

Magical Threads and Meditative Carpet in the Frequency of Zen Poems | By Tami Katz-Freiman

Homeline, the first collaboration between Tal Amitai-Lavi and Tal Frank, is a site-specific project composed of three domestic elements created out of unexpectedly weightless materials including, light, projection and delicately-installed, ultra-thin nylon strings, presented in a completely dark space.

Entering the space, the first element one encounters is a window, *Homage to Marcel* (2021), created by Tal Amitai-Lavi and inspired by Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow*. Housed within drywall in a finished, two-sided wall built for the show, *Homage to Marcel* physically divides the space in a way that undermines solid notions of interior and exterior, visible and invisible. Standing in front of the window the viewer may see another standing on the opposite side, seemingly mirroring their reflection. The optical illusion is deceiving, and it is unclear whether the space beyond the window is real or imaginary. The play of light and materials makes the window look like it is flickering or dissolving, causing an ambiguous sense of depth and precarious feeling of staring into another dimension.

Amitai-Lavi also created the second element, *Untitled* (2021), a large-scale curtain that spans the length of the rear wall of the space and seems to slightly move, blown by an imperceptible wind of unknown origins. It is made through an obsessive, meticulous process of stretching thousands of thirteen-foot long, thin transparent nylon strings. The curtain shimmers in the dark under undulating light beams coming from a video projector which emphasizes its fragility while its gossamer qualities undermine its functionality. The optical experience of the elusive and hypnotic motion of the screen is enchanting. Rooted in the performing arts, mythology and art history, the origins of the curtain can be associated with the "theatrical screen" and the act of painting (1).

The third element, which was created by Tal Frank, *Floor Plan* (2021), is a projection on the floor of an animated carpet featuring a kaleidoscope-like labyrinth pattern based on architectural elements from Locust Project's floor plan. Each subtly moving shape in the video animation corresponds to a wall, doorway, or column in the actual space creating geometric carpet patterns reminiscent of those in a Turkish rug. Frank utilized 3D software to create the illusion of a realistic textile material and morphing movements, similar to fractal forms in nature, creating a "digital sculpture," composed of

ornamental geometric shapes modified and recreated from 3,420 unique frames.

These three elusive semi-objects generate a succinct, close-knit architectural-sculptural setting in an encompassing environment of black and white. The installation as a whole is immersive and contemplative, playing with reflections, inversions, illusions, and space disruptions creating an illusionistic, dreamlike environment. The airy, transparent, ghostly character of the strings, along with the light beams and projections, constitute the weightless “volume” of the forms and together orchestrate the magic. The rhythmic flickers of light that vibrate as one wanders the space, convey an air of mysticism, like timeless rays of light found in mysterious spaces. By entering a world where foundations appear to be dissolving and life-sized architectural structures have lost their functionality and physicality, the viewers are challenged to rely on their senses while questioning their perception.

Magic is a key word in both Amitai-Lavi’s and Frank’s work. In both cases, the core of their work is anchored around the wonder of metamorphosis—both in material and space. For many years, Amitai-Lavi has worked with austere, fragile and unusual materials, such as sewing threads, nylon strings, kinetic sand, baking soda, and lighting. Her first work (in collaboration with Haimi Fenichel) with light beams and nylon strings was a bookshelf, *Untitled* (2006), which was also displayed in a dark space as part of *Fatamorgana*, a show I curated at the Haifa Museum of Art in Israel. It functioned there as a marker, as a trace of an object or a drawing in space. The books lost their physical presence and appeared like ethereal x-rays that consist only of a cultural memory and a spiritual charge. In her recent body of work she was actually sculpting with light beams. Her solo show *Light Construction* at Chelouche Gallery of Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv (2014), featured a combination of sewn threads unfolding a story about a destroyed house damaged by a storm with a life-size door made of nylon strings leading nowhere and a colonnade supporting nothing.

Over the years, she further refined and restrained her voice, using an increasingly frugal language, while exploring the same subject matter since the beginning of her career: HOME in its most profound meanings, especially its inherent reference to “stability” or promise for “shelter and safety.” The minimalist approach via her ongoing reductive process, distances her from narrative and brings her closer to the hardware, to the architectural element itself, to the threshold and to the windowsill, to the supportive walls and

columns and thus—to the poetics behind the discourse of HOME and its vulnerability.

Magic is also at the core of the work of Tal Frank. Challenging boundaries between reality and fiction is central in her sculptures, installations and video animations, where she creates imaginary spaces through endless actions based on the physical gravity and movement of materials and objects. In her immersive installations she refers to a familiar place, but always with a twist. In *Swan* (2007) she created an illusion of an oil stain by carving it in wood. In *Balata Camp* (2018) she simulated burnt paper using watercolors. In *First Set* (2015), presented at the Herzliya Museum of Art in Israel, she created an installation of a place frozen in time—an abandoned tennis court overtaken by wild artificial plants—presenting a civilized world defeated by nature and submerged in chaos.

The most powerful experience in *Homeline* is the illusion, the optical deception, and disorientation that undermines reality, but also produces a sense of transcendence. The viewer recognizes the domestic elements, while still trying to figure out what she/he is actually looking at. Both artists are interested in this type of perception process, researching in their work how the mind interprets what the eyes see and pushing the boundaries between vision and perception. The viewing experience focuses on the void, on the immaterial and lack of color, on the reduction of expressive means to the bare minimum, all in a concise process which strives to capture the intangible and ultimately encapsulate the spiritual meaning of HOME.

The economic use of materials does not indicate thriftiness in labor, much to the contrary. Laborious processes, craftsmanship and love for details is a common denominator between Amitai-Lavi and Frank. In fact, the minimalist tone in *Homeline* is created through multiplicity and mass accumulation of individual details. It seems as though the more precise the act of reduction, the more labor-intensive the process becomes. The act of stretching thousands of nylon strings to create the curtain and the window, as well as the pre-production of the digital-animated carpet, was preceded by several months of meticulous mathematical-engineering calculations and labor.

The modernist white cube of Locust Projects has been transformed by the artists into a black cube, featuring substance without substance. With a simple, reduced syntax of opposites, Amitai-Lavi and Frank have successfully achieved a metaphysical transformation of the space—the three domestic

elements hover in the dark, luminous, floating like a feather and, at the same time, powerful and monumental.

The sequence of magical moments discovered as one wanders throughout the space brings to mind the reading of a Zen poem or a koan. Signifying the paradox of Zen, which presents a thing and its opposite, the koan demands that the reader or scholar jump the hurdle of illogic to overcome the obstacle and gain enlightenment. Like the "Gateless Gate" of Zen, here too, the window is not a window, the carpet is not a carpet, and the curtain is not a curtain. The emphasis here has more to do with "weight" and "proportions" blending together yet contradicting each other—dark versus light, volume versus void, concreteness versus illusion, and presence versus absence.

And lastly, although the concept for this project was born long before the pandemic shut down the world and forced us all into our homes, one cannot escape a post-COVID perspective which evokes an additional psychological layer. The installation places us physically as well as psychologically within a domestic space and in front of the interior elements that have accompanied us for the past year during our isolation. In the hands of Amitai-Lavi and Frank, these mundane—and now all too familiar—elements take on a new life however fleeting, into the sublime.

[1] I refer here to the famous Greek mythology about a painting contest between Parrhasius and Zeuxis in which a curtain that was supposed to protect a painting was actually revealed as being part of the painting itself. It is the earliest examples mentioned of the idea of *trompe-l'œil*. In *The Art of Painting* (1666-1668), by Vermeer, the painted curtain that covers about a quarter of the canvas acts as a theatrical gesture of invitation into the scene.