



Michal Helfman:
Give/Get (detail),
2015, inlaid wood,
shell, woven plastic,
metal stand, two
3-D-printed dice,
dimensions variable;
at K.

MICHAL HELFMAN K.

For her first solo show in New York, Israeli artist Michal Helfman presented a taut display that included drawing, installation, a dice game and a video. “I’m so broke I can’t pay attention” was the penultimate in a series of six quick-fire exhibitions addressing contemporary value systems (for which the downtown gallery P! temporarily rebranded itself as K.). Passersby were misled by *CHANGE* (2013), an illuminated green sign in the window mimicking that of a currency exchange. Inside, a number of visitors asked to change money at a service window before discovering the ruse. Surprise, one might say, is a form of creative currency.

Helfman’s regard for staging and interaction dates to the time she spent working at a nightclub. To the right of the service window, heavy strings of metal piping, ceramic beads, small plastic skulls and shells veiled the doorway into the gallery. This barrier, smartly titled *Certain*, both generated discomfort and focused one’s attention. After the clanking awkwardness of getting past it, entering the show’s main space felt relatively free. An anthropomorphic metal sculpture, *Attention* (2015), pinned a bundle of dollar bills under one “foot” while the “arms” held an elastic band taut, as if ready to shoot it through a hole in the service window. This impish piece characterized the show’s light-hearted, slightly peculiar atmosphere.

Two works were particularly potent. The acrylic-and-oil-pastel drawing *One Dollar* (2013) portrays the pyramid vignette printed on one-dollar bills. In Helfman’s rendition, perspective has shifted. The pyramid is seen in three-quarter view, while the Eye of Providence looks askance. The ribbon flanking the pyramid bears a faint, demonic visage, and the now-lurid green vegetation, overgrown and seething, looks like the sea. Paradoxically, Helfman’s alterations show that none are needed to demonstrate the ghoulish character of a symbol passed daily from hand to hand.

A low dicing table with two stools stood in front of the drawing; the type of woven plastic used on the stools also cov-

ered part of the gallery wall, as if to continue the scenario. The installation, titled *Give/Get* (2015), includes a pair of dice with words, not pips, on them: We, Will, For, Get, Give and Not. An accompanying document lists the possible combinations and suggests meanings for them (as in, “For–Give: I cannot forgive that art will sleep in the bed that was made for it”). Riding a narrative of sociopolitical worth, the dice were 3-D-printed at the artist’s request on a machine smuggled into Syria by a humanitarian worker to make prosthetic devices.

“I’m so broke I can’t pay attention” contradicted the poverty of its title. In the video % (2014), dancers move in a line, breaking into formations but always falling into a collective forward step; in the show, the works likewise inserted themselves into streams of value and skirted them by turns. This waltz of engagement was astute and never earnest. Helfman conjured a lightness of being that shielded the subject matter—money, exchange, symbolism, economies of attention and care—from judgment or consequence. What remained was a stimulating reflection on contemporary value, with artworks as its conduits.

—Iona Whittaker

The Videofreex and their “Media Buses” at Maple Tree Farm, Lanesville, N.Y., n.d., chromogenic color print. Courtesy Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art.