

Avital Cnaani | 'Sturdy'

Keren Goldberg

Cardboard Back

Surprisingly, the word “Cardboard” first appeared in the English language as an alternative drawing surface – in Ann Brontë’s novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). When the future husband of Helen Graham, the novel’s heroine, observes a faded drawing on the backside of one of her works, she worryingly notes that “the pencil frequently leaves an impression upon cardboard that no amount of rubbing can efface”. Helen is anxious that once the man will recognize the image, which depicts his own portrait, he will know of her true feelings for him. The story presents the cardboard as the insignificant backside of the drawing, but also as a material that inscribes the truth.

In her show “Sturdy”, Avital Cnaani uses cardboard not only as a drawing surface, but also as a material for sculpture and as an ontological object. It serves as a material for the creation of three dimensional stains, or is presented in its entirety as abandoned storage boxes, carrying their original marks and labels. Although, as opposed to her previous shows, in the current show, the drawings are “drawingly” hung and the sculptures are “sculpturely” mounted, the two media continue to blend in space. Ultimately, cardboard is made of paper, and is essentially a two dimensional material.

The One and the Inside

Following the word’s literary etymology, one could continue to elaborate about cardboard usage throughout art history, from the early 20th century Cubist collages and Dada masks, through Andy Warhol’s reversed ready-made Brillo boxes of the 1960s, and finally the usage of quotidian materials by the local *Want of Matter*. But the exhibition’s surroundings does not draw from these art historical connotations. Cnaani investigates the cardboard itself, as an abstract entity holding a physical, or more specifically spatial, function.

A cardboard box is a leftover, a packaging or covering. Its shape is designated by what it holds. By using it, Cnaani continues her preoccupation in the surface of materials, as seen in her previous Formica sculptures. Similarly to Formica, which disguises itself as another material, cardboard too is affiliated with make-believe, as the word is also used to describe something fake, or provisional. Indeed, Cnaani’s use of cardboard summons a child-like imaginary game: the painted cardboard cut outs seem as props in a children theater play, and the large boxes invites us to play “house”.

But the images painted on the boxes do not seek representation; at least not in the straightforward sense of the word. And as opposed to the boxes' flat exteriors, the full, amorphous stains mark an inside. Contrary to Cnaani's previous sculptures, which were made in pieces, her present works are channeled towards the single. Complete cardboard boxes carry whole images. The latter are spread across a grid formed by the boxes' folding marks, so that the disassembling of both image and surface is derived from the boxes' production conditions. Drifting across the show, the viewer is propelled by a constant tension between the consolidation of the singular to its segmentation.

Land, Sea, Air

In contrast to Cnaani's wooden and Formica constructions, which seemed like dry skeletons, the cardboard has a kind of liveliness to it. When it is stained by color, it changes its texture, similarly to beach sand in its repeated meeting with the sea water. It is as if the puddled stains, primary amoebas and whale-like wombs that are spread across the boxes move between land and sea while performing an archaic moment of evolutionary stranding; a mitosis of division and segmentation. However, these images also follow a closed circle of life and death, or a nullifying primacy. The narrow, upright boxes seem like vertical coffins, suited to the dimensions of the flat bodies imprinted on and inside them. Thus, these sturdy cardboard shells remain at a loss.

Deep Ecology/Low-Grade Cardboard

Allegedly, this cardboard show could not have opened in a more fitting timing – at the pick of public awareness to the ecological crises. Indeed, Cnaani did not only use cardboard, which is made of recycled paper, but also appropriated cardboard labeled as “low-grade”. Recycling the recycled. Nonetheless, this is by no means a show of recycled art, or “Junk Art”, delivering some kind of an activist ecological message. Cnaani acts from within a “deep ecology”, as she terms it. A personal ecology, through which she ponders the mere possibility of creating art in a world of abundance, and strives for reduction. To return to the singular.