

By: Leah Ollman

Exhibition review Nira Pereg's exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, L.A

Publishers: Art in America. 2010

Nira Pereg is one of a bevy of young and midcareer Israeli artists whose work provides a broader view of their country than the mass-media coverage that reduces their land

to a site of overt and perpetual conflict. Born in Tel Aviv in 1969, Pereg makes understated videos that focus on ordinary aspects of Israeli life. There are controversial qualities to her subjects, but Pereg leaves them unspoken

and unseen, assuming instead a largely neutral stance. Her work lacks the dynamism and sensationalism typical of the media's more polarized approaches to Israel's contested terrain, but it offers its own quiet, matter-of-fact truths.

Pereg (who divides her time between Tel Aviv and Berlin) has been exhibiting internationally for the past decade; these concurrent shows marked her first solo appearances in the U.S. Both of the video works on view were shot over an extended

period of time but appear to document activities of a single, typical day. *Kept Alive* (2009), a three-channel, 22-minute projection at Shoshana Wayne, centers on workers and mourners at Har Menuchot (Mount of Rest), Jerusalem's municipal cemetery. At play in the sprawling complex of closely aligned, pale stone markers are the same forces that define the city of the living just down the road—religious and

governmental, foreign and domestic, Jewish and Arab. Pereg shows them operating in

concert rather than clashing. Jewish mourners pray over the dead, and a Muslim worker prostrates himself in prayer just outside the compound's wall. One worker warms his dusty hands over a fire, and another shows off some vegetables he's grown surreptitiously at the site. A representative of a burial society shakes a donation can as visitors stream by. The civic machinery of the place rolls along, with

workers digging, tending and engraving the markers that read "Kept Alive" (in Hebrew) on reserved gravesites. In perhaps the oddest passage, several men engage in target practice with guns alongside the cemetery's new construction.

At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the single-channel *Sabbath 2008* chronicles, in just over seven minutes, the weekly ritual of barricading streets to prohibit traffic from entering Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox neighborhoods during the Sabbath. As

sundown approaches late Friday afternoon, members of the community, from small boys to older men, drag out police-style metal barriers from their stored positions on the side of the road. The harsh scraping of metal across asphalt punctuates the sounds of the work week even as it signals protecting the sanctity of the Sabbath for those inside the demarcated areas. More secular Jews contest this assumption of authority, and those who defy it can be subjected to hostility and even violence, but no such

tension is illustrated or even suggested in Pereg's work. In both videos, she limits herself to the lucid but uncontextualized representation of a set of actions. Her portraits of place show us what the mass media doesn't, but by favoring surface over substance, she declines to show us how much those actions matter.

