

Benjamin Reich, "Black Stars" (*curator Doron Rabina*)

Gallery of the Midrasha L'omanut (College of Art) in Tel Aviv

By Uzi Tzur

Haaretz Culture and Literature, 16 January 2004

The gallery is dim. The main wall has been painted black. On the floor, in the dark, lie books which have fallen off an empty bookcase. However, the books have not fallen on the actual floor, but, rather, on a black piece of cloth, to prevent their downright desecration - a clue to the complex world of young Benjamin Reich. Among the books Babylonian Talmud, the writings of Brenner, Hazon Ish, portraits of rabbis and an old album with black and white photographs of boys - as further clues. Across the room, on the floor, in a pool of light and still immersed in developing solution, there is a black and white photo of three haredi (Jewish ultra-orthodox) boys on their way back from the beach: giggling, skimming the excitements of the beach and the city. While the books lie in the dark, like the dry bones, the photograph is in the light, like a sprouting bud, drawn to the light, like the creative process which seized Reich, who is still nurtured by these books and by that world, which has remained, perhaps, in the dark

On the dark wall hang in a row, at eye level, silver boxes lit from within, like stripped Hanukkah menorahs in an aquarium - clearly the influence of the way of presentation of Christian Boltanski (the Jewish-Polish-French artist), on the ironic boundary between the Christian and the Jewish. Inside each box, in quasi holiness, glows a color photograph from the borderline world of Reich, who moves like a covert spy between the two worlds, stealthily looking at men and snapshotting moments.

But in spite of the apparent secrecy, the pictures are imbued with internal quiet and harmony: two children-brothers are seen in a stairwell in lily-white kippot (yarmulkes) and light earlocks, aristocratically alien, lit as if from within; a naked lad stretched, self-conscious, on a bed, lit with the red light of fulfilled lust; a haredi man sleeping on a stiff bed with his tallith (prayer shawl) hanging down, his face wrapped in hurried sleep and the cold light sculpting the folds of the white tallith and his dark, powerful face; a couple of haredi guys walk in a nightly street, by the street lights, and a shade of prohibition steals into their expression; a field of thistles, withered in the heat of summer, shot from below, bursting toward the blue sky; next to it - a naked youth (unaware of his nakedness and beauty) dipping himself in pure spring water, his hand stretched gracefully to assess the chill and the strength, and his face out of the frame, in a quasi ritual of purification and sexuality. In another photo, a group of religious schoolchildren is seen at the waterfront, in European autumn light (another duality of Reich's, between here and there), perhaps to

observe the mitzvah of Tashlich, or, maybe, just taking a walk outdoors; the teachers-rabbis watch the photographer with concern, while the children carry on a lively dialog with two soldiers of a foreign army who are looking for something (perhaps a body) - a gentile idyll which Jewish anxiety has stolen into; a silhouette of a man with his manhood erect, prostrate on the red soil (the desire at home and outside). It is worthwhile to look also at the photographs and albums in the gallery office, which have a more autobiographic aspect and great poetic plasticity, such as in the strikingly beautiful portrait of an elderly haredi man, transcending time and place.

Reich is somewhat unripe, primary, groping, but also has the beginning of an independent statement. This is a lovely first exhibition for a young, intriguing artist, well curated by Rabina, which opens an aperture into the indrawn haredi world and the intimate secrecy of the male object of desire. The exhibition may suffer from (unripe) over-interpretation, but its vitality and beauty compensate for it.

There is in Benjamin Reich a cold fire, burning and freezing. He arrived at his artistic work out of consuming creative urge, with self-study or very fragmentary formal study, so he is not the conventional product of the instruction line of academic art institutes - which makes his entrance into the mainstream and the private galleries harder, but also shapes his uniqueness.

© Haaretz