

Francis Mckee

To Live Outside The Law

In a small work from 1997 called *Underground Event* Nahum Tevet places his work on a shelf under a table supporting an architectural model of the Paracelsus Klinik in Marl, Germany. It is a scale model of the hospital, a classically white, modernist building set in a landscape of green lawns and trees. The simple table that supports it is designed to its own plain modernist principles. Indeed, although it was built specifically for the model, it recalls the tables of Nahum Tevet. Spotting the opportune moment, Tevet filled the space beneath the model with his own wooden pieces – cylinders, hollow cubes, rectangles, and naturally some small tables. The model was already pregnant with paradoxes. A visitor entered the Klinik only to be confronted again with its external view in the model. Standing within the full scale building, however, you were now viewing the whole edifice in miniature. By adding his own work, Tevet created a new, impossible basement to the building, filled with comparatively giant sculptural forms. The artist's gesture twisted space and time, highlighting the complex perceptions of the building that the model already generated.

There is an echo of Tevet's idea in an account of a proposed basement in the Pompidou Centre which was published first in 1976 by Albert Meister under the assumed name of Gustave Afeulpin. Meister imagines the creation of a 70 storey basement under the new French cultural centre. This underground space is to be an alternative to the high-powered world of contemporary art.

About the chairs: this was the miracle of this evening. While I was out someone proposed that in order to start saving, each one should bring at least one chair, that it was not necessary to buy new ones and that the money would be better used for equipment for creation ... It was a bit like the slap of Zen that suddenly opens the spirit and sparks off enlightenment....

Let's get back to the chairs...because this elementary furniture has set the tone for the centre. To opt for recuperated furniture meant that we were positioning ourselves radically apart from the fashionable cultural institutions, the luring design and the modern art filtered Kartell. It meant too, that we would straight

away give up culture as comfort (or comfort as culture, which is more common), that we were ready to reconsider all aspects of life as cultural phenomena, that to reflect on things as ordinary as the chairs was a prerequisite to be able to rethink every aspect of culture progressively.

It's clear that Nahum Tevet's work is complex and that *Underground Event* can be related to minimalism and modernist architecture. However, there is also a resonance with the fantasy of Albert Meister and a clear renunciation of the smooth predictabilities of the contemporary art scene. In its own way this serves as a reminder of the roots from which minimalism sprang: the use of industrial materials and the simplicity of form and construction that allied the work with the everyday world.

The way in which Tevet makes his work already underlines this. Each piece is carefully crafted in a studio that critics have noted is similar to a carpenter's workshop. Likewise, critics have noted his upbringing in a Kibbutz and how many of his pieces evoke the forms of the Spartan furniture that was used in these communities or in army camps. This evocation of furniture is, as Meister would say, positioning Tevet radically outside the orthodoxies of minimalism and the design conscious art world.

Moreover, since the early nineties, the time deliberately taken for construction of these increasingly large works defies the economies of contemporary art. Some of the largest pieces have stretched on several years in the making and are created through a process that moves beyond the world of deadlines and the production line:

My incessant engagement with repetitiveness and with one thing leading to another, and more and more, which in the end doesn't lead to anything, and that's how it has been throughout the years – but also in the development of a single work, *Seven Walks*, for example, which was quite a 'disturbed' dynamic of almost eight years of work on a single work, in which I added and added and then removed and removed and removed and so on. The dimensions of the work and the prolonged time of making it are connected with my move to a new studio outside town in a moshav, in what had actually been the gym hall of an abandoned school. Its dimensions became a condition of the work's growth, and it took several years to grow in this place.

The unused gymnasium in a moshav is itself a telling fact. Moshavs, like kibbutzes, are undergoing a transformation in Israel as they are compelled to abandon their collective,

socialist roots in favour of privatisation. The way of life they once stood for is now being jettisoned under the dictates of the free market.

The works conceived by Nahum Tevet have a melancholic quality that mirrors the passing of that world. In large works such as *Untitled 1995-96* or *Take Two* the pieces transform their rooms into something akin to a storage space. Often with these larger works there is a sense of everything being stacked, packed away, forgotten and invisible to the world outside. This quality of otherworldliness is reinforced when the works can be seen in natural light that provides new tones and infinite mutations of shade but lacks the persistent urgency of electric light.

The scale of these works alone persuades us to spend time with them. Their melancholy, abandoned air permits us to extend that time and takes us out of the hurried timeframes of contemporary life. The evocation of furniture and the expanse of semi-hidden forms invites us into another mental space, half-glimpsing private spaces, almost recognising certain shapes. Discussing the fundamental human need expressed in furniture, Gaston Bachelard says:

Wardrobe's with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life. Indeed without these "objects" and a few others in equally high favour, our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy. They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy."

Tevet's works share this sense of intimacy. The mass of wood, the nearly recognisable familiar forms, the serene colours and the endless nooks and crannies of each piece offer space where the viewer can lose oneself.

Such descriptions may, however, begin to sound too cosy. Tevet's work does not exist simply to provide comfort. And, in the long run, losing oneself is not a comfortable experience. The works may remind us of furniture but, finally, they exist beyond a clear identification with furniture. As the artist himself points out 'They are always reminiscent of things in the world, but they do not take part in it.'

As we walk around the pieces and, in some cases into the breach of some of them, we find ourselves in constant movement, always realigning our view of the work. This process of viewing is a deliberate result of Tevet's construction – 'In the final analysis,

the work is build so as not to allow you to stand quietly in one place, there's something unquiet about it, that pulls the carpet from under your feet.'

This restlessness compels us to constantly renew our perception of the work, putting the piece into motion as each element shifts in relation to the other and to our relative viewing position. What we experience is the phenomenon of parallax – the apparent motion of an object due to a change in the observer's position.

The effect of this phenomenon is to unsettle our sense of self. The certainty of our perceptions is one of the vital supports in the construction of a stable self. The ability to trust our senses and to take a sure measure of the world helps ground our relationship to the world around us. In Tevet's work that trust is challenged and we are bound to constantly recalculate our measurements of the world and our distance in relation to it. The losing of oneself takes on a much more fundamental meaning as the viewing process dismantles our certainties.

Observing the ever changing inventory of Tevet's storage-like works we are reminded of the ways in which our own lives can be recalibrated. As Italo Calvino puts it - 'Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.'

Tevet's works place us in a shifting world, sometimes almost familiar but never legible enough to grasp definitively. Space, time and truth all become relative constructs to be renegotiated. The object of perception becomes indescribable.

It is here that Tevet's work acts like the 'slap of Zen' described by Albert Meister. We enter a labyrinth of shifting signs, lose ourselves and find instead a space beyond the laws of contemporary living. What Tevet creates is an alternative mental ecology which extends our attention span, challenges our constructed identities and engages us in a protracted dialogue with our sensual environment. In *Underground Event*, almost an emblem of Tevet's work, the subterranean geometrical forms worked therapeutically to remind us of the principles underlying the modernist hospital. With larger scale works such as *Untitled 1995-96* or *Take Two* the pieces revise our understanding of the buildings they inhabit.