

Portrait of a Sabra: Gestalt of a Symbol

by Liat Grayver.2016.

A *sabra* grows at the side of my family house in Kfar Yehezkel, a village in northern Israel. This large prickly pear cactus was always part of the landscape I grew up in, a silent part of my everyday existence. Without ever having consciously reflected on its presence, its form has always been intimately familiar to me. A few years ago, while visiting Israel, I suddenly became aware of its complexity and began to draw it regularly, in order to explore and understand its form. Periods of absence offered a distance that allowed me to rediscover the cactus each time anew. With each visit, the working process became more intense, more intimate, and it became clearer and clearer that I was not just creating images of *a* cactus, but rather that I was creating images of *this* cactus.

It seemed to me that the sabra in its form and corporeality resembles human forms. Like a person, the cactus strives to grow tall and to brace itself against gravity. As with a human form, the cactus is made up of various limbs branching off from the main trunk, and the way the limbs connect to the trunk strongly resembles human joints. The various angles of the limbs and trunk create the illusion of human gesture, of frozen movement.

The human struggle to oppose gravity is embodied in excessive form in a cactus. Just as we build strength to oppose the downward pull of gravity, the lower branches and trunk of the sabra gradually build strength to support the younger branches, themselves struggling to climb ever higher. Nevertheless, the weight eventually proves to be too much for the mother plant to bear and branches split and fall to the ground. Each branch forms new roots where it landed and eventually develops into a new cactus.

The sabra motive is a symbol that is laden with multiple meanings in Israeli-Palestinian political discourse. Found throughout the dry regions in Israel, the plant is able to survive on very little, and parts of the plant that break off and fall from the main trunk form new roots wherever they land. For the first generations of Jewish people born in the region, the sabra was adopted as an important symbol of hope, regeneration and tenacity, and reflected the intimate connection to the land the proponents of the new Zionist movement yearned for. These New Jews colloquially referred to themselves as “Tzabar” (linguistically related to the Arabic “sabra”). For Palestinians, the sabra has quite another meaning. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Israeli military completely destroyed abandoned Arab villages in an attempt to erase the memory of these places. However, today one can see traces of these villages through the presence of rows of sabras, growing again where they previously had been planted to form fences or walls surrounding the houses.

As much as I might wish to represent the sabra in an abstract manner, devoid of its inherently political content, as someone coming from this region it is impossible to free

myself completely from its complex history. Nor do I wish to portray it in an *expressivistic* manner. My own feeling is that we destroy the essence of things when we forcefully shove them into categories and overload them with meaning — we can then no longer feel the thing, no longer see it, because of the bias with which we confront it. These works are part of my artistic attempt, on the one hand, to free objects from their symbolically laden existence and, on the other hand, to dissolve the self-evident political context that enshrines them, in order that we may perceive these objects undisguised and unfalsified, and thereby be able to develop a sense of nearness and intimacy, or grace, for them.

Sabra. Arabic for patient.

Sabres. Plural form (Yiddish only) of sabra.

Tzabar. A container.