Video of flamingos with gunshot sounds enters the realm of voyeurism and victimization

BY ANNE MINDSTETT

The piece is called "67 Bows," and when I first heard the name I thought of ribbons and party streamers, something garish and pretty and pink. Pretty and pink, at least, wasn't in the mix. This week, "67 Bows" by the Israeli artist Nira Pereg goes on view this week at the Hirshhorn’s Block 3. It is about flamingos.

Pretty and pink, in a distorting, mesmerizing flock, the flamingos stand on stilts, long legs through the watery shallows of their enclosure. (The film was made in Jerusalem, Germany, Israel, and Norway.) Their "bows" are not ribbons, but physical sensation, a lowering of the upper body, generally accepted in human society as a sign of emotions or of submission. The flamingos hover in apparent union, refusing their long necks together in the final scene.

Put this video into a hospital scene and you see the movements as gentle anesthesia. Instead, the soundtrack consists entirely of the click of a single gun being cocked, and then fired, over and over, at unpredictable intervals, and the birds bow each time the gun goes off.

The sound tears through the Hallmark fabric of our sentimental illusions and replaces one hackneyed vision (aren’t these wild birds beautiful?) with another (isn’t violence tragic?). The birds are cast not as a happy community of noble savages, but as a victimized population, enduring a steady threat, ground down by alarm until the fight-or-flight lastact of the first "click" becomes a mere reflex, a wearying accompaniment to the daily grind.

We see that the animals are imprisoned. Rather than embracing the tropical illusion the zoo seeks to create, we look behind the palm trees to the bare branches outside the plate-glass windows, or note the bunkerlike aspects of the enclosure, with its concrete pillars and paddled deep pools of water.

At one point, the camera zooms in on a group of birds, one grooming itself so that underfeathers of deep pink and crimson are visible; in this context, the flamingo evokes a wound. Another bird stands still, its head on its breast, eyes wide open and staring fixedly; it appears to be trembling.

Voyeurism is a kind of assault. We’re used to watching animals in a zoo, and on screen; indeed, PBS and Animal Planet offer their own kind of tape loop of non-stop anthropomorphized narrative. In Pereg’s piece, this voyeurism becomes implicitly culpable. Are we, as part of the larger society, responsible for this imprisonment, this innocent suffering?

Of course, we know that the flamingos aren’t actually hearing gunshots; something else must be provoking their movements; that not all of them — when you look closely — are actually "resetting" to the sound. Or do we? Film, for us, is so naturally equated with documentary that one has to fight consciously not to take the evidence the video presents at face value. Video art has flourished in Israel over the past few decades. Pereg, in her early 40s, who has shown extensively in Europe and Israel but who had her first solo American exhibitions in California only last year, is among a host of her compatriots who have embraced a medium that easily juxtaposes focused observation with social critique.

The implications of this critique are certainly obvious in "67 Bows": the piece stands in a long line of animal metaphors in Western art that extends back to Aristophanes’ "The Birds."

It doesn’t offer any comparably fresh insights. Pereg’s work is deliberately heavy, hermeneutical, by contrasting a vision of "pretty" with a sound of "violent," both weaving into the vocabulary of Hitchcock, she creates a work whose points are easy to grasp, as if enlazoned in block letters across the screen. Its facility returned me to the sugary evocations I first saw in its title; here, indeed, is social critique tied up with a homogenized breath. 

FRIGHTENED FLOCK: In Nira Pereg’s 2006 video work “67 Bows,” viewers see a group of flamingos, confined to a crude enclosure, appearing to react to the sounds of gunshots as they bow in apparent union at the repeated, percussive blasts.

ART REVIEW CONTINUED ON C4