Painting Against Itself:

Tsibi Geva's Recent Work

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My friend (and, implicitly, my teacher) David Shapiro wrote in an essay published in 2005 to accompany Tsibi Geva's exhibition "After" (Annina Nosei Gallery, New York) of the "wild oscillation" that occurs in Geva's art—and through which, I would add, that art reveals itself. I thought I knew what David meant but never until recently, when I saw the paintings the artist has done over the past couple of years, did I realize just how wild the oscillations could be. Of course I knew that among artists there are the steady ones and the restless ones, and that Geva is one of the restless ones. But like many other restless artists his divagations not only take him to new and unfamiliar territory but also lead him back inexorably to what he has done before, so that familiar elements return in new guises that makes them unfamiliar.

It is often said that there is no progress in art; this may not be strictly true, but still we might stop short of saying, for instance, that the technical progress made in the technique of representation between the time of Giotto and that of Raphael amounts to a definite aesthetic improvement, or indeed that the annulment of representation in the work of Mondrian is necessarily of greater value than its deconstruction at the hands of Cézanne. Art is as art does, and if the vicissitudes it undergoes in the doing add something to the depth or breadth of the field as an imaginary historical totality—what André Malraux called the imaginary museum—their contribution to the value of any individual work (or any individual artist's oeuvre as it develops through time) is always at hazard. And what is true of art as a whole may also be true of any particular work; I can't help but think of Thomas Hess's extraordinary observation (in his well-known essay "De Kooning Paints a Picture") about the development through the two years of its making of de Kooning's *Woman I*, 1950–52: "The stages of the painting...are neither better nor worse, more or less 'finished,' than the terminus.... Some might appear more or less satisfactory than the ending, but this is irrelevant. The voyage, on the other hand, is relevant: the exploration

for a constantly elusive vision; the solution to a problem that was continually being set in new ways."

Among the new ways that Geva's most recent paintings attack some old problems is precisely the fact that they can be characterized as attacks. These works are the most furious—at times even violent—I've ever seen from him. On the occasion of Geva's 2008 retrospective at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, I wrote about his oeuvre as involving both abandoning painting and painting with abandon. These new paintings would seem to belong to the latter tendency; but make no mistake, the kind of abandon that we witness in them is the opposite of carefree, and not entirely that Nietzschean "freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness" that we so value in painting when, as rarely happens, we find it. It's more like a life-or-death struggle, imbued with what de Kooning called "a desperate view," or what Picasso said was "Cézanne's lesson," namely anxiety. In these works the painter is fighting something that is stronger than he has ever had to face in his work before. Is it himself? Probably, but to leave it at that would be superficial in its assumption that it is evident who or what one is fighting in the struggle with oneself. Consider: I could extend the statement by saying, *He is fighting something stronger than he has faced before, namely himself; and he is winning*—a statement I would stand by, incidentally, but that displays the seemingly paradoxical fact that these grammatical personages "he" and "himself," which are supposed to have the same referent, have become divided against each other. Who then is the "he" who wins and who is the "himself" who therefore is presumably overcome?

That's the sort of question, of course, that can rarely be answered. To give a name to these two selves or two aspects of the self would somehow be too schematic and therefore misleading. And yet it's the sort of question that can guide an inquiry whose object is not an answer, exactly—an inquiry whose point is simply to have unfolded its own terms, which in my view is the most valuable kind of inquiry when it comes to art. Perhaps the distinction between these two kinds of inquiry has something to do with the difference in the task of the historian on the one hand and the critic on the other. W. B. Yeats famously said that of the quarrel with others one makes rhetoric; of the quarrel with oneself, poetry. But he forgot to factor in the complications that arise when taking into consideration something that another, very different kind of poet even more famously said: *Je est un autre*—"I is someone else." If what Arthur Rimbaud said is so—and

it is so, and it implies as well that the other may somehow reciprocally be myself—then there is never any poetry without rhetoric (or, indeed, rhetoric without poetry) and the quarrel within oneself and the quarrel with society, with history, with *the others*, whoever they may be, are inextricably intertwined.

That Geva has a quarrel with the way things are has always been more than evident. This is an artist, after all, who once titled one of his exhibitions "Rage" (Achshav.Now Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2001). That exhibition included a wall made of tires, which the artist himself associated with those set aflame by Palestinian youths in the Intifada. But rage is not his usual stance. His has more often been a quiet, patient, but relentless contradiction. Perhaps this is most evident in his long series of paintings, beginning in the late 1980s, of the *keffiyeh*, the typical Arab headdress that has become a symbol of support for the Palestinian resistance; pundits dismiss young Jewish sympathizers with the Palestinian cause as *"keffiyeh kinderlach."* Whether Geva is one of their elders I don't know; neither in his art nor in public statements concerning it does he editorialize on behalf of one side of the conflict that consumes his part of the world; instead, his paintings register, for all their visual beauty and ornamental verve, that the fact of conflict cannot be dismissed. His art has never overtly offered any positive, "utopian" vision of reconciliation. The ground on which one stands is always a ground of discord. Consider the "terrazzo" paintings that Geva made first in the early 1990s and again in the following decade. For me, these were always about the merely nominal nature of the relation between image and abstraction. It might be said that in these paintings Geva depicted a kind of flooring typical of Israeli houses—but since this type of flooring has no regular pattern to it, the painter was thereby giving himself permission to paint completely abstractly, with only very loose formal limitations sufficing to maintain the reminiscence of the terrazzo pavement with its irregular tiling on which, in Israel, one walks every day without thinking about it. It is the word, finally, that secures the resemblance. I am still fascinated with this aspect of the work, but I needed an inside informant, so to speak, to make me aware of others. In her essay for the 2001 catalogue for "Rage," the critic/curator Tami Katz-Freiman points out some other implications to this choice of motif, which might be evident to other Israelis but were not so to me. She explains that the Hebrew word for terrazzo is *balata*, a word of Arabic origin "that naturally penetrated into Hebrew as part of

the dynamic dialogue taking place between these two languages. Balata is also the name of a large refugee camp in the West Bank. Moreover, in the pre-Intifada days, the job of floor-tiling was carried out by Arab workers. The slang expression *rosh balata* in Hebrew parallels the English 'blockhead.' The *balata*'s transformation into an abstract-cosmic painterly field furnishes this graceless object with almost Pop-like qualities, but at the same time reinforces the sense of threat inherent in its contexts."

In Geva's terrazzo paintings of the 1990s and 2000s, however, this sense of threat remains largely tacit. It emerges, if at all, primarily on a visual level, through the sense that the decorative randomness of the placement of color shards in the abstract field might always be on the verge of devolving into sheer chaos. This glimpse of chaos within the banal is enticing yet disturbing. I think of the lines from W. H. Auden's poem "As I Walked Out One Evening":

> The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
> The desert sighs in the bed,
> And the crack in the tea-cup opens
> A lane to the land of the dead.

Just as one looks with both fascination and horror at the crack in the tea cup that suddenly seems to have become a yawning abyss of mortality, one feels a dizziness, one feels the ground trembling beneath one's feet, when the pavement no longer seems to provide any secure ground to stand on.

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More recently, when Geva reintroduced the terrazzo motif in a vast untitled triptych of 2011—the earliest but one of the paintings in this exhibition, and the largest, it is the work that seems to announce in no uncertain terms that a new phase in the artist's work is being launched—the terrazzo functions differently, because it no longer invests the entire pictorial field but works as an element among others. The left-hand canvas is entirely given over to the motif, which in the other two sections of the painting emerges only very intermittently in the background, where it is nearly buried. The imagery in the central section (and spilling over a bit onto the left portion of the right-hand canvas) is figurative, while on the right we see a quasi-abstract form that we can nevertheless identify as a tree. So it seems that we are being shown three different realms as we scan the painting from right to left: nature, man, and the manmade.

The return of the human figure to Geva's work here is noteworthy, as is the emphasis given it by its central placement; it has been absent from his work since the mid-1980s. But the figures were always isolated in Geva's early paintings, and they seemed to haunt the canvas without its quite being their place. In the 2011 triptych, on the other hand, there is a group of figures—at least three, although there might be more, since the painter's process of adding and subtracting, covering and revealing leaves several fragmentary traces of what seem to be figures but cannot quite be identified as such. They lurk behind the outlined figures in the foreground of the central canvas like half-forgotten memories. Far from being solitary, contextless personages like those of Geva's paintings of the early 1980s, these are a group of orgiasts: a roughly outlined female figure fellates a male companion while being taken from behind by another. And the canvas *is* their place; the two of them on their knees show the bottom edge of the canvas as congruent with the ground on which they kneel.

These figures are drawn crudely, even cruelly. One senses that here, sex has become horribly entwined with violence and domination. It's not that any violent act is shown; the violence is in the representation of the act, and we intuit that this violent representation is not merely something stylistically imposed on the scene that is shown, but rather makes evident something inherent to it but otherwise not visible. And yet to say that is somehow to imply that there is some "real" scene being represented here, which seems odd, for the showing of it is so unreal. After all, this is not a representation of a piece of human behavior—it is a representation of a representation, that is, of a piece of graffiti such as one might find scribbled on the walls of public toilets anywhere in the world, the sort of scrawl in which, its maker anonymous, real drives toward sex and aggression are free to mix precisely because their expression is so safely unreal, inconsequential. And to the extent that it is the picture of a picture rather than the picture of an actual scene, then it may have been misleading of me to say, as I did above, that the three canvases present images of nature, man, and the manmade. For the image of an image is likewise an image of the manmade rather than of man; and a closer reading of the right-hand canvas, with its image of a tree—but look how its two branches echo, upside down, the pair of legs that presumably belong to the man being fellated, that scrap of figuration that, as I've mentioned above, has somehow migrated over to the right from the central canvas in the triptych—would undoubtedly

remind us that we should see it as being about the image of a tree more than about a tree.

The Italian curator and critic Martina Corgnati has beautifully invoked, in an essay published in 2010 to accompany Geva's exhibition "Song of the Earth" at San Gallo Art Station, Florence, the way that the artist had been making (in the paintings just preceding those we are concerned with here) works that "to a certain extent represent 'landscapes' (even though they are not landscapes) disseminated with mountains (though they are not mountains)." So it is with terrazzo, with orgies, with trees: in a painting they are not terrazzo, not orgies, not trees, or else we use the verb "to be" in a special sense that it takes on only with respect to the things of art. Or perhaps, and this is more likely, we use the verb in a special sense that art reveals, but which is common to everything that involves human feelings: desires, fears, love, respect, hate, shame, wonder… One's sense of oneself, and of others. *Je est un autre*—and in a painting a landscape or a mountain too is another, is something else than a landscape or a mountain. Is it just a series of marks? Perhaps, but to say only that would be to pretend that nonresemblance is more essential than resemblance, whereas these paintings trouble us with an excess of resemblance, in which only a change in orientation distinguishes a tree from a human body.

Just as every image that comes to find its place in a painting is something other than itself, so in these recent paintings of Geva's images that we think we remember from his paintings of the last three decades and more return, but as something other than they were. And as with Hess's de Kooning, they return not necessarily as better or worse, or more or less developed, but simply as other: estranged from what they once were without being able to forget what they once were.
Geva returns not only to the terrazzo, as in the painting I have discussed at length, but to the birds that he has painted so often—now often taking on a daemonic aspect that they have never had before, like harbingers of death—along with traces of the kind of patterning that were found on the *keffiyeh* paintings, but now fragmented so that they no longer form any determinate symbol. The veils that shroud the faces of otherwise nude women in certain of the paintings recall the headscarves seen (on women whose bodies are not otherwise revealed) in some of Geva's paintings from the very early 1980s. In those early works the reference was apparently to the land's Palestinian inhabitants; now the veil seems instead a more generalized symbol of mourning, however much this

may contrast with voluptuous forms of the female body—and of course this contrast is entirely to the point. The flower, which has been another of Geva's constant motifs (and one that he has treated with a freedom that has left it with an identity as close to purely nominal as that of the terrazzo), also turns up occasionally in the new work, but as little more than a sort of explosion of black and brown smudges, no less threatening than anything else in these paintings. And behind it all there is still a sense of the landscape—although it is still a landscape that, as Corgnati said, is also not a landscape—but never has the landscape Geva painted been so dark, so ruined, so nearly apocalyptic.

In these paintings, everything that Geva has ever painted seems to return in order to turn against itself. This is an art that fights itself—and wins. Would it be too simplistic to speak of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos today, with the centennial of Freud's great essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, written in the wake of the Great War, only a few years ahead of us? Perhaps not if we observe what these paintings tell us about how entwined libido and the death drive really are. Which side does art stand on? Or is it without *parti pris*, its allegiance subject to wild oscillations? The answer may be unclear, but what can't be mistaken is that in his struggle with himself, with history, with his own history, this artist has found new strength.