

Offspring of the Assembly Line:

On Ben Hagari's *I, Pencil*

Text by George Laws Weinberg

The "I" of *I, Pencil*, Ben Hagari's latest film, is perhaps the artist, or perhaps the pencil. Artists are no strangers to instrumentality, divine or otherwise. And are pencils not exquisitely capable of expression? And who, or what, hasn't felt the tool in indiscriminate hands? It could be a statement of self-identification made by many at the same time, by choruses of factory or cultural workers. And yet by too few, as all styli append the screen, which supplants as first guide of hand-eye coordination, of thought made visible.

Hagari's identification is more specific: the pencil of the film courses its production line into being, and into... fatherhood.

The film follows in Hagari's practice of embodying his subjects – as an Arcimboldo salad in *Fresh* (2014); as a studio golem in *Potter's Will* (2015); as a pandemic Panic Pete in *The Back Side* (2020). From the primordial clay of the pencil factory's graphite hopper the film emerges, and the figure of Hagari soon approaches, in the pajamas of an inmate somnambulant, to join the mix.

The graphite, or lead, core of the pencil is extruded under pressure and emerges at first as a trailing drip, then a wire rapidly spooling like tape or film onto the factory floor. Some graphite escapes backwards around the ram, blossoming kinky reflections. We follow the cores' assembly into wood sandwiches and emergence as familiarly pencil-formed, their coating and capping with ferrules and erasers. But not with the familiar tenor of industrial footage, nor often mesmerizing clip of a "How It's Made" is this course run; each step is a tableau of cinematic fancy, of dramatizing light, painting with the inverse of graphite as it were (evoking Hagari's *Invert* of 2010), effecting the negative of the flat, functional fluorescence of a modern factory floor. Hagari here again benefits from his longtime collaboration with

cinematographer Boaz Freund. The atmosphere shares of the notional chalkiness of an early Lynch film but with purport to personalize and ennoble the assembly.

The expected narrator is instead the score, by saxophonist and composer Matt Bauder, which skews the self-apparent mechanical rhythms with color – in the wet neons of *Blade Runner*, or in the Technicolors of an Eames Office short – and drawing our attention to one particular pencil among scores. How is such an outlier produced? Has the artist, subsumed at the start, been condensed to this expression? This first half of the film concludes with a return to the hopper, the artist's hands reemerging now graphite to the tips, as pencils, finger-like, sharpen themselves with a roll across the abrasive belt. Now party to the pencil's genesis – at the Musgrave Pencil Factory, a hundred-year-old manufacturer in Shelbyville, Tennessee – or at least in a fugue, we abruptly jump away, albeit to a different industrial niche, repurposed – The Boiler, in New York City, where the film was also first screened. It is the set for the second half of the film, for a dance both grave and whimsical.^{fig. 1}



Fig. 1
Ben Hagari, still from *I, Pencil*,
2022, digital video, sound,
16 min, courtesy of the artist

The dance is an encounter between a young girl and an adult pencil, a pencil the size of an adult, a puppet in reality, willed by an almighty hand. And in reality the girl is Hagari's daughter, as oblivious of her father's intentions as any artist might be of their own, a Derridean animal belying the artifice of even a puppet; in her lightness and determination of gaze, she is Pinocchio to Mangiafuoco's marionettes. To her, the pencil is a stranger and a familiar, disquiet to be exulted: her father, all phallus and phallusless.

Which recalls the lead extruder and backward blossoming of that mechanical intercourse, those energies that escape predetermination. To what use? Are they folded back into the next batch? Are they ephemera, braced in the filmic moment by an outstretched eye, for sketching the contours of some latent desire?

The dance embodies the conflicting desires of the parent: to fashion one's offspring functional – up to spec – and yet exceptional, and self-possessed; at once reproduction and variation. A parent and artist both perhaps feels these conflicts most keenly.