

James Trainor  
**Thinking Small**

When I first met Nahum Tevet, he had everything he needed in a suitcase. It was a chilly November in 2010 in New York, and Tevet had just installed himself in rented rooms on a nondescript block on West 16th Street. In fact, the picture he presented was nothing less than the proverbial “one-suitcase man,” the itinerant figure who has judiciously edited, whittled down and eliminated all the extraneous matter of his far-flung existence so that it all packs and interleaves neatly—metaphorically as well as literally—into a single portable case. In his “shoebox,” as he later jokingly called it, he had brought with him for this self-imposed three-month sabbatical all the necessary materials for assembling and constructing a diminutive art work within the tight linear confines of a snug railroad flat, itself a domestic shoebox form requiring of the inhabitant an economy of means, movements and actions. It immediately struck me as a decidedly Duchampian enterprise, and like the grandfather of

Conceptualism’s famed *boîtes-en-valise*, Tevet’s suitcase was both handy museum and concentrated biography, shape-shifting self-portrait and retrospective inventory. The important difference, however, was that Tevet’s traveling salesman kit was not an endgame, it was not an ironic summation of a career. It was an active workshop, a studio for a man-on-the-go, a new beginning. From out of this carpenter’s portmanteau sprung a modest assembly line of wooden planes and panels, miniature Euclidian geometries, paint, glue, dowels and wood screws, objects waiting to be conjoined, shuffled, banished, reunited, and brought back into the fold.

The basic building blocks that comprise Tevet’s formal vocabulary of sculptural units (for both his small wall works and the large, sprawling, encyclopedically heroic sculptural installations) are simple, verging on the Platonically archetypal—the table, the chair, the box, the boat hull, the rectilinear plane, the book-like block, the framework armature, etc. Together they form a catalog of stock objects or inanimate familiars—the ubiquitous things of the world against which we take our own measure and gauge our presence. Two years later, visiting Tevet’s studio in a blocky warehouse in the industrial Shvil Hamifal area of Tel Aviv would be like gaining access to the central stockrooms of some vast and mysterious manufactory of which 16th Street was an itinerant outpost, a place where an archeology of disassembled components and parts is indexed and categorically arranged on industrial shelving. Tevet calls these varietal objects his readymades, yet in contrast to the Duchampian understanding of the term as a found object pressed by the artist into service in a work of art, Tevet’s inventory is all self-produced. Like the rows and rows of typesetter’s blocks at a printing house, the common denominator is that all these individual units comprise the resilient bits and pieces of an adjustable lexicon that hint at a narrative thread amidst the geometric abstraction. Some objects are brand new, with the lingering aroma of fresh paint and glue; others have been loitering for up to two decades on some upper shelf, waiting patiently to be assigned their syntactical purpose, or re-assigned a new role in a new context.

Back in Manhattan, in the context of the apartment that served as Tevet's somewhat cramped quarters during those months, the atmosphere was part monastery and part production line, the sequential arrangement of uniaxial tenement rooms (bathroom leading into kitchen leading into sitting room leading into bedroom, like coupled train compartments) echoing nicely Tevet's artisanal sequential working methods. One's first impression on surveying the miniature output of Tevet's workshop pinned to the plaster walls, arrayed like little handcrafted machines, ambiguous toys, or architectural models of nothing grander than themselves, was that he was permitting himself the liberty to play, engaging in an elevated expression of serious fun, slyly simple on the surface but drawing on a deep percolating aquifer of experiences and weighty calibrations of forms and associations developed over years and decades. As in a game of chess, the pieces comprising these intimate assemblages are limited, generically familiar, always the same. Yet within this confined framework of sameness lies a nearly infinite range of possibilities, configurations and potentials. As with the pieces of a chess match in-progress, each object seems to embody a carefully chosen set of opening moves, initial stratagems and intuitive gambits for charting the elusive path through a relationship of parts. They are, on this level, a set of manipulative and manipulable propositions, presented puzzle-like, and mathematical in their ability to express their values on multiple planes and from various viewpoints.

There is something playful and comically slapstick about this precariousness of vantage point and scale. The viewer, confronted, for example, with a nested configuration of chair, table, or skiff-like forms of different sizes projecting from the wall—some right-side-up, others resting on their side, some upside-down, abutting one another with a cabinetmaker's precision but seeming to occupy different realms of orientation—is required to constantly recalibrate and puzzle out an elusive "correct" point of view: What is up and what is down? What is large, what is small? Is this an aerial or ground-level view? What exactly am I looking at? What looks like a skiff seen from beneath the water could also suggest an old clothing iron seen from above. It is both, or neither—it is a mere block of wood, playing tricks.

As in the exquisitely controlled chaos of a Buster Keaton silent comedy, in which a pinwheeling house turning end over end transforms a floor into a ceiling, a wall into a floor, humdrum furniture into precipitous ledges or footholds, there is a sense of topsy-turvy domestic vertigo in these little worlds, scaled to the size of a human head, that Tevet fastens to the wall. And there is more than a whiff of Alice in Wonderland-like dislocation and skewed perceptual instability at play as well: when a miniature table is introduced to another one 95% its size, encountering it at, say, a 45-degree angle rotated on a perpendicular axis, is one object the original and the other the inexact copy? Is there a hierarchical system operating here to which we can be given the key? And what are we to make of our own comparative relationship to these objects that politely refuse to agree upon a definitive arrangement, function or relative size? Are we the Gulliver in this situation or the Lilliputians, or is the scale of our own presence immaterial to the event?

But, as viewers, we are beguiled and seduced by the kaleidoscopic, multiplying, mirroring, doubling, folding uncertainty either way. Anything that is labeled "drink

me”—as was Alice’s elixir—we have a difficult time turning away from. Like refracting jewels, like shiny new products rolling off the assembly line, they have us in their diminutive grasp. They are small and irresistible and they know it. And this fact raises the specter of trust and doubt, even for Tevet—how beautiful is too beautiful? Is their intimate toy-like size some sort of trick? Are these objects nothing more than alluring, spring-loaded traps? But one fundamental question raised by each object time after time—“why is it this way and not that way?”—contains within it the kernel of redemption of them all. Each iteration, with a certain degree of humility built-in, deflects attention towards all the many other versions of itself that it might have been, but is not and never will be. How original, how perfect can one thing be if you can make another one right next to it that is only minutely different? Together, as sequential propositions on the wall, the individual works begin to set up amongst themselves a “family dialogue,” as Tevet refers to the kibitzing compositional discourse that takes place. They are snippets of dialogue that admit to being fragments, not final proclamations or summations. And from the wall they beckon and cajole, arguing multiple lines of reasoning from every angle without settling on a conclusion. Resisting the rigid authoritativeness of perfection that comes with any singular object, they opt instead for the suggestion of a salutary indeterminacy, finding their freedom as kindred events, slipping in and out of symmetries and synchronicities, all happening at the same time.