



Tel Aviv Museum of Art

ROBIN RHODE under the sun

September 28, 2017 – February 3, 2018
The Agnes and Beny Steinmetz Wing for Architecture and Design, Gallery 3
Herta and Paul Amir Building

EXHIBITION

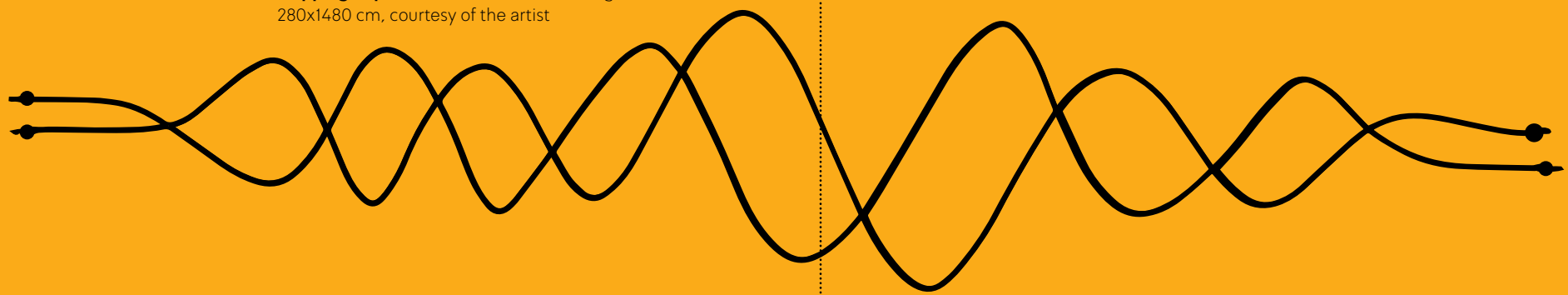
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Assistant to the Head of Curatorial Wing	Iris Yerushalmi
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BROCHURE

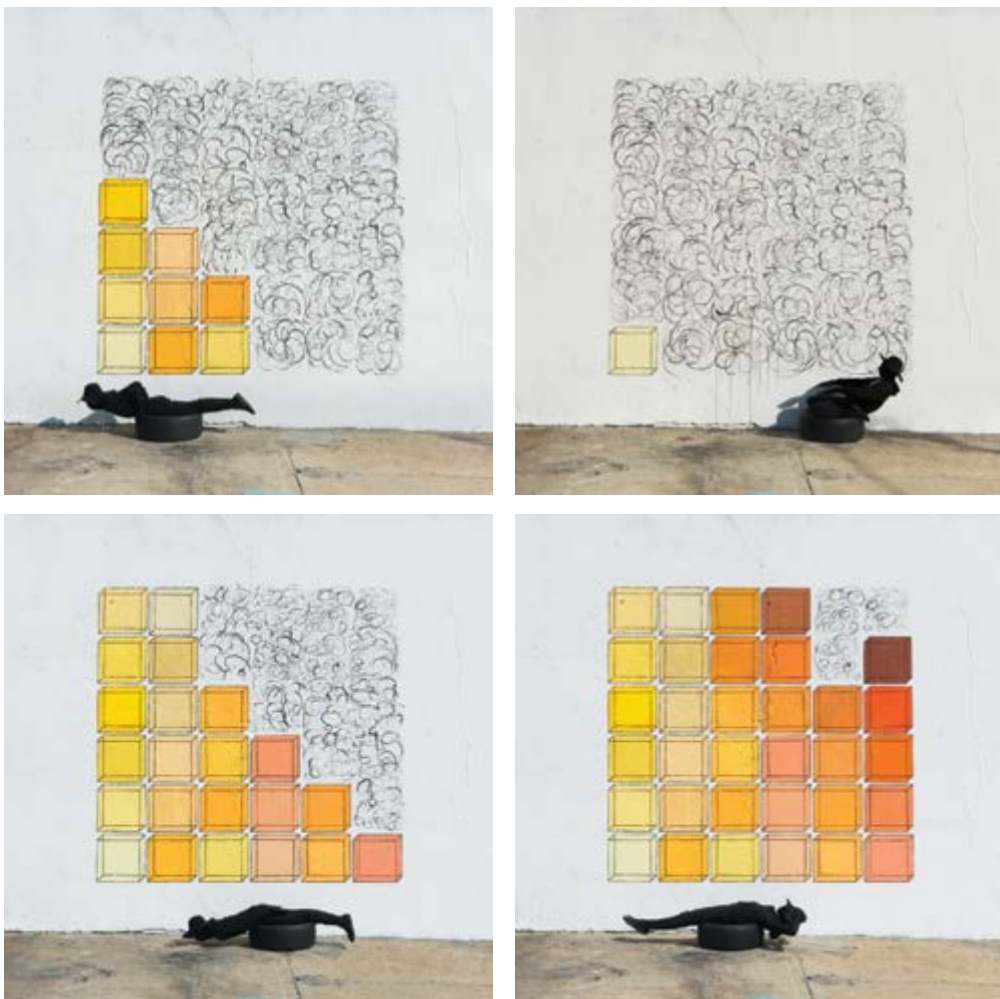
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On the cover	Skipping Rope , 2017, stainless steel, LED lights, wood, 280x1480 cm, courtesy of the artist

ROBIN RHODE

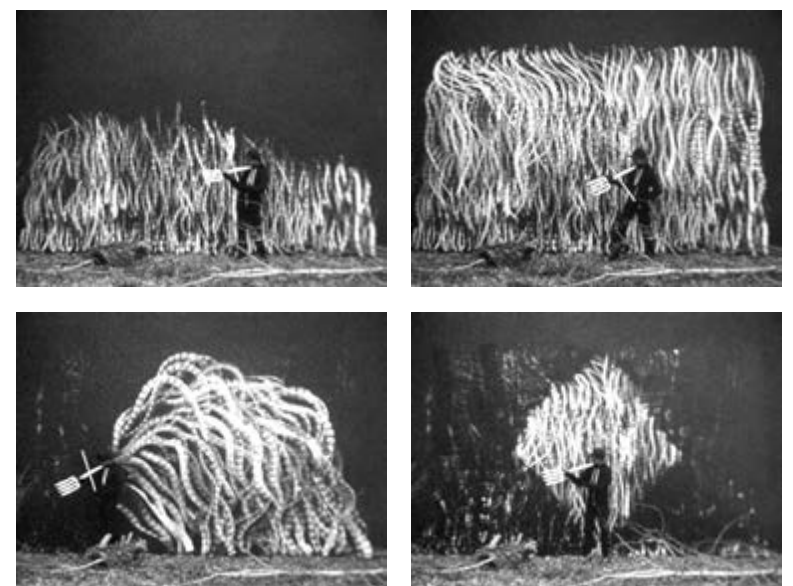
under the sun



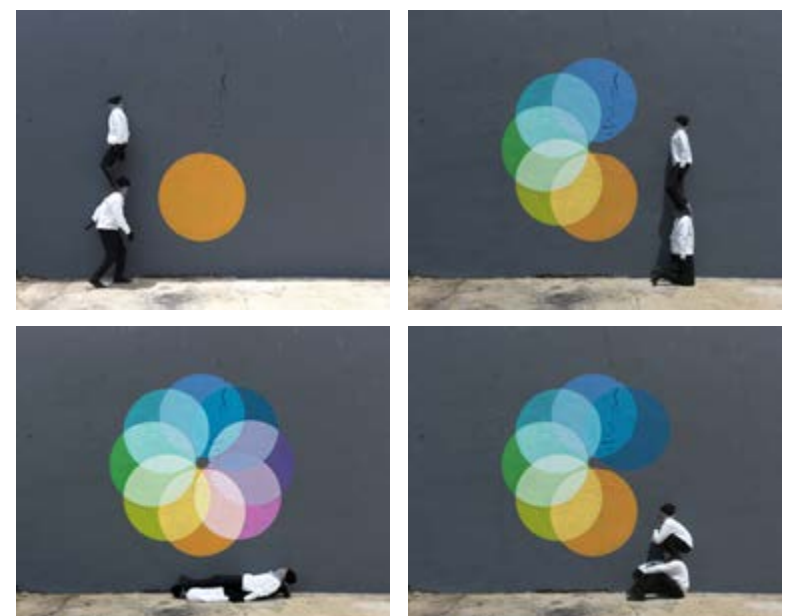
This exhibition was made possible thanks to the generous support of Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv; Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong; Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town and Johannesburg; Rea - Printhouse, Tel Aviv



Under the Sun, 2017 (detail)
C-print, 36 Parts each: 50x50 cm
Courtesy of the artist, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong, and Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv



From: **The Grass is Singing**, 2016
Super 8mm film, 3:33 min, courtesy of the artist and THE EKARD COLLECTION



Inverted Cycle, 2016 (detail)
C-print, 8 parts each: 56x70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv

Under the Sun is the first Israeli museum exhibition devoted to the work of Robin Rhode (b. 1976, Cape Town; lives and works in Berlin). Rhode creates in the mediums of drawing, painting, photography, sculpture, video, and installation art. He uses a range of materials including chalk, charcoal, and soap, as well as the human body – the artist's own body and the bodies of others.

Rhode was raised in Johannesburg, where his artistic approach was consolidated during the post-Apartheid period. Local street murals, as well as the paintings created by Rhode and his friends on the walls of their school, continue to serve as sources of inspiration for his work. Another school-related experience that has left an imprint on his work was the initiation rituals during which older students forced the newcomers to treat these paintings as if they were real – by pretending, for instance, that they were riding a painted bicycle. The absurdity of these childhood rituals, with their abusive overtone, has been assimilated into Rhode's work, evolving into an intriguing combination of drawing and physical actions. His works are often initiated as wall drawings that subsequently develop into performances, in which the artist, an actor, or sometimes both, respond to the represented image. Since these actions are ephemeral, and since the drawings are destined to be erased at one point or another due to their location in the public sphere, the final product is presented as a series of photographs or a video. The artistic object is thus the documentation of an event unfolding outside the art world; it is a vestige of an energetically charged, physical occurrence that persists long after

low, transience and permanence, bodily and cerebral elements, an ascetic black-and-white palette and vibrant color. The current exhibition captures the breadth of the complex body of works created by Rhode, whose life and art-making emblemize the quintessential lifestyle of contemporary artists: moving among different places, sources of inspiration, mediums and modes of action, while remaining equally committed to both art and politics.

Rhode's works have been featured in numerous museum collections, including the Tate Modern, London; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Guggenheim Museum, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and additional venues. He frequently participates in international group exhibitions, and his works have been shown at the Venice Biennale (2005), the Biennale of Sydney (2010), and Performa, New York (2015).

SKIPPING ROPE, 2017

A skipping rope first appeared in Rhode's works in 2005, in a performance held at the modern art museum La Villette in Paris. In the course of the performance, he invited members of the audience to skip over an imaginary rope. A film documenting this event is included in the current exhibition. An earlier work, **Necklace** (2009), captures a figure skipping a rope resembling a necklace, which keeps duplicating itself and multiplying as the series develops. Yet another jump rope appears in the photographic series **Double Dutch** (2016), named after a street game that involves simultaneously skipping two ropes that are being swung in opposite directions. This sports activity has been translated

the traces of movement, tension, and sweat dissolve and disappear. The power of the artistic objects created by Rhode – videos, photographs, or sculptures – thus paradoxically lies in their fundamental loss of power in comparison to what once existed outside, in the street, under a blazing sun.

Rhode exploits the public sphere as a platform for exploring issues on the international agenda, as well as ones specifically related to life in South Africa. Rooted in urban youth culture, his works touch upon questions of culture, identity, and history, and are characterized by a hip-hop rhythm and by the power of graffiti paintings.

Rhode's work is equally rooted in the history of photography and contemporary art. A number of his photographs reveal the influence of pioneering photographers such as Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, who sought to capture movement in static images. Other works call to mind the aesthetic of the Italian Arte Povera artists active in the 1970s, or that of Minimalist artists such as the American Sol Le Witt. Rhode's video works also reveal the influence of the monumental artworks created by fellow South-African William Kentridge, especially in terms of the combination of drawing, photography, and animation.

Like their creator's dynamic engagement with different sources of inspiration, the works themselves embody a series of contrasts: they are figurative and narrative, yet can simultaneously be read in relation to formal values such as line, color, composition and perspective; they exist on the spectrum between high and

into a tangle of undulating lines, which entertain reciprocal visual relations with the jumping figure.

The sculptural version of **Skipping Rope** extends over close to 15 meters, and is exhibited here for the first time. It is composed of stainless steel and a chain of constantly flickering lights. The sculpture's appearance depends on audience participation: when a handle is pressed, the lights go on, and the degree of exerted pressure (which depends entirely on the viewer) determines the speed with which the blinking LED lights go on. The spiral form of the rope is reminiscent of DNA molecules, charging the connection between the people divided by the rope with a biological dimension. The skipping rope combines elements of sculpture, rhythmic drawing in space, and audience performance, and encapsulates the concepts of three-dimensional drawing and participatory art.

The audience's participation in this museum exhibition follows directly upon earlier actions performed by Rhode, who believes in social engagement and collaboration, especially among children and adolescents. In 2011, he presented a community education program titled **Paries Pictus** (Latin for "Wall Painting") at the Castello di Rivoli museum in Turin, where he directed 50 children aged six to eight as they drew on a gallery wall. In order to do so, the children needed to collaboratively hold up the large, heavy colored pencils created especially for this project, while Rhode oversaw the process. In 2013, he recreated this project with children in the Bronx borough of New York City.

UNDER THE SUN, 2016

The work **Under the Sun** was born following Rhode's visit to Israel in 2016. The Israeli climate, which is similar to that of South Africa and significantly different than that of Berlin, where he currently lives, inspired a colorful digital image of sun rays that evolved into a wall painting.

The Israeli point of departure for this work places it in an unexpected context – that of local images of sun and light. In her article on representations of sun in Israeli art, the curator Ellen Ginton writes: "Generally speaking, one could say that there are those who paint the world (in the sun), and those who paint the sun itself."¹ Robin Rhode answers to the second definition, painting the source of light itself. This form of "painting based on knowing rather than seeing," which was prevalent in ancient non-Western cultures, stands in contrast to the Western conception of the world as perceived by the sense of sight.²

Rhode treats the squares of color as if they were a stained glass window or mosaic composed of colored glass, two techniques associated with church interiors. He seems to offer a scientific, microscopic view of rays of light, while attending to the spiritual dimension of light and to the sun as the source of life, much as the artist is the source of the artwork's life. Rhode's sun rays form an additional link in the representational history of the sun, which includes countless interpretations of the dual relations between human beings and the cosmic star without which there is no life.

This series, which is composed of 36 photographs, captures transitional states between sunrise and sunset. Sunrays

break out of the yellow square in the lower left part of the painting, extending out toward the upper right corner, square by square, as the geometric image gradually overtakes the black, tumultuous, unrestrained whirlpool. A figure sporting a black outfit and a wide-brimmed hat is seated in a black tire, responding to the squares of light with gestures ranging from aversion and defense to receptivity and glorification. The ambivalent relationship to the sun reflects the polar qualities associated with it: beauty, sublimity, shining light and eternity, as well as a blinding, aggressive, all-consuming power capable of leading to madness. Light is thus presented as an abstract, spiritual energy. At the same time, it is also placed in the context of sociopolitical associations, such as the planned power cuts in South Africa and the fact that an African-American inventor contributed to the patenting of the light bulb.

INVERTED CIRCLE, 2016

Rhode's study of color theory and his translation of a digital color spectrum into a wall painting have led him to create several works in recent years. One of the central works concerned with this subject is **Inverted Circle**, a series of photographs related to the color wheel first presented by Isaac Newton in his treatise *Opticks* (1704). Yet whereas Newton's wheel contained seven colors, Rhode presents eight colors that are transformed from one image to the next. This transformation begins with the warmest color, followed by the cool colors and ending with the optimistic color pink, which completes the circle.

The two human figures (the artist and his doppelgänger) are dressed in identical black-and-white outfits, and respond to the plot unfolding on the wall as if they were a physical barometer. In the first systematic study concerning the physiological perception of color, published by Goethe in his *Theory of Colors* (1810), he described both black and white as necessary for the creation of all other colors.

The formal and mental power relations that develop between the anonymous human figures and the scientific color wheel initially underscore the supremacy of the two figures, who tower over a lone orange circle. In the end, however, the two men are seen lying in defeat at the foot of a color wheel. The horizontal crack in the wall mars the harmonious perfection of the wheel, pointing back to the problematic everyday reality of life in South Africa.

THE GRASS IS SINGING, 2016

Rhode sees himself as a storyteller, whose art combines influences from various fields such as literature and music. The title of the animation film **The Grass is Singing** was borrowed from that of a novel by the British writer Doris Lessing (1950), whose subject was racial politics in Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe).

This film was created using stop-motion animation, a technique frequently employed by Rhode. Like the works that preceded it, it was produced using 8 mm. film. The world of fantasy and imagination created by Rhode in his works is enhanced in his films by the inclusion of a soundtrack, theatrical elements, and an atmosphere reminiscent of early silent films. The music

played by the violinist Martin Weiss was composed by Arenor Anuku, a Berlin-based composer of Nigerian origin who has composed soundtracks for additional animation works by Rhode.

The Grass is Singing is a melancholic work centered on an expanse of wild grass and its futile attempt to overpower a monumental concrete wall. The film is composed as a play in three acts: initially, the grass appears as tongues of light, growing rapidly upwards as music is played on a pitchfork serving as a violin. Having overtaken the screen, the grass is then gradually reduced to a narrow, undulating strip that disappears off screen. In the second act, the grass once again grows rapidly, this time resembling a mane of hair or wings affixed to the violinist's body. In the third part, the grass overtakes almost the entire screen, pushing the violinist to the right-hand side of the stage. Finally, however, darkness overcomes the flames of grass, consuming them as the urban concrete wall vanquishes the wild natural expanse. The violinist stands momentarily in silence (in tribute to the passionate struggle of the grass), and then walks offstage.

¹ Ellen Ginton, "To be the Apprentice in the Sun," in *Sun Exhibition* (exh. Cat.), 2000, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, n.p., in Hebrew.

² *Ibid.*