

Photo based art

Angela Levine

With the departure of the galaxy of foreign artists and critics who graced the opening week of the 3rd Israeli Biennale of Photography, the Museum of Art at Ein Harod has reverted to its previous tranquil existence. But still on view – and well worth visiting – is "Persistence of Memory," the international photo-show curated by London-based artist and critic John Stathatos, which forms the central attraction at this year's festival.

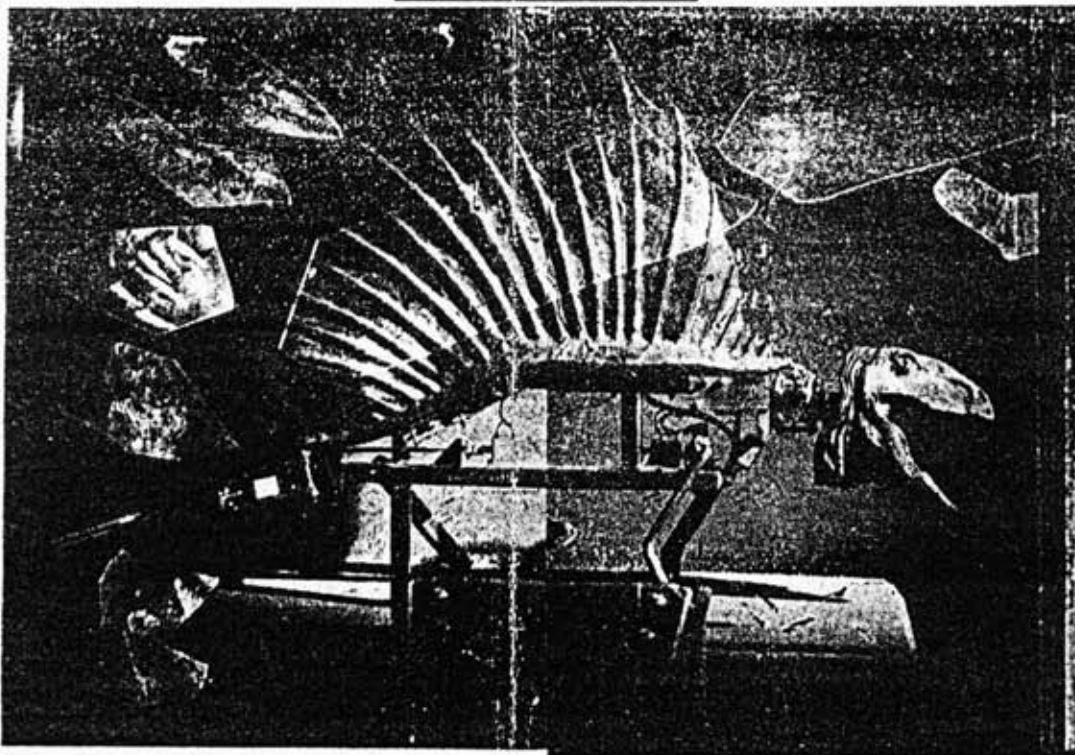
In a year in which social documentary photography (by Latin American artists) was featured in the central show at the prestigious Rencontres de la Photographie in Arles, it is intriguing to note that Stathatos's exhibition completely bypasses this form of photography. On the contrary, "Persistence of Memory" illustrates the unique power of the medium to conjure up past events, not through reproductions of reality but through images arrived at through memory, nostalgia and association.

Participating are 15 well-known Europeans, one American, Jane Mulfinger and four Israelis: Gilad Ophir, Chaim Luski, Moshe Ninio and Michal Heiman. The exhibits include installations, slide projections, mixed-media wall exhibits and a limited number of works which are purely photographic in nature. Since the accent here is on "photo-based" artists, for whom photography is only one of the several media in which they work, one should not be surprised to discover that virtuoso photography is scarce in this show.

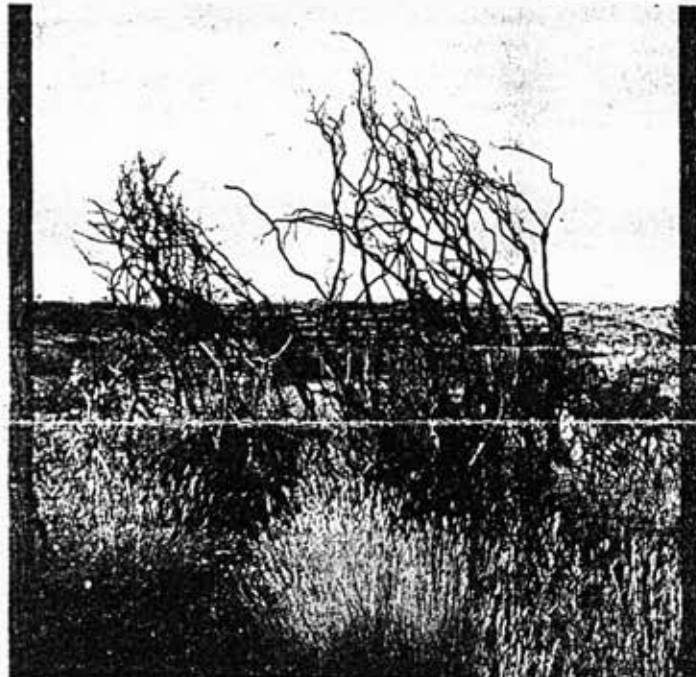
For purposes of discussion, one might divide its contents into four categories: photographs which allude to the historical past; Nature-based images; exhibits which question tradition, perceptions of form, space and personal identity; and works which allude to a deeper story beyond the superficial image. The odd men out in this grouping are David Boeno (France) and Chaim Luski, each of whom are involved in fascinating experiments with light, an aspect of photography which does not accord with the subject of this exhibition.

A number of artists appear to be fascinated by museum exhibits. Enzo and Paolo Ragazzini, for example, produce cibachrome prints of agricultural implements, toys and household artifacts housed in a 19th century folk museum. These pictures go far beyond mere documentation; they succeed in conveying to us a sense of loss at the passing of a remote farming community which we personally never knew.

At first sight, it seems that Juan Fontcuberta (Spain) also photographs objects in a museum; in his case, a museum of natural history. But, look again and one sees that he specializes in faking assemblages of imaginary creatures. These make-believe zoological exhibits, which have made him famous, lead one to query the authenticity of museum exhibits as a whole and, perhaps, even the reliability of the scientific



Ella Maor: untitled, mixed media (Belt Sturman). At left, Joan Fontcuberta: "Tatlin Dinosaur", frottogram (Ein Harod Museum of Art).



John Stathatos: "Dry Light", silver print (Ein Harod).

information which one finds in books. In these recent works – which he calls frottograms – negatives of rocks, plants or animals have been rubbed against the photographed object. As a result, textured surfaces in the final prints appear amazingly lifelike.

Nature is the starting point for slide installations by Bertrand Gadenne (France), the only participant to relate his exhibit to the kibbutz. In preparation for his work, which is presently staged in the dark interior of the old kibbutz theater, he photographed a stuffed eagle owl on exhibit in the Beit Sturman Natural History Museum at Ein Harod. As a slide, this image is projected onto a mirror and its reflection beamed onto a strip of feathers, kept in motion by a breeze generated by the slide projector. The resultant double picture gives the illusion of a live owl hiding between the feathers.

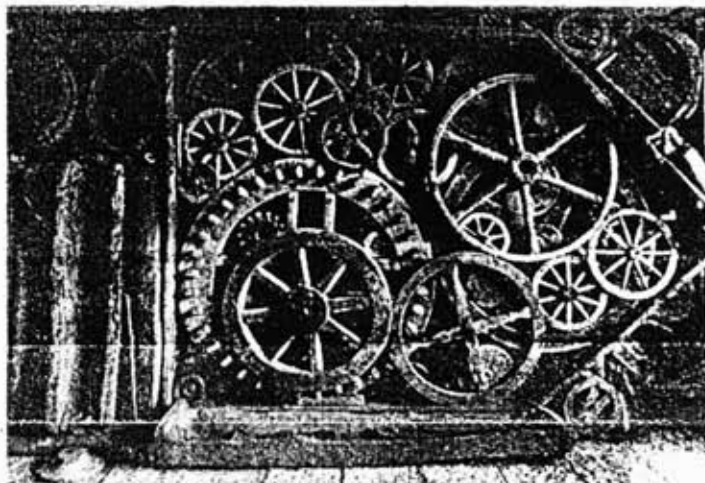
Stathatos (who is also exhibiting) shows some powerful frames of rocks and trees in which contours and forms are reproduced with an enviable skill, giving some forms the appearance of abstract sculptures. This may be the type of effect for which Moshe Ninio was striving, but failed to achieve, in his close-ups of an oriental rug; a work which is one

of the weaker links in this show.

Susan Trangmar and Yve Lomax (both from England) create environments which alter our conventional perception of objects in space and our own relationship to them.

Another work replete with shifting meanings is "Stigmata" by Lizzie Calligas (Greece), comprising 60 silver prints depicting a hand resting loosely on a woman's body. Subtle variations in light, tone and definition make each frame slightly different from the previous one; sometimes the flesh is transparent, sometimes opaque, sometimes luminous. In consequence, these pictures give rise to a wealth of associations, religious, sexual and feminist. Among interesting exhibits making reference to some hidden story are Jane Mulfinger's snapshots from an anonymous family album mounted onto white board pierced by Braille text. The lives of these people, like the Braille writing, remain tantalizingly beyond our comprehension.

Secrets are hinted at in the photographs of Nikos Panayotopoulos (Greece) who uses a disposable toy camera to produce scenes of his childhood in the suburbs of Athens. In some instances, he marks a certain street or patch of land with an arrow, as if to indicate that some



Enzo & Paolo Ragazzini: cibachrome print (Ein Harod).

event took place there long ago.

Through the use of archive material combined with their own photographs, Michal Heiman and Ania Bien (Holland) set up strikingly imaginative dialogues with personalities now dead. In comparing the recent tragic death of the painter Aviva Uri with that of the poetess Rachel, Heiman has picked a theme which ideally suits her spare cerebral style; her photo installation succeeds in creating an atmosphere both poignant and shocking.

Bien's subject is Franz Kafka. The Dutch artist imagines what would have happened had he not died in 1924, but instead had come as a refugee to America in the late '30s. Her installation juxtaposes views of Manhattan (seen from a moving vehicle) alongside Kafka's supposed memories of Europe. This is an ingenious idea, but the links between the two worlds are over-subtle. One would have liked Bien to have indicated some of the precise visual stimuli which might have sparked off Kafka's recollections of the past. For example, take her three photographs of nude women in submissive poses, almost certainly meant to represent Kafka's three sisters who died in the Holocaust. An appropriate catalyst for this imagery might have been the figures of women passing by in a Manhattan street.

Perceived overall, this is a well balanced, distinguished presentation which maintains the high standards set at the 1988 Biennale. As regards the Biennale as a whole, praise is due to Galia Bar Or, direc-

tor of the festival, who has triumphed again, despite a skeleton staff, cramped conditions and a shoe-string budget.

FOLLOWING THE pattern set in the two previous Photo Biennales, promising young photographers have been given the opportunity to show their paces in their own modest exhibition (in the adjacent Beit Sturman). Nine participants were selected from 100 candidates by a jury consisting of Nissan Peretz (Curator of Photography, Israel Museum), Oded Yedaya (photographer and critic) and Galia Bar Or. Christopher Wade (Cultural Attache, British Council) joined the judges in awarding one of them, Yariv Katz, a £3,000 British Council grant for study in England. Second and third prize-winners, Osnat Yavin and Moriel Deffer, were given cash prizes to be spent on Kodak equipment.

Compared to previous years, one notes a far higher standard of achievement. There is no pretentious or flashy work; all nine young photographers demonstrate a sound technical grounding and a considered approach. Apart from Katz's fine composite pictures relating to local legend, in which his own photographs are bonded with figures reproduced from "Sefer Ha'Shomer" (a popular record of the early exploits of the Yishuv), I found Eretz Harodi and Nir Nadar's tiny confessional cells particularly appealing. Other participants are Sigal Avni, Yoram Buzaglo, Anat Gorel, Tal Stern and Ella Maor. (Both shows till Nov. 30).