



PRINT JANUARY 2020



View of “Dina Shenhav,” 2019. From left: *Merkava* (Chariot), 2019; *Soldier #3*, 2018.

Dina Shenhav

NOGA GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Developed by the Israeli Defense Forces in the 1970s, the Merkava is a battle tank used widely in Israel’s military operations. It was recognized by the American conservative magazine *The National Interest* as one of the five deadliest tanks in the world. Dina Shenhav’s sculpture *Merkava* (Chariot), 2019, appearing in an exhibition of the same title, occupied a vast portion of

the gallery space with its impressive scale and meticulously detailed surfaces. Yet this model had been hand-fabricated entirely of foam (with a wood armature) and thus deprived of its lethal force. The malleability of the material gave it a slightly sagging silhouette, and, most notably, its guns hung limp. Crammed behind a couple of columns, it was clearly not going anywhere.

In the combination of scale (large), detail (graphic), and material (soft), Shenhav threw a proverbial wrench into the customary representation of the military in the Israeli public sphere. Any sense of strength (or, for that matter, of heroism or a moral high ground) was evacuated, leaving only an impotent prop and, by extension, the suggestion of a general feeling of exhaustion in the wake of the country's ongoing armed campaigns. It was not a stretch to evoke Pino Pascali's "*Armi*" (Weapons) series, 1965–ca. '66, a trove of almost perfectly rendered olive-green military equipment that the Arte Povera artist fabricated out of found objects as a critique of the colonial wars in the late 1960s. Unlike Pascali's exercise of virtuoso mimicry, Shenhav's strategy is to combine seemingly antithetical elements, as in the acrylic-on-plastic portraits of soldiers displayed on either side of *Merkava*. In *Soldier #2* and *Soldier #3*, both 2018, the fluid black lines delineating the faces of the young conscripts appear in stark contrast to the brightly colored supports—one blue, the other purple—on which they are painted. Beads, glitter, and swaths of red paint articulate additional details, such as the soldiers' helmets and combat gear.

One assumed that the craft-like and decorative aspects of both the sculpture and the paintings were meant to connote a feminization or domestication of the military. By eliciting these registers of (gender) difference, the artist initiated a conversation with a local audience for whom supporting the nation's soldiers (everyone's sons and daughters) is both a personal and collective endeavor. Serving in the military is not only mandatory but also structures many aspects of culture and society after the draftees return to civilian life. And given that women are not exempt—and even, for a time, made up some tank units, though they were not deployed to frontline combat positions—Shenhav's position cannot be automatically considered as strictly oppositional.

The artist's attentiveness to the minutiae of the tank's sculptural construction and her fascination with embellishing the soldiers' portraits suggested a libidinal nexus between craft and politics. The handwork—at once obsessive, searching, and tender—and the use of simple, easily available elements are crucial. In the durational process of fabricating emblems of some of Israel's most hallowed rites of passage as well as its myths and symbols of national identity, Shenhav tries to connect an abstract realm of signification with the materiality of lived experience. What would touching these trophies, icons and ideals be like? And, if they are so tactile, aren't they also transformable? Though *crafting* may not be a foolproof path to a political alternative, it seemed to be Shenhav's means to manifest the contradictions embedded in warcraft.

— *Nuit Banai*