli artist who'd been living for a decade in New York and in both these contexts — Israeli artist and New York artworld — the feeling that these issues could not be tackled in a 'respectable' way was all but universal among serious artists. To explain this 'impossibility' in a nutshell, let me follow Paul de Man and use the term *Prosopopoeia* — assuming the role and the voice of the dead victim. This obscene mechanism prevails in most works representing the Holocaust, as grotesquely manifested in Steven Spielberg's words upon receiving the Oscar for *Schindler's List*. He thanked the academy in the name of 6 million Jewish victims, as if they were collectively and wilfully channelling their testimonies through his Hollywood spectacle. And then there is the widespread notion that the holocaust as a locus defies representation and can only be addressed by

abstraction, by forging an emptiness onto which the subject might project the inability to account for the unimaginable and the unspeakable (the premise underlying James E. Young's seminal essay on Holocaust memorials). To this one might add, in the Israeli context, a profound wariness regarding the nationalistic instrumentalisation of the Holocaust: the persistent and numerous ways by which Zionism exploited holocaust representation and the device of prosopopoeia to make political and monetary gains, to seek justification for its own aggressions, to *Zionify* the victims en masse, postmortem. In the Israel of my childhood, the Holocaust became a ubiquitous presence, almost a fetish that inundated education, political rhetoric and the mass media. In other words, art that tackled Holocaust representation inevitably risked being appropriated by this ideological apparatus.

The project assumes a polemical stance in opposition to the positions I saw around me. Instead of dignified silence, there is an excess of dubious figuration. Instead of a singularity of voice emphasising the trauma as an absolute, incomparable event that brooks no disturbance from other realms, there is a pastiche of seemingly incommensurate realms of experience (commerce, erotics, childhood memories) that taint the solemnity and purity supposedly befitting such issues.

Instead of suggesting a re-enactment of the past, there is the emphatic indexing of the experiences at hand as rooted in the present (beginning with the rather ridiculous utopian horizon of experiential identification offered by virtual reality, a 'state-of-the-art' device that already seemed farcical to me back then). And, of course, instead of appropriating and forging an iconography of victimhood, I stipulated the need to identify with the victimiser, to find pleasure (even erotic pleasure) and beauty (implicating the very process of my own image making) in the role of the victimiser.

HP: *What is the purpose of fusing an extensive set of iconic historical and contemporary cultural references, as you do in the two pieces on display?*

RR: Obviously, in these works, there is a disavowal of nationalist and Zionist tropes of identity in favour of a return to that which Zionism attempted to eradicate — the diasporic, 'effeminate' Jew. Yet it is crucial to me that this earlier figure would be understood as construed and imaginary as well (as is well known, it was the gentile canon, first theological and later scientific, that circumscribed the qualifiers of the Jew as an other). That is also why in *Out (Tse)* there is a condensation and convergence of Israeli and Jewish figures with Christian ones. For example, the four miniatures that render the demon escaping through bodily pores —

mouth, rectum, navel and vagina — clearly echo medieval martyrdom scenes. For me, much of the interest lies in the way our picture of each designated and specific moment is constantly disturbed by other moments. The figure of the possessed submissive can connote Leah, the possessed woman in Anski's play *The Dybbuk* (1914) or a Christian martyr, Linda Blair as Regan in *The Exorcist* (1973), or Red Riding Hood, a pornographic figure, etc. — something akin to what Dali defined as 'critical paranoia': seeing many images where supposedly there should only be one. But this excess is never arbitrary. For me all these figures suggest a schism that allows us to see the force at work as foreign to the subject (the demon, the torturer, etc.) or as an internal rebellious force. For example, both Leah and Regan can be seen to rebel against their designated roles as women opposing potential masculine invasion — Leah becomes possessed exactly when she is about to be wed, and Regan when going through puberty. In other words, the demon may be one and the same as its host.

By pointing at this multiplicity of pasts we can reflect on the specificity of a present that echoes and resurrects what has supposedly been buried and done with. That is true as well when you think of *Live and Die as Eva Braun*. This project also invites the viewer on a somewhat uncomfortable trip to given moments and places in the past, but ends up, I hope, illuminating the present.

A copy of this booklet is available in large format print.

Iniva would like to thank the artist Roe Rosen and curator Hila Peleg for their hard work and enthusiasm for this project. Iniva would also like to thank the architects Kuehn Malvezzi for their contribution to this exhibition. We would like to acknowledge the following galleries and collections for their loans of work: Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv; Yair Garbuz Collection, Tel Aviv; Doron Sebbag Art Collection, ORS Ltd., Tel Aviv; Hagit and Ofer Shapira Collection, Tel Aviv; Antonio Somaini Collection, Milan.

Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts)

Iniva explores key issues in society and politics, offering a platform for artistic experiment, cultural debate and exchange of ideas. We work with artists, curators, creative producers, writers and the public to explore the diversity and vitality of visual culture.

Exhibition opening hours (Free admission):

Tues, Wed, Fri: 11am–6pm

Thurs: 11am–9pm

Sat: 12 noon–6pm

Sun, Mon and Bank Holidays: closed

Curator's tour:

Thursday 5 April 2012
6.30pm

Rivington Place, London EC2A 3BA
T: +44 (0)20 7729 9616
www.iniva.org
www.rivingtonplace.org

Stuart Hall Library

The Stuart Hall Library provides an extensive bibliography of reference materials and resources relating to this exhibition. The bibliography is available in print as well as through the Library website, and there will be a display of these materials in the Library throughout the exhibition.

The Stuart Hall Library is open: Tues to Fri, 10am–1pm, 2–5pm. To make an appointment, phone 020 7749 1255 or email: library@iniva.org. You can also plan your visit by accessing the Library catalogue online at www.iniva.org

Iniva is a registered charity (no. 1031721)



K U E H N M A L V E Z Z I