

Hava Mehutan: Situation 2020

Curator: Noga Migdal



The veteran and venerated artist Hava Mehutan is one of Israel's leading sculptors. For seventy years now, she has exhibited locally and abroad and has earned recognition and appreciation. Her wide-ranging oeuvre is to be found in the collections of Israel's finest museums.

Mehutan began her artistic career with a journey in search of a path through the artistic and intellectual tangle of a fledgling country in formation. Her work drew inspiration from the parched and primeval Negev (where she lives) and its visual power. The isolation of the place and its remoteness from the centers of art steered her to greater profundity and inner contemplation, disengaging her from what was "accepted" in those years and causing her to find her own unique mode of expression.

In the 1980s, Mehutan produced a series of installations in response to the Lebanon War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1984, influenced by these grave events, she created an environmental work at Mount Sodom that registered a protest. Rows of sandbags—heavily burdened with residues and weight—are laid in trenches across the ground. "Everyone who lives in this country," she says, "knows what we have here: rows of holes in the ground and the sandbags are arranged so as to suggest that there is no end to the holes to be dug here." Mehutan then reverted to creating images based on the human figure, through which she probed concepts such as nonexistence, helplessness, finality, and death.

In her Situation 88 exhibition, Mehutan displayed figures crafted in cloth and plaster bandages perched on black pedestals. "The bodily details disappear and defy individuation. Their mouths are closed; they are unable to express themselves. Their only identifiable organs are eyes and noses." [1] The plaster laid over them evokes an impression of lifeless characters in shrouds. Alongside them is a column of black iron figures - a mute mass of onlookers, their yellow eyes gazing at us in pain and terror. "The lineup of witnesses, like the chorus in a Greek theatre, observes the drama that plays out in front of them but, unlike the chorus, cannot speak out." [2]

Mehutan's sculptures span multiple timelines and include references to both current and historical political events. The sculptor references bygone values and sets them against an alternative set of ideas and concepts through the medium of contemporary Israeli sculpture, which expresses the complex realities of the place where she and live.

Mehutan observes the vicissitudes of Israeli society as would a prophetess at the gate.

The Situation 2020 exhibition examines transformation and seeks hope.

[1] Shulamit Height (curator), Situation 88, Outlines, Herzliya Museum.

[2] Haim Finkelstein, "Existential Art," in Hava Mehutan: Works (exhibition catalogue), Beersheva Museum of Israeli Art, 1989 (in Hebrew), p. 3.