

## Back Facing Back

*“And perhaps the collapse of the two possibilities one into the other is the root of the matter – standing in front of a blank wall, the photographed woman reflects for us both the nakedness of the king and our inability to see what could have been there.”*

Dori Ben Alon on Assaf Hinden’s exhibition *Figure of Work*



Untitled [Fig. 44] Musée Oldmasters Museum, Brussels, 2023, archival pigment print, 29.5x44 cm

On the walls of the Braverman Gallery, where Assaf Hinden’s solo exhibition, curated by Adi Gura, is now exhibited, are photographs taken at galleries and museums depicting viewers observing artworks, which have been digitally removed from the photographs; consequently, the viewers seem to be staring at bare walls. As visitors wander through the gallery, they will see fellow visitors observing the photographed figures gazing at blank walls. A double view is hence created – a back gazing at a back – just like in René Magritte’s painting *La reproduction interdite* (*Not to Be Reproduced*), where a man is shown from behind, looking at a mirror, where his back is reflected instead of his face; rather than showing a face-to-face representation, the painted image itself is reproduced.

Throughout the years, Hinden’s work has dealt with the subject of memory, both personal and collective. From some of his previous work emerges an ongoing occupation with the structuring of memory and the relationship between documentation and manipulation. Hinden has photographed, among other things, material from family archives, heritage centers, and taxidermy – whose role is to

preserve memory, and through which the possibility of trusting the very action of documentation could be undermined.

This time, his photographs include people, standing with their backs to the camera. Their identities are vague, and the question arises whether they are staring at an empty wall, or whether there was something there when the photograph was taken, something that we are the only ones unable to see. This strange mode of facing a wall alludes to the performance work *War Veterans Facing a Corner* by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, produced for the first time in 2011 and shown across the globe since, with different local war veterans participating in every version, standing with their backs to a wall.<sup>1</sup> Sierra's performance enabled the viewers to stand next to the performer, the veteran, feel his or her live presence, but not see his face. Sierra himself stated that he sees in the performers, all former soldiers, living monuments of violent events. In relation to this statement, it is interesting to consider the position of the still monuments photographed by Hinden.



Exhibition view, *Figure of Work* (by Daniel Hanoch)

Human presence is a common thread between the works of the two artists – the element of observing a person facing a wall. In Sierra's work, the core factor is the relationship between the body of the observer and the body of the veteran, the duplication of the bodies standing one behind the other, the sensual resemblance between them, which seems to say “there is an undeniable resemblance between

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<sup>1</sup> The Israeli version of the show took place in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City, as part of the festival “Under the Mountain”, initiated by the Jerusalem Cultural Season project. Israeli reserve soldiers participated in the performance.

us". In Hinden's case, meaning is created not through the duplication of the present body but rather through the duplication of the gaze: the visitors at the exhibition observing visitors at an exhibition.

Hinden's photographs also raise questions pertaining to the order of things: the omitted image can be understood as one omitted for the sake of the secondary observer, but present while the primary observer – that photographed in the work – was watching it; however, the omitted image can otherwise be understood as a landmark of that which cannot be seen, even when facing it directly, when being in its presence. And perhaps the collapse of the two possibilities one into the other is the root of the matter – standing in front of a blank wall, the photographed woman reflects for us both the nakedness of the king and our inability to see what could have been there.



Untitled [Fig. 50] The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2024, archival pigment print, 29.5x44 cm

It seems that the act of removal of the works from the gallery walls in the photographs sheds light on the architectural space as a considerable theme. Instead of constituting a practical element that enables us to observe the works, the gallery space becomes a central theme in the work, no less than the wandering figures and the omitted images it features. In fact, the gallery walls are the only object that tends to stay in place as exhibitions change in museums and galleries. Artworks changing is not a strange or uncommon event, it is simply not an action usually revealed to visitors, and one shall hope that even if visitors were to bear witness to the temporarily blank gallery walls, they would not be enchanted by them.

Bare walls as metaphor for absence touches on local contemporary issues. Imagery of absence tends to attract more attention during periods of crisis and loss. The photographs of viewers at exhibitions, from which the subjects have been removed, allude to the romanticism of absence, vis-à-vis the possibility of remembrance; memory as an encounter with that which is lost. In this case, the photographed viewers serve as potential witnesses to the lost image, and the act of observing them evokes an attempt to extort some sort of testimony to the image that existed when the photographs were taken, before the act of removal. Returning to Sierra's statement, Hinden's figures could be understood as living monuments embodying a memory and testament of that which occurred in their presence, even if the documentation has been removed, omitted or censored.



Untitled [Fig. 54] Kunsthaus, Zurich, 2023, archival pigment print, 29.5x44 cm

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