

# More than little green men

The Bezalel MFA Gallery in Tel Aviv is giving space to students' imaginations

• By DAVID STROMBERG

Sculptors Boaz Kadman and Lihi Chen have been peers throughout their undergraduate and graduate art studies, and their ongoing dialogue has been not only personal but artistic. For the first time they turn this dialogue public – in the form of a co-curated exhibition at the Bezalel MFA Gallery in Tel Aviv – and we learn that their latest subject is science fiction.

"We tried to think about the essence of sci-fi and less of its symbols," says Chen, whose work consists of installations with a fetishistic attention to surface and detail. "To focus on what the genre forces the writer, the director – or in this case, the artist – to think about. And then we tried to see whether an artist can create a science-fiction artwork."

The result is an exhibit titled Real Sci-Fi, for

which Chen and Kadman went searching for art that was aiming to engage with reality in an innovative or inventive way.

"If you leave out fantasy and escapism, you're talking about making art," says Kadman, whose works have varied from small-scale collage and poetic Hebrew cut-ups, to large gallery, museum and site-specific installations. "Sci-fi is like a model or map: You lose a lot of details to have a bigger view."

Chen and Kadman sought out works that were fascinated with technology, including some aspect or result of it, and which, like literary science-fiction, would reflect where and when it was made.

In science-fiction literature, the sense of time seems to be paradoxical. "[Sci-fi] is about trying to think of what would happen next,"

says Kadman. "But isn't that futile? Shouldn't we deal with the now?" Yet he suggests that the "now" is inescapable, and that this kind of exploration helps "widen the spectrum of what we think about beyond the minimum, beyond just what's necessary."

One example is Rotem Tamir's balloon-making machine, which involves mechanics and chemistry and which Kadman jokingly dubs "stupid science." The mechanism is used to make rubber from scratch, form it into a double-holed balloon with a tube on each end and then pump air into it until it pops. There's a sort of "experiment" involved in which the artist measures how large the balloon gets before it bursts. The process repeats indefinitely.

The work's lo-fi quality is important for the show as Kadman and Chen were interested in things that a person could do alone, through personal effort and without a big production. As Kadman puts it, "It's a question of: what can I actually do?"

He adds: "We use cars and jets, but we don't know how they work technologically. Which explains why we're excited when we see a slide projector. It's not just nostalgia – like seeing a windmill – but we can actually see how it works."

He gives the additional example of a washing machine: "First someone made a rotating drum. Someone else made better detergent. There were a lot of inputs. No one teaches you who invented the washing machine, but it's a very-complicated machine, and they're everywhere."

It may seem silly, but it illustrates a deeper point: "It's about learning to participate in something larger."

In art, this participation can be quite literal: In *Judean Desert*, Karin Mendelovici took a photo of the hilly landscape familiar to many of us – one which already resembles the popular idea of a barren distant planet – and stuck several clumps of yellow putty in a few places. Suddenly we not only imagine an alien terrain, we realize that in our imagination the simplest material can be turned into some creature inhabiting that terrain. Despite its "simplicity," this action has the capacity not only to alter the landscape, it can even turn into a challenge of that landscape's presumed sanctity.

"It has to do with a relationship to society," says Kadman. "It's the model of a place that supposedly doesn't exist and people who sup-



Sharon Glazberg, 'Black Moon and Dead Sea,' 2003, lamda print, 70 cm. x 50 cm.



Gil Lavi, 'Black Butterflies,' 2008, collage and marker on cardboard, 13 cm. x 17 cm.



posedly aren't us – but it's a model of a society, and because it's a little 'weird' I become more interested."

As an artist, working with models is essential for Kadman. As he puts it, the starting point is simple so that one can understand what he or she is doing. After creating a model, one can work with something that was not necessarily understood before. And sometimes when a work is done, though it can be understood as being man-made, it can be confusing to understand where it came from.

"You see something," says Kadman, "and you wonder: how did I make that?"

For him this process involves taking part in a culture, figuring out what one's space is, what action is to be taken. "If I actually affect things – little me in this big place – then there's a meaning to what I do."

This further implies a sense of responsibility. "Again, the washing machine is a good example: You want something to go in, and something to come out. You don't want it to keep going around in circles."

For Chen, the exhibit touched a more ominous chord. "We're constantly being told that the apocalypse is coming," she says. "And I think many artists internalize this and allowing themselves to show their fear. And this is an interesting place: where art becomes the fulfillment of an idea or fear."

In a still from Noa Gur's video, *Ransom*, we see a young woman standing in a thicket, a floodlight from her right making it difficult to identify her exact location. Still, we clearly see that there is some structure behind her, and in this frozen moment we worry that it could obliterate her. Yet she stands calmly, stone-faced, arms at her side, awaiting whatever destruction may come.

There is a sense of things getting out of control, initially beyond our imagination and yet created by us, and even accepted once they come into existence.

"We plan on a personal level. We have city planning, economic planning. But how much do we know about where society is going?" asks Kadman. "We don't. But we can get an idea of this through experiments and thinking about it."

For him, this is the essence of real science fiction. He gives a very real example: "International travel became very cheap, and suddenly we were overwhelmed by the global village. How did we not see that coming?"

Chen refers to a "parallel world" in reference to the kinds of works that were chosen over time to be included in the show. "What came out is a show about some sort of promise, about a parallel world and about landscape, surroundings, environment," she says.

One piece that travels between the boundaries of worlds is Sharon Glazberg's photo work, *Black Moon and Dead Sea*. In it, a mound of dirt is made to look like the desert mountains, above which hangs a pink circle. But it's not difficult to see a person in black paint behind this pink ball, which we suddenly realize is a gum balloon. The extreme openness of each of the components – the artist's exposure of this being a model landscape – somehow turns it into an alternate reality where a blackened human figure is the creator of floating galactic bodies.

Chen describes this kind of work as creating a "stage-set for life." She explains that sci-fi is a very large genre, and that in gathering works for the show she and Kadman tried to understand the difference between any piece of art and one which can be related to science fiction.

"We aren't curators, we're artists who have

colleagues that we believe are doing something relevant," says Chen in reference to her work with Kadman. "Doing this show at a university gallery allowed it to be more open. There was a lot of fun in the curating."

It's the kind of show that would be difficult to plan and execute in a museum setting. Bezalet's spokeswoman Michal Turgeman, who worked closely with Chen and Kadman to help bring the show to fruition at the academy's Tel Aviv gallery, emphasizes the academy's commitment to giving graduates and lecturers a chance to explore original ideas. "We're committed to presenting areas of activity that can positively impact art and design, and which often don't have opportunities in more commercial locations," she says.

As artists who work with their hands to create alternate realities, for Chen and Kadman this curatorial excursion reflects back on their own work. "We're making a differentiation between sci-fi as fantasy/escape and sci-fi as a model for understanding one's life, relationships," Kadman says of the show's more general thematic aims.

"Art is like love or peace, it's very abstract if you just say that word. It's a process of self-study, discovering something you may already know. Like taking apart a machine and putting it back together – it's not something 'important' but it helps me understand something."

This relates to the very essence of what it means to be a contemporary artist. "The position an artist should take is not that clear today," says Kadman. "You can say 'photographer' or 'painter,' but more and more you find yourself in a position in between. And you have to give it a new meaning."

This self-determining action – creating new meaning – is the way that science-fiction becomes real.

*Real Sci-Fi is on show at the Bezalet MFA Gallery, Rehov Salame 60, Tel Aviv. Open Fridays and Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., until February 7.*



Noa Gur, 'Ransom,' 2008 video, 4:12 minutes



Rotem Tamir, 'Balloon Machine,' 2008



Karin Mendelovici, 'Judean Desert,' 2004, plasticine on photo paper, 100 cm. x 70 cm.