Aboard! [1]

Curator: Carmit Blumensohn

In the beginning, there was photography - photography as a way of freezing the moment, a way of searching for the truth. “Every photograph is a certificate of presence,” as Roland Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography.* Photography is deemed to be evidence of existence, the proof of reality, a guarantee of truth as perceived by “the operator” – the one who makes the photograph. Freezing a moment in the camera lens loads it with various possibilities of observation and decoding.[2]

Orit Bertini Shavit continues her journey far beyond this genesis and uses photography as a point of origin for rich, far-reaching artistic adventures. Her current exhibit challenges traditional photography that had been her “home” and anchor for many years of creative work. The photography existing and present in her work is a free medium without limits or borders which constitutes a springboard to new worlds created during art-making. The result is an unraveled space in which a continuous dialogue takes place between the two- and three-dimensional, between still photographs and sculptures, and between video and inanimate objects. Rustling below the surface of the powerfully sensuous visual aesthetics are deep emotional loads of a journey, restlessness, constant expectation, and an attempt to contain the hidden and concealed; that which the ocean waves or gusts of wind deposit on the shore to which the artist frequently comes from her home near the sea after the storm abates.

The works in the exhibition resonate with the collective memory of traditions, legends and myths associated with sea journeys, embarkations, and marine wanderings. The repeated image of the ship floods the symbolism of the sea voyage in various cultures, associated with the constant human search for all that is unattainable and the human desire of wanderlust.

Hans Blumenberg described this desire in his book *Shipwreck with Spectator:*

> Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphorics of the perilous sea voyage. The repertory of this nautical metaphorics of existence is very rich. It includes coasts and island, harbors and the high seas, reefs and storms, shallows and calms, sail and rudder, helmsmen and anchorages, compass and astronomical navigation, lighthouses and pilots. Often the representations of danger on

[1] On the metaphor of the sea journey, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator* (1979). p. 1

[2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: On Photograph* (1980), Chapter 36

> the high seas serves only to underline the comfort and peace, the safety and serenity of the harbor in which a sea voyage reaches its end.

Orit Bertini Shavit carefully stages photographs comprised from pieces of childhood memories and concrete materials charged with metaphorical meanings. Thus the *Ark* is made of a tower of books topped by tree bark gathered from the beach, its shape like Noah's Ark which offered refuge from dangers threatening humans, survivors of the flood embodying the destruction that humanity brought upon itself. The books that comprise the tower – on art, culture, values, ethics – perhaps hint at the possibility that only the lofty idealism of human beings can save human existence from crashing on a reef, splintering and drowning. At the base of the ark to the left is Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* and at the right is the catalog of the Israel Museum's 1998 exhibition *The Joy of Color.* At the center is an ancient manuscript from Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck and Viewer,* music from Mozart to Don Giovanni, books of photography, poetry, art history, and military history.

The unique integration of the personal with the universal expressed in this artwork characterizes Bertini Shavit's oeuvre.

The work *Dream State* presents a collection of objects that also represent pieces of memory from childhood to adulthood (among them, *Pinocchio,* a Berlioz record, a family photo album with an imprint of a ship on the binding, the artist's father's scarf, a postcard reproduction of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* including a very old screen displaying continuously changing images. The concrete screen planted between the photographed images has a surprising presence. The images dancing across the screen are images of the research Bertini Shavit conducted on the subjects of the exhibition. The raft, for example, reappears as an image of transience and being tossed around between hope and despair. When confidence collapses and war approaches, masses of people set out for an uncertain sea journey with the dream of a new homeland, one of safety. In contrast, the raft, like the ark, embodies the possibility of rescue, a basis for the hope of realizing the dream.

Inventory recreates the attempt to assemble the remains of a shipwreck by attaching the pieces, or alternatively, the rebuilding of the ship as the option for a new world. The planks washed ashore are laid down in painstaking order with regular spacing, creating recognition of the load embodied in each one. Classification and archival treatment are the essence of the artistic-research language of the entire exhibition. *Skeleton (Remnants)* is a very large-scale hanging work comprised of knitting needles. Bertini Shavit laboriously and patiently attached hundreds of knitting needles of different sizes and types with the aid of thin, transparent webs of glue. The piece is located in the space

between connectivity and avoidance. Is the artist referring to Icarus's wings with their disappointed promise, or is it about the remains of a shipwreck? Perhaps it is the skeleton of a huge, extinct marine mammal? Does it embody the warm and comfortable domesticity of a mother (or grandmother), the home of a knitter no longer alive?

The image in *Untitled (Twilight)* is of a ship made of very thin, shaky boards in an intermediate state: is it a dream? Is it twilight? Where does the sea end and the sky begin? The questions intensify when it becomes clear that the ship, which at first glance seems to be forging ahead, is actually attached by nails to the wooden cube and is grounded. This is the situation in *Flat Boat* as well – a stop motion work – with the image of a raw raft whose components seem human. They move upward and downward, with clumsy, infinite cyclicity, with neither a goal nor meaning.

The photograph *Untitled (Female Cult Figures)* contains an essential uncertainty representing the journey in which the exhibition engages. It is made of pieces of wooden boards gathered on the beach. It seems that the planks have come together on their own into archaic, gigantic figures, with embodied spiritual and mystical possibilities. These figures are located frontally like an armada in a foggy sea, the question remaining as to whether they are headed for war or for peace and acceptance.