

The Art of Excavation

The natural-history collections of the spirit have actually transformed works of art into the hieroglyphics of history and brought them a new content while the old one shriveled up.

—Theodor Adorno, “Proust Valery Museum”

The paintings look beautiful in the soft pink light of sunrise. The gentle murmuring of birds, the rustle of wind, and the subtle lilt of the camera all animate the installation, calling attention to the placement of these works of art in time. But we are watching this scene in a museum, the paintings displayed for viewing in the image also stacked against the wall for storage. Dana Levy’s video installation *Impermanent Display* creates an uncanny gallery, displacing and doubling the familiar objects and scenes of the museum, along with the history and culture it is assumed to preserve.

Commissioned by the Petach Tikva Museum of Art to create a new work using the museum’s collection, the Israeli-born, New York-based artist Dana Levy turned to two paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Ancient Rome* and *Modern Rome* by the celebrated 18th century painter Giovanni Paolo Panini. In these pendant pictures, Panini depicted not the city itself, but a grand gallery of paintings representing important works of Roman art and architecture during these two different epochs of history. The city emerges as a collection of sculptures by Michaelangelo and Bernini and monuments including the Coliseum and the Pantheon. While glorifying Roman cultural and economic power, Panini’s paintings also highlight an archaeological approach in which history is seen through ruins.

Levy used Panini’s imagined galleries as a model for her approach to the Petach Tikva’s collection. *Impermanent Display* includes a heterogeneous selection of self-portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes painted in a variety of modernist idioms from the feverish colors of fauvism and broken brushstrokes of impressionism to a muscular social realism. In Levy’s selection, there are specific sites—the Western Wall and the Knesset—as well as everyday

scenes that function metonymically—scenes of violence, scenes of prayer—to represent modern Israel.

Rather than an installation in the museum, Levy asked to transport her selection of paintings and sculpture to be installed at the Mazor Mausoleum, one of the oldest standing structures in Israel. Dating to the 3rd century CE, the mausoleum is just a few miles from the museum. With a temple like façade, the edifice is a palimpsest of history: a Roman building with a prayer niche in the southern wall added by Muslims in later Antiquity that today sits almost unnoticed alongside highway 444. With the added layer of 20th century paintings and sculpture, quietly attended to by the museum’s cataloguer and conservator, Levy’s temporary exhibition in this open-air structure not only exposes works of art to the elements, but also reveals something internal to the institution. The scene recalls a storeroom in which works of art are assembled according to criteria like size or inventory number. The arrangement suggests an arbitrary, which is not to say meaningless, collectivity at work in the composition of a museum collection.

Impermanent Display is a “copy” of Panini’s Roman paintings in film, a medium which enables Levy to rework these 18th century view paintings in contemporary terms, both political and aesthetic. The artworks are revived by the installation—unstuck from the narratives of the museum and resituated as a kind of ruin, incomplete and marked by history. Her camera delivers this scene not as a static display, but as a moving image. Her slow pans and long takes heighten the drama of objects and the act of looking that takes place in a museum.

Archaeology is a discipline of excavation. The archaeologist pieces together unearthed fragments into stories of human history. A similar process of revelation and recombination exists at the heart of the museum where the ongoing collection and display of objects can recover and remake history in response to contemporary concerns. In *Impermanent Display*, this analogy between the archaeological and the museological unfolds like a story that is both absurd and inspiring.

--Megan Heuer

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