

Film Review - "The Museum": An Esthetic Experience, A Touching Human Story

Through the touching human stories of the people working there, and through the portrayal of amusing and absurd situations from daily life, film director Ran Tal tells the story of the Israel Museum with elegance and subtlety. This, along with the cinematography and music, make "The Museum" an esthetic pleasure through which the political-nationalist agenda associated with the site with this demanding name is revealed.

Shmulik Duvdevani, YNET 3.12.17

How does one document a museum? How does one tell its story and understand its meanings? How does one observe a site that molds the way we see it? And mainly, how does one make a film about the Israel Museum, about its national, historical and artistic contexts? Ran Tal's excellent documentary film "The Museum" answers all these questions by observing the observers, the people who mold its perspective, those who work with it and the site where it takes place. Is it, then, only a coincidence that the film opens without a perspective?

A museum, according to Tal's film, is the place where perspective becomes narrative and the narrative is conveyed through the objects we observe. The exhibits. The Israel Museum, just like the kibbutz in "Children of the Sun" (2007) and Sahkne National Park (2012), Tal's last pair of stunning films, molds the Jewish-Israeli image, its collective national memory - the same image and memory that Tal's film dissects gradually and elegantly.

"The Museum" provides a behind-the-scenes look at Jerusalem's Israel Museum: curators, directors, restorers, ushers, visitors and the kashrut supervisor. Ostensibly, it's a documentation of a monumental art institution à la Frederick Wiseman's "The National Gallery" from 2014 which probes the innards of the famous London museum. In fact, it's a film that reveals the political-nationalist agenda associated with the site with the demanding name of "The Israel Museum."

Emperor Hadrian, the Exodus from Egypt, coexistence, the destruction of the Temple and representation of the Palestinians - all these become a source of esthetic wonderment and political complexity. Here, a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) visitor wonders aloud to the rabbi - the kashrut supervisor - why isn't there a single mention of the Israelites in the exhibit devoted to Pharaoh? And regarding another exhibit, the question is raised as to what meaning lies behind the exhibition of the bronze statues of Hadrian, who in the Jewish historical memory is associated with decrees of destruction rather than cultural refinement and epicurean knowledge as he is in the rest of the Western world.

But "The Museum" offers more than a discourse on the politics or posterity that are channeled into this beautiful site. The film's wonderful opening scene questions how image can be translated into words, and in another scene in which blind people touch a sculpture by Giacometti the question arises as to whether a work of art can be felt.

These issues don't appear in the film devoid of context since Tal wanders among historical images and narratives, examines the kinship between them, the way they exist in a location that seems to be cut off from time and space - the moment when the camera goes outside and captures the museum environs comes as quite a surprise - and how they create meaning.

No less than Wiseman's film, "The Museum" is reminiscent of Alexander Sokurov's film "Russian Ark" (2002) which follows, in a single 96-minute shot, the journey of a 19th-century visitor to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, in which 300 years of Russian history are covered through works of art and fictitious encounters with historical figures. A similar feeling comes up when Tal's camera, just like Sokurov's random visitor, roams from the Shrine of the Book where the Dead Sea Scrolls are displayed to a touching, personal Holocaust story, then to a festive government meeting being held in the museum to mark its fiftieth anniversary.

A museum is a place which provides a perspective on the past, but on the human image as well. And in fact Tal's film makes its central perspective felt by observing people as they cast their silent gaze in a vague direction while in the background we hear their personal monologues as the soundtrack. These include the museum director who was the only Jewish boy in the Pennsylvania town where he grew up, who tells of a dramatic personal decision; an usher in the Shrine of the Book who's also a cantor; a Palestinian guide; and a musician who immigrated from Azerbaijan and works as a restorer. Their stories imbue the film with a touching personal angle, emphasizing the fact that the museum, after all, is a place that tells a story (the film is even divided into episodes entitled "Building a Story," "Hearing a Story" and "Story").

Tal observes the museum's visitors and employees and cleverly captures amusing and absurd situations such as the visitor who asks where "The Circle of Life" is, or the surreal headphone party held in honor of the institution's jubilee year. Daniel Kedem's camera work and the music composed by Asher Goldschmidt make "The Museum" an esthetic treat which is also part of the film's statement. After all, a museum is the place where history, memory and narrative (Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian in this case) are molded into an esthetic experience.