

TEMPO RUBATO

Raz Gomeh

October 6 – December 3, 2011

« A linguistic system is a series of differences of sounds combined with a series of differences of ideas ».

Ferdinand de Saussure

« If unconscious activity of the spirit consists in imposing forms to content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all spirits, ancient and modern, primitive and civilized, just as the study of symbolical function, one needs and it suffices to reach the underlying unconscious structure present in each institution and in each custom, to reach a ground for interpretation valid for all institutions and all customs. »

Claude Lévi-Strauss

On that hectic afternoon, just hours before the grand opening of the gallery with a solo exhibition by Raz Gomeh, R.P., a young journalist writing for an Israeli newspaper called me one last time as part of her effort to confirm a remaining detail on her list of facts to check: “Am I getting this right and the exhibition indeed doesn’t have a title..?”

Running the risk of seeming anachronistic or dated, anchoring Raz Gomeh’s new body of work into the realm of structuralism, and seeing it through the scope of this school of thought seems to find justification on several levels.

First and foremost, by avoiding giving titles both to the works in the exhibition and to the exhibition itself, Gomeh deliberately abstracts his production from the verbal sphere in an obvious aim at placing the works within the realm of the sensitive, the innate, the unaffected and distancing it from the heavily signified realm of language. This constitutes, in my opinion, a first element of reading that strongly resonates with concepts of structuralist kind.

As first posited by Ferdinand de Saussure in the late XIXth century, structuralism found its first terrain of exploration in the field of linguistics. Refraining from going too deep into a largely exploited and written about discipline, Saussure’s legacy essentially sets grounds for a systemic understanding of language in which individual semantic elements are to be understood as relative to each other and in opposition to each other. While this theory was initially applied to language, Saussure’s concepts largely bled into other theoretical and cultural fields such as literature, art, and architecture. It also affected social and cultural anthropology as theorized by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In this latter field, societal structure is apprehended as an entity of internal dependencies where individuals build their identity based on that of the people they interact with. This second angle of structuralist reading proves particularly relevant to Gomeh’s current body of work in the sense that his

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objects - sculptures one might say - are personal, yet open-ended enough to set ground for grasping of a kind that transcends the artist's own social and personal stance.

Drawing from childhood memories of time spent in the environment of his grand parents' house, the artist abstracts elements of his visual memory – namely of typical Israeli household furnishings - into a indexical system that he subsequently reconfigures into a highly evocative formal vocabulary. This strategy is similar to that of the early minimalists who wanted to achieve a simultaneous relation between the body's internal space, the mind and the environment. In stripping the material - wood, glass, metal - from any kind of affect or emotional charge, Gomeh avoids the slippery track of sentimental revival, hence circumscribing *de facto* a hazardous potential for nostalgia, which would drastically restrict the potential of the works for collective impact. By resisting the fetishizing of objects from the past and rather placing his visual thinking on the level of analytical, opinionated research, Gomeh proposes a highly processed personal reading of the influence of his early visual environment on the mark up of his own memories.

Aside from Israeli interior design from the 1950's, another formal inspiration for one of the two sculptural objects currently presented - a semi free-standing room divider connected to a wall on one of its sides and roughly positioned in the center of the exhibition space - came from the architecture of the former Federal Assembly of Czechoslovakia building in Prague. Designed by Karel Prager and completed in 1974, the imposing construction is well representative of late brutalist architecture. With an elevated core supported by two large pillars and what seems to be "a building supporting the building", the main structure is complete with repetitive window patterns made of bronze-colored metal and reflective glass.

These two formal elements certainly constitute a point of entry into Gomeh's current exhibition. Entering the gallery space, the visitor faces the sculpture extending perpendicularly from the wall and into the space. As authoritarian looking as the Czech Assembly building was originally rendered, Gomeh's sculpture on the other hand has been afflicted with several devices of rupture that set forth both its intrinsic structure of formal integrity and bring in an element of what one might term self-organized criticality. In this regard, and for as much as the work is a room divider - imposing upon the visitor a particular deviation throughout the gallery space - the main wood platform is also structurally divided by a metal and semi-reflective glass frame while it is, and it is of utmost importance, simultaneously supported by it.

Gomeh's use of semi-reflective glass links the sculpture to the well-known tactics of minimalist practices of the late 1960's and 1970's as exemplified by the work of Dan Graham. The latter used the material by means of pointing out the rhetorical apparatus it constituted in International Style skyscrapers – namely capitalist office buildings - and stated that the apparent visual opening actually hides the one-way opaqueness of the mechanisms of power that are concealed behind the facades, thus generating different gazes between those who are watching from the outside and those who are inside. Gomeh's choice of material seems indeed rooted in a desire to control this sort of power as well. By depriving the viewer from visual information (what is behind the sculpture) and replacing this data by his or her own representation, Gomeh fully enacts the asymmetry of the construction, resulting in a conceptual unbalance – truly a dystopian consideration on the artist's part - that is further reflected in the formal structure of the sculpture.

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On its backside, the piece is executed with a much rougher, “work in progress” feel. There, the glass panels are simply see-through and the surrounding wood elements, devoid of a polished finish are also much looser in structural terms. A wood plank - a screen of sorts - is mounted onto a sliding track that opens a potential for lateral, yet restricted movement. By seemingly revealing what one could call the antechamber of the construction (an early stage or unfinished version of the front side), Gomeh places a particular stress on the performative aspect of assembling the sculpture.

Performance and the importance of the body action is also a very central aspect to the second sculptural object presented in the exhibition. Applying black ink on glass, the artist reproduces vegetal details based on illustrations found in XIXth century books depicting local sceneries from Palestinian times. Interestingly, the graphic motifs are delineated by two intersecting circular shapes resulting from the artist's own movement, namely that of his extended arm circumventing the drawing space. In so encapsulating the familiar graphic elements, Gomeh inscribes them in a performative frame and binds their physical expansion to the dimensions of his own proportions. This restrictive strategy is further developed through the overall structure of the piece. With the two symmetrical supporting wood tracks – the actual medium for potential movement – interrupted by the gallery walls, Gomeh constricts the sculpture to the physical characteristics of the exhibition space. Sealing a close conceptual relationship with the room divider sculpture, this formal choice activates a possibility “guided reconfiguration”. In an ongoing effort to balance the poetic with the mass-produced and the personal with the collective, the loose and organic feel of the ink drawing comes in sharp contrast with the medium used: five disconnected vertical, equally-sized glass panels positioned within tracks incised in the framing wood elements. With both pieces, Gomeh creates works that encompass their own catalyst, indexical record, and conceptual product.

Lastly, the third piece in the exhibition appears as an element through which to read both other works; holding its own wall, the framed photograph depicts a motif shot earlier in the artist's practice, namely some six years prior to the mounting of the current exhibition. The arrangement, a studio shot of a typical 1960's plastic milk bottle used as a vase for artificial flowers and placed against a neutral gray backdrop conveys an acute sense of irony and humor. This glamorized depiction of Israeli kitsch rendered in the fashion of commercial photography inscribes Gomeh's stance within the realm of a skeptical approach to aesthetic forms in regards their potential for sentimental recuperation and for triggering nostalgia.

Guillaume Rouchon
Tel Aviv, October 2011