



Mind The Gap

Michal Geva

Mind the Gap
Michal Geva

Thesis Catalogue presented to the
MFA Fine Arts Program
School of Visual Arts, New York

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

By Michal Geva
May 2016

Advisors: Ken Landauer, Kara Rooney

(c) Michal Geva, 2016

Mind the Gap

Michal Geva

Forms of destruction, voids of collapse, and sceneries of an unstable ground are central themes in my paintings. I use images of architecture in landscape, breaking the logic of compositional form by constructing conflicts and collisions that occur within the subject matter of my work and its process.

I am interested in the investigation of painting through the language of the planned and the accidental. Elements of control and uncertainty allow me to pursue the analogy between actual states of disintegration and the transgression of formal and stylistic boundaries in painting.

While referring to social, political, and emotional structures, my paintings give expression to an anxiety brought about by a deep-seated sense of impermanence and lack of stability. Utilizing the language of organic and structural form, my work exposes the fragility of architecture, nature, and human nature, casting doubt on the stability of Painting.



Untitled, 2016, 48" X 60", Acrylic and oil on printed image, Aluminum box

“The human settlement is a product of Society. It forms the most genuine expression of the society’s structure, expectations, dreams and achievements. Thus, the built settlement turns out to be the symbol of society and the substance of its creation.”(1)

I was born in Kibbutz Ein-Shemer in Israel, into a family of artists. I grew up in the children's house of the kibbutz until the age of 5, before moving with my family to New York. Two years later, we returned to Israel to live in Tel Aviv.

My grandfather, Yaakov (Kuba) Geber, was one of the important architects of the Kibbutz Movement and an important figure in the building of communal society in Israel since the 1930s. My father, Tsibi Geva, has been an influential painter and installation artist since the 1980s. I am part of the third generation of artists in a family in which art has always been a conversation and a way of life, and where painting has always been a language.

The Kibbutz is a unique and original form of collective settlement in the nation-building project of the state of Israel. Its philosophy was based on early Zionist and socialist ideology that championed equality, sharing, and mutual aid. These values were realized through economic equality, the sharing of all property and land, and the provision of full health and education services for the life-cycle of its members. In the ideal community the members would contribute according to their ability, and would receive according to their needs.

The utopian vision of creating a new type of egalitarian society—anti- bourgeois and anti-urban—was the most extreme manifestation of the social-Zionist dream in Europe. From the mid-1930s on, the Kibbutz movements established their own planning and engineering departments. The architects of the Kibbutz were engaged, both ideologically and practically, in the ideas of the movement where the planning of the Kibbutz reflected the social agendas, aspirations, and hopes of their inhabitants as well as architectural solutions to daily and theoretical challenges.

One of the main emphases in Kibbutz planning was placed on public life and community. The Kibbutz's center was the most important part. It included services and administration alongside a range of public buildings, particularly the dining room ("Hadar ochel"), the essential gathering hall for the community; other major spaces included the member's hall ("Moadon La'haver") and the children's houses ("Beit Yeladim").

The buildings were designed in the vein of functional modernist architecture, influenced by the International Style and Bauhaus movements, popular in Europe at that time. Philip Oswald, director of Bauhaus school in Dessau, relates the connection between the two movements to the fact that both Zionism and the modern movement were associated with the socialist movement. Another common aspect between the international style and the country's settlement, he claims, is the one of colonialism. The generic modern movement came from the idea that it was founded on virgin land, in a place where there is no history, only nature and topography. (2)

Although the "Kibbutz Haartzi" (one of the major parties in the Kibbutz movement) was associated with left wing ideology, and later on, became a major force within the Marxist party, Mapam (the United Workers' Party), the Kibbutz was also a frontier strategy. It was a "facts on the ground" strategy ironically criticized and identified today with the extreme Rights' settlements in the occupied territories. (3)

The model of the Kibbutz served the Zionist ideology since its beginning, due to the fact that the left-wing parties dominated the country from the time of its establishment, from 1948 until 1977. That year was a major turning point in the country's political history, marking the first time the left had lost power. It is at this point that the major right wing party- Likud- took over, replacing the country's longstanding socialist model with the neo-capitalist one that dominates Israel to this day. The alienation between the government and the Kibbutz movement, which began in those formative years, was the beginning of a decade's long process of ideological, social, and economic deterioration. The Kibbutz could

not remain a socialist island in a capitalist country, while Israeli society moved towards privatization in all aspects. As a result, the kibbutz movement went through economic and social crises, gradually privatizing its lands and giving up large portions of its cooperative model.

My grandfather was one of the founders of Kibbutz Ein-Shemer. He immigrated to Israel in the early 1930's, where he was appointed the head of the architecture-department of the Kibbutz. Only years after, in 1952, did he study architecture in Vienna. His architectural style was influenced by the legacy of the Bauhaus and International Style, with the attempt to connect that approach with the characteristics of the Israeli landscape and the functional aspects of the kibbutz's' life. He built cultural centers, classrooms, dining halls, and agricultural buildings, and he was the first Jewish architect to design a mosque in the nearby Arab village, Meisar. That was in 1960, seven years before the Six Day War, which began the Israeli occupation.

The Kibbutz, for me, along with its autobiographical aspect, is a representation of the broken Israeli dream. The physical and conceptual disintegration of the Kibbutz in the last decades are only one reflection of the breakdown that occurred in Israeli society as a whole.

As a result, the personal, social, and political origins of my work have always been accompanied by a larger interest in the existential and psychological aspects of collapse and disintegration. The biographical house or landscape, as well as the universal, are used in my paintings as metaphors for stability and belonging, or, on the flip side, anxiety, entropy, and lost. At the end of "The days of Awe," a text written by my father for his exhibition at Annina Nosei Gallery in New York in 2001, he describes the effects of political chaos in Israel:

..."This is how a Jewish state (altneuland) was improvised on the backs of the Palestinian peasants, who were mistaken for stones: part of the landscape, a virginal expanse of nature. Now lots of stones are flying around- the intifada, the revolt against the grid, the logic of the occupation.

One has to understand this place called "despair" or "dead end" as an Archimedean point of sorts. A man who no longer has anything to lose may change the history of an entire region or society. He could also become Pollock."(4)



Untitled, 2016, 73" X 24" (diptych), Acrylic and oil on printed image

Entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, is based on the idea that energy is more easily lost than obtained, and every system experiences a constant increase of disorder.

In his essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments", Robert Smithson examines the work of his contemporaries who base their practice "on the ice age, rather than the golden age", and would most likely agree with Vladimir Nabakov's observation that "The future is but the obsolete in reverse."(5)

The law of entropy tells us, according to Smithson, that in the future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all encompassing sameness. A single power remains linear, and it is the power of time, which dictates a constant and certain growth of clutter.

In another essay, titled "Sedimentation of the mind: Earth Projects," Smithson outlines the significance of earthworks with a beautiful painterly analogy between mental conditions and entropic geological activities:

"One's mind and the earth are in constant state of erosion. Mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries."(6)

Smithson was interested in the idea of entropy as it relates to time and the accumulation of history. His aim, largely realized in his monumental earthworks like *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and *Partially buried woodshed* (1970), was to create a work that would increase in meaning as it decreased in physical reality, a work that would gain in legend as it diminished in existence. Entropic art contains catastrophe, disruptions, mistakes and contradictions. Like the work of Smithson or his contemporary, Gordon Matta-Clark, who focused on the urban and constructed environment rather than the natural one, it is based on the unknown, composed out of deformation, errors, randomness, and chance. It reflects the bleached and fractured world that surrounds the artists as he tries to organize it into forms, patterns, grids, and subdivisions.

In a similar way, the Israeli artist Moshe Gershuni speaks about his paintings:

"I can talk about the world of forms that I make as a fluid world... a world of forms that are on the verge of a breakdown, as the last attempt to hold onto a form of something that falls apart, wearing out, becomes liquid. And this last attempt to hold on to a shape is the challenge, because otherwise the painting is sliced or fluid..."(7)

For the past two years, my work has been concerned with creating refractions, intersections, displacements, and interruptions in the painted landscapes as a way to translate the language of collage into painting.

My early paintings were all acrylic on canvas, based on photographs that were taken from different sources, and were used as the starting point of a process in which I intentionally complicated and challenged my ability to anticipate the result. This process involved painting layers of images and covering parts of them with tape, which (in most cases) was taken off later on in order to reveal aspects of an earlier layer. Fragments of images of architectural structures and landscapes were assembled one next to the other, presenting an unexpected and enigmatic intersection of the natural and the fabricated. With hard-edged lines, gestural brushstrokes, and fluid poured paint—transparent to thick, concrete to organic, present to hidden—the paintings revealed in the experience of remote landscapes, both nostalgic and wounded.



Untitled, 2014, 29" X 40", Acrylic on canvas



Untitled, 2014, 29" X 40", Acrylic and tape on canvas



Untitled, 2014, 46" X 60", Acrylic on canvas

Later on I became more interested in the relationship between the architectural motives within the paintings and the architecture of the space that I was working in.

The work *MAPAMs' (United Workers' Party) Building* (2015)^{pp.13} was a site-specific mural I did for Java Studios Gallery in Brooklyn as a part of a group show titled "Sidewalk Trophy." The image was of a building in Israel that was planned and built by my grandfather in the '50s for the United Worker's Party ("MAPAM"). It was a very iconic building at the time, symbolizing a political reality in the beginning of the newly established country. The building continued to be used by the party until the mid-90s, when it was finally sold to a private entity. Following the purchase of the building, it was closed and abandoned for many years, then demolished. As impetus for the work, I used a picture taken in the building's last years that showcased the deserted and decaying structure.

The gallery space itself was located in the lounge area of a large studio building. The door and the façade walls of the gallery were made of glass, defining the exhibition space. The image of the building was divided into two parts, with a glass wall in between, beginning from the outside perimeter of the gallery and continuing into the gallery space. I used a projector to trace the photographic image for *MAPAMs' Building* directly onto the wall. In order to distort the image and relate it to the space, I decided to paint the right side of the building higher than the left.

The twisted continuity of the neglected historical structure floated unmoored on the white gallery wall, the fracture exaggerated by the cold glass. This bifurcation of the pictorial reference lent the piece a sense of nostalgia, like a broken dream, symbolizing the political and social shift in Israel today.



Installation view of *MAPAMs' Building* from The Java Project Gallery, 2015



Mapam's (United Workers Party) Building, 2015, 84" X 48", Acrylic on wall

In a different mural, *Dining hall* (2015)^{pp.14-15}, I projected a black and white image of a Kibbutz's dining hall onto the corner of my studio. The projection, which I moved a number of times within the space, was screened on the two corner walls and extended to the floor. Using the projector generated a built-in distortion, created as a result of the angle of the screen and its position on the wall. In some sections of the composition the screened building was traced more realistically and detailed, while in other sections it was rendered fully abstract. On the right wall, the typical Kibbutz dining hall image was painted in a representational illusionistic way. Black and white marks both constructed the structure onto the wall and merged it into it; the white studio wall became the wall of the painted image. Sloping in a diagonal angle onto the left wall, the out-of-focus image converted into blurry expressive gestures and drips, limited only by its defined edge. Turning again onto the stained gray studio floor, the painting returned to its accurate descriptive line and revealed the opposite side of the dining hall building.



Dining hall (Kibbutz), 2015, 72" X 108", Acrylic on wall



Dining hall
(Kibbutz), 2015
72" X 108",
Acrylic on wall



Culture club
(Kibbutz), 2015
47" X 40"
Acrylic on wood
And wall

Dismissing the conventional borders of painting by working on the walls led to a group of paintings that were constructed out of multiple panels and found objects.

Shelter (2015)^{pp.18} is a corner triptych made out of two canvases and a wood board. The image is composed of different photographs of neglected spaces, assembled together but continuous and broken, presenting a surreal and disturbing perspective of an under/above ground site. The different points of view intersecting one another deconstruct the higher and lower floors of the image. The foreground palette of dusty pinks and muddy yellows mixed with grays and black to increase contrast, both covers and reveals an under-painting of brighter saturated colors that appear as water or toxic fluids. The title of the work refers to underground bomb shelters in Israel, where this kind of architecture is engraved in the landscape in the same way that the reality of it is imprinted in our socio-political consciousness. In Israel, these structures became integral not only to the land's topography, but to urban life and existence.

In *Tower* (2015)^{pp.20}, I built the painting while painting the building. The work is made on three found panels: the bottom one is an off-white table surface while the upper two are dark brown Formica parts of IKEA furniture. Working on found objects and materials was a natural development that grew out of my interest in abandoned spaces. Just as the photographed site, the found surfaces came with their own baggage and history, echoing the presence of the structure painted on top of them.

Unlike canvas, the smooth surface of the boards acts as a non-absorptive material. I used the surface's physical rejection of watery paint and the fragmentation that results from it, to emphasize other inherent clashes in the painting. The constructed painting presents contrasts in color and in shapes: a light blue spray paint marks the sky over the dark background, defining the sharp outlines of the building and trees, next to fluid organic patches and drips of watery color that represent trees and vegetation in some areas, and a rock or ground in others.



Shelter, 2015, 48" X 82" (Corner triptych), Acrylic on canvas and panels



Untitled, 2015, 16" X 26" (diptych), Acrylic on multiple panels



Tower, 2015, 90"x23" (triptych), Acrylic on wood panels



Yaffo, 2015, 23" X 63" (diptych), Acrylic on wood panels



Untitled, 2015, 53" X 30" (diptych), Acrylic on panels

I became more aware of the actual space in which I was working and its relation to my physical body. Space, scale and bodily gesture became part of my approach to the work, an attempt not only to create a descriptive image of destruction and deconstruction, but also to be one.

Untitled (2015)^{pp.24-25} is an installation consisting of two rolls of paintings, each 8 ft long, suspended vertically from the ceiling to the floor of my studio and separated by a distance of 10-20 inches. The two rolls began as prints of a panoramic landscape photograph that I found. Abstracted forms—organic and geometric—were then expressively painted over the printed landscapes, sabotaging the panoramic view and changing the direction of the ground. These references to destruction and ruin increase the work's motion of collapse and are embedded in the topography. Erosion, collapse, a dug abyss, they have always been there as a potential fracture hidden in the pastoral landscape.

The process of these works involves ruining or risking something precious. Whether I find the print or make it, the object becomes valuable once I decide to work with it. Cutting and painting over the image requires a certain detachment, and the confidence of creating something new. The gestures and forms deconstruct and dismiss their photographic referents, but they also create a dialogue with the original printed image. This way of working allows me to detach the painting from its primary source, content, and value, and react to the new object as refined and present.

Untitled, 2015
98" X 51",
Acrylic on printed
image





Untitled, 2015
98" X 51",
Acrylic on printed
image

Wadi (2016)^{pp.26-27}, the latest in this series of works, is constructed out of four strips of thin MDF panels, each 12 feet long, with a printed photograph of a panoramic landscape of the Israeli desert mounted on top of them. The four strips are leaned against the wall, curving 5' long onto the floor and into the space, with a gap of 4" between each strip. The horizontal landscape, once again rotated vertically, is bent between the wall and the floor of the space, acting as a resonance of the narrow valley created by the mountains that surround it in the photograph. "Wadi", the title of the work, is taken from the Hebrew (originally Arabic) word describing this form of a river-valley.

I see this piece as the culmination of many integral steps I have taken in my working process over the last two years. In it resides the shifted ground of the implanted photograph; the fragmentation of the painting's surface and the use of multiple panels; found objects and found images; dealings with space, scale, and structure contained both within the work and in relation to architectural space and bodily presence; and finally, the deconstruction of conventional boundaries between painting and that of sculpture (object), photography, and architecture.



Wadi, 2016, 144" X 60" X 60", Acrylic on printed image and MDF



Wadi, 2016, 144" X 60" X 60", Acrylic on printed image and MDF

My painting is always two steps ahead of me. It holds knowledge and wisdom that I can only put into words in retrospect. "You make art from the waist up" my father once told me, discussing the directional movement of the visceral knowledge as it makes its way to intellectual awareness. Uncertainty and instability are embodied in this method of working, from the body to the mind. So are trust and confidence.

The feeling of the ground falling under your feet is simultaneously physical and emotional, vertical and horizontal. It's the feeling of an earthquake, but also like waking up from a dream; the moment of a breaking heart or falling in love; ascending on an airplane and migrating to a faraway land; being both home-sick and distance-sick; sensing the sweet and bitter taste of nostalgia and fantasy.

These undercurrents, with their associations of destruction and reconstruction, raise a continuous and unresolved assumptions, in which in my view and experience, utopia and entropy, inform my work and by extension, the foundational premise of Painting.



Untitled, 2015, 19" X 27", Acrylic on wood

1. Samuel Bickels, "Planning the Kibbutz Settlement" [1945] (Heb.), in Arie Fichman, ed., Data for Kibbutz Settlement Planning Data 1947 (Ein Harod: The Work Seminar of the Kibbutz Meuchad, 1955). 2. *ibid.*
2. Keshet rosenblum, Haaretz newspaper, April 2013. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/architecture/premium-1.2003195>
3. Arie Sharon, Kibbutz+Bauhaus: An Architects Way in a New Land, (Karl Kramer Verlag Stuttgart and Massada Israel, 1976)
4. Tsibi Geva, Mount of Things, Tel Aviv Museum, 2008. 184
5. Robert Smithson, Entropy and the New Monuments, from Unpublished Writings in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, edited by Jack Flam, published University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2nd Edition 1996
6. Robert Smithson, A Sedimentation of the mind- Earth projects. Artforum September 1968
7. Moshe Gershuni , from an interview at "the Fruidian place in Jaffa" in 1995, Studio Magazine 76, 1996.

www.michalgevaart.com

(c) Michal Geva, 2016

