

# *Beyond Guilt Trilogy* <sup>1</sup>

Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir,  
126 Artist led gallery, Galway, Ireland,  
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**Text by Maeve Mulrennan**

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Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir,  
*Beyond Guilt Trilogy*, 126 Artist led gallery, Galway, Ireland, 2011: image  
courtesy of artists.

126 recently hosted the exhibition *Beyond Guilt Trilogy*, by artists Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir. These works have previously been seen in Vancouver, Berlin and Istanbul, either as a whole or just on video. On entering 126, viewers are greeted with three immaculate and expertly installed viewing rooms, a projected video

piece in each one. Before each film there is a small text giving a very loose context to the work, something that isn't completely necessary, but adds an anthropological element to the work. The first video, *Beyond Guilt #1* is nine minutes in duration and starts with the text:

*During 2003 we filmed encounters with guys and girls we met in bars.  
We filmed the whole movie at the toilets of the bars.*

This piece has a shallow perspective, due to the cramped filming conditions. The subjects are groups of young men and then young women. The voices of the artists, unseen behind the camera are calm, nonchalant with just the right amount of wide – eyed naïveté. We hear a question that we subsequently hear over and over again in the other pieces, a sweet voice enquiring, “What do you mean?” The artists press their subjects for more revealing information without any explicit manipulation, or any reason as to why they want this information. There is an uncertainty from the viewer's position: exactly just how involved are the artists? They take off their tops, repeatedly question and provoke their subjects but nothing further is shown. The same also happens when discussing the army. The artists claim not to recognize the army symbol, something as familiar as the alphabet in Israel. When they are incredulously asked ‘Were you not in the army?’ they repeatedly claim not to remember. It is this vagueness and blurring of boundaries that keeps the viewer uncomfortably intrigued.

*Beyond Guilt #2*, eighteen minutes long, begins with the text:

*During 2004 we made contact through a dating website on the Internet with the men seen in the movie. Every evening we started the chatting at eight o'clock, from ten o'clock and forth we arranged with the men to arrive to the hotel room in intervals of thirty minutes with each one.*

naked but is shy about explaining a scar on his shoulder. He also gets nervous when it is clear that he won't be the only man there; whether it is because he wants to remain dominant or whether he is worried he will have to do something he isn't comfortable with is not made clear. When asked why he enjoys the army reserve he explains casually that it is like a vacation: it breaks up his routine, he laughs a lot and the other men are really nice. It is easy for us to jump to conclusions about there being solidarity, a gang mentality and a sense of belonging. However the artists do not stretch this out, they move on with their questioning.



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Galway, Ireland, 2011: image courtesy of artists.

There is a visible turn in the last piece, *Beyond Guilt #3*, which is fourteen minutes in duration. The text explains:

*In October 2005 we ordered a prostitute to a cheap hotel room. We have asked her to film the movie.*

The camera angle is reversed and we are confronted with the artists. Before we had only seen glimpses of them, mostly Maayan. In the other works they have been incidental figures: going to answer the phone, dancing, taking their top off or a moving figure in a mirror. Here they are being turned into the subject. They encourage the hired prostitute to instruct them. However it soon goes back to the original format of them asking questions. We hear how this woman changes her skin tone, language and nationality to meet men's' desires. How men repulse her yet she regrets not being one of them. We hear of her abortions. It ends with a faux-naïve song and the women bonding and playing dress-up with masks and feathers in a cheap hotel room. It's all a bit Tracey Emin.

The key to the success of the previous two works was the ambiguousness of the narrative and the blurring of power. The repeated refrain "What do you mean?" brought us more into the piece through use of confession, confrontation and honesty. The final piece, while exceptionally strong, is too narrow in comparison to the first two widely ambiguous videos. There is a feeling of the artists wanting to balance everything out, but it doesn't: the prostitute is not the opposite of the men. She becomes a stereotype, an exposition to neatly tie up the trilogy. There are strong points: in a context where nationality can mean life-or-death, the thought of a woman playing with her skin tone, nationality, language (she boasts that she is multi-lingual) and age is quite interesting. She comes across as some sort of reconciliation mediator. The clichés of multiple abortions and a resentment of men may only be a cliché because these things really do happen. There is also a feeling that

the artists want another female voice: one cannot help but wonder what their position actually is: is this foray into Israel's underbelly something entirely new to them or are they only too used to it?

The statement accompanying *Beyond Guilt Trilogy* focuses on the "undermining power relationship between photographer and the photographed, men and women, the public domain and the private sphere, object and subject." This is a tall order by anyone's standards, and while it does address these topics, it does more than that. The artists successfully manage to tackle these complex subjects in a way that is both at once intimate and alienating. Intimate because we witness people's desires, secrets and needs. Alienating because we are in an odd position: not quite a voyeur (that is SO 80's), more of a witness.

The video works are called a trilogy, which indicates that one builds on the former, creating a narrative. This is further emphasized by artists Sela and Amir as the work is carefully credited with dates, in the same order that they are shown in 126. However it might be more honest to see the works as three sections of the same complex story that run concurrently, interlink and speak to each other.

From the first and second videos we see that war is so everyday it is mundane; one of the men keeps his sex toys in an army issued bag. Only in the first piece do we see two women becoming emotional about it and explicitly stating their political views. Another review of this work states that the subjects of the video show some sense that they think they are doing wrong. I disagree as they are entrenched in an extremely complex situation. A lot of people hope that the prejudices and stereotyping that they see in the media are not true, however we do have men boasting about war and we do hear one man talking about thieving Arabs. To be fair to him, we also hear how he stole from the thieving Arabs and got a dishonourable discharge from the army. He does not call himself a thief and is proud of his loot. The artists confront us with seedy

situations involving sex, power and a sprinkle a sado-masochism. It is not supposed to shock: we follow the artist's position of being nonchalant – particularly needed when we are sitting in a gallery space with our peers during some of the racier scenes.

There are several ideologies at stake here: that war can solve problems, you can gain power from both military and sexual encounters, and freedom can be gained from doing this. This is strongly contradicted in the final video in the trilogy with the prostitute who resents being a complex female and would prefer to be a man, even though she hates them. There is no ideology here. All one can do is put on a mask and remain nonchalant.



Ruti Sela and Maayan Amir, Press Image, 2011.