





Dina Shenhav, *The End of the Forest*, 2008, foam installation, Tavi-Dresdner Gallery, Tel Aviv

## Dina Shenhav: D.O.A. Contextualizing Hunting

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Dina Shenhav is preoccupied with the reciprocal relations between man and nature and with the complexity stemming from man's status as both sovereign and subject in a variety of archaeological, ecological, political and social contexts. The themes she is concerned with are charged with an apocalyptic quality, and range from violent conflicts (war in the Middle East or conflict-ridden biblical stories) to destruction and annihilation in an ecological, universal context. In all of these frameworks, Shenhav employs a poetics of allusions and traces that reveal a deep affection for small details in order to examine the paradox that allows for the simultaneous existence of cruelty, violence and aggressive displays of power alongside gentleness, compassion and humanity.

Shenhav's ongoing concern with conflicts is given expression not only on the thematic and conceptual level, but also in her choice of materials: using soft materials such as ashes or foam, she sculpts powerful scenes of domestic and urban life and destruction. Despite the numerous mediums she works with (installation, sculpture, painting, drawing, photography and video), the material she has been most identified with for over a decade is an old-fashioned yellowish-white type of mattress foam, which she sculpts and carves in a meticulous, labor-intensive process to create deeply moving scenes. Although her sculptural style is realist, Shenhav leaves the material itself and the traces of her artistic action exposed, while underscoring the contrast between the softness of the foam and the hard inanimate objects it is used to represent. So, for instance,

hard objects related to violent gestures such as knives, saws, or axes, are treated using a soft material that seems to absorb the cruelty of the actions embedded within them.

*D.O.A.* is Shenhav's fifth foam installation. Her first solo museum exhibition, *Game Over* (Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel, 2001), featured large-scale works centered on scenes from the Lebanon War and the *Intifada*: images of soldiers dressed in khaki, brown and black camouflage uniforms that were copied from media photographs, and subsequently disassembled and reassembled as a mosaic. As the technique of sculpting in foam became one of her signature artistic traits, these colorful, flat works, which were affixed to the wall, gave way to monochromatic foam installations. The first of these, *Dog* (2006)—which was also exhibited at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art—consisted of an extensive sculpted environment resembling a forest, with an abandoned dog tied to one of the trees at its center. Two years later, the installation *The End of the Forest* was exhibited at Tavi-Dresdner Gallery in Tel Aviv (2008). This installation featured the backyard of a wood-cutter, and raised questions concerning ecological crimes and global warming. The third foam installation, *The Bed's Dream*, was exhibited at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2011), and featured a children's room seen through a window. The absence of human figures transformed the room into an intimate yet disturbing space. In 2013, Shenhav presented her fourth foam installation, *The Hunter*, as part of the Special Project at the Fresh Paint Art Fair, Tel Aviv.

This earlier version of the current work featured various weapons and tools, as if it were a work space abandoned by the hunter.

The installation, *D.O.A.* (Dead on Arrival), whose title is borrowed from the police jargon used to describe a murder scene, similarly highlights the absence of human figures. The yellow foam dominates the scene, lending the highly detailed hunter's abode a pale, whitish, monochromatic tone. A small lodge filled with highly detailed objects merges into the surrounding mangrove plantation – calling to mind the expanse of the Everglades, which the artist has never visited. The installation is composed of meticulously executed tools of the hunter's trade: rifles, axes, knives, saws, shotguns, ammunition, traps, taxidermy deer heads, fur pelts and dead animals, as well as the hunter's boots, a kitchen table, chair, shelves and food remnants on a plate, which impart the impression that the hunter has just left. Each of these items was hand-carved individually before being set within the meticulously detailed hunting lodge interior, which is crafted of the same pliable yellow foam.

The relaxed domestic appearance of this generic living environment has a deceptive quality, which camouflages the lodge's routine use as a site of calamity—an arena of murder. The shot animals, which once served as a moving target, are treated like the rest of the inanimate objects: some of them are displayed as trophies, while others are piled up one atop the other, their heads drooping

to the ground. The yellow foam seems to continue absorbing what cannot be absorbed: blood, pain and guilt.

Hunting habits have undergone numerous incarnations in the course of human history—ranging from an existential need geared towards survival to a social activity (tribal initiation rituals), an economic necessity (supplying materials for coveted fashion items such as fur, feathers or ivory), or a form of leisure or sport. In medieval Europe, aristocratic families held private estates, where hunting was limited to their members and guests. Over time, the tradition of hunting came to be perceived as a status symbol, with members of the nobility treating it as a form of amusement designed to demonstrate their courage and dispel their boredom. In the 19th century, hunters began using the science of taxidermy to present hunting trophies or exhibit the hunted animals' skin or fur in order to showcase their achievements. Over the years, entire animal species have grown extinct or have reached the verge of extinction due to wild and unrestrained hunting practices. By 1900, more than five million birds, including 95% of Florida's shore birds, were being killed annually in order to provide feathers to the plume industry. It was not until the first decade of the 21st century that various parliaments around the world began passing legislation designed to prohibit hunting and limit the use of hunting methods deemed as especially cruel. In the United States, hunting is an accepted form of sport that is not necessarily affiliated with a specific social class, and is thought of as part of a culture of bonding with nature and as representing a respectful attitude towards the environment. Paradoxically, many hunting organizations in the U.S. are also active on environmental issues, and sometimes receive special seasonal hunting permits in order to regulate wildlife populations that might exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat and threaten the well-being of other species.

The representation of hunting in art has also undergone numerous incarnations. The iconography of hunting scenes in the history of art may be divided into interior scenes and outdoor scenes. The painters who depicted the interior of the hunter's home usually featured the hunter himself seated at a table alongside his weapons, surrounded by the skins of hunted animals. These images, especially still lifes, were related during different periods to the theme of *Vanitas*, while outdoor hunting scenes depicted in genre paintings and portraits featured the hunter in action – riding his horse or pursuing an animal. These images, which usually depicted pairs of hunters accompanied by a dog, were designed to underscore the sitters' high social status. Significantly, neither type of painting cast a critical gaze at the hunters or defined them as evildoers.

Only in recent years, as part of a larger concern with ecological issues and a vegan lifestyle, have social attitudes towards hunting as a sport begun to change, giving rise to a critical gaze that underscores the cruelty of this practice and the perspective of its victims. More than 50 museums advocating respectful hunting practices, wildlife preservation and ecological consciousness currently exist throughout the world. The Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (Museum of Hunting and Nature) in Paris, for instance, takes a pedagogical approach to animal anatomy, as well as to hunting techniques and devices, and underscores the paradoxical relationship between hunter and the environment: "The underlying intimacy that once linked together mankind and the environment, the precious relationship that surrounded the most archaic ritual—taking the life of an animal, sometimes at your own risk, to keep your community alive."<sup>1</sup> In recent years, this museum has added to its permanent exhibitions of taxidermy and fauna commissioned



Dina Shenhav, *The Bed's Dream*, 2011, foam installation, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

works by contemporary artists that cast a critical gaze at the theme of hunting. One of the most prominent artists in this context is Mark Dion, who for the past two decades has critiqued humankind's often cruel treatment of nature, while also demonstrating that "nature" is a construct which is constantly being reshaped and reinterpreted. His project *Concerning Hunting* (2008), for instance, examined hunting as a traditional, yet controversial, cultural practice. "One of the fascinating things about hunting," says Dion, "is its fundamental contradictoriness: the sensitivity of the hunter and his profound knowledge about what nature requires are also expressed through the act of killing animals." Dion's artistic examinations do not focus on nature as such, but rather on the hunt as a form of cultural engagement with it.

In Shenhav's work, the display of weapons and dead animals in the hunter's cabin similarly embodies the controversy underlying this cultural phenomenon, which is given expression in the contrast between the cruelty and violence that pervade the scene and between the soft, pale mattress foam associated with the domestic sphere, and the monochromatic tone that blurs the differences between the weapons and their victims. The result is a theatrical space pervaded by a sense of "soft" horror, in which the details are blurred and boundaries are no longer clear.

A reading of Shenhav's works is always shaped by the tension between cultural, political, aesthetic and poetic traditions. One could attempt to match this installation with a narrative and wonder about the story it conceals, or the motivation that causes a man to devote his life to killing animals, yet such a story cannot be easily fixed within a specific, coherent storyline. Although it is not as political as earlier works by Shenhav, this installation is part of a series of works concerned with states of dying and natural

destruction (fallen trees; destroyed, smoke-filled cities; and ruins), which seem to indicate the artist's shift from a concern with local politics to universal manifestations of human evil that are not associated with a particular place. Michal Ben-Horin has tied Shenhav's works to the artistic concern with melancholia in certain aesthetic traditions. In a comprehensive article devoted to Shenhav's work, she mentions the forest paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, the melancholic master of German Romanticism, that silently attest to the death of culture while expressing a longing for a heroic past. As Ben-Horin notes, "Friedrich's forest imagery is imbued with an intimation of the oppression and horror that pervades European folktales, thus alluding to encounters that take place at a removal from the city and the law, in the realm of the threatening and the invisible... This dark, irrational realm, a realm of instincts and desires, is not subject to the rule of reason." The experience of observing and wandering through Shenhav's installation leads the viewer into the hunter's intimate world, which indeed comes to appear as a poetic and aesthetic representation of melancholy. Or are the violence and bloodshed addressed in this work in fact an allegory for the violence of one human being towards another?

*Translated by Talya Halkin*

**Dina Shenhav: D.O.A. (Dead on Arrival)**, curated by Tami Katz-Freiman, will be on view through January 31, 2016 at ArtCenter [Little River Edition] 7252 NW Miami Court, Miami.

Additional support for this exhibition has been provided by Mifal Hapais, Outset, Beit Berl College and the Consulate of Israel in Miami.



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<sup>1</sup> Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, <http://www.chassenature.org>.