

## **Matan Ben Cnaan, Still Life with Sardines**

Galit Landau-Epstein

“Matan Ben Cnaan’s works almost always carry a social or political charge. He describes his work as the intertwinement of content and form, and notes that the content “usually is not heartwarming.” Although he does not frequently paint still lifes, he has created three paintings concerned with sardines: the first captures a coffin depicted as a can of sardines, while the second presents a row of sardines on a cutting board, ironically calling to mind, for the artist, the verse “Here lie our bodies in a long row . . .” which appears in a 1948 poem by Haim Gouri.

In the third painting, which is included in the exhibition, the image of the sardines is influenced by images of mass graves, as well as, indirectly, by the sprats that appeared in the paintings of Israel Hershberg, one of the founders of the contemporary realist school of Israeli painting. The sardines in this painting are transformed into decapitated bodies piled one upon another as they float in an oily liquid. The image is viewed from above, with special attention paid to the textured wooden board upon which the glass bowl containing the sardines is placed. The conventional, everyday appearance of the sardines in the bowl is suddenly recast as a horrifying scene depicting a mass death, while the wooden board comes to resemble clods of earth that welcome the dead bodies.

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