

Nahum Tevet in Conversation with Sarah Watson

This conversation took place in New York on June 24, 2016, while Nahum Tevet was preparing for the exhibition *Nahum Tevet: Works on Glass, 1972–1975*, the first time that this body of work has been exhibited as a comprehensive series. Tevet discussed a variety of topics, including his early artistic influences, Israeli art of the 1970s, and the development of the works on glass, while reflecting on more than four decades of artistic production.

Sarah Watson: You were raised in a kibbutz and have discussed how the kibbutz education system was very supportive of art. How did your experience in the kibbutz system guide your artistic interest?

Nahum Tevet: The educational system in the kibbutz movement was very different from the regular school system: it took part in an ambitious, ideologically motivated, socialist—if not communist—modernist project, influenced by advanced European thinkers of pedagogy, such as Rudolf Steiner. There was room for music, sports, gardening, as well as lessons in painting and other arts. I was into the visual arts from childhood on, and I was strongly encouraged by the art teacher at the local high school. Around the age of fifteen I started taking professional college level art classes once a week.

SW: Where did you take lessons?

NT: At a Teachers' College, Oranim Kibbutzim College, about an hour away from Kibbutz Messilot where I was raised, and which is located in the Beit She'an Valley, not far from the Jordan River—about a thirty-minute drive from the Sea of Galilee. For the first year, I studied drawing with Marcel Janco, the Dadaist. For the next two years I studied oil painting. Then in 1966 I went into the army.

SW: How long did you serve in the army?

NT: The Six-Day War broke out in the middle of my service, which was therefore extended to three years. After the army, I went back to the kibbutz and once a week I started going to Tel Aviv to study painting at the Avni Institute of Art. I was relatively well-informed about art through *Time* and *Life*. Every Friday after dinner, I would go to the kibbutz reading room and steal the art section from both magazines. At that time, in *Life*, there were very good reproductions of works by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Smithson, and the like. This was the source of my art education. Having all this information in mind and going to an old-fashioned, traditional painting school, I realized after a while that it was not the right place for me.

Every week, when I went to Tel Aviv, I would go to the galleries. There were very few, and only one or two galleries that clearly featured the avant-garde of the moment—Gordon Gallery, Yodfat Gallery, and sometimes Mabat Gallery. They showed art from the late 1960s and the younger, more advanced artists of the time. I realized that the most interesting among the new artists coming to the scene were former students of the painter Raffi Lavie, so I got in touch with him.

SW: When did you start studying with Raffi Lavie?

NT: In late 1969, early 1970. I studied painting with Raffi on a weekly basis—one-hour meetings at his home. He was very generous. In his backyard, there was a little structure, falling apart, which was his former studio. He allowed me to paint there for two days a week. I worked with him for about a year, after which he told me, "Okay, you are now an artist." I was painting then with acrylic-based paint on plywood. My interests were in the possibilities of easily changing the format and the shape of a painting while painting it.

At this time Raffi was initiating group shows for young artists in Tel Aviv and was leading an art group called "10+," which had started about ten years earlier, in 1965.

SW: Who were the artists in 10+?

NT: Lavie, Buky Schwartz, Yoav Bar-El, Ran Shchori, Michael Druks, Rita Alima, and Henry Sheleznyak, among others.*They brought new sensibilities to the Israeli art scene, which until then had been dominated by a sort of French-influenced lyrical abstraction.

SW: And so Lavie really provided a support system for young artists?

NT: Yes, he did. In addition to me, there were other artists who were all somehow connected with him. They included EfratNatan, Michal Na'aman, Tamar Getter, David Ginton, Ehud Pecker, DganitBerest, YairGarbuz, and a few others—a strong group of young artists. Raffi Lavie played the role of impresario and organized exhibitions in different venues. My first group show was in 1971, in an exhibition he organized at the Artists House Tel Aviv, titled *New Faces*. In 1972, Lavie became the curator of the Sara Gilat Gallery in Jerusalem. He showed the work of this group of artists as well as his own work and that of other, older artists like Moshe Kupferman.

SW: In addition to Raffi Lavie, you have cited Yona Fischer, the curator of the Israel Museum, as a major influence on your artistic development. Was this influence derived from the exhibitions he presented at the Israel Museum,

** Michael Druks was not formally a member of IO+ but he was among the many artists whom Raffi Lavie invited regularly to exhibit with the group.*

such as *Concept + Information*, in 1971, and *Beyond Drawing*, in 1974? The first personal encounter you had with him was not until Rauschenberg's visit to Israel in 1974, right?

NT: This is true. Yona Fischer was a great and inspiring curator; he showed the best Israeli painters of the late 1960s and early 1970s, like Arie Aroch, Raffi Lavie, and Moshe Kupferman, and younger Israeli artists like Benni Efrat, Joshua Neustein, and Pinchas Cohen Gan. He also organized solo shows of Sol LeWitt, Douglas Huebler, Christian Boltanski, etc. He did not pay much attention to the young "Tel Aviv" scene nurtured by Lavie. We did not meet until Rauschenberg asked to see me.

SW: Your first solo show was at the Sara Gilat Gallery in 1972, and it included a few of the early glass works. Was there a catalyst that led you to begin making works on glass?

NT: In my first show at the Sara Gilat Gallery, I exhibited a few glass works and some floor and leaning wall sculptures, as well as what one might call "paintings." One of them, for example, was a large standard-sized (240x120x0.6 cm) sheet of plywood thinly whitewashed, sort of held on the wall by threaded steel wire and some tapes or nails. In these larger objects, I used found materials from my immediate surroundings such as wires, wooden sticks, masking tapes, etc. I did drawings that were actually sort of mixed-media collages at home. The works on glass grew out from these works on paper, in continuity with their inner collagist attitude; there were drawings or papers attached with masking tape and other means to the front of the glass sheet "protecting" the paper work.

SW: The use of these materials is akin to what you see in the Arte Povera movement originating in Italy in the 1960s. This interest in the use of everyday common materials was prevalent in a lot of the work made in Israel during this time, particularly in Tel Aviv. The 1986 exhibition *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art*, curated by Sara Breitberg-Semel, which included some of your works on glass, explored the use of these materials, defined by Breitberg-Semel as "meager materials"—"dal," in Hebrew. You have said that you disagreed with the theory that the use of these materials represented something uniquely Israeli in the work.

NT: There was a lot of this type of work in Tel Aviv in the 1970s, this is true, but I never thought this sensibility was uniquely Israeli. I remember asking Sara, "what about [Kurt] Schwitters?" I was thinking that "meager materials" was not a sufficient enough criterion for "Israeli Art."

SW: You mentioned, and I am quoting you: "I always thought the interesting potential for Israeli art might happen by what I called 'mistakes in translations.'" Can you explain what you mean by this? As you see it, are there examples of these "mistakes in translation" at play in the glass works?

NT: Since its very beginning in the early twentieth century, Israeli Art was looking for its identity. The big question was "What is Israeli in Israeli Art?" Naturally, there was interest in the local imagery of the place and its landscapes—the "building of a Nation" narrative—and also in more abstract subject matters like the local light, or claiming a certain sensibility for materials (*The Want of Matter* show, for example). It was done mostly by adopting/importing a given dominant language or a timely style from Europe, from Paris, or later from New York. So there is a question of "digestion" of "translation into Hebrew." I was thinking for example that if you can paint perfectly fine German Expressionist paintings with local imagery, or an excellent, high-quality French abstraction with local light, it may not be enough. And the same holds for minimal or conceptual art. You are surely in an inferior position, and it is important to be aware of it. You are not taking part in the main discourse, so there is no reason to pretend you are and to work according to certain dominant models.

I saw international art only through reproductions until 1975, and I was seeing it while being in a completely different context. You could not live in a relatively poor socialist kibbutz and pretend to be Donald Judd or Richard Serra. This offered a great sense of freedom: you could respond to models coming from the "center" with an outsider eye. You could manipulate the *language*—create your own interpretations, sometimes the result of potentially fruitful misunderstandings; you could play the game differently, and not obey the *rules*.

In the glass work and my other works of the early '70s, I was dealing with minimalist and conceptual ideas, working with a "wrong language" full of "spelling mistakes." I was inventing a private non-rational "system" while using simple found materials from my immediate surroundings. I was interested in the American/European Minimal and Conceptual art that Yona Fischer was showing at the Israel Museum, but I was dealing with it with a warmer, maybe synthetic, approach—that of materials I found around the kibbutz mixed with a Tel Avivian accent. It turned out productive, I believe.

SW: You created the works on glass from 1972 to 1975, but the series was interrupted by the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Do

you see a difference between the first part of the series [1972–73] and the second part [1974–75], which started when you returned from the war?

NT: I think that you can see in the early works on glass that they were much more abstract than the later ones and typical of what I was interested in in 1972. I was then making paintings and objects searching for some kind of “truth to the material.”

From 1970 to 1971, while I was working in my studio, still in the kibbutz, I realized that I was less interested in what was happening on the canvas (which was Raffi Lavie’s model), and more in the painting as an object and the ways in which it relates to what was outside of it, to the world—and “the world,” for that matter, was the space of a given place, the room, the walls, etc. “How should it hang? How does it stand? Why? And why here?” Or “How does this thing allow itself to occupy a place in the world?”

I dealt with this question by exploring and presenting the simple mechanism that enables the thing to happen. This is achieved sometimes by emphasizing the various devices which allow a certain object to appear the way it does: the bare glass, the nail and wire holding it, the definition of the borders of the glass sheet, etc. This was also the case with the other works I was doing at this time, the objects, the paintings, and the installations.

The first part of the series was done in the kibbutz in 1972. In 1973, I concentrated on larger objects. I moved out of the kibbutz to live near Tel Aviv three weeks before the Yom Kippur War suddenly broke out in October 1973. I was drafted for a very long time, even though the war was short.

SW: Did you stop making work during the war?

NT: While drafted, I was not making any art, except for many small sketches for future works. I got stuck in the army until February or March of 1974. So, I actually started my life outside of the kibbutz with my wife and son around March of 1974.

SW: It was also after the Yom Kippur War that you met Robert Rauschenberg, while he was in Israel preparing for his exhibition at the Israel Museum, *Robert Rauschenberg in Israel* [May 29–August 3, 1974]. How did you meet him?

NT: Rauschenberg came to Israel in May 1974, and some of the glass works were on view at the Sara Gilat Gallery, where his partner Robert Petersen had a show. Rauschenberg saw the works there and he got very excited. I was invited to go to the museum to meet with him. I was sort of surprised; here was this great artist with a whiskey glass in his hand and music playing and five or six people working with him. It was like a party. It was the complete opposite of my image of “serious art-making.” But it was really exciting that he was very interested in the glass works and also in my larger paintings and installations. After returning home he invited me to come to New York; he even sent me a small grant.

SW: Did you come to New York?

NT: No, unfortunately, I could not come. I came only in 1979.

SW: Rauschenberg purchased a few of the glass works. Did meeting him and registering his interest in your work influence the series?

NT: When Rauschenberg went back to New York, he left me a package of materials. I was excited by this nice gesture, especially since among the materials in the box there were some that you could not find in Israel at that time, like the wide silver tape I used in some of the glass works. All of this encouraged me to look at this series again and to continue working on it.

The second group of glass works, made between 1974 and 1975, started from where I had left off with the first group, early in 1973, but eventually reflected ideas that I was busy with in my sculptural installations (like *Corner*, 1973–74). In these installations, painting is signified by the fact that a given surface—a 3-mm plywood standard-size panel—would be covered with a very thin layer of white acrylic-based house paint, as if it were the ground for a painting to come. I was seeing any surface covered by paint as “A Painting.” These “paintings” were activated in various installations in given spaces, for example *Arrangement of Six Units* [1973–74] at the Sara Gilat Gallery. In these installations, I actually removed the monochrome paintings from the wall and activated them in space, as if the paintings were looking for a place for themselves in the world—a place to function in it.

Something like this actually happened with many of the glass works done in 1974 and 1975. Not only was I interested in the way a work was hung, the two sides of the glass sheet, etc., but I invented justifications for making it—personal fictional “systems” that I spoke of as “excuses.” Systems to allow the object to function in the real world or to become part of a real object.

SW: Your work has a strong sense of place—or an orientation to the world that seems to be achieved through these systems or, as you call them, “excuses,” that you create for yourself in making the work. You have talked about how the drawings, diagrams, and measurements of the glass works function as instructions, so to speak, to allow the works to have the potential to be more than just an object to look at, that they could be a window pane, a tabletop cover, etc. Can you elaborate on these systems?

NT: For example, many of the glass works, such as *Untitled #28*, *Untitled #29*, and *Untitled #30* have geometric forms

drawn on them, a circle or a square; so it's a question of how can you make something that is geometric and is not only an empty, formal, abstract shape? Here it appears as if I am taking the glass, and the glass should be used as a window or a table top. In the kibbutz, in the 1950s, if there was a table you wanted to protect, you would put a piece of glass on top. Actually, one of these works has a note in Hebrew that says, "this is a glass for the window, to fix a window." Basically the idea was that "this is a sketch for an object in the world."

SW: Thirteen of the works on glass were shown at the GalerieSchmela in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1975. GalerieSchmela was one of the most important galleries in Germany during the postwar period, representing artists like Joseph Beuys, Arman, Gerhard Richter, Hans Haacke, Christo, Lucio Fontana, Robert Indiana, Yves Klein, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jean Tinguely, Richard Tuttle, and the list goes on. How did you become connected with Alfred Schmela?

NT: My glass works were shown by the Tel Aviv-based Delson-Richter Gallery at the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland, in 1975. Horace Richter invited me to join him in Basel. This was the first time I went abroad. In Basel, I met Joshua Neustein, Michael Gitlin, and Zvi Goldstein, who later became colleagues. At this time, many artists from America and Europe would go to the fair and it became a meeting place for artists. I was very naïve and dared not approach the gallerists, not until Michael Gitlin convinced me to do so. I had no portfolio, just a plastic bag with some small pictures thrown in it and some slides I could show with my son's toy slide-viewer. I started approaching galleries. I saw one booth where there was an older man with a big beard standing there with his daughter. No one was visiting their space, and yet there was a big, wonderful Rauschenberg, and a Cy Twombly, and a Joseph Beuys in his booth. Since he was just standing there, I asked, "Would you mind looking at my work, sir?" He said, "Why not?" I opened my bag and showed him two or three images. He immediately asked me where he could see the originals and I said, "At Richter's stand." This was in the evening and the fair was about to close. He said, "Tomorrow morning, ten o'clock sharp, I'll be at the booth." I didn't know Schmela, or how important he was.

SW: You were unaware of the history of the gallery?

NT: I had no idea. I went back to Richter and I told him, "Tomorrow someone named Schmela will come." He said, "Wow!" He started cleaning up the place, and Schmela came the next morning at ten o'clock sharp. He started to look at my work and he said, "Oh, I forgot my eyeglasses at my stand, let's go there." However, as we walked away he immediately opened his jacket and he showed me his glasses. He said, "Come with me. We'll do a show."

SW: Hunter College's *Nahum Tevet: Works on Glass, 1972-1975* marks the first time all of your works on glass have been shown together. Up until now the Schmela show in 1975 was the largest exhibition of this body of work. In preparing for the exhibition at Hunter, you have spent a great deal of time revisiting the glass works. Has reflecting on this series, over forty years since its making, revealed anything to you about your practice and/or how you interpret the glass works within your oeuvre?

NT: It was like going back in time, to my very first years as a young artist, and it seems to be so different from what I have been doing in recent years. Last winter, when I started preparing for this works on glass exhibition, I had an exhibition of my recent works at the Mishkan Museum of Art, EinHarod, a famous kibbutz in Israel. The exhibition included a *Table* from 2014—a sculpture that pretends to have the potential to function in real life. I was thinking of the sketches of tabletops from the early glass works, wondering: Are they finally being made as *real* things?

The EinHarod show also included a very colorful and intricate large room installation, which was made out of many furniture-like wooden modular units that are minimalist-looking and made out of plywood. All of these units were produced at my studio, where I play the role of the handicraftsman in a pre-industrial workshop, not unlike that of the potential glasscutter in the works on glass from 1974 and 1975. One can point out many intricate differences and connections between my work now and then; however, it is quite apparent that the minimalist puritan attitude of the work from the '70s is currently taking part in my minimal/maximal and sometimes very large, spectacular, and complex labyrinthine installations. I feel like I went on a very long journey, yet there are all these ideas in the later work that see their starting points crystalized in the glass works, paintings, and sculptures from the early '70s.