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The Smokey Life: Ohad Meromi at Nathalie Karg

by Naomi Lev

Ohad Meromi: Worker! Smoker! Actor! at Nathalie Karg Gallery

July 10th to August 15th, 2014

41 Great Jones St (between Bowery and Lafayette)

New York, 212 563 7821



Installation view, "Ohad Meromi: Worker! Smoker! Actor!" 2014. Courtesy of Nathalie Karg Gallery.

Inspired by Marx's Communist Manifesto, and bringing in elements from Russian Constructivism as well as Modernism, Ohad Meromi ignites a passion much needed in today's commercialized art scene. In his current solo show at Nathalie Karg Gallery on Great Jones street, Meromi presents works in mediums such as sculpture, installation, and video, creating a space oriented towards participation and gathering.



Ohad Meromi, *Grave Digger #23 (Primitive B)*, 2014. Cast aluminum and mixed media, 75 x 11 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Karg.

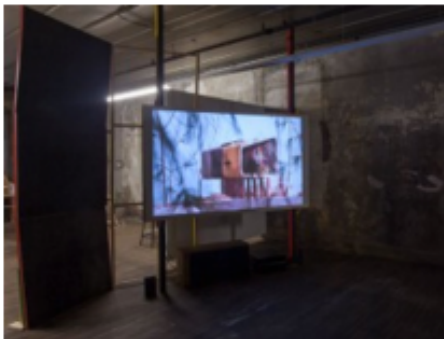
When entering, the gallery's raw space seems quasi-empty. In the center of the room a 75-inch totem titled *Grave Digger #23 (Primitive B)*, 2014) stands solitary. The totem is a gray primitivist female figure made of cast aluminum and mixed media, sitting on top of a plinth made of carved wood. The figure is in a squatting position; its eyes, brows, mouth, and nose are painted black, as well as its nipples and genitalia.

Meromi's series of figurative "Grave Digger" sculptures was initially presented in 2010 at Gallery Diet in Miami, and was inspired by Andrei Platonov's novel *The Foundation Pit* (finalized in 1930 but published only in 1987 due to censorship). The iconic novel traces a group of workers who are digging a foundation for an ideal building that epitomizes a picture-perfect future. In the novel, the pit becomes a political commentary towards the brutalities of Stalin's collectivization of Russian agriculture, and is eventually revealed to be a grave for the diggers themselves. According to Marx and Lenin, the term "grave diggers" refers to a rising revolutionary class that will overthrow the ruling bourgeois order. The symbolic sculpture stands silent and erect and serves as guidance for the possible revolution of the proletariat, or as we will soon recognize — of the cultural producers in contemporary capitalist society.



Ohad Meromi, *Half Modular Dome*, 2010. Wood, industrial paint, concrete, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery.

Further in the gallery is *Half Modular Dome* (2010) made of wood, industrial paint, and concrete. The structure appears as a behind-the-scenes theatre construction. On its backside (facing the viewer entering the gallery) are yellow stickers of numbers and letters as well as assembly and re-assembly instructions that trace the dome's previous functions. When built a few years ago, the dome was designed to transform Meromi's studio into a rehearsal space, and to adapt to different venues to create a performative stage. Here, the dome divides the gallery space in two: a primitivist presence on one side and an improvised amphitheatre on the other. The centerpiece of the show, a 20-minute-long single-channel video called *Worker! Smoker! Actor!* (2010-2013), is situated behind the dome. The video combines stop-motion animation with recorded participatory performances from workshops held at Meromi's 2010 solo show, "Rehearsal Sculpture," at NYC's Art in General. Meromi meticulously created all the elements in the film: the props, the architectural models of the protagonist's hangouts, and even the complementing electronic video-game music and graphic intertitles. The story is pretty simple: a factory worker (performed by Jessica Lin Cox) wakes up in the morning, goes to the factory to produce American Spirit cigarettes, goes to the supermarket to get groceries, and then goes home to rest. The cycle of "production" is completed when the worker finds out she has lung cancer and is sent to a healing facility.



Ohad Meromi, *Worker! Smoker! Actor!*, 2010-2013. Single channel video, 20:36 minutes, Edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Karg Gallery.

The notion of "work" and "rest" preoccupies Meromi and is addressed in a theatrical manner in this video in the form of the worker's cigarette breaks. The cigarettes themselves then play various roles: they are the central element in the "working" process, they are the "resting" tools, and they are the toxic hazard that leads the worker to the resting resort. Meromi also uses text in the film in the form of placards based on Vsevolod Meyerhold's actors-training method, called "Biomechanics." These short texts, rewritten by Meromi to suit his narrative, raise questions regarding the existing division between labor and rest, and whether this division can be transformed. In one of the placards Meromi writes: "Every worker tries to expend as few hours as possible on labour and as many as possible on rest."

House of Culture (2010), a 15-by-14-inch architectural model made of glass, concrete, and mixed media, is situated in the front gallery's window sill. The miniature building's colorful stained-glass windows bring transcendent light into the gallery and a glow of utopian idealism into the exhibition space. In the last scene of the featured video, the worker gazes at the House of Culture from afar, and Meromi writes: "The very craft of the actor in an industrial society will be regarded as a means of production," bringing the show's vision to a final conclusion.