

The Days of Awe

The installation *Days of Awe* is the last and final part of a trilogy (*Notes on the Days of Awe*, “Another Spirit,” Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1981; *Notes on the Days of Awe 2*, Art Focus, Jerusalem 1999). This expression, or name, has a double meaning: it refers to a specific period of time (between the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement) in the traditional Jewish calendar, while also offering a concrete, harrowing characterization of the violent and bloody conflict currently raging in the Middle East.

What is at stake here is the displacement of a strong, fundamentalist presence into an unfamiliar environment – into the “white cube” of the gallery, at the core of a cold, professional, almost sterile art world.

Fundamentalism, as I understand it, is the transformation of something into “too much,” an obsession whose catalyst may be religion or pain or terrible suffering, like any uncontrollable urge. Van Gogh’s art is fundamentalist; so is Pollock’s, in its own way. What fascinates me in their work is precisely this place (which no one had ever arrived at or had ever been able to conceive of before), the place of what is “too much.” It is within this space, just like in psychoanalysis, that this miraculous mutation, this decline into what is “too much,” takes place.

A 13-year-old Palestinian boy no longer has anything to lose when he sets fire to a pile of old tires on the road leading into Jenin, just moments before he will be shot down (a rubber bullet) – another *shahid* whose dead soul adds fuel to the raging Middle Eastern fire. The black man had nothing to lose when he inserted his head into a tire suffused with gasoline, set it on fire and collapsed within it on a crowded street in Johannesburg.

Metaphorically speaking, “allover” painting must be understood as an evolutionary act that erupted at a certain moment in time, born of the despair of cultural sublimation – that is, composition. Today this means moving in the opposite direction than that delineated by Mondrian’s heroic journey: the momentous effort to divest the tree of its leaves and branches, of everything that was personal, arbitrary, chaotic; to peel it all off and remain with the skeleton, the tree-ness, the structure.

How much power and well-honed intellectual effort was invested in this effort to build a wall, to impose order and set some limit to this urge. From today’s more distant perspective, one may rethink this monumental structure. “Thinking” is essentially different from “building,” “carving” or “extracting” a form out of a larger body. It goes through your

This exhibition opened in Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, on September 21, 2001, ten days after the attack on the Twin Towers. The text was written a month earlier, in August 2001.

entire convoluted system, contaminated by filthy bits of the world, extremely local, trapped in its own, other logic.

I can see this image now fading in and out, the structure and the scaffolding replacing one another, dissolving into one another. This is how several of the abstract painters active over the last decade have been thinking their Law of the Father. A model that builds on a repetitive basic structure inevitably remains decorative and empty, or else appears as an emblem of totalitarianism, of an ideological, political and psychological dogma – since every change involves shattering the model's dogmatism. A slim volume I bought several years ago featured various patterns used in different cultural contexts. One of them, a specific and rare category to which all of my speckled-tile paintings may be related, is called an "irregular pattern"; the nonconformist, recalcitrant, subversive, messed-up stepson of the entire system.

The tire walls are the plural of the private case, or "more of the same." They exist in advance, ready-made, charged, subjugated to this urgent, fundamentalist impulse to proliferate. They have to be built quickly, improvised out of whatever comes to hand; the wording of the statement must not be allowed to cool down.

This is how a Jewish state (*Altneuland*) was improvised on the backs of the Palestinian peasants, who were mistaken for stones: part of the landscape, a virginal expanse of nature. Now lots of stones are flying around – the Intifada, the revolt against the grid, the logic of the occupation. One has to understand this place called "despair" or "a dead end" as an Archimedean point of sorts. A man who no longer has anything to lose may change the history of an entire region or society. He could also become Pollock.

Tsibi Geva