Abandoning Painting and Painting with Abandon: Tsibi Geva and the Readymade

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Every word must have been born at a certain place and time but only rarely is it possible to see this happening. Dictionaries may record a word's first appearance in print but from this we can usually infer some unrecorded prehistory. In general, whenever we use a word, it is one that has already been used countless times before.

All poets know this. If anything, the material they work with can often be described, not so much as *words*, but as the hidden history of words – the uncanny familiarity of words perceived as if for the first time. "Not only as a suggestive factor, but also as a cultural sign," as Geva has said, referring to paint as if it were an element of language, both *langue* and *parole* (to use the old Saussurean terminology), both system and expression.[1]

[1] *Tsibi Geva*, Julie M. Gallery, Tel Aviv, undated, unpaginated.

There are painters' painters, and there are also poets' painters. Tsibi Geva is a poets' painter, and the reason is that, within his own art, he disposes of a knowledge equivalent to that which the poets share, a knowledge that seems to be comparatively rarer among painters: the knowledge that when one uses a certain material, makes a certain mark, deploys a certain image – just as when one writes a certain word – it is always one that trails a history behind it. It is always, as Marcel Duchamp has taught us to say, readymade.

You'd think this would be as obvious to the painter as to the poet, and in a certain way it is – only the painters tend to leave this knowledge in the back of their minds; they bracket it, one might say. And there are good historical reasons why they got into this habit of mind; though the reasons no longer apply, the habit (as habits will do) persists. For centuries, after all, Western painting sought to produce convincing representations – images that seem to viewers to *look like* what they represent. Although, as E.H. Gombrich long ago demonstrated, these convincing depictions were only ever based on modifications of existing representational schemata, the whole task of the painter was to make those schemata disappear in favor of the believable images they subtend – to push the schemata back, so to speak, into the unconscious of the painting. And, of course, the same was even truer of

the material substrata of the painting – the stretcher, the canvas, the primer and so on: In traditional representational painting, all these seem to magically disappear.

With modernism all that changed, of course. The representational schemata took on a life of their own, and so did the material underpinnings of the image: Cézanne with his visibly constructive marks and his passages of unpainted canvas is the figurehead of this great revolution. And yet somehow the poet's sense that the matter of one's work is a common possession remained dormant among painters – with the prominent exception, of course, of Duchamp, whose idea of the readymade is entirely congruent with the poet's sense of the word as always already existing, but who fatefully (though only, in retrospect, contingently) realized this idea in the process of renouncing painting.

And yet if it is true – and I believe it is – that, as Thierry de Duve put it, "The readymade…ought to be reinterpreted today in connection with painting," this is not only because the history – or so to speak, the prehistory – of the readymade is entirely within the realm of painting, as de Duve so clearly showed.[2] It is because while for Duchamp, the readymade led away from the practice of painting (though not from the idea of painting), today it can also lead us back to painting, indeed to the very heart of painting. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Geva.

2 Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), p. 150.

To understand that, today, the readymade lies at the heart of painting is a different thing from showing that, at its origin, painting lay at the heart of the readymade. To do the former, however, is to accept something that goes counter to all that we have been taught to think about contemporary art, that there is a dichotomy between "an avant-garde strategy, sometimes dubbed 'appropriation' and openly indebted to the art of the readymade" and "a return to painting that equally appropriates the past…while it disavows the precedent of the readymade."[3] One wonders where this idea of a return to painting that disavows the readymade came from. The reference is clearly to the figurative painting of the '80s, the so-called Neo-Expressionism – but how much of this painting was really in denial of the readymade? Not much. Schnabel, Salle, Basquiat, Kiefer…however one judges their work, it was never without cognizance of the readymade.

3 De Duve, p. 151.

Geva, too, is an artist who came of age in the '80s, a little after those that I have just mentioned, and his "return to painting," too, has come not through a disavowal of the readymade, but rather from a constant rediscovery of it. His art is as distinct from any of theirs as they are different from one another. One should say, in fact, that for him there was never a single return to painting, but rather that he has constantly and persistently returned to painting – that he is always returning to it because he is always abandoning it, or being abandoned by

it. (His work involves both abandoning painting and painting with abandon.) The first works of his that I saw, in 1986, were figurative. Since then, the human image has been absent from his work, but representation (of a sort) has been recurrent: keffiyehs, terrazzo floors, flowers, thorns, birds, mountains… We recognize many things in these paintings, even when they verge, as they so often do, on the edge of the unrecognizable. To state the obvious, Geva never paints "from nature," "from life," though his paintings' motifs are always somehow or other *about* nature or everyday life. These are schematic images – almost ideograms. But in a crucial way they are not ideograms because the ideogram means to bypass the word in order to represent the thing directly.

Geva (whose early figurative paintings also incorporated inscriptions) never thinks of bypassing the word. On the contrary, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the word, and only the word, enables the viewer to "see" the motifs depicted in his paintings. This is most obvious in the terrazzo paintings, which in the absence of the name could easily be seen as allover abstractions, highly compacted fields of raw texture and color. But also the keffiyeh paintings take such extreme liberties with the patterns that indicate the motif that, in many cases, had they had lacked the name, one might not recognize the referent. The same is true of images that have more recently come to prominence in Geva's work; what we are asked to see as a mountain is merely the diagonal meeting of two flat areas of paint, while the thorns and flowers are merely roughly vertical lines that somehow can be seen as stalks when they support the bundle of markings that the name "flower" or "thorn" instructs us to read as petals or prickles. The word, the name turns what might have been a vague, questionable and possibly unverifiable evocation – "This painting reminds me of a flower, what do you think?" "Doesn't this remind you of a terrazzo floor?" "Is that supposed to represent a mountain?" – into something definite and categorical.

To this relation between word and image, the birds might appear to be an exception. Anyone would recognize any of them as a bird. Yet still, it is the name that unifies them, this vague, bare, rather abstract word: bird. No other word will do. Among them you will not find a hawk, a sparrow, a dove, an owl, a parrot, a jay, a woodpecker, a crane, a pheasant, a kestrel, a finch… No, none of these. Each is simply a bird. The fact that only this one word can clearly describe these various images is a signal that it is a lexical identity that is at stake in the paintings. "Geva's bird has never flown," as Sarah Breitberg-Semel recently put it with such eloquence, "never spread its wings."[4] The reason for this, of course, is that it is a bird whose existence is barely other than linguistic. Is this also not the reason why

[4] Sarah Breitberg-Semel, "Notes on a Black Flower," in *Tsibi Geva: Natura morte* (Turin: Ermanno Tedeschi Gallery, 2007), p. 9.

these birds (like the flowers and thorns, for that matter) are almost painted as outlines in black, or at least in some dark and colorless color that might as well be called black – because black is the color of ink, of writing?

Geva's flowers, too, are typically (though not exclusively) black – they are *written*, and this is amazing because how many artists are capable of painting by means of writing? There is a real kinship here with Cy Twombly, even though Geva is not directly painting the word *bird*, the word *flower*, but painting the image as if he were writing a word. "Doesn't the schoolboy learn the essence of *table* by copying its name in his laborious handwriting?" asked Roland Barthes in a great essay we can never re-read often enough. Likewise, "by writing *Virgil* on his canvas it's as if Twombly were condensing in his handwriting the very immensity of the Virgilian world, all the references of which this name is the repository…. Twombly knows that the Name has an absolute (and sufficient) power of evocation."[5] Likewise, with Geva, one can sense the proximity to the schoolboy who has set himself, with determination but also, often enough, with a certain frustration, to the copying out of some emblematic figure in a book – a copying that is a way of appropriating the essence of the thing, of internalizing a sense of its meaning.

For me, at least, a foreigner, this copying of Geva's, like Twombly's, contains in concentrated form the immensity of world – not a Virgilian world, it goes without saying, but the lived Israeli world that has produced him and of which he never stops thinking. (As with his relation to the practice of painting, his relation to nationality appears to be a continual cycle of alienation and affirmation.) This lived immensity includes all the immense tensions and conflicts that are part and parcel of this world, of course including the conflicts over names (starting with the names "Israel" and "Palestine") that pass through its history. There are good reasons why his work alludes so incessantly to nature, to the land and to what is built on the land, for what has always been urgent for Israelis is to create a livable relation to this place they have claimed and that has claimed them. Needless to say, this is not only an Israeli problem. As an American, I am also the product of a history of displacement. Perhaps today one might say something similar of Israel to what D.H. Lawrence wrote eighty-five years ago of my own country: "One day the demons…must be placated, the ghosts must be appeased, the Spirit of Place atoned for. Then the true passionate love for American Soil will appear. As yet, there is too much menace in the landscape."[6] What moves me in Geva's paintings is their manifestation of an immense need to love the troubled landscape in which he has found his being, a need to appease ghosts and atone for the spirit of place. He doesn't beautify this place, or idealize it. His copying and recopying of its emblems

5 Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 180.

6 D.H. Lawrence, "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales" (from *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1923), *Selected Critical Writings* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 191.

keeps showing it to him as rough, harsh, impure, silent, resistant, "thorny." (It is what I believe the Lacanians call the Real, as distinguished from the Imaginary or the Symbolic.) But he persists, because in this persistence he hopes to come to terms with it as it is.

To paint the image as if it were a word: Clearly, this is not to paint bloodlessly, with detachment, or as a manifestation of cleverness. For Geva, it is to paint as if one's life depended on it. As perhaps it does. The word, the name, is the matter of history. And as I said, it is always readymade, but by whom, and for what purpose? For the painter, it may also be possible to paint without painting. At least that is what Duchamp may have been doing with his readymades, if one agrees with de Duve; or if what he was doing was not painting without painting, then it was certainly *thinking about painting* without painting. Geva, like many other painters since Duchamp, has sometimes done something similar. In a moment of crisis, Geva wrote, "If my work succeeds, the painting will be 'a thing'…like a beautiful and indifferent door."[7] But for those who consider that the readymade is necessarily an object and assume that it should not embody itself in painting, it may be easier to understand the importance of this concept for certain other of his works, which one might tentatively refer to as "sculptures" or "installations." The "lattices," for instance – metal structures whose forms echo those one often sees covering windows (or perhaps I should say, that one often fails to see covering windows) – are clearly offspring of the strategy of the "keffiyehs" and "terrazzos," insofar as they are likewise taken from things in everyday life that are flat, patterned and generally overlooked, things simultaneously functional and ornamental (and therefore manifesting the universal impulse toward the exercise of aesthetic judgment in daily life). But they may nonetheless appear more closely tied to the logic of the readymade – despite the fact that they have not literally been found in the world but have been built to the artist's specifications – because they are not painted, not representations, but actual objects produced by means of industrial processes. To my mind, however, what is more important is that they come "after" Geva's painting and take their point from the clarity with which they pursue certain procedures from those paintings. It is precisely because the paintings are already permeated with the structure of the readymade, which is really the repeatability of the word, that the sculptures (if that's what they are) can play out certain consequences of the thinking that was already adumbrated in the paintings.

From another point of view, the "lattices" show that the only true readymade is the world itself, and that the artwork is not only framed by the world, surrounded and contextualized by it, but also frames the world in turn. Situated on the perimeter

7 *Tsibi Geva*, Julie M. Gallery, Tel Aviv, undated, unpaginated.

of a roof terrace in Jaffa in 2002, they frame the existing environment without presuming any interpretation on it. A beautiful video made from this rooftop is a veritable "city symphony" comparable to Walter Ruttmann's famous 1927 film-portrait of Berlin, but in a certain way more profound because its structure does not feel imposed but rather discovered. Geva seems to say, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Don't think, but look"[8] – meaning, don't imagine that you already know what you are looking at before you have really looked. This could be the entire lesson of Geva's oeuvre. By the same token, when similar lattice structures are exhibited not on the exterior of the gallery, with a view toward the surrounding city, but inside the art space, in the 2003 "Master Plan" exhibition in Haifa, one sees the objects but sees, equally, that the walls that allow one to see the object block the view of anything else. Again, it's not so much that the objects allude to the readymade but that they display the gallery itself as a readymade. The ethic of the artwork is not to say but to show, not to proclaim but to present. And when something is shown, it has somehow been changed. Where Geva finds a wall, he puts something there, and the thing he puts there – let's call it a painting, though as we've seen this is not always exactly the case – shows both itself and its environment. Conceptually, it creates an opening in place of a closure. It becomes "a beautiful and indifferent door." If we cannot pass through it, we have a problem that is up to each of us to face in our own way, or perhaps we can only face it all of us together.

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 39.