

Netai Halup

The Living Room

Curator: Smadar Keren

Ghostly memories and currents of anxiety about the future have repeatedly led Netai Halup to the road connecting Tel Aviv and Beit She'an over the past year. A year ago, he was told that his grandmother's house – where his mother grew up and which had been a significant part of his childhood – was about to be sold and torn down. A moment before he loses his grip on it, Halup has decided to return to the house and spend some time in it. The extended stay in the empty house has flooded him with memories of the shared family space – flashes that created a "choreography" of moments and events that had taken place in the house's living room. He outlined these moments on the floor as the echoes of memory paths seeking to be realized again and cast the marked tiles in concrete mixed with pigment. These cast slabs became the foundation for the new work.

The Living Room by Halup is a sculptural installation where traces of the past come together into a new story. The installation is an array of sculptural objects cast in concrete and other materials, positioned in two consecutive spaces. In the first, geometrical tiled planks of varying heights stand on bases made of a mixture of sugar, tea, and milk, with interlaced white fossil-like objects. Here and there, a fragile monument stands out, dazzling in its loneliness. In the second space, a kind of ghostly theater of bodies and crates with exposed guts, made of crushed concrete, supporting and interweaving with one another – shoulder to shoulder and body within body. The sculptures are the products of material interventions Halup has performed on remnants of objects and structural parts of the vacant family house: cassette tapes, bedsheets, windows and window frames, tiles and nails, cupboards and shutters – each becoming for him a monument to a lost memory whose traces must be captured in matter. Halup's sculptural technique includes creating a form for each object and pouring concrete into the empty space around it in a manner that captures its shape, like a death mask. In some instances, the form exceeds the dimensions of the object, elongating it like another extension of its body. Sometimes, just before pouring the concrete, as a talisman based on superstition, the object is bathed or submerged in an organic liquid (lemon or pomegranate juice) in a way that disrupts its hardening.

In general, Halup's sculpting technique includes a series of actions with a regular rhythm: breaking, coating, plastering, compressing, hiding, covering up, casting, stripping, exposing, and peeking through. He controls the material thoroughly, and the mix of concrete components – cement, sand, and pigment – is as familiar to him as an old family recipe passed down the generations. At the same time, he is aware of its limitations and lets them overpower him. The last series of sculptures he has made is the result of spontaneous but conscious "poetic accidents." Halup describes these works as "out-of-control events" where he is required to forget all that he knows and hunt for what has been lost. "I use fragments of the house to confront its physical memory, perhaps to tell a story, or a poem, the manifestation of an event. However, the event erupts through the cracks, surprises and changes everything [...] like finding oneself in an unknown territory. It is impossible to prepare for such an event. One must let go, get lost, perhaps give up [...], be carried away in a wide-open foreign homeland."

The material dialog Halup is conducting with his memories from the family home is expressed in the different nature of the two parts of the installation. The first part, the floor work ("The Living Room"), presents low, horizontal surfaces that come together as an arena (for a meeting, an event, or a show). It contains actual signifiers of a place, and together, the components make up a fragmented memory map. This space is a direct product of his early visits to the empty house, and so it echoes an act of near remembrance in time (staying within) and in distance (in contact with). The second space is an unstable territory, accompanied by a sense of anxiety. It is an enigmatic collection of airy, perforated, frayed sculptures ('Better Left Untold,' 'Secrets,' 'Hide-and-Seek') that recall Pandora's boxes full of secrets. This space is an expression of memories of a different order – what has remained in memory (but has faded) and what has been exposed only with the passage of time.

The Living Room by Halup – a third generation of a family whose roots are in Iraq – is a wish to capture in matter what has been lost in the spirit. It is about the elusiveness of memory, which lies under the surface, and perhaps more, in its handling and the understanding that our life's narrative is a story that may be written in various ways, contingent on time and space. The prologue to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* contains a description of a comparison between the act of story-telling and the act of remembering, since "both turn to a certain event and attempt to comprehend it through its traces." What is memory, then? The author inquires and replies, "It is not a neutral, indifferent documentation of events, but rather an active response to them. [...] an active dubbing of traces of the past and resurrecting them in the present, dubbing that is a tactic since memory 'creates in a place not its own;' it addresses an event when it is already over and, therefore, always contains a dimension of otherness."¹

The spirit of Halup's sculptures is revealed through their fragility. Like the intensity of silence that remains on a stage at the end of a musical piece, so do the echoes of memory rise through the gaps, in the peepholes and the interior of the forms – in the quiet of the 'horizon' or the contour revealed by the end of the sculpture. What remains of the family home that Halup attempts to hold on to by the force of memory? "Memory is never home," it has been written, "and neither is the story. The storyteller does not reconstruct the traces but their fragility. He does not presume to report accurately but to perform a tightrope act, which might indeed be helped by memory's testimonies but will also work with the current state of affairs."² This may be why Halup has ended the accompanying collection of stories written for his previous exhibition³ with a note about his grandfather, the storyteller: "As time goes by, I can hardly remember most of his tales; as do my stories — they alter with him — from truth into fiction."⁴

¹ Eran Dorfman, "The Writing of Everyday Life," Introduction to the Hebrew translation of Michel de Certeau, **The Practice of Everyday Life**, Resling, Tel Aviv, 2012, pp 21-22 (In Hebrew).

² **Ibid.**

³ **And Other Stories**, 2022, Artport Gallery, Tel Aviv (curator: Na`ama Haneman) (In Hebrew). Alongside sculpture, Halup is also engaged in writing. The encounter between the written word and the material occupies him in his work, where theater, literature, and poetry take a central place.

⁴ Netai Halup, **And Other Stories**, 2022, Published by Artport, edition of 100 copies.