

Still Life with Watermelon/ Shlomit Breuer

What's green on the outside, red on the inside and has watermelon seeds? Such corny witticisms, starting as a riddle and ending as a joke, undermine the usual riddle structure the minute the logical challenge is removed by including the answer in the question. At the same time, the paradoxical dimension inherent in most jokes becomes a structural contradiction once the comic and puzzling structures are merged together. The unavoidable answer to the green outside and red outside question – which equals, perhaps, only to that of the question who moos? – has been utilized for marketing and advertising as well as political purposes. The pejorative term “watermelon communists,” coined by right wingers to describe radical ecologists, was born from the controversy over the remedy for damages caused by climate changes. According to these right wingers, the ecologists are double-faced, their “green” outlook merely hides their real “red,” social-economic agendas.

In her continuous dialog with the history of art, Tal Amitai-Lavi's perspective is often critical, reflective, or humoristic, as she thematizes issues such as representation, aesthetics, genres, construction and deconstruction, and the relations between inside and outside. In this exhibition, she deals with two major genres, “still life” and “landscape painting,” which often hold an inferior position within the canonical hierarchy of Western art, because, among other things, they are devoid of a narrative. Like a landscape architect, or, alternatively, a director setting up a three dimensional “still life” scene, Amitai-Lavi installs in the exhibition space a large Perspex sheet with acrylic-paint-filled suction cups attached to its back. In a way resembling the divisionist or pointillist isolated dots of pure color applied to the painting's surface, her patches of color fuse only in the eye of the beholder creating a ravishing landscape scene of a European forest, whose laborious mode of creation also brings to mind that neo-expressionist technique. At the foot of this artificial, pixelated-like forest, an external generic landscape that has infiltrated into the interior simulating a divider screen, she disperses plaster casts of painted, perforated and carved watermelons that lie around like punctured balls, or expressionless, identical decapitated heads, a local grotesque version of Jack-o'-lanterns.

Next to this installation, Amitai-Lavi “plants” a colorful composition of scented tree air-fresheners. On the one hand, the composition simulates an indexical range of cheap, synthetic mass-produced product, sold under commercial names alluding to nature, such as

“Black Forest”; and on the other hand, it references the divisionist practice of brushstrokes that do not blend on the canvas, but in the eye of the beholder.

The artificial forest, appropriated from a web repository of digital images, is redolent of synthetic scent of air fresheners and surrounded by plaster casts of watermelons, bananas, and other objects. Amitai-Lavi installs this ensemble in the space, offering a consciously synthetic mimesis instead of the false semblance of virtuoso realistic simulacrum such as the one described by 1st century historian Pliny the Elder in the story about Zeuxis and Parrhasius, who held a contest to determine which of them was the more naturalistic painter.

The juxtaposition of the watermelons (still) with the North European forest (life), not only stresses the botanical fallacy of the installation, but also may give rise to a quandary, or a slight discomfort about the very essence of the “still life” genre. The French term “nature morte,” like its Hebrew equivalent, suggests an oxymoron, or a hybrid that unites nature/life and death in one independent immortal entity. Like any linguistic construct, this concept, too, imparts sociocultural validity to an idea, all the more so when such an idiom has become so common that it seems to convey an objective reality.

Modern still life, representing objects such as fruit, tableware, and dead game animals on their own rather than as narrative details of genre painting, or at the margins of religious scenes, emerged as a distinct genre in the 17th century. Ennobled still objects, depicted within a staged domestic scene embodying the aesthetics of abundance and affluence, represented a status symbol of the emerging bourgeoisie as it replaced the aristocracy as a dominant class.

In her work, Tal Amitai-Lavi drains the genre of its immediate encodings. The watermelon, borrowed from an available and familiar inventory of the still life genre, is taken off the table, lies around outworn on the floor, replacing the painting two-dimensionality with a three-dimensional object. Thus, the immobile still object comes to represent a movement, and the sublime becomes mundane. The subjective presence, relinquished for the benefit of reinforcing the object, metamorphoses in the installation into the viewer’s movement, and, unlike Renaissance vanitas paintings, the smiling gazes of the watermelon skulls do not evoke humility and consciousness of one’s mortality, but rather express the grotesque.