Art as a Retrospective Prediction

Essay / Merav Roth
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Art as a Retrospective Prediction

Painting, prediction, life drive and death drive, devastation, mourning, and creation. Psychoanalyst Dr. Merav Roth offers a succession of thoughts, insights, and personal associations following a series of meetings with artist Tsibi Geva, on the occasion of his exhibition "Where I'm Coming From," which has recently been presented at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art.

On the occasion of Tsibi Geva's exhibition "Where I'm Coming From," which opened at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art during the Jewish 'Days of Awe' (curator: Aya Lurie), we conducted an ongoing conversation in the exhibition space, in cafes, in emails, and on the phone. Each conversation rolled into the next one like tongues of fire chasing one another's tail in a creative volcano that never stops flowing. The intersection of psychoanalysis – my field – and Geva's art gave birth to a talk I gave at an event in honor of the show, as well as this essay.

First, a word about the relationship between psychoanalysis and culture: in the past, psychoanalysis used to assume a stance of paternalistic, interpretive authority. It stretched books and paintings on the psychoanalytic couch, and even worse – the artists and authors, often interpreting in a banal and predictable manner, finding King Oedipus here, there, and everywhere. In time, as the illusions of the Age of Enlightenment and Great Truths collapse, alongside the understanding that fields of culture and knowledge are in a state of constant reciprocal influence, insight and curiosity rose among psychoanalysts regarding the descriptive and interpretive powers of art and culture – about humankind, the world, and even psychoanalysis itself. This text contemplates, smells, and listens to Geva and his work, in what is turning into reflections about mourning practices, prediction, and correction within art-making.

I will start with an association that has come to me en route to the exhibition for the first time. As I was driving to our first 'interview,' I thought about Geva's work, *Tires* - he had sent me a photo of it – black tires compacted into huge piles, creating a mesmerizing,

Tsibi Geva, "Where I'm Coming From," Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019-2020
Curator: Aya Lurie
Photography: Avi Amsalem, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

daunting form. Thinking about them, a memory of the car accident that had killed my sister, when I was a child, arose in my mind. More precisely, I remembered how, as a young woman, I used to drive to the university every morning in my little Autobianchi, playing Shlomo Gronich (an Israeli composer, singer, and songwriter) on the tape deck and singing along with him, "I choose life! I choose life!" as I wrestled wearily with the death drive. An initial association.

Tsibi Geva, Archeology of the Present, the 56th Venice Biennale, Israeli Pavilion. Curator: Hadas Maor, 2015
Photography: Elad Sarig, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

Geva has worked with tires before, in a variety of ways. In the Venice Biennale, for instance, he used them as an outer shell that covered the Israeli Pavilion in the Giardini, turning it from a 'container' of the works that hung inside into an enormous outdoor sculpture. The tires in "Where I'm Coming From" are compressed into about 50 bales, each weighing approximately 800 kilos. Geva recounts how, coming to the plant in Ashkelon to sort tires while at work on the Biennale project, he saw for the first time those bales the machine had been

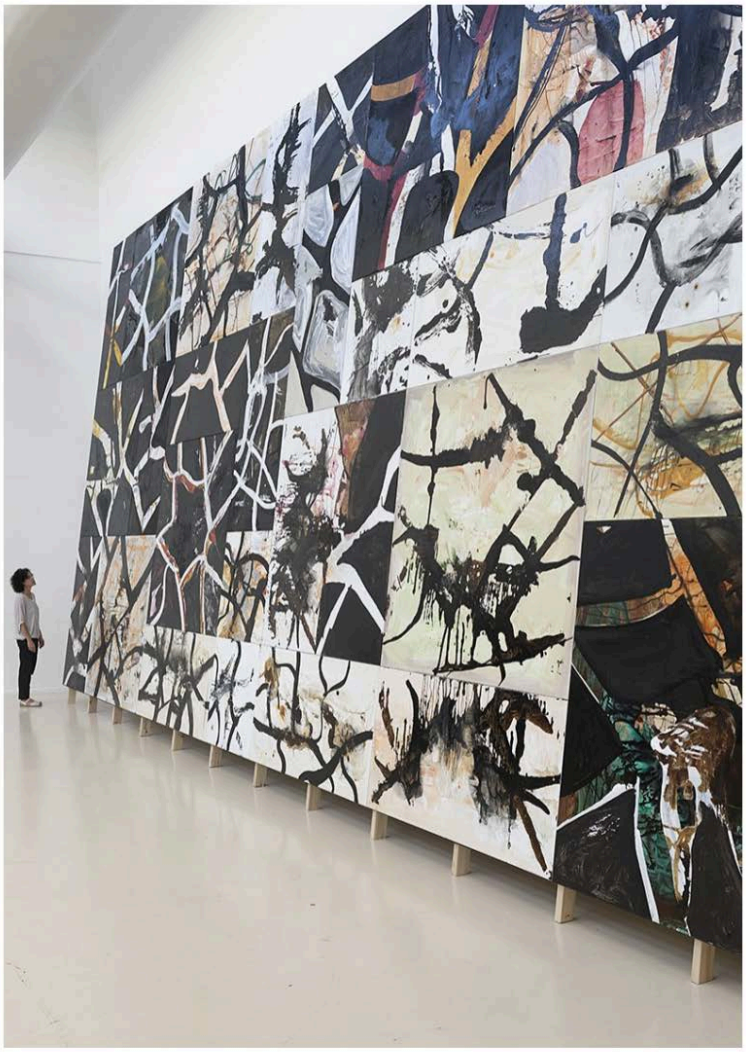
making. "I was overwhelmed by it; it had massive sculptural power," he says. "I said to myself that a moment would come when I'd be making something with them. And here, in this show, the tires come in a different state – huge bales, packed and compacted like a frozen potential, imprisoned, suffocated almost, desperate to break out."

We move on to look at the wall of paintings. It is 560 cm tall and 1260 cm wide. You can stand in front of it for a long time: 35 parts, each painted on a separate canvas. I recall a talk Geva has once given, talking about the architecture books of his father, the architect Kuba Geber;[1] mostly German books, in which he discovered the grids drawn by his father for the houses he had been designing, and he was surprised by the similarity to his own work. "Yes," Geva says, "I've been totally unaware of the way they reproduce themselves in my grates! It is probably part of my DNA. Only years later, after my father's death, I found this book, *Hagoder*, a catalog from a factory in the Haifa Bay making grids for cement, sometime in the 1940s or 1950s. This catalog contained all the patterns that had become my artistic vocabulary. It amazed me. Only then I'd realized that though in the past I'd wanted to escape anything that had to do with architecture, my artworks are made of parts of broken-down buildings – I refer to tiles, windows, grates, and grids. Perhaps it was because of this lack of knowledge, this blindness, or the knowledge that doesn't recognize itself, that these materials have drifted up and appeared in my work."

Tsibi Geva, "Where I'm Coming From," Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019-2020

Curator: Aya Lurie

Photography: Avi Amsalem, courtesy of Tsibi Geva



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Photography: Avi Amsalem, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

Geva's words remind me of a term coined by the psychoanalyst Cristopher Bollas2 – the 'Unthought Known' – which accurately defines the phenomenon Geva is describing: inner knowledge that we have not yet thought about. Even though we know it, it hasn't yet occurred to us. And when we finally think about it, it is accompanied by a sense of "yes, of course, obviously" - so much so, that the new idea or artwork often seems to be common knowledge, nothing new.

Later, to my surprise, Geva said: "What guided Aya, my curator, when we met at the studio, to understand this wall (the grid), was her seeing there a broken side-view mirror of a car I had found somewhere. She photographed it and said, 'this reminds me of it.'" I wonder about the match between Aya Lurie's association and my own (although I had seen the accident in the *Tires* work and she on the wall of paintings).

I asked myself what part the 'accident' plays as a creative force.

As we talk in the exhibition space, other visitors offer a range of apocalyptic associations as well. They see in the tires a mound of corpses in Auschwitz, a memorial to road accidents, burning tires in Gaza, a bunker on the Bar-lev fortifications from the War of Attrition, or buildings consumed by fire.

In one of the follow-up conversations, Geva would tell me, "the first time I made tire walls was in 1999. I remember the expression that occurred to me then, which appealed to me very much: 'death walls,' as in race tracks – they used to build walls from tires, to brake the crashes. Ship ports also use tire walls that function as shock absorbers." The

paradox of the 'death walls' as shock absorbers strikes me as significant in the context of the artwork as well.

The *Grafitti Wall* – the third part of the exhibition space – also has related images: a razor-wire fence between life and death and a forest where Partisans are hiding in the thicket, wondering what the light behind it would bring – salvation, or a sudden attack by radical evil. For the making of the graffiti wall, which is almost entirely black, Geva has invited in several assistants and instructed them to hatch it in black, to fill in and cover the wall, freely and energetically, but not entirely, so that it remained unfinished. The traces of the motion that vibrates in black on the white wall is present as a kind of turbulent action painting, leaving behind a compact, charged drawing.

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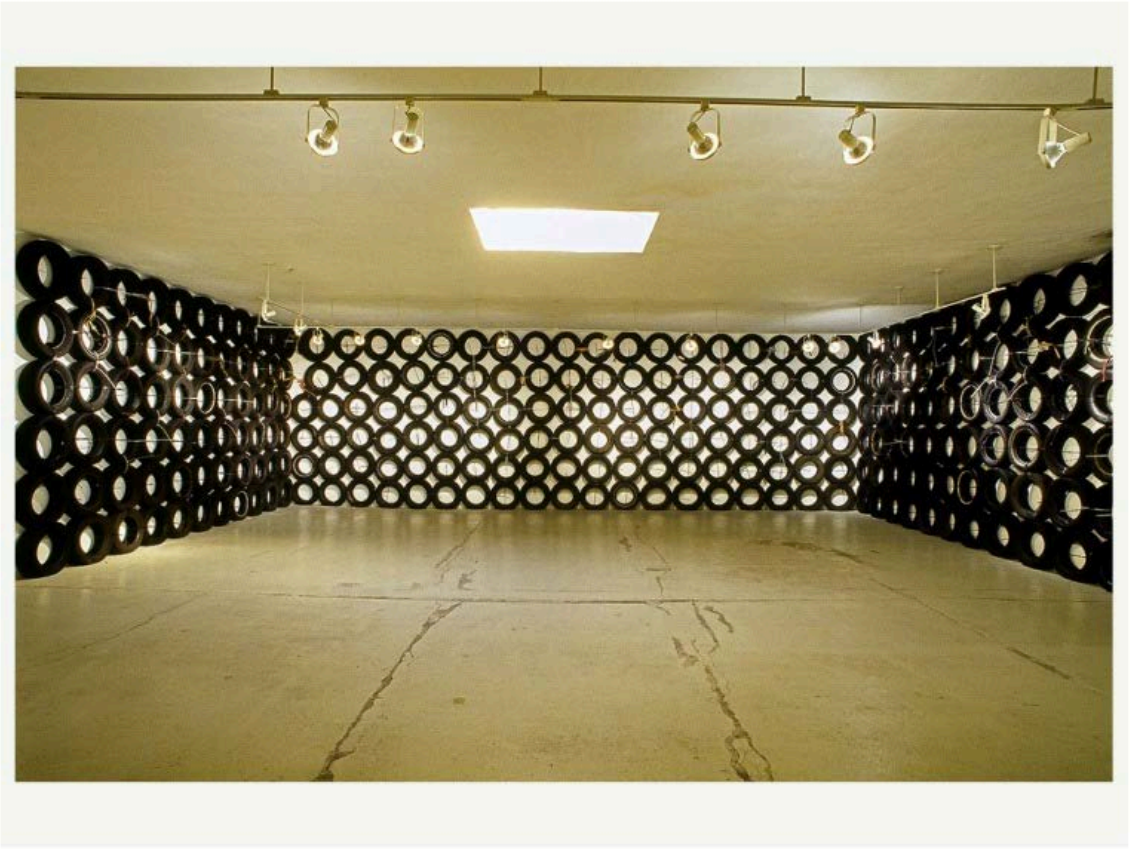
Photography: Avi Amsalem, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

While the mound of tires, the commanding grid, and the grimy graffiti seem strewn with death and destruction, they are also the cement of the art's structure. The death drive is alive and kicking, reviving the viewer, whose soul shadows the destructive force, mourns its ruins, and seeks to re-infuse them with justice and grace. The beauty of Geva's work and its poetic and aesthetic power is overwhelming. It is interesting to note that in Hebrew, the same etymology includes this kind of experience (maf'im ;מפעים), the heartbeat (po'em ;פועם) and the past (pa'am ;פעם).

Geva tells me about "Days of Awe," his exhibition at the Annina Nosei Gallery in New York, in 2001. "I was in New York at the time. There has been a sequence of bizarre coincidences. About two months before the show, I wrote about the realization of the



Tsibi Geva, "Days of Awe", Annina Nosei Gallery, New York,

2001

Photography: David Ellison, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

idea of fundamentalism in art, an associative text that jumps between concepts and events in the political world and the way evolution takes place in a work of art. Its last sentence was, "A man with nothing to lose can change the history of a region or a whole society; he can also be a Jackson Pollock." Because Pollock, as an allegory, is the ultimate sublimation of the sense of a dead-end. And then, a week before the show in New York, as we were still building it, the Twin Towers fell. We were working on the exhibition in a nearby building, and I saw the plane high in the air, circling the tower and then slamming into it, slicing it like a knife. It is impossible to put this feeling into words. It felt like an earthquake.

Afterward, all of New York filled up with a strange, burning smell, and in my exhibition - an installation of tire walls covering the gallery's interior - there was an overpowering smell of burned rubber. It was tough because it echoes the odor in the streets. And if that weren't enough, there was another odd synchronicity related to the 'Days of Awe.' At that time, I met Renata Salecl, a philosopher and lecturer. She has published a book about violence in war and art, and there's a section about my work. I invited her way in

advance to give a talk. She came to New York close to the end of the exhibition and gave a talk about the book and my work. It took place at Columbia University, and it was really crazy because, in retrospect, everything felt like a prediction, a prophecy. It is an experience that amplifies anxieties extraordinarily and validates them. I was convinced that from now on, there would be more attacks on New York, and there was something in the air – between anxiety and deep mourning."

Freud wrote (in 1918) about 'afterwardness,' a mental phenomenon where a trauma that had occurred in the past, but had not been 'registered' in the psyche acquires resonance, validity, and meaning following a later traumatic event that spreads its tentacles towards the primal one. Again I remember my association about the accident on my way to see the tires at the exhibition, and when that is joined to Geva's New York story, I re-conceptualize the encounter with art as a retrospective prediction. The materials of art-making draw on both life and death, from life- and death-drives that well within artist and viewer alike. The traumas and sufferings we bear as dead scars and lacunas of meaning encounter representations in art that retrospectively predict the catastrophes that had already happened to us.

Geva seems to have designed the 'accident' retrospectively. The Holocaust; the Bar-lev Line, all that bubbles up in the viewer's inner world as he faces Geva's works. This reminds me of something the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott said, in 1974 - when we worry about the future, we are not actually afraid of what is coming, but instead of what has already happened. In a similar spirit, as I look at Geva's works I realize that art shows us what has already been; the artist's soul predicts our past in some wondrous way, and we position ourselves in front of it, or him/her, to a task of deciphering, from within the road and aesthetic space the work affords us, past sufferings that predict those still to come. This transformation is itself a correction and a source of solace, because of the possibility to generate fresh creation from all of life's materials, even those that are painful and ominous. "Archeology of the Present" was the title Geva gave the large installation he had created for the 2015 Venice Biennale – a holistic, multi-layered structure. "A Mound of Things," his 2008 exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, was also about a layered construction, made of fragments and shards of a menaced present.

A psychoanalytic thought is slowly taking root in me. In psychoanalysis, the life drive is a constructive force, while the death drive is destructive. But in Geva's works, I sense that the death drive is by itself constructive. Force that equals matter. Motion that equals matter. Tires, the smell of death, everything is matter. Materials for creation. Art in a different state of matter obeys a different set of rules. Hesitantly, I check with Geva: "It appears that in your work a fissile material is also a building one. A consuming material is also alive. It doesn't just break up, destroy, kill, it does not even create a space, a crack through which new life forms may wriggle out. The split your black lines create throughout the length and breadth of the grid, for instance, has a life of its own." Geva accepts this description and talks to me about the conflict between black and white as a concept, not just as a color scale. I ask whether he thinks that the conflictual tension in

Tsibi Geva, "Where I'm Coming From," Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019-2020
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Photography: Avi Amsalem, courtesy of Tsibi Geva

his work today occurs only within the black.

Geva recounts: "[artist] Moshe Kupferman once visited my exhibition at the Julie M. gallery [in Tel Aviv]. He said nothing for a long time, and then he came over and said: "Tsibi, your black has changed." That was probably the most beautiful comment I have ever heard about my work." Geva also mentions the text Barry Schwabsky has written about his art, titled "Painting Against Itself," which looks upon Geva's paintings as an interior struggle, an inner conflict. Schwabsky sees Geva as one of the most restless artists in existence. In his text, he writes that "one of the ways to describe how Geva's latest paintings address old issues is precisely through the fact that they can be characterized as attacks."[4]

When I get home, I sit down to watch an interview with Tsibi Geva on YouTube, conducted by curator Yona Fischer. Fischer says that in Geva's work, there is a "melancholy, where you cannot distinguish between what is cheerful and happy and what holds some sadness or regret that are evident in the painting; this is what separates the realm of the painting from the world. That melancholy thing." And Geva answers, "This is the main feature of my work, a personality feature, it's not something I choose. It has existed in me since childhood. These paintings are elegies, they are mourning." Geva goes on to discuss with Fischer the debate about "the death of painting," and the writings of Yve-Alain Bois about painting as a work of mourning.

The psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden once wrote about the 'artist's art of mourning,'[5] and I follow in his footsteps with the 'reader's art of mourning.' I now make time to reflect on

the 'viewer's art of mourning.'[6] The work of mourning vs. the making of artwork is so tangible in Geva's exhibition. The privilege of moving along the lines and deep into the blacks, the ladders and ropes that hew at and embed hues in the viewer's soul, inscribing the ups and downs of past and future life turns, confirming through the aesthetic experience rocking the anchors of his soul that he is not alone, and that the movement of destruction is as universal as the constructive one. The viewer realizes that the ravaging force is everywhere, but the mighty forces of productivity are also present in him. And as Yona Fischer has said, you cannot separate the cheerful and happy from that which brings sadness and regret; therefore, the passion for painting is optimistic even as it dips its brushes in ashes and dust. The tangibility of these processes in the current exhibition is particularly intense because of the way Geva uses the various components - size, scale, mass, intensity, smell, color – all of which provide a formidable foundation for our encounter with ourselves within our existence.

There is a wall in the exhibition that I haven't yet discussed. On the side of the room hangs a painting. A single painting, like in the old days. It shows a structure resembling a guard post or a watchtower. Geva says he made this painting five years earlier. Only recently, when he visited his Kibbutz just before the exhibition and took pictures of the house he grew up in – his father designed it in the 1930s – did he realize how similar the image in the painting was to his childhood home. It was known as the 'secure building.' The flat roof had rifle slits, a tower, and a projector they also used for Morse communication in emergencies.

In a café, I ask again about Geva's childhood home, which is presented as an 'Unthought Known' in the exhibition. He tells me that while still a small child, his father has been sent to study architecture in Vienna, and was absent several years. The boy Tsibi lived in a constant state of longing, and his absent father became a mirage, to the point that he was not sure whether he had existed or not. He remembers another man, which he had experienced as coming 'from nowhere,' who for a time used to appear almost daily at the "love hour" (a mid-day break in which Kibbutz parents used to spend time with their children). He would carry Tsibi on his broad shoulders and stroll with him. But finally, this person has also disappeared. Speaking about him, Geva says: "I do not know, and would never know, who he was. It makes me cry. It remained a mystery for me – who was this man? What was I to him? Why did he disappear? And if he loved me so, how come he'd gone?"

After another sip of coffee Geva told me that for years he had been fussing with this memory, which remained planted like an old, faded black-and-white photo, undecoded. He talks about the tall man who has vanished, and I'm thinking this is a retrospective version of the earlier trauma - the disappearance of the father. I tell Geva about a paper I have written on "dead memories and living oblivions," and ask him if he knows Borges's Funes the Memorious. Geva is excited; of course, he knows him - he knows by heart some parts of this magical story. "I remember a sentence that appears toward the end, following the very particular description of Funes's phenomenal memory, his total and infinite memory [quoting from memory]: 'I suspect that he didn't know how to think.

Thinking means forgetting, simplifying, generalizing.' I am quoting from memory, so maybe it's not accurate," he says, as if continuing the text he has just quoted from.

I think about the exhibition's title, "Where I'm Coming From," which is borrowed from a 1978 poem by the Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun.

Geva's identification with the longings in Yeshurun's poem, gaping like a wound and as still as a monument, is clearly evident. In Michael Gluzman's book *The Poetry of the Drowned* (2015), he mentions the fact that Avot Yeshurun was born on September 19th, 1903, right after Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). I am amazed by the reappearance of the Days of Awe, for the third time now, in the context of Geva's exhibition. The first has been the title of the exhibition in New York ("The Days of Awe"), the second is the timing of the current exhibition, and the third pops out of the reference to Yeshurun. The wheels of trauma reappear in repetition-compulsion - revolving again and again, begging for resolution and reparation.

I keep pondering Avot Yeshurun's name. "Avot" in Hebrew means "fathers," and "shur" is a command to look at something. I think of Geva's artworks, watching over us like a fatherly poet, portraying our memories and telling our story, reaching us through all of our senses, predicting us in retrospect, inspiring us to re-dream our past in colors that we had not even known that we know.

Tsibi Geva's "Where I'm Coming From" (curator: Aya Lurie) was on view at the Herzliya Museum of contemporary Art, between September 21, 2019 and February 1, 2020.

1.Tsibi Geva has also been born as Geber. His brother, the artist Avital Geva, changed his name to Geva, and Tsibi had followed suite.

2.Bollas, C. (1987). The Shadow of the Object – Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known. New York: Columbia University Press

3.Winnicott, D.W. (1974). Fear of Breakdown. *Int. Rev. Psycho-Anal.*, 1, pp. 103-107.

4.Among the new ways that Geva's most recent paintings attack some old problems is precisely the fact that they can be characterized as attacks. p. 20.

5. Among the new ways that Geva's most recent paintings attack some old problems is precisely the fact that they can be characterized as attacks. p. 20.

6. Ogden, T.H. (2000). Borges and the Art of Mourning. *Psychoanal. Dial.*, 10(1), pp. 65-88.