Art

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Amikam Toren

Interviewed by Patricia Bickers

Re-representation

Francis Frascina

Women + Art +

Jennifer Thatcher

Tania Candiani

Profile by Rob La Frenais

Amikam Toren interviewed by Patricia Bickers

[redacted]RE-TOREN

Armchair Painting: Untitled (worship here) 2007

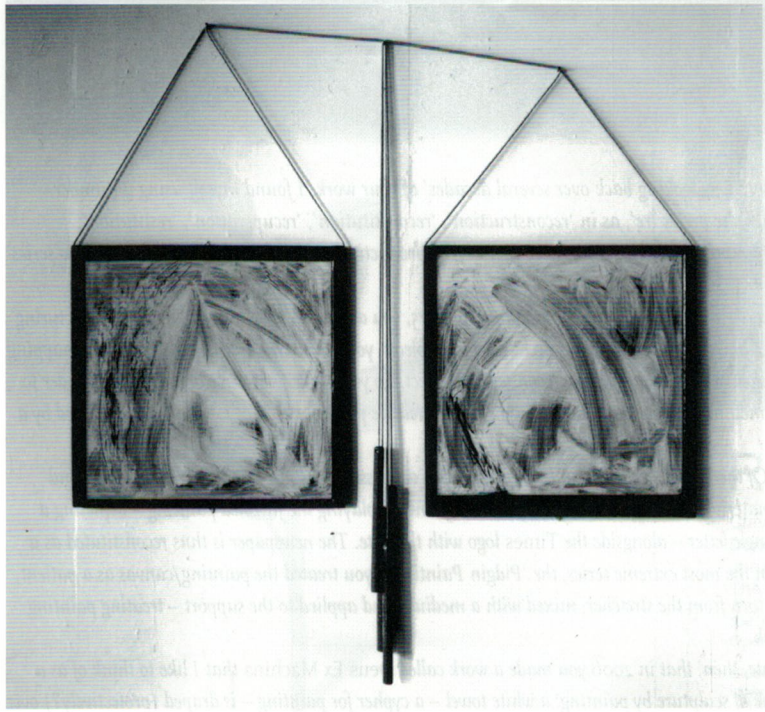
Patricia Bickers *When I was looking back over several decades' of your work, I found myself using a number of words beginning with the prefix 're', as in 'reconstruction', 'reconstitution', 'recuperation', 'restitution', 'representation' – or re-representation – and, more recently, 'reproduction', a word used in the title of a new series of works.*

In one of the first series I remember, 'Simple Fractions' of 1975, you addressed sculpture by breaking – fracturing – milk bottles and, as though they were precious archaeological objects, you reconstructed them, in each case mapping the breaks in a drawing displayed alongside the reconstructed object. So you broke the source object down in order to reform it and make something new, a metaphor perhaps for the creative process, one that is necessarily preceded by a destructive process.

Similarly, in the 'Of the Times' series begun in the 1980s you addressed painting by pulping newspapers and mixing the resulting material with PVA medium to form the paint, displaying the finished painting – depicting a form derived from a single letter – alongside the Times *logo with the date. The newspaper is thus reconstituted as a painting, as art. But in the most extreme series, the 'Pidgin Paintings', you treated the painting/canvas as a patient, pulping canvas cut or torn from the stretcher, mixed with a medium and applied to the support – treating painting by painting, so to speak.*

It seems appropriate, then, that in 2006 you made a work called Deus Ex Machina *that I like to think of as a kind of dramatic rescue of sculpture by painting: a white towel – a cypher for painting – is draped (protectively?) over a collapsing concertina drying frame which is reinforced by a steel armature.*

Amikam Toren A crutch – yes. Destruction-as-a-metaphor is well established in art. But I use destruction practically, in a non-metaphorical way. My approach to making art is aided largely by 'tactile' thought, it



Reproduction (Three Men and a Pregnant Woman) 2013

Safety Regulation Painting No 5 1989

forces action first and then reflection – or analysis – follows. Though I see my output as propositional, the thinking is largely tactile, and that is the case even with all the text-based works I have ever made, and there is a good deal of text in my work.

The 'Simple Fractions' series was an important moment in the history of the making of my work. Mapping the reconstructed bottle enabled me to see how much precision there was in the destructive process. And more importantly I realised how vital the possibility/impossibility of representation was to me as a subject. It gave me the green light to paint without it being a return to painting. Traditionally, representation was the domain of painting. I wanted to bring to the practice the lessons I had learned from my work with fragments and give it a propositional option – painting with a question mark.

It is a commonplace of art criticism to write of the crisis – even death – of painting but not of sculpture as a category. Perhaps this is because it has morphed into installation or other forms?

Yes. Over the years sculpture has been able to acquire a wider brief. Work that was defined as performance, installation or video installation and so forth came under the category with comfort because it was handled within space – which is the domain of sculpture.

Painting, though, was excluded from those explorations, and it seemed smug and conservative. It was a kind of category unto itself – always on the wall or within a frame of some kind. It needed to be reapproached – not in terms of image-making, but in terms of questioning everything about the process of its making: what is painting made of? What is paint? What is the relationship between painting and the rest of the world? Where do you place it?

The interesting thing to me about this process of reapproaching painting was that it enabled me to use representation (which itself is a very traditional form) as an axe with which to demolish painting and reinvent it.

I ended up reversing the maxim that representation excludes its subject. This opened up everything and paved the way towards a fresh practice.

You re-presented painting?

Yes, but this was an extension of the way I was already working with other objects – chairs, teapots, windows or whatever – the rest of the ordinary world. Painting was there, just one of many items, like newspapers, cardboard boxes and so on, part of what I saw as a non-hierarchical order of things, all of which were available to me.

And yet painting does enjoy a special status, particularly in the market, and when you began to make the 'Armchair Painting' series, a riff on Henri Matisse's paintings for the bourgeoisie, you seemed to be taking on painting's special status – I'm thinking here of Untitled: Worship Here *of 2007, a seascape which, unusually for the series, is in a gilded frame. The cutting of the words directly into the canvas support could be construed as an act of aggression towards painting.*

I did cut them lovingly.

Yes, paradoxically. You have said that in creating real space through cutting into the surface you are attacking illusion in a manner that relates perhaps to Lucio Fontana's 'Concetti spaziale' paintings, in

the sense of cutting through to the other side.
Yes, but my other side isn't a metaphoric 'other side', it is the immediate wall behind the paintings. Fontana had this receding black space on the other side, which I don't believe in. I wanted the immediacy of the ordinariness of it. In other words, that little space which is trapped between the wall and the painting is a real space and it deals with light and shadow in a very particular way, which affects the rest of the painting. That clash, or uneasy link, between real space and illusionary space creates an ambiguous kind of presence that holds the gaze of the viewer as they interrogate what it is they are seeing. Very often people don't understand immediately what it is they are looking at because they imagine the text is either a light projection or even something painted on top.

That is the very essence of illusion – our capacity to be deluded, you might say. But whereas in the 'Pidgin Paintings' you cut or tore the canvas and used it to 'bind' painting's wounds, in the 'Armchair Paintings' the cutting is more aggressive. How do you respond to that?
I don't think of it as aggressive. On the contrary, I give it a chance. I make art. The aggression I use may be compatible with the kind of aggression you would find in most kitchens up and down the country, where people use a sharp tool that cuts. All making involves some form of aggression, so it's there – but in the scale of aggressive acts committed upon earth, I think it is a minor offence, really.

We were talking earlier about the position of painting in the hierarchy of art and it could be said that in the case of the 'Armchair Paintings' that the source paintings, or I should say 'found paintings' –
– Purchased paintings.

The 'purchased found paintings', then, are mostly by amateurs, and are usually seen as being of less value than, say, paintings by recognised artists in museums. For instance, the slashing of the Rokeby Venus *in the National Gallery is seen as an act of vandalism whereas Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning is seen as an artistic act.*
'Armchair Paintings' can be made from the work of professional artists as well. I don't have a case against amateur painters. I am able to afford their work whereas Monet is out of my pocket.

But you would if you could?
Yes. I don't think any work would be destroyed by my action. The image is still there. You can still see what the painter painted. In some cases, what I do gives the work another chance, an upgrade. In others, it would just give you a bit of a jolt, if you like. And re-engage your seeing.

The original painter might not agree! Do you think that in the recent 'Memento Paintings' series you make amends by painting your signature under that of the original in the corner of the purchased found painting, which is all that remains of the original? Is this a form of reparation?
It's a kind of acknowledgment. Not exactly reparation but a non-patronising, non-hierarchical gesture – this is my signature, this is your signature. I'm not trying to wound or diminish anyone else's art at all. Nor elevate my own. These are just opportunities to explore new propositional paintings, which are as economical as a Japanese haiku. There are many things you could do with a painting: put it on the wall, bin it, burn it or put your own name on it. I include my own work in this, of course.

In the more recent works using found paintings, the 'Reproductions' series, the figurative painting, referenced in the title, is almost entirely obscured by your 'abstract' painting, which literally consumes the original. At the same time, all the colours turn to a kind of grey, though when seen together the range of greys is subtly varied so that references to the original subjects remain in the overall tone: forests, grass – Reproduction No 8 (Green Park) *– sky –* Reproduction No 60 (The Sky's the Limit), *both from 2013 – urban scenes and so on.*
All reproductions make reference to the original. This series does that, of course, but here each individual painting is consumed so that it becomes its own reproduction.

You actually get a lot of colour variation when you see a group of them together. This particular process denies the image but reveals the colour of the painting. It also unlocks the viewer's imagination. The titles are very often a description of what image was in the original painting. And often, if a title was written on the back, I will reuse that.

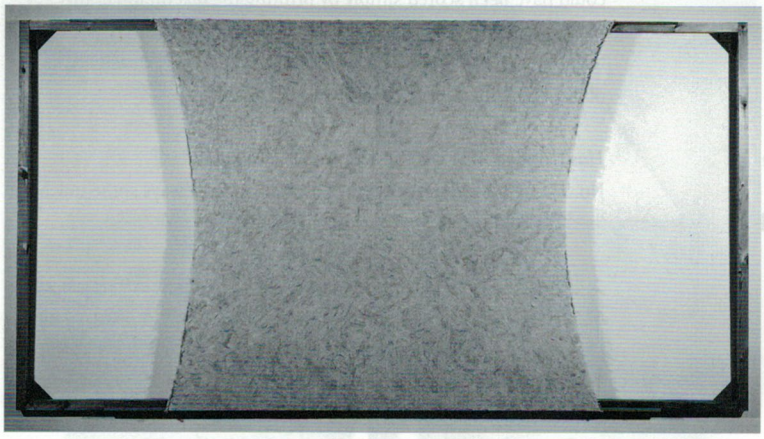
I particularly liked the play on words in the 2013 work titled Reproduction (Three Men and a Pregnant Woman). *You have literally generated a new work from the old.*
I have reproduced it. I became a woman!

Indeed, a kind of parthenogenetic birth. This series, like others related to it, could be said to have been born out of the 'Armchair Paintings' – the longest-running series in your work so far. You return again and again to painting as a suitable case for treatment. There is one, Untitled: In use Night and Day, *1991, which suggests simultaneously the longevity of the painting tradition but also that it is 'parked'. Another, from 1996 and depicting a black female nude half-length figure, carries the – again 'found' – text: 'Penalty for improper use'. Obviously, that has political and gender applications but, equally, the accusation could be made against you.*
That is an important observation – I take full responsibility for my improper act. Art does not exclude the political. Mine is a reflection on the political rather than being agitprop itself.

For instance, in *Untitled: Kill Rushdie* from 1990, a political point could have been scored simply by printing the text on top of the painting, if that was the sole message. Leaving aside the politics in the text, the painting is constantly at work, negotiating its existence as an object/painting. This exceeds the merely political.

Has Untitled: Kill Rushdie *ever been shown in the UK?*
No. Though it has never been 'censored', it has always somehow been 'excluded' from being shown in the UK.

In the 'Actualities' sculpture series the body is more obviously referenced, the chair being its surrogate. In the case of Actualities No 2, *1984, half the chair has been pared away – including the seat whose stuffing spills out like its guts – right down to the joints. All your work deals with, yes, destruction and re-creation but through it all is this sense of vulnerability – not just of the human but, perhaps, of the category of art itself.*
This group of object/sculptures came out of my attempt to make a presentational painting of a chair. In 1979-80, I was filing down a wooden chair, producing paint out of the filings in order to make a painting of the chair with itself as pigment. The one chair yielded nine paintings, all the same size and bearing roughly the same image of a chair. Because I wanted to keep the remaining structure of the chair intact, I left more body around the joints. Eventually the object of a skeleton emerged but it was never planned. The work that resulted was *Neither A Chair Nor A Painting*, 1979-80.



Actuality 1983-84 Collection Vehbi Koç Foundation

Pidgin Painting: Harasho 1987

Once this was done I realised the potential of the 'object as a skeleton' and some time later began to make the 'Actualities' series. While I will not argue with your observation, it is important to admit some innocence – I only initially wanted to paint a chair out of itself. I have no idea how to approach work that deals directly with 'the human condition' or 'the condition of art'. Those shoes are too big for me.

The window has often been a subject in your work and, of course, the window as a metaphor in art goes back to Alberti and perspective: the window on the world, this constructed illusion of three-dimensional space that you have attacked. But more particularly, in your case, it is a reference to Marcel Duchamp's 1920 piece Fresh Widow.

Regarding *Fresh Widow*, one of the works that I have made with windows that has never been shown is actually titled *Slash Widow*. And it has the same colours as the original work by Duchamp – so, the reference to Duchamp in my work is certainly steady over the years.

One series, the 'Burglary Pieces' that involve using broken glazed windows and doors, are overtly threatening. Safety Regulation Painting *of 1989 in particular, in which the remains of two sash windows are strung up, held in a precarious balance, like two opaque eyes, the glass obscured by whitewash. Unlike the 'Armchair Paintings', which you can see through, this work actually prevents you from looking in.*

Yes, it forces you to look at, rather than in or through. I go around the town and see those kinds of whitewashed windows in shops and so on. To my mind they are remarkable paintings. I enjoy looking at them.

So a preoccupation with painting runs throughout the work, even though it may not be so obvious in some of the works using other media – you have worked in all kinds of media from photography, film and collage to sculpture and installation. Even the move to video is in your mind something to do with painting, is that right?

Storytelling is a form of representation which needs a certain amount of de-banalising. Both *Carrots* and *Refreshments* tell autobiographical stories. The possibility or impossibility of that was handled by turning the location into a protagonist which created a gap between what the viewer saw and what they heard, and which supported both the narrative and the moving image.

I was particularly interested in 16 Evelyn House, *which you made in 2009, because it addresses so many of your themes to do with destruction and reconstruction, with restoration and recuperation. At the time, your building was being renovated. It was almost as if you had commissioned the builders to make an Amikam Toren work and the result, to use another traditional art category, is to my mind a self-portrait. Would that be fair?*

Yes, indeed, it became a self-portrait. And the fact that I had to pay £13,000 (my share of the building work) did make me feel as though it was work I had commissioned.

I videoed different kinds of jobs that were being done on site and coupled this with a voice-over reading letters that I received while living at the same address. It produced the same kind of discomfort, maybe, that you have with the text and image in the 'Armchair Paintings'. The connection between what you saw and what you heard was a bit uneasy – unpredictable.

It is very intimate, too. Your private world is made public in a most

unusual way, appropriate to the fact that it was your home.
It is – the gamut of letters ran from the intimate to the professional, and official things that you receive from the gas board, the NHS or stuff like that.

This ties in to what you were saying earlier about the fact that you don't want art to be a special category. It is part of life, part of politics – it doesn't operate outside those things.
It is political in the sense that art operates within the political system under which we live – but I wouldn't categorise it as social realist. The kind of art I make needs to be completed by the viewer and every viewer may do that in their own way. Hopefully, the work is able to engage with the condition of life in a wider field.

Looking back at your work it is possible to trace certain themes and connections between artworks, but the first time I saw Golem, *2002, I was totally unprepared. I had absolutely no idea what to make of it. How did that work come about?*
I can't make it out either! In that sense I'm in the same position as you are. In the 1970s I made a decision never to censor myself. To do, if at all possible, everything that came to mind. Though some of my sculptural work is closely linked to my practice as a painter, the rest is often entirely spontaneous. *Golem* is one of these spontaneous eruptions. Though I'm not a visionary kind of artist, I woke up one morning with that image imprinted on my mind. As I was having coffee, I drew it and wrote the word 'Golem' underneath. Very quickly I felt compelled to produce this object and I thought, 'Well, if I can find a way of making it, I'll do it'. And there it is. Though I made it there is not much more that I can say about it.

I now see it as another way of addressing what you might call the burden of art: the spindly legs of the John Lewis ironing board, albeit clad in stainless steel, supporting this massive half-ton weight of Kilkenny black marble, the thin aluminium membrane of the cover – standing in for painting – in-between, takes one back to the chairs in the 'Actualities' series. There is the same sense of taking something almost to breaking point before bringing it back from the edge.
That's something that happens again and again in the work – that sense of vulnerability, of being at the point of almost being unsupported, but just being there.

Do you ever feel, as an artist, that the struggle is sometimes unsustainable? I know you taught for years and that, apart from what you may have got from teaching, you also had to teach to live.
You have to do what you have to do. It kind of felt as though there was no choice about the matter. I did all kinds of jobs to make money. Teaching was one of them. And though I never earned enough, I somehow managed to make it work. My accountant often told me that my life didn't make economic sense, he thought (wink-wink) that I had some cash income that I was not disclosing ... I wish. But what can I say? It's a life priority. You take responsibility for doing what is important to you. It is so simple that it is almost impossible to say.

Was teaching sustaining in other ways – intellectually?
Teaching in itself was intellectually engaging, at times. It has some parallels with making art – you are engaged with giving. Attempting to support young artists as they struggle to emerge is also a process of teaching oneself, there are quite a few unexpected by-products along the way and that feeds into your own practice too.

In a strange way certain things have come full circle in that you were born in Jerusalem and lived in Tel Aviv before coming to the UK. You are about to participate in a show about painting at the Jewish Museum in New York, which, of course, has a distinguished reputation for showing challenging art – particularly in the 1960s. How do you feel about that?
Well, I have lived in London since 1968 and, like it or hate it, it is my home. This is where I have matured and made my work over the past 50 years. The upcoming exhibition in the Jewish Museum is a survey, making important links between a number of artists who approach painting in an unorthodox way – of course I'm delighted to participate.

One idiosyncratic series of works that we haven't discussed is the orange peel works, the first of which, Black Hole, *1997-2006, was developed over a long period. How did that come about?*
It has to do with my diet. I guess, being born in Israel, it's just too predictable. I peel them by hand, and then I put them on the windowsill to dry and enjoy having the odd look as they are drying, how they twist and turn into these strange spirals and then, also, the scent – the slight marmalade scent. Once they were dry, I would throw them away. Then, at one point, it occurred to me that I was throwing away really beautiful objects that have very significant sculptural values and so I started to collect them in black dustbin liners – after all, they're rubbish.

The titles – Black Hole, Quarks *– suggest some kind of revenge of the organic and the natural against science and reason. Is that possible?*
At one point I had to put the bag of orange peel into an exhibition and it had to be titled and, being bored with untitled work, I just gave it the first title that came to mind – so, *Black Hole.*

Plan B, *2013, is another apparently idiosyncratic sculpture.*
It was made with readymade sculptural objects – wooden objects. You could call them airport art: small statues made out of wood that come from all over the world. I amassed them in a cube-like shape on top of an architect's drawing board, suggesting a 'plan B' – a new possibility. Like *Golem*, the cube is big, oversized, too heavy for its apparent support.

Back to the drawing board?
Back to the drawing board, yes.

Conversely, the 2006 work Received Wisdom *– the lecture chair whose wooden armrest for writing on is repeated in the form of an unfeasibly high stack – like* Plan B *can be related, at least retrospectively, to* Golem, *but neither is like* Golem. *They are more explicable.* Golem *still remains a mystery.*
Mystery is not a way of pulling wool over the viewers' eyes, it is a by-product of dealing with the unknowable. That mystery is important. Without that, there is no point in the work being there, really. ■

Amikam Toren's exhibition 'Unorthodox' runs at the Jewish Museum in New York 6 November to 27 March.

PATRICIA BICKERS is editor of *Art Monthly.*