

SPITTING OUT THE TRUTH

Politics, personae, perversion and play collide in the radical and frequently caustic work of Israeli artist Roe Rosen

By Barbara Wurm

The film world is occasionally infiltrated by the art world. You don't like that? You think all art does is disseminate dry discourses into a lively realm of images? Well, Roe Rosen is the man (and sometimes the woman) to torpedo your convictions. That's his thing: the disturbance of firm beliefs, the subversion and perversion of authoritarian or dominant speech acts, the sabotage of existing (media) formats of social control, the suspension of conventional human behaviour. The paintings, films and narratives of Rosen (who heads the advanced visual arts programme at Ha'Midrasha Art College and teaches at the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem) act on subtly constructed microcosmic levels, promoting the power of minorities – whether in relation to ethnicity, gender, sexuality or class. They also address the borderlines of the ethical, the cutting edge of politics and aesthetics, by 'performing singularity' rather than making universal statements.

But at the same time – and this is the thrilling, albeit deconstructively inconvenient, even horrifying, aspect of it – his oeuvre is not just a conceptualist transfer of, say, Deleuze, Bataille and their (queerer) like, but an intellectually refined yet fiercely bodily repudiation of art's apparent divorce from reality. It imposes introspection by inflicting pain; it attacks by spitting out the more or less undigested truths of contemporary political discourse. Here we have, finally, the return of a strategy barely identifiable in our post-ism times: provocation! How else to describe a stand-up routine delivered by a deliberately sinister woman (Hani Furstenberg in *Hilarious*, 2010) who cracks one unfunny joke after another, transgressing, as if by accident, every possible taboo along the way, including the comparison of the Israeli occupation with the Nazis.

The middle part of Rosen's latest filmic triptych and winner of the Orizzonti award for best medium-length film at Venice in 2010, *Out (Tse)* focuses on a central yet liminal body part: the buttocks. We watch one woman (Yoana Gonen) spank the naked bottom of another woman (Ela Shapira) until it's black-brown and blue-green. The session is shown in changing shots; some close-ups fix our gaze on the thrashing site but more often Shapira's facial expressions are foregrounded. Witnessing the gradual increase of pain is an utterly discomforting spectacle for many reasons, mainly connected with the first part of the film, the documentary-interview mode of which connotes serious sincerity. The women introduce themselves as lesbian members of the Israeli BDSM community and talk about their political identities: Gonen is a left-winger convinced that extreme sex reflects and reveals empowerment, is bound up with questions of domination and submission; Shapira (no less self-conscious



Hello. I am Roe Rosen.

שלום. אני רועי רוזן.

Identity crisis: in *Confessions* Rosen puts his speech into the mouths of three different women

Rosen is an artist with enormous erudition and a voracious, nearly libidinous interest in the analysis of ethical transgression

and reflective) grew up in a clearly racist Israeli environment, the symbolic coin of which, in Israeli terms, is the foreign minister of the time, Avigdor Lieberman. What the sub's mouth spits out are his words, his utterings. She is possessed by his demon; having internalised his thoughts and sentences, now it's time to disgorge them ("I pity the left. Miserable people that probably suffer from a genetic defect... There is no problem in transferring the Arab population. It's the only solution"). This fierce yet playful exorcism – after all, we are not witnessing disgust but desire, on both sides – is underlined by the occasional overlay of Rosen's own parodist demon paintings (a device used across his whole oeuvre, as are ventriloquism and disembodied voices), and is completed by the film's chilled-out third part, in which the living room is inhabited by guitar- and musical saw-players delivering the Russian poet Esenin's *Letter to Mother*. Rosen has called this "a direct, if twisted, homage to the final scene of another film that



I pity the left. Miserable people that probably suffer from a genetic defect. May God forgive them.

Hard-hitting: *Out (Tse)*

deals with radical sexuality and politics: Dušan Makavejev's *WR, Mysteries of the Organism*".

Rosen's distinguished position as a visual artist with enormous erudition and a voracious, nearly libidinous interest in the analysis of ethical transgression allows his cinematic experience to be nourished by several sources, including hidden strands of film history. Each of his pieces opens up a whole spectrum of references to formats, genres, modes or individual films. A prime example is the *Confession* series, which consists of a trailer (*Confessions Coming Soon*, 2007), a bonus-track gag reel (*Gagging During Confessions: Names and Arms*, 2008), a music video (*I Was Called Kuny-Lemel*, 2007) and the actual film (*The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, 2008). Here again, it's the medium that transforms politically precarious discourse. What sound distortion achieves in *Out* (the demon's voice) is the teleprompter's task in *Confessions*: three women with different ethnic backgrounds introduce themselves as Roe Rosen and utter Hebrew sentences that have been transliterated into alphabets with which they are familiar. The result is speech made strange and sometimes quite distorted. At the same time, these confessions challenge the moral regime of the genre as understood by St Augustine et al; you don't just ask someone else to take on your deeds.

Play with personae, invented, confused and dissolved, is also performed in the video *Two Women and a Man, Joanna Führer-Ha'sfari on Justine Frank* (2005), which launched Rosen's filmmaking career. The names used generate a characteristic ambiguity, the Führer referring to you-know-who, Justine Frank being the pseudonym under which Rosen published the pornographic novel *Sweet Sweat* (itself evoking de Sade's novel *Justine*). If you've struggled with Derrida's idea of travelling signifiers, watch Rosen. His network of references is set up to facilitate experimental examination of the multiple realities we live in. The mocking bird's meanest piece, *Hilarious*, brings it all out once again: Rosen's art is defamiliarisation at its best, an apotheosis of the uncanny. ☺