

Nahum Tevet

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Nahum Tevet, *Seven Walks*, 1997-2004, detail.

In the mid-1980s, geometrical abstraction was, for many, the artistic mode where the most exciting lines of thought, turns of style and artistic practices converged. It was the privileged locus of postmodernism's critique of modernist idealism, the vehicle for the triumphal entry of theory into the heart of contemporary art, and the perfect way for baby boomers to indulge in some knowing nostalgia. The artist who best articulated this moment in his writing, and most single-mindedly drove it home in his painting, was Peter Halley. In a 1983 statement, Halley described how he used the "codes" of Minimalism, Color Field Painting and Constructivism "to reveal the sociological basis of their origins." In the decades since, art that critiques modernist abstraction has become a seemingly permanent fixture, always finding new adherents (not unlike pop music subcultures such as hardcore punk that devolved from radical statements to stylistic options), while Neo Geo, the movement that brought Halley to prominence, has been installed in nearly every art historical account of the period.

Which brings me to my subject, Nahum Tevet, an Israeli artist who in the early 1980s also began to deploy the codes of bygone avant-garde movements, but under very different circumstances and with very different results. Born in 1946, Tevet launched his career in the early 1970s with work that was notably Spartan, even within the context of Post-Minimalism. Period photos record some Ryman-like wall pieces held together by paper clamps, masking tape, and string, and larger, flimsy-looking plywood and aluminum structures. The most striking of these early pieces were *Arrangement of Six Units* (1973-74) and *Corner* (1974). The “arranged units” are rectangles of thin plywood (roughly 2 by 5 feet each) resting on short wooden legs. In photographs of their original installation (at Sara Gilat Gallery in Jerusalem in 1974) they are jammed up against a wall. These structures resemble tables, benches or sleeping cots, but it’s clear that they are too low to sit at, too fragile to sit on and too narrow and hard for sleeping. Evoking an impoverished dormitory, they convey institutional regimentation (the institution could be educational, military or carceral). In *Corner*, Tevet gets by with even less: three plain wooden chairs and two pieces of plywood are configured to block off a corner of a room. One wonders to what extent the bleakness of these works reflects the mood in Israel following the Yom Kippur War of 1973.



Nahum Tevet, *Arrangement of Six Units*, 1973-74.

Although little known outside Israel, these early works of Tevet’s strike me as classics of Post-Minimalism, albeit a Post-Minimalism with distinctly Israeli inflections: in those cot-like structures one can read a metonymic history of a nation, from the grim bunks of the death camps to the socialist utilitarianism

of the early kibbutzes, to the regimented discomforts of service in the armed forces. Yet these sculptures—or should I say “horizontally installed monochrome paintings”?—also include an element that signals their departure from Post-Minimalism, a feature that signals Tevet’s emerging engagement with the medium of painting and with art history. I’m talking about the coat of white industrial paint applied to the exposed side of the plywood in both *Corner* and *Arrangement of Six Units*. Breaking, undramatically yet definitively with the “truth to materials” that was the rule for most Minimalist and Post-Minimalist sculpture, Tevet opens the path that will lead him, eventually to the complex sculptural-painting installations that constitute his major achievement.

When Tevet first started playing with the legacy of Constructivism and other related early-20th-century avant gardes in the mid 1980s, he was making multi-part wall reliefs with rather painterly surfaces. In these centrifugal compositions every element, which sometimes included found elements such as folding chairs, seemed to be moving away from a spinning core, as if cyclone had struck of gallery of works by Tatlin, El Lissitsky and Rodchenko. In the “Painting Lesson” series the centrifugal structures rose up from the floor. While Tevet’s work of the 1980s has striking similarities with art being produced in the U.S. at the same time by artists critically engaged with modernism there are points at which his work diverges from theirs, in its intent, its process and its meaning. Consider, for instance, Tevet’s relationship to the legacy of European modernism: as an artist born and raised in a nation where Bauhaus architecture was both symbolically and actually foundational, Tevet is obviously going to have a deeper, more invested relationship with his sources than artists living in a country whose architectural-ideological beginnings are Neo-Classical. There may be some big New York buildings designed by famous Bauhaus alumni but Tel Aviv, the city where Tevet has spent much of his working life (though he was born on a kibbutz) famously possesses more Bauhaus-style buildings than any other city in the world. What does this mean? For an American artist to fill his or her work with references to European modernism is something that generally comes without significant cultural or psychic cost; it’s a discretionary choice made from among the goods on offer in the cultural marketplace, rather than (as chez Tevet) the consequence of a decision to confront an important piece of one’s inescapable cultural patrimony.



Nahum Tevet, *Painting Lesson No. 4*, 1986.

By the mid 1990s, as Tevet continued to create floor-based sculptures, the paint had become flat and complex grids had tamed the centrifugal forces. It was now that the scale of the work began to grow dramatically, culminating in what may be the artist's masterpiece, *Seven Walks*, a sprawling installation that Tevet worked on from 1997 to 2004. At first glance, his large-scale projects such as *Seven Walks* or *A Page from a Catalogue* (1998), a version of which was included in the 1999 Carnegie International, don't come across as unified works of art. They feature dozens to hundreds of neatly made, evenly painted wood elements some of which stand upright on the floor, while others are stacked atop one another. Planar shapes predominate: boxes, sometimes with one side open; shelving units; miniature tables, often atop incredibly elongated legs; thin partitions; solid cubes; and here and there an anomalous more sculpted form such as a small boat hull.



Nahum Tevet, *A Page from a Catalogue Nimes Version*, 1998.

The ensemble looks like a random accumulation of parts waiting to be organized and assembled: think of the warehouse of a manufacturer of modernist furniture or a museum's collection of unused pedestals and display units, or an unfinished scale-model of some crowded city of windowless tower blocks; Martin Kippenberger's "Peter Sculptures" might also come to mind. Gradually, however, the logic (formal, structural, metaphorical) of Tevet's method begins to emerge. Visual rhythms and rhymes are established among the elements; structures take on anthropomorphic properties, especially in their interrelations; social issues are raised by the incessant divisions, enclosures, the ways in which the elements accommodate each other. (In the catalogue of Tevet's 1997 show at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, Lóránd Hegyi suggested that Tevet pursues a "dual strategy" by evoking the historical project of Constructivism while "deconstructing" it with "personal events and experiences.") And yet, crucially, this structure never completely emerges. The artist has said that he intentionally creates works that can never be seen in their entirety, that resist visual and mental assimilation: "Things are happening in the works that you can analyze but can't really grasp, because too many things are happening in them all at once, and you can't identify all of them—if you focus on one thing you don't see any of the others." (*Nahum Tevet: Works 1994-2006*, edited by Sarit Shapira, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 187) The best on-line resource for Tevet is his website: <http://www.tevet.net>.



Nahum Tevet, *Seven Walks*, 1997-2004.

To encounter such a work is like wandering through a city for the first time: each turning of a corner presents unexpected situations; moments of space-time remain disconnected, partial. In one sense, Tevet is the most sculptural of artists by making us so keenly aware of how the position of the viewer determines the perception of the work. Yet he also offers us something that is a notable property of painting: an infinity of possible trajectories through the work. The viewer's body moves around the work as if it were sculpture, while the eyes traverse it as if it were painting. In the past 20 years there have been a number of artists who have brilliantly engaged with both these mediums (Jessica Stockholder and Rachel Harrison come immediately to mind), but I can't think of anyone who has so fully integrated them. Tevet has also pushed his work far beyond its initial premises, something that few, if any, of the one-time stars of the Neo-Geo '80s have managed to achieve. It's time for more of us (the present writer included) to catch up with the work of this major artist.