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A Different Spin On Israeli Society

‘Centrifuge’ show, panel discussion shine light on marginalized populations.

01/28/14 | [Orli Santo](#) | [Special To The Jewish Week](#)

With negotiations to curtail Iran’s nuclear ambitions going on in Geneva, talk of centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium, is plentiful these days.

But the image of a centrifuge took on a whole different spin, so to speak, last week with a panel discussion on the intersection of art and social activism tied to an exhibition of Israeli artists now on view at the [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#).

[\(http://www.nathancummings.org/\)](http://www.nathancummings.org/)

“I think the idea of Israel, in a lot of people’s minds, is pretty monolithic,” says Chen Tamir, curator of the group exhibition entitled “Centrifuge.”

“Israel is either utopian or dystopian, either glorified or demonized. I wanted to portray the more complicated issues that are part of the reality on the ground here,” she says.

The show is produced by Artis, a New York-based nonprofit promoting art from Israel, and on Jan. 23 Artis and the New Israel Fund recently held a showing of it, followed by a discussion moderated by Stephanie Ives, New York director of NIF. The panelists were Mati Milstein, a photojournalist working in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and Nadia Ben-Youssef, U.S. representative of [Adalah](#) (<http://adalah.org/eng/>), The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel.

Ben-Youssef, an American human rights lawyer, said told the audience that Adalah began using art to change laws after the law itself failed them. For years, the organization battled Israel’s 2003 Citizenship and Entry Law, which bans family unification of Israeli Arabs with residents of the 1967 occupied territories, essentially separating 15,000-20,000 Arab families. Bringing in a slew of international law experts and human rights petitions, Adalah fought the law all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court, where, in 2012, it lost. The law was upheld.

The organization realized it needed to find other channels to change policy. The following year it organized an exhibition called “Families Interrupted,” which showed 11 photographs of mothers, husbands and children who could never live together. Looking at their faces, people who did not understand the injustice of the law could suddenly see it quite vividly.

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“Art touches people on a different level,” said Ben-Youssef. “It transcends rationalizations, and it humanizes situations of injustice.”

“Centrifuge” features works by 16 artists, and it brings to life some of Israel’s more marginalized issues, such as the plight of migrant workers, Ethiopians and Russians – the ones often omitted from the Jewish-American discussion.

Rather than thinking of Israel as a melting pot, in which all nationalities are forged into one, “Centrifuge” conceptualizes it as a divisive force that pushes some communities to the periphery, while others emerge at the core.

Luciana Kaplun, a young Latin American immigrant, created a hilarious mock telenovela titled “Ella, La Telenovela,” in which foreign migrant workers play a rich, glitzy family bickering about an absent maid. The maid’s name is Ella – “goddess” in Hebrew, but “she” in Spanish. The men are infatuated with Ella, the women scheming to replace her, and their melodramatic dialogues mirror Israelis’ mixed attitudes toward foreign workers – the fear of being replaced along with the lust for cheap labor, the patronizing benevolence that can morph in a blink into a nationalistic fury.

One of the exhibit’s few pieces of eye candy is a series of small, exuberant oil paintings by The New Barbizon group. Comprised of five young female immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the group picked up the abandoned impressionist traditions of their namesakes and went out to the streets to paint life around them as it happened. For example, Zoya Cherkassky’s “The Ceaper Buing” shows an unmistakably Israeli reality – a chasidic Jew and a black man crossing a busy street, passing a mini-market with a heavily misspelled English name.

In his three-part project, “Ethiopian Curtain of the Ark,” Ido Michaeli attempts to breathe artificial life into a dying craft and culture. A beautiful tapestry depicting the religious mythology of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, a central story in Jewish-Ethiopian lore, hangs alongside a video of its making and Michaeli’s illustrations for it. It looks just like the religious garments Jewish-Ethiopians once used in worship, but though the theme and form are authentic, the artifact itself is anything but.

Commissioned from Ethiopian factory workers in Lod by a middle-class Sabra, for the sole purpose of becoming his art exhibit, the fake item reveals an entirely different culture and class order. “The ironic thing is that in Israel they don’t really make these anymore,” Michaeli noted during a tour of the show before the panel discussion. “So this imitation may very well turn out to be the last authentic Jewish-Ethiopian religious tapestry.”

Two large color photographs, portraying an attractive woman with Arabic calligraphy drawn on her face, are among the exhibition’s more courageous and thought-provoking works. The woman is Anisa Ashkar, an Israeli-Arab from Jerusalem. The photographs document her daily practice: every morning, before she steps out into a world where the word “Arab” is regularly used as a curse, Ashkar paints her face with Arabic letters, outwardly expressing her identity. Her act goes beyond art: it’s where art, life, ideology and practice are no longer separable.

“Centrifuge” runs through Feb. 28 at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, 475 10th Ave., at 36th Street, 14th floor. Visits are by appointment only: Contact exhibits@nathancummings.org (<mailto:exhibits@nathancummings.org>) to schedule. For more details visit www.artiscontemporary.org. (<http://www.artiscontemporary.org>)

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