

Patterns, Lattices and the Keffiyah in the Poetics of Tsibi Geva

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Since the early 1980s, Tsibi Geva's artistic research has hovered between different aspects of painting and sculpture, the element common to all, however, represented by dialogue. Through his work, the artist seems to shout out loud yet sometimes these cries seem inaudible, other times the noise is devastating, shattering his symbology and upsetting his colours. If his sculptural elements are highly geometric – often set within a structured and regular pattern – it is more apt to define his painting as untamed. His underlying artistic drive in all his work, however, is unchanged; an anxious and fervent inquiry into all those possible languages which cannot be contained within painting alone.

The rationalism seen in much of Tsibi Geva's sculpture can be most likely attributed to his origins. Indeed, Geva is the son of Ya'acov Cuba Geber (1907-1993), an architect close to the Bauhaus influence and whose work can still be seen throughout Israel; public and residential constructions, industrial buildings, schools and cultural centres, created mainly inside Kibbutzim¹. As a member of the Ein Shemer kibbutz, where Tsibi Geva was born in 1951, Cuba Geber was in charge of construction from the early 1930s. He is remembered for having designed a great variety of urban constructions, making frequent use of clear cut lines and geometrical forms, the very same that we now find in Tsibi Geva's work *Lattices*. These sculptures take the form of large lattices with different patterns: an alternation of grids, mosaics, bricks, abstract geometrical forms and rationalist lines giving rise to different forms but all with a common characteristic; that of the distance created by the viewer's position, in front or behind these structures. Tsibi's ornamental motifs are inspired by design manuals from the 1940s, 50s and 60s². These texts represented for Geva a veritable instrument from which he was able to identify concrete and rational forms, distinctive elements of the greater part of Israeli architecture and furnishings. However, there is also another reference to tradition through which the artist creates a visual and linguistic code specific to the place of origin. Sixteen examples of the *Lattices*, series, six of which exhibited at the MACRO, were featured in a suggestive installation created for the Haifa Museum of Art in 2003 (*Tsibi Geva: Master Plan*). This year, these same sculptures were exhibited in the Hagar Art Gallery in Jaffa³; they were positioned inside the

exhibition space and along the terraces of the building, giving the viewer an unusual and altered vantage point. Indeed, when placed inside the gallery space, these metallic lattices stood out from the walls, nullifying their original function; other *Lattices* pieces positioned along the perimeter of the gallery terraces created windows looking over the Jewish and Arabic districts of the city, each lattice creating a different view of the landscape. The resulting panorama was somewhat “contaminated” by the same lattices, giving the sensation of an unsurmountable barrier and a changed perception of the surroundings. In this way, Geva shares the same space as the viewer, allowing his art work to change not only in relation to the light but also to the viewer’s vantage point.

Tsibi Geva’s work focuses on interstices, those significant mental and physical spaces which separate people, ideas and cultures. For this reason he makes frequent use of specific symbols: the Keffiyah, landscapes, animals, words with the premise that these can in some way create dialogue. Their inherent symbolism can create windows and doors in those partitioning lattices which demarcate distance. From this, we can perceive the internal torment and struggle from which Geva’s contrasting style is derived and which give his poetics its distinctive characteristic: Abstractionism and Figuration, Rationalism and Expressionism.

His paintings are often large-scale works, characterised by signs, smears and free brush strokes; often they are contained within a visual field which nullifies the depth and relation between the figure and its background, leaving sentiments, emotions and the unconscious free to come to the surface. The canvas becomes a stage on which to act; through its primitive and untamed forms, his painting becomes action.

Geva’s style of painting cannot in any way be defined as Realist; it is more akin to German Neo-Expressionist or the Italian Transavanguardia movement of the 1980s, a very particular aspect of Post-Modernism which was the period in which Geva affirmed himself in the contemporary art scenario. His sculpture is diametrically opposed; it is more Minimalist, tending towards the reduction and elementarization of the form. He is closer to the Modernist experimentation of Mondrian and Malevič and the geometrical minimalism of Sol LeWitt.

His sculptures appear as three-dimensional “structures” characterised by an absolute identity between the form and the object in which the receptive process takes on a fundamental role. For this reason we have decided to include in part of the MACRO exhibition space the *Lattices* and *Keffiyeh* series, an unusual juxtaposition of geometrical and linear iron lattices contrasted by the informal materialness of the *Keffiyeh* series with its reticulate grids forming patterns conceptually akin to the sculptures.

Obviously, the choice of such a profoundly significant symbol as the Keffiyah

is not incidental. As Tami Katz-Freiman explains, the Keffiyah is an element imbibed in folklore as well as being a political icon and is common to the collective imagination. Indeed, since the outbreak of the first Intifada, this image has taken on the symbolism of the Palestinian struggle. In earlier history, however, before the founding of the State of Israel, the Keffiyah was adopted by the soldiers of the Jewish National Military Organization (IZL) as a head covering and scarf⁴. Thus, this same symbol, contrary to common belief, unites two populations in their continual struggle to affirm their rights.

Thus, we can infer Geva's justification for placing at the heart of his concept of artistic creativity the dramatic impulse, the collective and individual identity often interlinked with that of memory and a constant quest for a bridge to unite the public and private. An unusual and harrowing contrast which provokes much suffering in its unending search for a language which can be understood by all. Through patterns – the focus of the artist's research since the 1990s – he is able to explain reality from diverse vantage points, creating a singular perception of the world.

This connection between the *Keffiyeh* and the *Lattices* series is further demonstration of the artist's desire to bring together politics and poetics; he creates a space in which the socio-political contents cohabit with the fundamental structures and forms which constitute the very pillars of contemporary art.

NOTES:

1. A kibbutz is a small community based on socialist ideals and communal living. Kibbutzim began to be established in Palestine with the emergence of the Zionist movement in the early the 20th Century, and on to the creation of the state of Israel.
2. Catalogue of Hagoder Concrete Works; Tür + Tor / Doors + Gates / Portes + Portails by Albert Haberer; Pattern Design: An Introduction to the Study of Formal Ornament by Archibald H. Christie.
3. Cfr. Miki Kratsman, Boaz Arad, Tsibi Geva, *Lattice*, 2002, single channel video with sound, 50'. The video is featured in the works selected from the Rome exhibition *Tsibi Geva: Recent and Early Works*.
4. Cfr. Tami Katz-Freiman, *Rage*, Achshav Gallery, Berlin 2001.