Introduction

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Tsibi Geva is an Israeli artist who divides his time between New York and Tel Aviv. He is widely celebrated for his paintings, sculptures, and installations, as well as for his practice of exhibiting unaltered found objects; this continuum between the unaltered object and the hand-crafted work of art has been a central feature of his relationship to daily life. Among other things, it proposes that a heightened receptivity is necessary to understand the commonplace world the artist inhabits, specifically the Tel Aviv industrial zone on the border of Yaffo, where his studio is located. The urban and architectural character of south Tel Aviv and Yaffo, is reflected in Tsibi's works in the sense that it (the painting and the process by which it comes into existence) is a metaphor for the ethno-socio-political syntax. Geva recognizes that this microcosm is not separate from the larger social situation, which is fraught with physical conflict; contentious points of view; and the osmosis that occurs in this heterogeneous area between intertwined cultures with distinct languages and customs.

Geva was selected to represent Israel in the 2015 Venice Biennale. The magazine *ArtReview* sent a questionnaire to all the "artists and curators exhibiting in and curating the national pavilions." The following

citations are two of the questions the magazine sent to Geva, followed by his answers.[i]

What can you tell us about your exhibition plans for Venice?

The plan for the Venice Biennale is for a complex new installation, which will extend over the exterior of the pavilion as well as on its interior and include motifs that I dealt with in the past (the Keffiyeh, terrazzo, lattices, shutters, and other components of the 'house' or 'home'), taking them to a new level. The installation will combine found objects, sculptures, paintings, and video art.

What does it mean to 'represent' your country? Do you find it an honour or problematic?

I was born in Israel. Except for a few years here and there I have lived in Israel all my life; my art is in a way the product of, and a reflection on this place which I love and which tears me apart in its radical political and ethical conflict. The Hebrew culture and language are my homeland and from my point of view, this is a fact – not an idealisation.

Nevertheless, I belong to those who for many years have opposed the occupation, and the destructive and cancerous influence it has on every aspect of Israeli and Palestinian culture and society. And in my work I tried all those years to deal with this complex and almost impossible identity in aesthetic and linguistic terms.

Geva makes two points that I want to focus on. First, he says that the installation will include "motifs that [he] dealt with in the past," and goes on to say that these motifs have to do with the accumulated iconography of the typical Israeli home. The fragments of motifs represent a broken home, fractured parts, migration: a kind of sub-

conscious backyard, a mound of things. Second, he states that his subject is the "almost impossible identity," or the fragmented Israeli identity. My thoughts about Geva's work, however, keep returning to a particular motif — a blackbird — which would seem on the surface to have little to do with the conflicted environment, or the idea of house or home (it is not a domesticated bird, after all). As with all of his motifs, which are often done in black lines, the blackbird seems to have been added as the painting neared completion as a way of making the turbulent layers of paint cohere, imposing order where there was none.

Geva's painting process is one of adding, covering over, and wiping out until a definitive image emerges. It is a process connected to Abstract Expressionism, particularly the gestural work of William de Kooning, and to his own sense of a fragmented identity coupled with an awareness of history as something that is continually being covered and uncovered. By connecting processes that we associate with Abstract Expressionism to his own circumstances, he expands our understanding of what this existential engagement with painting can do, as well as rejects the narrative that asserts that paint's destination was to become paint, a purely optical presence.

In *Untitled* (acrylic, 190 cm by 160 cm, 2017), Geva has painted a large black outline of a bird over a washy bluish-gray shape, a patch of linear blue strokes, and a loose tangle of vertical brownish-orange strokes. The strokes extend beyond the bird's form, which is edged on the left side by a blue line. The bird, which is oversized, sits on the end of a sinuous

black brushstroke (or bare black tree branch) the branch can also be seen as a detail of a naked female figure, looking at what could be a knot of black branches (or brushstrokes) to its right. Made mostly of supple strokes, the black branch appears to have been added to the painting around the same time as the bird.

This straightforward reading of a bird perched on a tree branch is complicated by the brownish-orange marks spilling from the bird's outline. What might initially appear to be an undemanding image becomes less so once you begin untangling the layers of lines, marks, and clouds of paint. Beneath the bird, in the painting's lower left corner, the artist has written "Blackbird" in black letters. Beneath this boldly written word, in smaller letters and bracketed by parentheses, Geva has included "After Stevens."

Geva is referring, of course, to Wallace Stevens' well-known poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Stevens divided the poem into thirteen sections numbered in Roman numerals. Each numbered section is a self-contained poem — simultaneously a quick image and a worldview, ranging in length between two and seven lines. This is the first section in its entirety:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing
> Was the eye of the blackbird.

My thoughts shift between Stevens' poem and Geva's painting, wondering what the relationship between them might be. I also take note that a similar bird appears in other paintings. Is he thinking of Stevens' poem when he draws the bird's outline in these other works as well? What am I to make of this motif?

Among the group I saw in the artist's studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, there were at least two other paintings in which the motif of the bird appeared. There is something enigmatic, even aloof, about this recurring figure. Perhaps this is because the artist always depicts the bird in profile, facing either left or right. Each bird turns one large foreboding eye to the viewer, either a big black dot or the outline of an empty circle. The wings are never open, and, as far as I know, it is sedentary and never shown flying. It is as if the bird is a stuffed object. For decades Tsibi dealt with nature as dead nature, anti-nature, or nature, which is represented by culture (in 2007 he had a show in Tedeschi Gallry, Turin Italy, titled Natura Morte)

This association with taxidermy occurred to me while considering a related painting, *Untitled* (oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 by 150 cm, 2017), in which the bird motif joined another, that of two figures having sex or, perhaps more accurately, of one figure sexually assaulting another. The motif is reminiscent of something you would see scrawled on a bathroom stall of a public bathroom.

The crudity of it is disturbing. Using a thick black line, Geva has drawn a naked woman bent over at the waist, her thin body stretching from the painting's right side, about a quarter of the way in from the edge, to the far left edge, where her hair and arms become a waterfall of vertical black strokes. Her breasts and belly hang down from her torso like skeins of flesh.

Geva's figure echoes the figure in Jackson Pollock's *She-Wolf* (1943), which, according to Roman myth, suckled the twin founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus.

In Geva's restating of the figure, a man stands in the space between her spindly legs and the painting's right edge and enters her from behind. Meanwhile, an oversized bird is perched on the woman's back, looking at the man, eye to eye. The bird's eye is a big, unmoving splotch of black paint, a kind of hole from which no light emerges. The painting is vulgar and everything is deliberately off scale.

This is how Barry Schwabsky, one of Gevas's most articulate and illuminating critics, describes a similar scene:

> 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.

The bird perched on the woman's back in Geva's painting brings to mind section IV of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

> A man and a woman
> Are one.
> A man and a woman and a blackbird
> Are one.

And yet the unity Geva depicts feels very different from the one conveyed in Stevens' poem. For one thing, Geva's unity is one of estrangement, where the man and woman are not facing each other and the sex is anonymous.

The presence of the bird – one that has possibly been stuffed – pushes this encounter into what Geva might call "a new level." What about the fragmentary motif of the *keffiyeh* in the painting's upper left-hand corner? The *keffiyeh* is a black-and-white patterned scarf, which has become a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Its hooked pattern evokes chain-link fences and fishnet stockings, images of separation and desire. The pattern can also depict an open latticed-window, which is also of Tsibi's vocabulary. The letters next to the *keffiyeh* pattern are 'black raven,' a reference to Edgar Alan Poe. So we have in Geva's painting allusions to Steven's blackbird and Poe's raven. Grief, death, loneliness, and yearning are among the things the bird symbolizes in Geva's paintings.

What does the potential rape depicted in the painting say about living in a country where two divergent cultures and languages – Hebrew and Arabic – are cloven together, predominately against their will?

Steven's poem is divided into thirteen sections, a prime number that can be divided only by one and itself. Each section reads like an aphorism. The fragmentary nature of aphorisms — a kind of writing favored by writers and thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, Malcolm de Chazal, and E.M. Cioran — enables them to embody a truth without contradicting any of the other truths the writer has proposed. It is a provisional truth that establishes its own reality.

Geva's attempt to recognize different subjectivities, or points of view regarding reality, while acknowledging the pervasive cruelty, violence, and alienation that is synonymous with everyday life, is crucial to understanding his work. The brutality and estrangement in Geva's depiction of the man taking the woman is anonymous, rather than anecdotal. It is not a story or an event that has been named, but the representation of an image that some unknown individual – whose feelings of rage, revenge, intimacy, and desire are all rolled up into one – has drawn on a wall. This is what is truly disquieting about the painting.

There is no condemnation on Geva's part, however. This is the gritty, roiling, stained world he lives in, one in which violence is part of the fabric of daily life. But what about the blackbird sitting on the woman's

back and on the tree branch? What might this motif mean for an artist who recognizes that the world is brimming with contentious points of view, and that death can happen at any moment? Certainly, for an Israeli artist this is not a purely aesthetic position.

In an interview that appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail* (July, 2014), Geva said this about his use of black and white paint:

> I feel my use of black and white is very chromatic, quite contrary to the idea of seeing things in "black and white." By using my particular kinds of blacks and whites I tried to express the sharp and blinding typical light in Israel, which produces a certain sense of aggressiveness. I feel that there is a deep and mysterious relationship between a landscape and a cultural or political atmosphere.

Geva's sense that there is a relationship between a landscape and a cultural atmosphere tells us more about how to look at his paintings. The space in which he places his figures, however abstract, is an ambiance marked by the realities of the world he inhabits — the *keffiyeh*, graffiti, poetry. It is a world in which intimacy and dialogue seem to have fled, and idealization has no place. All we seem to be left with is mute brutality.

What does it mean when Geva depicts the profile of a kneeling, muscular nude man gazing down at his own erect penis? In *Untitled* (oil on canvas, 100 by 75 cm, 2017), the artist has drawn the kneeling man's contours with a thick, rudimentary black line. The interior of his body is a flurry of brushstrokes the color of dried blood augmented by yellow

ochre washes. His calves and the ground on which he is kneeling have been quickly sketched in, while the layer of cream-colored paint surrounding him is tinted in ochre and pale pink. The man's pathos and isolation feels contradictory, at once funny, absurd, grotesque, and weird.

Geva's figures never look at the viewer or at each other, no matter how intimate the moment or close their bodies become. They exist in a world that is parallel to ours, as well as cut off from it. What are they seeing in their mind's eye? What does it mean that Geva wants to transfer obscene graffiti from a toilet stall to the walls of a house, gallery, or museum? I don't ask this question lightly, because Geva has had a long interest in picking up an object he has found on the streets and carrying it to another destination. His answer to the *ArtReview* Venice Biennale questionnaire offers a clue, which is that he wants us to understand 'home' on a new level. The 'new level' is actually the creation of a non-home by bringing objects, which are found in a back-yard or junk-yard storage room, to the forefront. He repositions the suppressed and denied by tearing down the traditional walls between the interior of the home and the society/landscape outside. By doing so, he underscores there is neither sanctuary nor escape; the world is always with us no mater where we go.

By transferring a crude motif from the closed-off secrecy of a bathroom stall to the very public space of a gallery or museum, Geva wants us to consider the kinds of barriers we put up in every instance of our life. At

the same time, the paintings differ from the found objects in a very direct way. Geva does not remove the graffiti from one location and literally move it to another. Rather, he reenacts its pervasive, generic language, which can be found in toilet stalls around the world. Is this the only language we have in common? If so, then doesn't it speak to our deeply rooted rage and brutishness?

I think this is one reason why I find Geva's blackbird haunting. It sits staring at whatever is in front of it. Is it a quiet witness, or is it immobilized? How is it able to remain motionless amidst the storms and swirls of paint? What kind of courage is needed to keep looking without closing one's eyes and mind? It is the kind of crucial looking that Geva knows is needed at this juncture in history, a looking that is calm and urgent, receptive and dispassionate. In a sense, the witness/the bird/the sitting woman, is the index of the painting. The viewer's only clue as to what exactly happened, or is happening, is the presence of these witnessing images. The event to which these images are witnesses lies outside of the frame.

As has been commented on by others, Geva's redeployment of things picked up off the street, as well as his use of a preexisting visual language, can be seen as extending Marcel Duchamp's notion of the readymade into unexpected directions. I want to suggest that there is another figure that Geva is connected to, and that is Charles Baudelaire's figure of the artist-poet wandering the urban streets, first described in

the groundbreaking essay, “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863). These words seem as relevant today as they were in Baudelaire’s time:

> […] the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.

Geva’s layered, fragmented paintings are akin to Baudelaire’s “kaleidescope[s] gifted with consciousness.” And in the middle of this turmoil sits the blackbird. Ever since I first read Steven’s poem, more than half a century ago, I have regarded the last section as an image of peacefulness:

> It was evening all afternoon.
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.
> The blackbird sat
> In the cedar-limbs.

Stevens’ blackbird seemed calm and accepting. After looking at Geva’s painting of a blackbird sitting in a tree, the stanza suddenly seemed ominous, an evocation of unavoidable change, a coming blizzard. That’s what art can do: it can make you see the world differently, open your eyes to another possibility, something unexpected, however unsettling. Geva’s art challenges us to look at the world in another way.

[i] The entire interview can be read here:
https://artreview.com/previews/2015_venice_25_tsibi_geva/