

Tsibi Geva: Past and Present

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This exhibition features some of Tsibi Geva's milestone works in his long, creative journey through painting, during which he has constantly pushed painting beyond its limits, toward a field of installations that take up an entire wall or inhabit an entire space. However, while extending the boundaries of his painting spatially (transforming the painting into a total surface or space) or temporally (producing images in serial form) to create installations which may also be read as narratives, Geva's pictorial technique and practice remain unmistakable. It is a painting process that manifests the artist's subjective vision and knowledge of the world. Despite his ventures into new dimensions through his installations, which include materials such as iron lattices (*Lattice*), rubber tyres (2001) and various found objects such as wooden objects and window frames (site-specific installation, Messina, 2012), Tsibi Geva remains always a painter at heart; an indomitable painter whose energies are focused on an inquiry of his surroundings, to which he bears witness – noting the ravages of time, its indelible signs, traces and abrasions, and its paradoxical beauty.

For this reason, Geva's painting can be read almost as a point of union or critical encounter between space and time, in which space pushes itself against its boundaries to express itself in infinite new gestures and expressions. The temporal aspect, which is always extended and complex, is brought into play through a sort of sequential stratification. In other words, one cannot capture the profound originality of Tsibi Geva's creative output without taking into account the architectural dimension of his work and his way of creating a setting in which all the elements are possible or, better yet, necessary. One must undertake an archaeological excavation to penetrate the depth of memory and the significance of form in his work.

Like East and West, different, even opposing implicit meanings coexist in Geva's works. It is a mound of symbols which the artist does not attempt to interpret. He renders them present, showing their complexity by letting his hand and gesture trace their form, delving deep into the repeated symbol. Similarly, Geva's most recent series of works (*Untitled*, 2011-2014) featured in this travelling exhibition is characterised by an analogous process of

stratification, which is not interrupted but rather enriched by a new presence – the human form. This takes us back to the thematic interests and intense gestuality which had already informed Geva's work in the past, particularly in the 1990s. Vibrant, disarticulated pictorial fields pulsate with tension in these apparently disjointed compositions, in which densely coloured marks and knots of raging, violent brush strokes interpenetrate. Disturbing, lascivious cascades of colour drip across the underlying paint. Violent, almost hateful traces of indefinable female figures feature in most of these works, sometimes accompanied by fearsomely aggressive, sombre birds.

Birds feature frequently in Tsibi Geva's works, sometimes accompanied by a legible caption, rather like a collection of fantastic ornithological samples. Together, they form an ambiguous natural-history compendium, whose signification changes with the language of the label applied to name that living creature, apparently so "natural" and a-historical (in Israel, labels may be in Hebrew, Arabic, or English, and to each language corresponds a different power system, an orientation, a point of view which is different from the others and sometimes in conflict with them). Like his flowers, Geva's birds have never been pleasing. They are skeletal, looming giants painted in black. The pictorial style insinuates and evokes – with every brushstroke, on every canvas – the total autonomy of these figures, something akin to the experience of Neue Wilden and American and European Neo-expressionism.

These birds have become even more fearful in Geva's current works. They are harbingers of misfortune accompanied by semi-erased female figures which can barely be discerned from the canvas. It is unclear whether these figures are sexually provocative or abused. They are ripped apart by the furious insult of the painting practice to their anatomy, their composure, their integrity. I have no wish to investigate here the possible significance of these wrecked and undoubtedly disturbing nudes, these recurrent portents of profound emotions, these frankly orgiastic scenes both crude and cruel which, in a brilliant critique, Barry Schwabsky associated not with any actual reference but, instead, with graffiti sketched on walls that have been scuffed and contaminated by countless signs; not the result of any violent action or gesture, but merely its representation. In other words, once again, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, it is just painting, painting on painting, an image, a nightmare if you will, but always yet another representation.

In any case, in his recent series the artist deliberately unhinges the relatively harmonious framework which he had held firm until a few years ago. He joined together his recollections of landscapes and the efflorescence of a dark, powerful painting style full of energy, scornful and dynamic but also showing care and attention to the subject. This new phase has taken form

after years of reflection about the artist's collection of objects. It is part of a global environment, which is not only the physical place where his paintings are born but also a life practice – which is itself an artwork, affirms Yona Fisher, the curator of two of Geva's important recent exhibitions. One was held in the artist's studio and the other (aptly entitled *Transition, Object*) at the Ashdod Museum of Art. These were both occasions to tackle the boundaries between Geva's artworks and his living environment, between painting and the world, between looking and doing, between the found objects and readymades which Geva has accumulated in his studio over the years (which to him evidently represent a meaningful stratification of ideas and memories) and the paintings that take shape as they are struck by the brush held in his hand.

In the process of this inquiry into his objects' stories, the artist's practice has become even more radical, even more immersive and total. Nothing is excluded as he draws on all possible visual subjects, even the most infamous, contemptible, conflictual and unutterable. These paintings reflect the good and evil of the landscape furrowed by contradiction where the artist lives, which is also where we all live.

These works confirm Tsibi Geva as one of the greatest painters of the past decade, one of the few artists in Europe and the United States – and even fewer in the Middle East – who have assumed their historical responsibility with full conscience. He has done so having mastered the practices and pictorial language of expressionism, which had dominated the art world thirty years ago, and then tempered and forged them until they became instruments that are as sensitive to subjective changes as to great historical ones. Geva's language expresses, at one and the same time, the experience of the individual and the infinite conscience of the world alike. •