

## **Burning Concerns: Delving into the Heart of the Conflict**

Tami Katz-Freiman

“There will be a wall consisting of tires, a wall with *keffiyehs*, a wall with *balatas*, and in-between all these – hovering birds,” this is how Tsibi Geva describes to me the crystallizing contours of the exhibition in Berlin. Four motifs laden with various combinations and interconnections, all of them quintessentially belonging in the Israeli context, but at the same time transmitting on a universal frequency intense feelings of anxiety, disconcert, and tension.

Dialectics and conflict are keywords essential to the understanding of Geva’s *oeuvre*. They are imbedded in the details and dominate the whole. It begins with the fact that his paintings perpetually converse with two sources: on one hand, the place from which he comes and to which he feels he belongs – Israel, the Middle East; on the other hand, the modernist western traditions of abstract painting. The dialectic tension between these two origins and the fundamental conflict they represent underlie his work, reflecting Israel’s heterogeneous setting and conflicted syntax. Likewise, the symbolism of each and every one of the motifs he has been addressing for over a decade now is imbued with intrinsic dialectics. Things become even more complicated when one tries to extract the meaning of the fine nuances. Geva’s work may be unraveled layer by layer; its meanings peeled off like an onion.

No matter how one views his work – which *prima facie* may be read as a modernist pattern, abstract painting or Oriental ornamentality – it cannot be mediated to a foreign audience without anchoring it in the intricate

preoccupation with local politics and identity. The point of departure is always an image of an object (*keffiyeh*, *balata*, tire) drawn from the immediate environs, from the cultural-political reality whose tangled characteristics are instilled in him. The processing is accomplished via filters of abstract painting, that reformulate the same image within the cultural field.

It is this act of image appropriation that embodies the nucleus of meaning. For example, the *keffiyeh* – a folkloric item of clothing and a political icon – is highly-charged in the Middle Eastern context: since the outbreak of the first *Intifada* (Palestinian uprising), the *keffiyeh* image is identified with the Palestinian society fighting for its independence. In the more distant past, before the establishment of the State of Israel, the *keffiyeh* was adopted by the fighters of the Jewish National Military Organization (IZL), who used it as a head covering and a scarf, as part of the Zionist desire to assimilate into the Middle East. The Arab was perceived at the time as an archetype for the figure of the “New Jew” who tills his land and reclaims the desert. Nowadays, in the reality of the second *Intifada*, the *keffiyeh* is not only a head covering, but also a resistance-oriented face covering: it represents collective Palestinian identity, yet conceals the personal identity of the individuals who take part in the struggle.

The meanings associated with adoption of the *keffiyeh* motif by a Jewish-Israeli artist range from the cultural-political level to the emotional-psychological one. The *keffiyeh* ornament – an airy, frilled Oriental arabesque – functions in the new cultural context as a grid, a lattice, or a grate: seductive and illusive, but also blocking and delineating. The act of appropriation is, thus, multi-layered: an act of identification with the “other”, who is also the “enemy”; acknowledging his

existence and associating with his essence; a metaphor for cultural-political colonialism that appropriates imagery as well; but mainly – facing anxiety, aversion and rejection vis a vis the threatening psychological context (in the sense of “know thy enemy”).

In the current exhibition yet another twist of meaning is added: the *keffiyeh* motif appears on nine black archive boxes whose symbolic connotations as the “black box”, Pandora’s box of collective memory, adds yet another layer to the preoccupation with the phantoms of the conflict.

By the same token, the *balata* motif too, is not a naive one. The *balatas* enhanced by Geva into an extensive painterly field are the plainest, most inexpensive kind of floor-tiles, found in almost any Israeli home: a flat, chic-less object on which we walk without even noticing. *Balata* is the Arab word denoting the terrazzo tile, a word that naturally penetrated into Hebrew as part of the dynamic dialogue taking place between these two languages. *Balata* is also the name of a large refugee camp in the West Bank. Moreover, in the pre-*Intifada* days, the job of floor-tiling was carried out by Arab workers. The slang expression “*rosh balata*” in Hebrew parallels the English “blockhead”. The *balata*’s transformation into an abstract-cosmic painterly field furnishes this graceless object with near-pop-like qualities, but at the same time reinforces the sense of threat inherent in its contexts.

The *keffiyeh* and *balata* are supplemented in the present show by tires and birds, two motifs that made their debut in Geva’s *Notes on the Days of Awe II* exhibited within the framework of *Art Focus 3* (1999). In the bare concrete

space, underneath Jerusalem's municipal soccer stadium, Geva installed rows of black tires, from floor to ceiling. The burnt tires – another symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – became a barrier, a safety net delineating the space like a fence, a lattice, a grid, a shock-absorbing wall (Geva dubbed it “the death wall”). Alongside the tires were wall paintings depicting flowers and birds indigenous to Eretz-Israel.

In this show, the birds are painted on assorted surfaces – shelves, stovetops, windows, old billboards, and paint trays. Despite its romantic appearance, the bird image is also not as naive as it seems. It is taken from pedagogical textbooks for the “homeland nature”, which in the country's early days, were supposed to indoctrinate the spirit of patriotism and love of the land. Sharply shaded, black-and-white, Geva's birds are rather reminiscent of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Like black crows hovering over the site of disaster, waiting for catastrophe, they attest to the inner rift, the rupture, the sense of alienation, anxiety, disappointment, and despair.

An exceptional painting in the exhibition, in terms of color as well as content, leads the viewer in an even more apocalyptic direction. On the surface of a black wooden board, fire rises from the ground. Hovering above the flames is the Aramaic acronym: BS'D – With God's help. It is a new and ironic letter combination in Geva's secular work.

Does it attest to the magnitude of despair?

Translated by Daria Kassovsky