



In this occasional new series, a critic responds to a single work.

CLOSE-UP

The Undiscovered Country

Mignon Nixon on Nira Pereg's *Kept Alive*

*A pickax and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet;
O, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.*

WHEN HAMLET ASKS THE GRAVEDIGGER, “Whose grave’s this, sirrah?” he receives the answer, “Mine.” Nira Pereg’s three-channel video installation *Kept Alive*, 2009–10, filmed at Jerusalem’s Mountain of Rest cemetery (Har Hamenuchot) and shown earlier this year at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, similarly asks: Whose grave’s this? In Jerusalem, the question is ominously political.

Metal striking rock. What harder sound? A narrow grave in stony ground. What tighter spot? The Mountain of Rest is crowded. Graves lie less than a foot apart. The gravedigger must be deft to squeeze in another soul. But death goes on, and so must the digging. The mountain must be moved. *Kept Alive* records the daily rituals of the workers whose task is to keep the traditions of death alive by making and tending the city of the dead, and the comings and goings of the mourners who visit it. Wielding pickaxes, shovels, and spades against the rocky soil, clearing weeds, or plying their skills in the workshop to cut and polish headstones and to inscribe the names of the dead, the workers are the central players in the drama. Pereg’s camera maintains a respectful distance from the black-clad bereaved, most in Orthodox Jewish attire, as they celebrate rituals of loss and remembrance. Seen from afar, these figures recede into relative obscurity, a perspective that serves to underline the social distance between life on the mountain and off it.

Vignettes of a gravedigger warming his dusty, swollen hands over a make-shift fire, a construction worker showing off a crop of peppers grown illicitly on the site, and a Muslim worker praying by the cemetery walls all offer glimpses of daily life in the shadow of the mountain. Pereg also takes her camera graveside for a closer look at the digging. One scene plays continuously on a screen adjacent to the main pair, constituting a kind of film within a film. It shows the gravedigger straining to prepare a grave. First, he hollows out the pit, burrowing down to its floor. Next, he excavates the burial slot, readying it for its occupant. Then he reverses the process, closing the chamber, shoveling in the dirt, and raking the plot flat. The din is incessant. Metal tools strike, scoop, and scrape the rock. Sprays of gravel fly up and cascade back to earth. Stones thud heavily into buckets. The worker is not young. His skin is dark and weathered. His back bends to the toil, as he stoops to swing the pick, shovel the dirt, gather stones and load them into buckets with his bare hands. The digger is at times half-buried in the grave he makes.

Opened in 1951, Har Hamenuchot is one of Israel’s largest cemeteries, and it is still expanding. *Kept Alive* charts the construction of a new section. A bulldozer crawls over the site. The infrastructure of memory in the form of reinforced concrete burial bays rises with the uniform efficiency of a parking garage. Graves are in high demand. The Hebrew phrase for “kept alive,” which can also be translated as “reserved in life,” designates plots purchased in advance and maintained, in constant readiness, by the workers. Grave digging, here, is the partner industry of urban construction, its indispensable corollary. The site’s inexorable development mirrors that of Jerusalem itself, a city where building houses, even for the dead, is never a neutral act.

Assembled from footage shot over seven months, the twenty-two-minute video follows the arc of a day. The piece begins with the foreman’s recitation of the stages of making a grave—the uncovering, the excavation, the burial, the re-covering, the cutting and fitting of the stone—and it closes with a roll call of the workers’ forenames, names such as Mohammed and Abdullah. Only the foreman, who speaks *Kept Alive*’s spare narrative, bridges the rigid segregation of religion and caste that Pereg so effectively dramatizes. Many a Jewish grave, and its care, is the work of Muslim, Arab, Palestinian hands.

Repression, Freud famously observed, is the means by which the unconscious is at once buried and preserved—preserved by being buried, like an archaeological relic, like Jerusalem itself. *Kept Alive*, with its themes of remembering and forgetting, inscribing memory and erasing it, is a drama of repression. For Jerusalem, Pereg suggests, burial has become a way of life. The work’s central figure is the old man, custodian of the dead, who crawls into graves to scrape a living. Buried alive by the system he serves, he nevertheless is stubbornly present: His labors play on a continuous loop. Like a return of the repressed, his unending task to excavate and to inter, he survives as a constant reminder of how hard it is, finally, to bury the past. □

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Opposite page, top: Nira Pereg, *Kept Alive*, 2009–10, three-channel color video projection, 22 minutes 26 seconds. Installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2010. Bottom: Nira Pereg, *Kept Alive*, 2009–10, still from a color video, 22 minutes 26 seconds. This page: Nira Pereg, *Kept Alive*, 2009–10, still from a color video, 22 minutes 26 seconds.

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