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AMIKAM TOREN: "Amikam Toren Finally Able to Live by His Art"

Written by Kenneth Baker

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London -- Sitting in his small, bleak, unheated studio in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets, Amikam Toren explained the personal background to his paintings and cardboard box constructions in "'Of the Times' and Other Historic Works" - his first show in America - which opened recently at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco.

Having made a modest name for himself in stage design before his move to London from his native Israel in 1968, Toren received a grant to study stage design with John Barry of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

"He took me around his empire," Toren said, "and I realized you have a department of buttons and a department of shoelaces, and it seemed to me ridiculous and sort of soulless and academic. I decided to take my chances as an artist, which is what I wanted to do anyway."

In his early London years, "I was doing my best to become a conceptual artist," Toren said, "but in my nature, I'm a very sensuous person. Conceptual art was fascinating to me, but I had to incorporate it into something I could touch."

Only in the past three years has Toren, 68, been able to live by his art. Remarkably, considering Toren's lack of exhibition history in our hemisphere, Silverman quickly sold several large paintings from Toren's series from the 1980s and '90s, "Of the Times."

Fragment fascination

Each unprimed canvas holds the magnified abstraction of a letter of the alphabet, painted in a grayish medium made by mixing clear acrylic with a single day's pulped issue of the [London Times](#). Adjacent to each work on the wall, where a label might customarily appear, hangs a cutting from the pulped newspaper, displaying the banner and date and perhaps a tantalizing fragment of headline, irrelevant, Toren says to his choice of a letter to paint.

The Silverman show also includes a "Pidgin" painting - a stretched canvas with corners cut away and pulped to serve as material with which the remaining surface is painted.

And exactly how does one pulp canvas?

"The coffee grinder is a powerful instrument," Toren said. He has used one to make a hash of materials ranging from newspaper to glove leather.

Of supporting himself during his many years in London, Toren said: "Sales would come occasionally, fellowships would come occasionally, but I taught at the University of Reading in the fine arts department, which was again a kind of gradual thing. I did it for about 15 years or so.

"The way I got into teaching was through exhibitions. They were seen by a lot of students who sort of demanded my presence for tutorials and such, then part time here and part time there."

In the early 1970s, "I became fascinated by fragments," Toren said, an interest "that continues and constitutes the bedrock of my work from then on."

Paradoxes of imagery

In 1979, he made a key work (not in the Silverman show) that he titled "Neither a Teapot Nor a Painting," with a deliberate echo of René Magritte's famous play on the paradoxes of imagery, "This Is Not a Pipe" (1929).

Toren took an ordinary teapot, smashed it and ground some of the fragments to make pigment that he then used to make a small painting of it on canvas. He displays the painting on a small shelf, alongside the unused teapot fragment, stuffed into the sort of jar he would use to hold conventional raw pigment.

"The drive," Toren said, "was simply to reverse the notion that in representation, the subject is excluded from its representation."

Regarding his education in art, Toren said: "The most important thing is that I don't have any art college background at all. I did a couple of years as an assistant to an artist in Tel Aviv. We became very good friends - lifelong, as it turned out. His name was Peter Hesse. He died about five years ago in Paris.

"That, in effect, was my art education, other than what I picked up among colleagues, and by traveling around and looking at things."

Not an entertainer

Hesse, who made abstract paintings in a European vein, "had strong reservations about the art market and would never exhibit unless his wife put her foot down," Toren said.

"He was against the commercial aspect of art, trading in art, all of that was an abomination to him, and I guess some of that sort of stuck with me."

Toren does not deny the humor that people understandably see in his art. "I don't seek it, because I don't want to be a kind of entertainer," he said. "But it matters to me to the extent it would have mattered to somebody like Chekhov, who wasn't a comedian, but there is a lot of humor in his plays because they deal with the human condition."