

Putting faces through their paces

Works from the Igal Ahouvi Collection are displayed with only a superficial connection among them, like glitzy objects in a store of luxury brands

ART Tal Niv

The works from the Igal Ahouvi Collection that are currently on display at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery are organized like a luxury store, with a nice arrangement of items. But there is no innate connection in the show, titled "Prima Facie," between the early Irving Penn photographs – a few fine examples of the 252 studio portraits of working people from the Small Trades project (1950–1951) – and Nir Hod's stunningly erotic diptych "Policeman" and "Policewoman" (1997), whose masquerading, queerness and placement of the artist's self at its center were not naïve then, and are not naïve today. Hod photographs himself with a pre-selfie, narcissistic replication fraught with flagrant commercialism, awareness, light hairs on his nipple, lipstick. The twin image of a bare-breasted "policewoman" falls short. She is simply not the artist, and the image does not have a reflexive dimension. Walking the massive gallery space, I come to realize that the curator, Matan Daube — he was appointed to the job about six months ago, replacing Sarit Shapira (after her seven years as curator of Ahouvi's collection) — was aware of a linkage between Hod's work and Ido Michaeli's 2011 self-portrait as Eli Cohen, the Israeli spy. Yet a strong sense of curatorial avoidance is felt all around. A point is made not to intellectualize any of it — just to present. So the interrelations between works are external and superficial. This is a face and that is a face. Along general lines.

Ahouvi owns time-based media too. Dark walls were built and engineering made it possible to screen a glittering video work, "Face in the Crowd," by Alex Prager, a successful young artist from Los Angeles. It's a fine video,



Top: photographs from Hans Peter Feldmann's project "100 Years," (photo by Elad Sarig); Bottom left: Nir Hod's "Policeman" and "Policewoman"; Fashion photographer Mula Eshet's image of singer Yaffa Yarkoni.

something of an imitation of the Todd Haynes aesthetic in a 13-minute capsule, screened in a black room with the de rigueur bench. The main character in the work is played by Elizabeth Banks in a helmet hairdo. Blonde. Doris Day and Tippi Hedren combined. Even Jessica Chastain appears in another work by Prager. Expensive works. For sure. Glitzy precious objects in a store of luxury brands.

Everything is hung on the wall as is, because all the works display faces, people. The show avoids any arrangement that corresponds to an artistic or thematic rationale. There is no connection between the works, other than that they are all the property of their owner. There is no special approach, even, let's say, to fashion, despite the presence of Herb Ritts, Richard Avedon and Penn — all known for their work within

the fashion industry. (I'm convinced that Daube understood this and therefore included the veteran fashion photographer Mula Eshet's image of singer Yaffa Yarkoni.)

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I feel a certain excitement, even a pounding of the heart, that always accompanies an encounter with an original work. Diane Arbus' prints are astonishingly sharp, the light falling on faces. Pores. Painting is represented. Works extending from Aram Gershuni to Marlene

Dumas, whom everyone loves and I find totally incomprehensible, with the ink stains and the liquidity of the paint that create gaping lips out of everything.

But there is no connection between the works on display — not in style, not in internal narrative, not in modes of representation.

Ahouvi encountered enormous criticism for a deal he struck with the university to present various exhibitions of works from his collection, in return for donating to renovations to the building. So it seems that he and his curator have decided not to fight the critics any longer, and simply show what they have, with no intellectual inspiration.

At the entrance level, a huge opening to no place special, are photographs from the well-known project by Hans Peter Feldmann, "100 Years" — shots of people from infancy to centenary. Each photograph in

the sequence is of a person (German, neighbor, acquaintance) one year older than the previous picture; but the effect is shallow and cold. In part because the work is antiquated. Also because of the dimensions of the exhibition space. It's impossible to understand the story, only that the copies of the project were purchased lock, stock and barrel. Only one photograph, of a boy of nine, is interesting and beautiful — and a woman of 33, the age at which I first saw the series.

At the entrance I see row upon row — organized like in a candy store — of copies of the "Babel" exhibition catalogue written by Sarit Shapira. "Babel," a previous exhibition of works from the Ahouvi collection, encapsulates the conceptual thrust, overriding theme and works that were displayed in other exhibitions in the building. Audaciously integrative, linking a 2007 work by the Russian-Israeli painter Natalia Zourabova, of a dangerous playground in which a blonde girl is shouting and a father is covering his ears, with Joseph Beuys' 1985 "Scala Libera." A catalogue that runs the gamut from the trivial to the brilliant in its formulation of the connections within the somewhat erratic collection. Its effort to talk art was exactly what one took pleasure in. Even the installation of "Babel" in the impossible space of the gallery was a conscious effort to conceptualize the collection, to move it beyond commercialism. Now, though, we have the opposite. The "Prima Facie" collection of faces is exhibited in the space, hung as is. Expensive. Some of the works are breathtaking beautiful and interesting, but every visitor is left to seek for meaning on his own.