

Tal Amitai-Lavi, *Green on the Outside, Red on the Inside* / Noa Raz Melamed

Conversation / Dan Pagis¹

Four talked about the pine tree. One defined it by genus, species, and variety. One assessed its disadvantages for the lumber industry. One quoted poems about pine trees in many languages. One took root, stretched out branches, and rustled.

Right from the very name of the exhibition *Green on the Outside, Red on the Inside*, the gap and imagination, which lay between the world and its representation, are emerging out.

This funny children's riddle, to which the answer is so obvious, of course refers to the watermelon characteristic colors. However, in this context, the exhibition's name immediately brings to mind the red and green as complementary colors in the color theory and can be used in juxtaposition in order to enhance and intensify each other.

Those who are familiar with Amitai-Lavi's recent work are in for a surprise. Her usual ascetic black and white pallet is being replaced by fresh and vibrant colors.

Seemingly, the world that is portrayed in the exhibition is the natural world – trees, forest, watermelons, bananas, flowers- but only seemingly.

The compositions that make up the two main works at the exhibition are two strict grids with a constant rhythm. These are two pictures of a pine forest. However, they are not the Jewish National Fund forests nor do they resemble a rain forest or the Black Forest. They are not dark and mysterious or hold within them the possibility of getting lost. These forests were domesticated, cultured and stylized till they became a pattern, a goblen art or a memory. A memory of what? Is it of a forest? An embroidery? Tapestry? An image?

In one of the works, Amitai-Lavi creates a large scale painting that is fragmented into dots of color, in a way almost resembling a pointillist or pixelated painting. The dots of color are made of clear rubber suction cups that were filled with acrylic paint. In meticulous and intensive work, the artist assembles the trees while she pays respect to the illusion of depth (such as concealment, relative scaling, and brightness). For a moment, the painting is glorified with illusionistic perspective, but is immediately flattened by the repetitive pattern on the surface. The viewer shifts between a momentary illusion that lures him in and the moment when he's expelled to the outer surface. Renaissance? Modernism? Pop?

Inside-out, outside-in, the eye roams on the face of the exterior and is sentenced, as the biblical Moses, to watch from afar, never to reach inside, unlike the lumps of color trapped underneath the clear rubber.

¹ Pagis Dan, *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, Translated by Stephen Mitchell, University of California Press, 1989

Another Forest work is made in a sequenced composition of car-freshener trees. Before us appears a breathtaking pattern on the wall, in which the unified trees are rooted in their place, upright and balanced, touching each other in a color coded arrangement that changes in each line.

From the smell of the pine resin, all which is left is the synthetic scent, meant for, in a pathetic attempt, to remove the smell of smog or cigarettes. This is a city-forest, a forest-city. The cultured urbanism had completely pushed aside wilderness.

The tree, an entity of many directions and details, had been used already by Mondrian as a means for abstraction and reduction until all that is left is length and breadth. Mondrian started his artist path by looking at actual trees- mulberry and apple. Amitai-Lavi does not look at trees anymore. This is a readymade object or article that in her work becomes an instrument for color and concept. On its treetop it proudly carries the product name: Car-Freshener (similarly to the name of the sanitization factory owner signed by Duchamp on his Fountain work). On its stem, at the root, it is stamped with its variation- the name of its unique scent: Green Apple, Lemon, Coconut or Leather (as the unique flavors of Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans, which emerge from the serial anonymity).

In the work Black Forest, Amitai-Lavi has made a diptych of two types of car-freshener trees that share the black color. The composition of this severe and dark work has a religious origin; however the placement of the different freshener trees in front of each other evokes irony and humor. The name of the work sends us far away to the popular touristic site in Germany, on the border of France and Switzerland, as refuge from our hot and sticky summer.

From the gallery floor, watermelon heads are sprouting. These are careful replicas of rubber play balls disguised as watermelons with a face. The "watermelons", as leftovers of childhood games, appear in different levels of deflation. They are "punctured" and immobilized in the time-past-their-greatness – "the wind been taken of its sails".

This redundant object that firstly seemed as a readymade is the result of a meticulous cast covered with a realistic painting in the shades of watermelon rind, or more precisely of the surface of the plastic ball disguised as watermelon. This image refers to the jack o'lantern of Halloween. According to this festive tradition, the eyes, nose and mouth are cut out and allow a peek inside. However, here the face holes are drawn on top, and therefor illusionary. Again, we are left outside with the whole green rind. The red, juicy, wet and the vivid remain as an unfulfilled promise.

The duplication and containment, where the image or concept is wrapping itself and folding into itself or replicated as in a house of mirrors, are recurring in Amitai-Lavi's work.

The work Matryoshka, from the mid 90's, indicates that from her early years of practice this subject matter had an important role, which had been examined in various ways and appearances. This work as well seems as a readymade but is a painting, done with great dexterity, of a pile of cheap bulletin board

posters (pashkevilim) of the Bnei Brak city council. The poster warns against flyposting posters illegally ("this sign had been posted on an illegal poster", it says). Amitai-Lavi painted the posters as they are on top of each other, as a warning that lost its power. The future and past are entangled with each other as two ouroboros snakes eating each other's tails.

The single photograph in the exhibition, also named Matryoshka, raises the question – what follows what or which is reflected, which is the origin, and which is the replica? The picture was taken in a public space, a corridor or staircase. On the floor there is a vase decorated with a big rose and inside it a big orange and red roses bouquet. On the wall behind it hangs a photograph of a vase with a large bouquet of different flowers that some have wilted. The vase in the photo within the photo stands on a round stone base (and its texture and color are reminiscent of the watermelon's image), on it are three apples and debris of one of the flowers. Just as in a Still Life painting, the apple and wilted flower serve as vanitas. All this abundance in the photograph appears with a forest edge in the background. What is this stone on which the vase lays? Is it a tombstone? A memorial site? At a second glance it appears that the work is actually a puzzle that was assembled, glued and photographed. The potential for disassembly into small pieces, fragments, and crumbs is left as a threat.

The exhibition Green on the Outside, Red on the Inside is a conceptual exhibition raising issues of taste and aesthetics, of memory districts, reality and representation, and origin and reproduction. However, this is the exhibition of a crafty artist, a committed worker that paints, photographs, sculpts, casts and pastes. An exhibition that showcases laborious and intensive work of precision and diligence and the ability to create something out of nothing and something out of something.

Finally, it is an exhibition that has a wink of humor, lure and tease. The faces of the watermelons gaze at the forests on the walls as in Daumier's "Art Critique" drawings. The bananas are a meticulously realistic painted cast: one appears as shed skin while the other stands erect, peeking out of its skin as if inviting the viewer (as the magic bottle in Alice in Wonderland): "eat me".