



PSM

Schöneberger Ufer 61  
10785 Berlin

PHONE +49 30 246 492 00

EMAIL [office@psm-gallery.com](mailto:office@psm-gallery.com)

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**Ariel Reichman**

**This is Worse**

24.01. – 27.02.2021

*AM / SAFE?* The question is as complex as it is elementary. The answer depends on a number of factors that concern all of the mosaic stones of our current living situation. We cannot get an overview of all of them; not all of them matter equally. And yet we can answer quickly, because in the end it essentially points to the individual feeling of each of us: "Do I feel safe right now?" Ariel Reichman raises this question as a kind of preface to his exhibition.

*I AM SAFE* can be read on the neon lights outside in front of the gallery building. Or *I AM NOT SAFE*—depending on the answer we ourselves give by pressing a button in the exhibition or online. If we press *NO*, all of the letters of *I AM NOT SAFE* light up. If we press *YES*, the small word *NOT* goes out: *I AM SAFE*. Our emotional state becomes visible—and so subjectively and temporarily as the question per se allows. It cannot be made objective and can scarcely be differentiated, because if we were to answer it in the absoluteness with which it is posed, the rigorous answer would always have to be: No, because there is no total safety. But I can certainly feel safe. At least sufficiently safe to answer the question with *YES*, even if it is/was only for the moment and in reference to those aspects that are foremost for me right now.

The works of Ariel Reichman are often about inner states and individual constitution. This is also true of the series *I Still Have to Be Strong*, which consists of tree trunks and branches that he gathered in the forest near his studio. The tree as a metaphor of strength and resoluteness becomes here a fragile body that has deep traces of burns in several places, produced by the artist himself. In those places, the solid wood becomes brittle, thin, and fragile. The visible fragility seems that much more astonishing to us because the former strength of the branches is still visible. This image can easily be related to a human level: The stronger a person seems to us, the more we are perplexed by signs of vulnerability. In view of society's debate over attributions of masculinity, this contradict can be read as a reference to clichés that still dominate: Visible weakness is the final taboo for men.

Collective insecurity and its effects on the individual play a role in Ariel Reichman's work above all when he addresses the themes of war and violent. In his series *Pre/Post Disasters of War*, he takes up the drastic depictions of violence that Francisco de Goya presents in his *Desastres de la guerra* (The Disasters of War). Goya's aquatint etchings, produced between

1810 and 1814, shows the horrors that people—in this case, Spanish and French people—did to one another during the Napoleonic occupation. Their unsparingness but also the criticism of state and church connected to that made it impossible to publish these sheets during Goya's lifetime. The etchings were first published in 1863. *Esto es peor* (This Is Worse) is the caption to one of these scenes from Goya's *Desastres*. The abysses of human nature are in a position to cause unbearable suffering, worse than one's own imagination permits. Ariel Reichman studied Goya's etchings intensely and reworked them artistically. In a series of six drawings, he takes up scenes but removes all of the people from them. Only the barren landscape—often scarred by violence just like the human protagonists once visible there—can now be seen. Reichman meticulously fills out the parts of the landscape that had previously been covered with scenes of violence and thus heals them in a sense. Do these images offer consolation on account of the seemingly pacified landscapes? If the absence of violence can only be achieved through the absence of people as such, then we can surely not allow ourselves to be fooled by the deceptive calm in Reichman's drawings: They open up the space to reflection on human nature, which is capable of supreme cultural achievements and at the same time opens up the deepest abysses.

Another of the artist's series is closely connected to war or, more precisely, to military culture. And here, too, interestingly, landscape plays a connecting role. In his *Military Landscapes*, Ariel Reichman makes military insignia—primarily from the Israeli armed forces—the basis of highly abstract landscapes. The insignia often represent stylized landscape elements that served as a background for military motifs, such as tanks, fighter planes, or raised flags. In his images, Reichman removes them and focuses attention instead on the formalized landscape, on its colors and characteristics. What do such insignia convey beyond military decoration? Is the depiction of the landscape an appeal to the patriotism of soldiers? Are the colors based on political color codes? Reichman is addressing here not least questions of aesthetics. Everything that is produced is subjected to conscious design. The criteria on which they are based depend on the context and intention. A military insignia must be clearly identifiable and easily distinguishable; it has to be expressive, to convey certain attributes, and ideally serve as identification. That is no small challenge for a designer, especially as the pictorial field and color repertoire are limited. The work *Military Landscapes* has a strong personal component in the artist's biography. He served in the Israeli military, where he repeatedly encountered various insignia. For the artist, questions of design and context are linked here. It is above all the contrast between the naive, almost cheerful adaptation of the landscape and the martial content for which it is the backdrop.

Ariel Reichman's work is often based on personal experiences. In his reflections on what he has experienced, seen, or been handed down, however, something universal is always concealed as well. He recognizes transferable patterns and using specific examples raises a question that can also be asked in other contexts. Not infrequently, the artist also connects to collective memories and experiences. In order to make them visible, he finds strategies for minimizing and maximizing, isolating and emphasizing, and translating into other media. Daily political events play a smaller role than our fundamental human condition does: What is our essence as human beings? Ariel Reichman finds the signs for our conditionality, for our dependence on external and internal factors, in everyday experience.