

“perhaps it`s dark, perhaps undarkened”

A solo exhibition by Udi Charka at the Givon Gallery

Curator: Avi Lubin

In his new solo show at the Givon Gallery, artist Udi Charka presents a site-specific installation with works in sculpture, video and drawings. At the heart his current show, which arrives more than a decade after his last solo project, is a sculptural complex of trees and branches encircling a habitat of silkworms that is meant to evolve and disperse within the duration of the show: the caterpillars should hatch, spin their cocoons and reemerge as moths. This is then a time-based piece, and in more ways than one: firstly in that it spans the life-cycle of the worms, from their hatching to their departure as moths; and, in a more fundamental sense, the show is time-based in that it must coincide with the growth of leaves on mulberry trees, which is the sole food consumed by the silkworms. To provide a constant supply of leaves, Charka organized a group of volunteers among his student at the Bar Ilan Yeshiva High School, who take turns in collecting fresh leaves and bringing them to the gallery. This is how the show sheds light on mechanisms of labor and the underlying mechanism of exploitation, both with regard to the boys and to the silkworms, presenting the full cycle along with its residue of cocoons and secretions.

There is an imminent chance, however, that things will not proceed as planned, putting the entire project at risk: the eggs might not hatch, caterpillars might not spin, or they might not enter them, and someone might miss his shift and fail to turn up with the necessary nutrition. The installation relies on many factors for things to succeed: the eggs must be refrigerated until leaves start to grow, otherwise the worms might hatch and die. And, once hatched, a steady temperature should be maintained. Charka can create ideal conditions for his worms, but he does not have control over how things ultimately develop.

The show lays a challenge of sorts to the orderly cycles of nature and their meaning, to religious faith and the artistic process. The title of the show, “Uncertain Darkness,” borrows from Tractate Shabbat, Chapter 2, in the Mishnah (“When one is in doubt whether darkness has set in [...]”) which is read in the eve of the Shabbat. It addresses the unclear time of twilight, after the sun has already set but before stars begin to shine. Neither day nor night, this time of day is meticulously scrutinized. Given the uncertainty of the matter, the Halachah subjects it to rigorous rules related to the day before and the night after. By contrast, In Charkar’s show, doubt and defiance are allowed to command a crucial place. It is uncertainty, precisely, that leads us to a twilight zone, to a place where boundaries and conventions are challenged. Instead of trying to ally together art with religious faith, Charka’s show offers a provocation of both, a twofold blasphemy.

This becomes particularly clear in a video where the artist’s daughter is seen falling asleep. More than merely an ironical reference to the history of Western painting, the video challenges a belief held by the artist’s grandmother: seeing it as a provocation of fate, she strongly objected to taking someone’s photograph while asleep, lest they never wake up again. In another video in the show we see the artist himself, who like an aimless hunter catches wasps and neutralizes their sting before setting them free again – releasing them, essentially, to their certain death.

The show features drawings from a series of Jewish cantors and cantors’ hats. Not just the leaders of the prayer in the synagogue, the ones charged with representing the congregation in the face god, cantors are also acclaimed musicians, recording artists who perform original music in concert halls. In Charka’s drawings their faces seem to fade away, in compliance as it were with the interdiction of making “an image or likeness” in Judaism. With this he also adopts, in a criticism mingle with irony, the habit practiced in some movement of Judaism of defacing or scratching the face out of a painting or a sculpture, so as not to transgress the interdiction. In

another, large-scale drawing we see the throne of Elijah the prophet, on which fathers circumcise their sons at the synagogue. The image of the chair relates to a series of noted chairs in Western art, from Velasquez's portrait of the pope to Francis Bacon's empty throne and Andy Warhol's electrical chair.