

Street Cats: an installation by Avivia Raz

"Agag was a hardened street cat", writes Rami Storistiano, "he knew how to cross the road carefully, to recognize violent dogs from a distance and to steal away to a safe place before the wicked beast caught his smell, how to ingratiate himself with kind and generous old ladies, how to fight with a rough cat over a place, a piece of meat or a she-cat in heat, how to follow a pretty cat like a shadow, until that whore finally gave in after many rejections, underlined by scratches, angry looks and reprimands, and graced him with her favors. He knew how to lift the lid of a garbage bin that was pushed slightly open by the contents jammed inside, how to tear a garbage bag and pick out the tasty morsels and sometimes, when luck was on his side, to trap a plump pigeon that was too late spreading its wings and flying away".*

Using paper and iron wires, tearing the paper into pieces and turning them into skin, bones and hair, Avivia Raz actualizes in three dimensions what Storistiano describes in words. The living space that she looks at is the no-man's land between the garbage bins and the garbage bags, and the scene portrayed is taken from the life of street cats, with dogs, pigeons and ravens stopping by for a visit before going on their way. The street cats' urban existence dictates their survival anxiety, their restlessness, their growing toughness in face of the chances of survival. These are not pampered "society cats" stretching their limbs luxuriously on upholstered sofas, but creatures who are constantly tensed for the next leap, at the mercy of the night and the day, the cold and the heat, moving in zigzag and winding routes, exposed to the menace of destruction.

"Agag jumped, stretching his legs ready to land and run, but the closing bin lid caught him by the chest... he howled and gasped, fighting for his life... a bit more and his back would break... he spat, bared his teeth and showed his claws, snorted with a dreadful sound... he dragged himself out with all his strength, holding his life in his hands, ran and ran, bounding through yards, jumping across paths, leaping over fences, scratched by bushes and tree branches, crossed a road and was almost run over..."

It is hard to identify the precise moment when Avivia Raz's paper cats are transformed from realistic design that accurately imitates their movements and gestures, to metaphoric states of decomposition and disintegration. The transformation occurs

through deviation – or exclusion - of one of the characteristics: scale, motion or anatomy, when suddenly there appears among the company of cats one cat, larger than all the rest, with his coat torn and bones exposed. The dead cat, half rotten, half eaten and gnawed, a corpse lying on the ground, its hair torn out and bones stripped bare, all of it says death: the death of nature – arbitrary, indifferent, a link in the chain of food and decomposition. The material – pieces of paper - is a clear metaphor for the sense of destruction that dominates the work, and when the cat falls victim to the violence of its threatened living space, it simply disintegrates into fragments, crumbles into dust and disappears as paper. The metaphor for the erosion and ephemerality of life does not need paint or solid material – simply pieces of paper of the simplest kind. The shift from realism to surrealism within a theatrical scene like the one created by Avivia Raz beguiles the viewer and leads him to a new way of understanding the work. These street cats are heroes in a chaotic space where the law of the jungle prevails, and life is volatile and ephemeral. Even the municipal stamp on the garbage bags does not arouse a sense of law and order or convey the possibility of a really positive organization. On the contrary: the bags piled up haphazardly and the feeling of filth and neglect testify to total fortuitousness. The municipal establishment fails to obscure Raz's metaphor of the jungle, of the outermost edges of urban space, where garbage is dumped and piled up, where the stray cats of the city live out their lives. Giacometti was once asked what he would save first from a burning building – an important work of art or a cat. A cat, answered the artist unhesitatingly. He wanted to say that life – even the life of a cat – is more important than anything else. Avivia Raz deciphers the codes of feline structure, movement and tension, and designs the fascinating contrasts of the cat – pampered domestication along with total lawlessness, seeking protection while defying danger. A cat's life: leaping, scratching, howling – and a bowl of milk.

Tali Tamir
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* Rami Storistiano, **Agag the Cat**, in: *Cheap Literature*, eds. Dudu Geva and Ofra Rodner. Barvaz, 2006.