

Der Wanderer, 2020 / Von dem Land hinab zu gehen, 2021

Karoline Schmidt /

Curator of the exhibition: Tu BiShvat – Fest der Bäume in the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz Museum in Chemnitz, Germany / 2021

Is a person rooted in his or her homeland, like a plant in the ground? In our global, networked, multicultural world, where it is possible to travel anywhere at any time, questions about origins and roots seem appropriate to a lot of people.

The Israeli artist Michal Fuchs engages with important topics such as »belonging«, »origins« and »exile« and integrates these questions into her installations *Der Wanderer* (The Wanderer) und *Von dem Land hinab zu gehen II* (To do down from the land II). The Mexican purple-heart plant, referred to in both English and Hebrew as the Wandering Jew, serves her as an object to engage with. One historical source of Fuchs' works is the legend of the Eternal Jew. It dates back to Christianity's anti-Judaism, which emerged in the 17th century and gave the name to the plant. A pictorial type of the Eternal Jew can be referred back initially to the religious legend of the shoemaker Ahasaveros, who refused to give Christ a drink while He carried His cross and was therefore damned to live his life eternally homeless. 1 In modern 19th century anti-Semitism the legend became referred to the Jewish diaspora and ideas about Jews as cosmopolitans without a nation or homeland. 2 This resulted in the Jews often being depicted as stateless strangers.³

The Wandering Jew plant, also called *tradescantia pallida*, is robust, spreads quickly, forms strong roots, and can survive under the most adverse circumstances – one of nature's survival artists. In her installation *Der Wanderer* Michal Fuchs deprives the plant of its natural growth and of its rootedness in the soil. In a white stele, at eye-level with the viewers, there is a glass container full of water in which the roots hover weightless and groundless; the part of the plant otherwise growing out of the soil remains concealed. In a process lasting just a few weeks, the roots in the water begin to grow. »The assertive presentation of the roots by rendering them visible and emphasising them, raises questions about uprootedness and rootedness«. 4 Michal Fuchs, who moved to Germany eleven years ago, engages in her artistic work with the all too human question of belonging. Given that the meaning of the plants and what they symbolise is not immediately evident for viewers, questions inevitably arise as to where the plants come from and what will happen to them. Will they survive in a new element? Can the allegory of uprootedness be applied to people's experiences? The artist denotes personal questions about her origins and identity, leaving enough scope for interpretation however, so that we can develop our own associations and enter into dialogue with one another.

Her second work, *Von dem Land hinab zu gehen II*, takes up the ideas in *Der Wanderer* and transposes them to a new level. Now cast in metal and with a filigree appearance, the flowers seem to be growing out of solid concrete basins, suggesting an image of immobility, an instantaneous moment. At the point where they emerge out of the rigid material however,

rust has formed. The process of rusting takes time and is often associated with demise. Rust becomes more active in connection with external influences, such as water, for example. The rust in the installation continues to grow over time and forms delicate »roots«, indicating that the development of the plants is not yet finished.

The title of this work refers to the departure of the Jews from Israel. Currently, it is mainly young people who are leaving the country, yet in the eyes of some, whoever emigrates from Israel is a deserter. Jews have been living in the diaspora all over the world for more than 2000 years. Their persecution and extermination reached a horrific high point in the Shoah. Since then, they look at terms such as »origins« or »homeland« in a more differentiated way. This is particularly reflected in the meaning of the expressions Yerida und Aliya. ⁵ In Hebrew the word Yerida is used to describe people who leave Israel. Leaving the Promised Land of Israel means a descent. By contrast Aliya, meaning to emigrate to Israel, means ascent. Anyone who comes there is raised up, anyone who goes away slips down. The installation Von dem Land hinab zu gehen II does not refer just to the artist's biography, who also left Israel.

In opposition to the negatively connoted descent from the Holy Land, through the plants the artist again indicates that a supposedly fixed law, culturally formed and then handed on, can be broken and development permitted. From apparently rigid stories, new ones can emerge. Like plants, people are also in a constant process of change. By rendering the plants' transformation process visible, the artist opens up space for thought and dialogue about existential issues related to origins, or beyond that, to the very meaning of identity.

1. Rohrbacher/Schmidt 1991, pp. 246–248

2. Arnold 2010, p. 64.

3. Dittmar 1992, p. 184.

4. Harten 2019, p. 2.

