

*Look, it cannot be seen – it is beyond form.  
Listen, it cannot be heard – it is beyond sound.  
Grasp, it cannot be held – it is intangible.  
These three are indefinable;  
Therefore they are joined in one.*

*From above, it is not bright.  
From below, it is not dark:  
An unbroken thread beyond description.  
It returns to nothingness.  
The form of the formless,  
The image of the imageless,  
It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.  
- Lao Tzu<sup>1</sup>*

## **Like a Thread in a Storm**

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Sewing threads, nylon threads, salt, baking soda, and lighting – these are Tal Amitai-Lavi's ascetic work materials. Airy and transparent, devoid of color and aura, their presence is immaterial, amorphous, fragile, and quivering, almost like working with thin air or sculpting in light beams. In the current exhibition these are mere threads – sewing threads which tell a story about a home, nylon threads which mark a door and columns – magical threads in the frequency of Zen poems. From one show to the next, Amitai-Lavi seems to further refine and restrain her voice, using an increasingly more frugal language, although the theme remains the same – the home and its most profoundest meanings, and mainly the illusion innate to its stability. The minimalist articulation distances her from narrative, from engagement with drama and relationships, and brings her closer, via an ongoing reductive

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<sup>1</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ed. Robert W. Dunne (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), p. 55.

process, to the hardware, to the architectural element itself, to the supporting walls that have collapsed, to the threshold, to the fake columns, and thereby – to the poetics of the discourse of home.

Only three elements comprise this site-specific installation, generating a succinct, close-knit architectural-sculptural setting in black and white: a monumental drawing of a house damaged by a storm, a colonnade which carries nothing, and a door that leads to the unknown. The title of the exhibition, "Light Construction," a paraphrase of the term "lightweight construction," offers a paradoxical ambiguity in this context – the airy, weightless, massless aspect, and light, which functions as the protagonist, constituting the volume of the forms and performing the magic.

The drawing (*Untitled*, 2014) on the entrance wall welcoming the viewer is clearly the key or narrative clue to reading the whole exhibition. It is one in a large series of drawings created in recent years, based on photographs of houses damaged by natural disasters or war. Via obsessive, meticulous work, Amitai-Lavi extracted the contour of a three-story Southern house in New Orleans damaged by the deadly Hurricane Katrina (2005) from a photograph she found on the Internet. The drawing was created by attaching black sewing threads to a transparent Perspex surface, while emphasizing the unraveled thread ends which intensify the sense of transience. The lighting continues the act of drawing, casting a thread-shadow on the gallery wall, conjuring up the image of the ruins, and indicating: a house once stood here, but the storm unraveled it.

To the drawing's left, in a separate darkened space, is a colonnade of round columns, echoing and duplicating the four colonial columns in the façade of the listed historical gallery building. The eight columns – produced by stretching thousands of ultra-thin transparent nylon threads – shimmer in the dark under light beams which emphasize their transience and fragility, undermining their functionality as well as the separation between the building's interior and exterior. The concrete from which the support columns are made was replaced by a substance without substance, an airy, transparent string structure, a column's shell, a marking in the space. The rhythm and the flickers of light, which change as one wanders in the space, convey an air of mysticism, as if they were X-rays of timeless, mysterious halls.

Mounted on the other side, in another darkened space, is the threshold – a door shifted, slightly open to a dark interior. The door and the lintel were made by stretching criss-crossed fishing line. Here too, the optical illusion is misleading, and it is unclear whether the space beyond the threshold is real or imaginary. The play of light makes the door appear as if it were hovering, producing a mysterious illusion of depth like being swallowed into another dimension. Once again, the division between interior and exterior is undermined. The modernist white cube of the gallery has transformed into a black cube, and its boundaries have been breached. The viewing experience focuses on the void, the immateriality and lack of color, the reduction of expressive means to the necessary minimum, in a concise process which strives to capture the intangible, to encapsulate the spiritual meaning of opening a door.

The economic use of materials does not indicate thriftiness in labor. To the contrary. It seems as though the more accurate the act of reduction, the more labor-intensive it is. The act of stretching, of both the columns and the door, was preceded by meticulous mathematical-engineering calculations, and the work process itself took many months. "I would have liked the work's duration to be reflected in the viewing duration, to summon a different, slower, more contemplative viewer," says Amitai-Lavi.

The process of work on the drawing was also rife with practical aspects: gluing the threads is time consuming, demanding discipline and precision, concentration and patience, and the image is constructed slowly and carefully, immanently opposed to freehand drawing. Amitai-Lavi's penchant for nuance is well remembered from her previous works, as well as the obsessive diligence and repetitiveness which manifest a desperate effort to obtain at least an appearance of control. It is as though, via the act of gluing, Amitai-Lavi strives to heal the ruins like an archaeologist, to rescue that which was destroyed by the storm and capture it, if only as a spectral image, a phantom.

Much has been written about the romantic and lyrical meanings of ruins which emerge in symbolic and allegorical contexts throughout Western history. The surgical, healing treatment in the artist's proficient hands here has transformed the image of the ruin, and emptied it of its inherent catastrophic essence, rendering it a more general metaphor of a breached house which no longer provides shelter. This is not the first time that Amitai-Lavi is drawn to disaster and catastrophe areas. One of the early manifestations of the disintegration of the home and family unit appeared back in her second solo exhibition

(Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2001) in a labyrinthine mosaic work, also in black-and-white (*Untitled*, 2000), in which a text contemplating the boundaries of the definition of "home" quoted from Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) was encrypted as part of the maze walls: "At what moment does a house stop being a house? When the roof is taken off? When the windows are removed? When the walls are knocked down? At what moment does it become a pile of rubble?"<sup>2</sup> Later on, her exhibition "[Temporary] Happiness" at Janco-Dada Museum, Ein Hod and the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (2004) alluded to the Versailles catastrophe<sup>3</sup> which served as a metaphorical anchor for the disintegration of her marriage.

In the current exhibition, the transition to life-size practical architectural elements stands out, indicating the metamorphoses undergone by the concept of home in her work.

Whereas in the past it emerged as a metaphor for the illusion of family happiness, its far-fetchedness is now embodied as a physical foundation of security, shelter, and protection by means of the transparency, the lack of mass, and the sense of material dissolution.

More than a mere house, the colonnade calls to mind a temple or some other public building, thereby extending the metaphor to the psychological, social, even political realms associated with our tenacious clinging to this land, to this place which hangs by a thread.

In this context, one may locate Amitai-Lavi's work in-between the magical, spectacular approach of sculpting in light, as exemplified by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, and the anti-

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> A tragedy that occurred in 2001 when the dance floor of the Versailles wedding hall in Jerusalem caved in under the feet of hundreds of celebrants, killing more than twenty and injuring over three hundred.

monumental approach exhibited by American artist Tom Friedman; between the disintegrating conceptual sculpture of British artist Cornelia Parker and the architectural installations of Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno. Most of all, however, the works in the current exhibition call to mind the floating translucent settings of Japanese artist Yasuaki Onishi. Unlike the organic forms and natural images spawned in his installations, though, the geometric architectural element stands out in Amitai-Lavi's work. In this context, her works are closer to the transparent domestic settings of Korean artist Do Ho Suh, who also employs thread, fabrics and sewing in his installations. As in Do Ho Suh's work, in Amitai-Lavi's case, too, the works' power stems from the choice of a clear, concise and simple language and from the sense of magic and mystery involved in enigmatizing the mundane. In both instances the concentration on the surface, the preoccupation with the object's representative façade, with shell images and image envelopes, is conspicuous.

The magical moments inherent to the encounter of light with the transparent strings generate an experience of wandering which may be likened to reading a Zen poem or a koan, signifying the paradox of Zen which presents a thing and its opposite, demanding that the reader or scholar jump the hurdle of illogic to pass the obstruction and gain enlightenment. Like the "Gateless Gate" of Zen, here too, the door is not a door, and the columns are not columns. The emphasis is on weights and proportions which blend together yet contradict one another – dark and light, darkened and illuminated, voluminous and empty, present and absent. Indeed, with a simple, reduced syntax of opposites, Amitai-Lavi seems to have performed a metaphysical transformation of the gallery space – the drawing of the wind-breached house, the colossal columns, and the door to the

unknown seem to hover in the space, illuminated, lightweight like a feather and at the same time monumental.