

IN **CONVERSATION**

TSIBI GEVA with Phong Bui and Jonathan T.D. Neil

Israeli artist Tsibi Geva's exhibition, *Paintings 2011 – 2013*, curated by Barry Schwabsky, was on view at American University at the Katzen Arts Center in Washington D.C. from November 5 to December 15, 2013. An expanded version of the exhibition, entitled *Tsibi Geva: Recent and Early Works* and co-curated by Schwabsky with Giorgia Calò, is currently on view at MACRO Testaccio in Rome. *Paintings 2011 – 2013* will travel in 2015 to the Mönchehaus Museum of Modern Art in Goslar, Germany, and Geva will be Israel's representative at the 2015 Venice Biennial. The painter Tsibi Geva and Al Held Critical Essay Editor Jonathan T.D. Neil paid a visit to Rail HQ (initially in the summer of 2010, the conversation was then carried further in a few recent email exchanges) to talk with *Rail* publisher Phong Bui about Geva's life and work.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Phong Bui: Can you give us a context of how this particular show came about?

Tsibi Geva: The exhibition *Tsibi Geva: Recent and Early Works* at MACRO Testaccio Museum in Rome (showing until September 14, 2014), is an expanded version of the exhibition I had in Washington in 2013, which focused on my paintings from the last four years. In Rome, the exhibition also features early works from my 1980s series *Biladi Biladi*, and a site-specific installation which combines sculptures from the *Lattice* series and paintings from my *Keffiyeh* series. This exhibition can be seen as a mini-retrospective. We tried to imply the conceptual and formal connections that exist between different groups of works from different periods, which are polyphonically interwoven.

Bui: I first saw your work in the fall of 1985. I remember there were paintings of political and cultural signs like a profile of a figure, sometimes mixed in with writings in Hebrew, other times barely sustained among floods of expressionist and highly charged abstract gestures. They were at

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the same time in broad rapport with Neo-Expressionist paintings without being in debt to any specific painter of that movement. Would you tell us a bit about the work of that period and how and why you came to New York?

Geva: I got a scholarship (the America-Israel Cultural Foundation Sharet Scholarship for Advanced Studies Abroad) in 1984, so I decided to come to New York the following year. What was so difficult was how to maintain the continuity of what I was doing in Tel Aviv with new things that were directly influenced by what I was seeing in New York at the time. I felt very challenged because I was losing my socio-political context or environment, and suddenly nobody knew what I was doing, what I was about. It was an important experience because I had to think about how to deal with myself, to work things out from scratch and figure out what is the relevant standard for me and what is not, what is the context that is pivotal to my works, and so on. I also thought a lot about the possibilities of how to make a change and in what terms can I make a change. I engaged with questions of identity while trying to figure out how to work with new subject matter. And I must say that I stayed in New York for two years and it was only in the second year that things started to change. Slowly, different aspects of my painting were going through major changes.

Jonathan T. D. Neil: Can you describe that more specifically?

Geva: For example, the first painting I began to work on was a painting of images from nature. And there was a silhouette of a woman sitting inside the landscape. I added some inscriptions to it, which somehow opened another space for the painting, I mean a space for the language, which reintroduced some conceptual and political issues I thought I might have lost. The texts or writings refer to territory and cultural notions or to meanings that may get lost in translation from one language to another. When I first came to New York I saw a Mondrian show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, which inspired me to rethink the compositional organization of the painting and divide it, as a metaphor for an internal order of things in the world, to ultimately create dialogues and counter-dialogues between the images. I still remember the day I met Ross Bleckner at the Studio School, when he came there as a critic. Our talks regarding my compositional divisions led me to rethink my strategy. Little by little the paintings changed to concentrate and distill those dialectic relationships into a single image.

Bui: Like those paintings of flowers and of avocados.

Geva: And the thorn paintings. These are large still-lives. The flower images are arranged in a vertical composition, like a close-up view of a standing human figure.

Neil: You mentioned that you had seen monochrome paintings by Richter, and Rauschenberg's early paintings from the 1950s, especially the white paintings and the black paintings. What role did that play in this change from the early compositional work, where you put some things here and there and then you balance them out in terms of composition, to making the painting a fully constituted field to be addressed as a unit?

Geva: It was a shock because I had never seen Rauschenberg's early works before "in the flesh," and I thought they were quite radical. I can't even say how they affected me except that they made me think about surface and the material and the totality of the object. It reconfirmed that a

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painting is an object that can exist independently, not only as a platform for bringing images together—that was a very profound realization for me. And yes, Richter’s monochrome paintings were equally important to me. I remember reading an interview with Richter and at some point he was asked, “What does it mean for you to make those monochrome paintings in the ’70s after Yves Klein?” And he said something like he believed that the reasons for doing them will be apparent in the paintings themselves. So I started to look at the differences between those who make monochromatic paintings, and to note how they all think differently about surfaces and paintings as objects. In Israel those issues were not part of the artistic discourse at all at the time.

Bui: In the catalogue essay for your large show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (*Mound of Things: Works and Projects, 1982 – 2008*), Barry (Schwabsky) thought of you as a painters’ poet and he pointed out that your use of black is equivalent to a poet’s ink, which is for writing. Interestingly, David Shapiro said you use color as the color of thought. Let’s start with the genesis of your use of black, which is a very distinct black that I have not seen elsewhere. I mean you use matte, semi-gloss, and all sorts of glossy black enamel paint as well as various black oil paint. What else?

Geva: And spray paint. I’ve always been attracted to black, ever since I began to paint in the ’70s. But as to how I got more confident about my use of black there’s an interesting anecdote. Moshe Kupferman, an abstract painter and one of the most important artists in Israel, came to one of my shows and he said to me, “You know, Tsibi, your black has changed.”

And it was the most important comment that I got from anyone. He, being a painter, probably made this sensible comment in reference to my use of materials, but to me it meant much more. I used to work a lot with acrylic, and then I switched to oil, which brings a different sensitivity to the painting, and then I combined the two. I met Gary Hume in 1986 and we spoke about the use of enamel, so I started to use enamel paint while I was at the Studio School. Of course, it was used by Pollock and de Kooning in the late ’40s and ’50s.

Neil: And Pollock’s black, which was poured on raw canvas, has a different look than de Kooning’s black, which was painted thickly with brushes.

Geva: Exactly. I feel my use of black and white is very chromatic, quite contrary to the idea of seeing things in “black and white.” By using my particular kinds of blacks and whites I tried to express the sharp and blinding typical light in Israel, which produces a certain sense of aggressiveness. I feel that there is a deep and mysterious relationship between a landscape and a cultural or political atmosphere. Likewise, when I use green, it’s never lively shades of green. I always “kill it.” My green is more associated with death and the decline of nature. It’s connected to



Tsibi Geva, Installation view in the exhibition: *Tsibi Geva: Recent and Early Works*, MACRO Testaccio, Rome, 2014. Photographer: Sarale Gur Lavy.

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a body of paintings I showed several years ago in Torino, Italy, in an exhibition that I called *Natura Morte*—that is, a deliberately incorrect version of “still life” in Italian, which literally means “dead nature.”

Bui: In your last visit to the *Rail* headquarters we spoke about your show *Master Plan* at the Haifa Museum of Art in 2003, which was dedicated to your father, an architect, who had migrated from Poland to Israel in 1933, whom you admired greatly.

Geva: Yes. Both of my parents came to Israel in 1933. They were part of the group of pioneers that built the kibbutz where I grew up. My father worked as a builder and then in 1952, just after World War II, the kibbutz sent him to Vienna to study architecture, partly because he knew German.

Neil: Was architecture being taught at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design?

Geva: The Bezalel Academy, which was founded in 1906 by Boris Schatz, didn't have an independent architecture department until the 1980s. Anyway, after three years in Vienna my father came back with a degree and he started to design buildings all over the country, especially in kibbutzim and villages—places that were being built from nothing. He designed everything: synagogues, houses, tables, chairs, gardens, etc. He was the first Jew to be invited—by people from the Arab village near the kibbutz—to design a mosque. I can identify every building he did in Israel because of his post-Bauhaus style, which was very minimalist and elegant. There are about 300 buildings of various kinds. But somehow I didn't go for architecture myself. I started to paint instead. It was only after he died in 1993, or even later, that I acknowledged the significance of architectural influences on my work. That was how the Terrazzo-tile paintings and the window and lattice motifs came about.

Bui: I assume that both your parents were supportive of you being an artist?

Geva: Yes. My mother was an artist too. She studied art and graphic design in Warsaw. But at some point when I was growing up she decided to stop, saying it's enough to have one artist in the family. My mother was really my first teacher.

Neil: Your brother, Avital Geva, is a conceptual, political artist who represented Israel in the Venice Biennale in '93!

Geva: Yes. He's older than me by eleven years. Through him I got to know the art world in Israel very early in my life.

Bui: What about people who came to Israel from New York, like Horace Richter, the art dealer, or Philip Leider, the founding editor of *Artforum*, who left the magazine and the art world and moved to Israel?

Geva: Richter had a commercial art gallery in Jaffa, but he wasn't really involved much with the contemporary scene, whereas Leider was involved through his writings, especially for *Kav Magazine*, edited by Yona Fischer. Leider also taught at Bezalel, but I have never been part of that institution. In Israel there are two big art schools. One is Bezalel in Jerusalem and the other is the

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Midrasha in Tel Aviv. And they are very different from one another.

Bui: So rivalry exists in the state of Israel. [*All laugh.*]

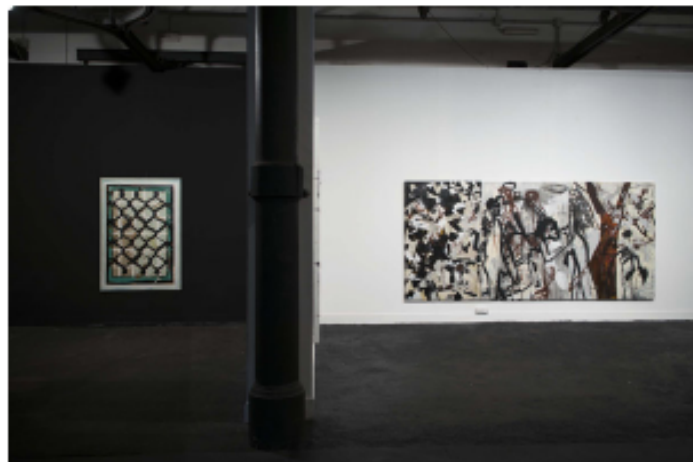
Geva: The differences between the schools became the differences between artistic approaches. Now the differences are no longer about issues, just politics.

Bui: Did you participate in any important group shows in Israel in the mid or late '80s?

Geva: A particular show comes to mind, which was called, *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art*, curated by Sarah Breitberg-Semel at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1986. This show focused on the poverty of materials—the use of plywood, for example—by Israeli artists, especially in Tel Aviv, which was something like the Israeli version of Arte Povera. However, contrary to Arte Povera which focused on materials, this exhibition pointed out and conceptualized an artistic stance which involved a secularized poetics of the sublime. Anyway, I was probably the youngest artist in this show. Then, when I came back from New York in 1988, I had a big one-person show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, *Tsibi Geva: Paintings*. I really wasn't sure how my work would be accepted at the time. In Israel in those days one important influence was Jasper Johns, with the structure that he suggested and the architectural and spatial relationships between images, while others favored concentrating on a single image, as in Giorgio Morandi's works—a bottle on the table. Unlike any of these positions, in my work the relationship was not between the images on the surface. Instead, they offered a dialectic within the image itself. Contradictions coexist in my work in each and every canvas—and this has turned out to be an ongoing project. There is the precise, architectural aspect on the one hand and an expressive, wild, sensuous aspect on the other hand. Cultural and formal contradictions coincide in my work in a way that does not correspond to common artistic classifications, such as an “expressionist” or “architectural-constructivist” style of painting.

Bui: So your paintings of the avocado trees are large still life paintings inspired by Morandi?

Geva: Yes. It all began with a small book I bought called *The Green World*, which was about greenhouses, and it immediately reminded me of my brother Avital, who has developed a greenhouse project as a significant political artwork over the last 30 years. In the book there is a beautiful drawing of an avocado tree whose pit is inserted halfway into a glass of water.



Tsibi Geva, Installation view in the exhibition: *Tsibi Geva: Recent and Early Works*, MACRO Testaccio, Rome, 2014. Photographer: Sarale Gur Lavy.

Bui: That's how to grow your own avocado tree! Can you talk about the *Terrazzo*-tile paintings and the paintings of the Keffiyeh, a significant symbol of Palestinian nationalism?

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Geva: I started painting them after the first Intifada in 1987, a few months after I came back from New York. They were as much about what was going on between Israel and Palestine as they were about my interest in abstract painting on the one hand and neo-geo painting or even pattern painting on the other hand. The *Keffiyeh* series and the *Terrazzo* paintings both began in 1989, and were created simultaneously; I see them as complementary series. Beyond the local political aspect, the *Terrazzo* works refer to a pattern that allowed me to deal with issues like the deconstruction of the surface and the disorientation of the gaze. At the time, it was closely related to central issues in neo-geo painting.

Neil: The image and the object are the same which is like a [Jasper] Johns abstract matrix, where image already exists in the world.

Geva: Yes. It's an abstract image and at the same time a very local object. I am affected very much by things that are at the margins of art, used or banal objects and images, which also reverberate abstract forms, such as the backgammon board pattern, or used car tires as material. Functional objects typical of a specific environment, which have a presence and carry connotations but are not symbols. Two years ago I had a show titled *Transition, Object* at the Ashdod Museum of Art in Israel, curated by Yona Fischer and Roni Cohen-Binyamini. This exhibition was an installation combining found objects, which I call "abandoned objects," and works that I made using them. Barry Schwabsky was the first to pick up on this aspect in my work in his brilliant essay, "Abandoning Painting and Painting with Abandon: Tsibi Geva and the Readymade."

Neil: It's interesting because you were describing the flower and thorn paintings in terms of mapping out on the canvas this singular image in a field in which you could exercise your freedom through the gesture or the evocation of the work. But then the *Keffiyeh* paintings come along which offer a new synthesis: a single piece of cloth with its design, the crisscross pattern, its dimension, its border and its internal frame, and so on. The evolution seems logical to me.

Geva: Yes, the keffiyeh allowed me to bring together everything in this pattern which, in addition to its cultural references, is both a grid and an ornament. The ornament was rejected in favor of the grid by the Bauhaus and the modernist tradition. I wanted to bring them together in a single image.

Bui: Which is not the same in the *Terrazzo* paintings!

Geva: Well, the keffiyeh is also a very concentrated image, it's a kind of icon. It's also very symmetrical. Sometimes I break the symmetry, but rarely. They were all practically of the same size, 70 × 70 inches, whereas the *Terrazzo* paintings were larger. But since the structure of the tiles is also pre-given, and they are very clear and plain with cultural references immediately recognizable by Israelis (this modest tile was used in most of the buildings built in Israel for many years), this gave me the freedom to broaden their meanings.

Neil: Perhaps less with the *Keffiyeh* paintings, partly because it's an existential image that implies fences, borders, and other political connotations.

Bui: True. I agree with Jonathan. And how prophetic and ominous was your last show at Annina

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Nosei Gallery in 2001.

Geva: Yes, this huge installation was composed of hundreds of tires on the walls, *Keffiyeh* paintings, and paintings of birds which I grouped together like a flock of black birds (both harbingers of death and witnesses). It opened 10 days after 9/11. I had titled it, before the event, *The Days of Awe*.

Bui: And that summer before 9/11 Daniel Barenboim conducted Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem, which was controversial as a political statement. I remember talking to Professor Anat Biletzki, the member of B'tselem and of the Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace about how much we both admire Barenboim and Edward Said for having founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together young classical musicians from Israel, Palestine, and other Arab countries every summer to collaborate, to understand broader perspectives through music. And Anat was lamenting that there are not enough of these collaborations in Israel.

Geva: It's very frustrating, but we never stop trying. Many artists in Israel have shown together with Palestinian artists. I've shown, for example, with Asim Abu Shakra, who died young, at the age of 29, and was a very important Arab painter who lived in Israel. We taught in the same school in Tel Aviv. He was an Israeli Arab who identified himself as Palestinian. One of the distinct images that he painted was the Sabra cactus, which is the name by which Israeli-born Jewish people call themselves, standing for roughness on the outside and sweetness on the inside. But for Palestinians the Sabra represents the Palestinian villages deserted during the 1948 War, which used this cactus to mark their territory. In fact, I have once painted a homage dedicated to him, a keffiyeh with a Sabra in the background, which raises a wide set of connotations. That painting, "Keffiyeh 43 (Homage to Asim Abu Shakra)," 1992, is in the collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. But in general I agree that in recent years the intellectual left-wing in Israel hasn't had as much power as it had years ago.



Tsibi Geva, "Keffiyeh," 2014. Acrylic on polyester, 93 x 83 cm.

Bui: What about your image of the bird in profile, always in profile?

Geva: Donald Kuspit once wrote a review for *Flash Art* about a group show in which I participated in Philadelphia (*The Concerned Eye: Israeli Art Today* at the Port of History Museum). He noticed that both my birds and my sitting women were always painted in profile and always at the center of the canvas. They are very static figures. The birds seem taxidermied—they never fly.

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Neil: Like dead nature.

Geva: True.

Neil: It's important to point out that the birds are always painted on found objects such as a tin or wood panel, a piece of glass, or even on a paint tray, among other things. There's this need to combat the possibility of negotiating again between the images and the objecthood. This constant negotiation between the danger of slipping back into pictorial space and the need to navigate some sort of physical boundary that denies spatial recession. This is evident in the sculpture of the lattices and the video where there's the deep space of the surrounding neighborhood of Jaffa, but the image is constantly frontal, filling the field of vision. It's the push and pull between surface and depth.

Geva: I agree. The lattices become a kind of window that frames reality.

Bui: Which is related to the overall pattern of the *Keffiyeh* and the *Terrazzo* paintings of the late '80s.

Geva: Yes, especially the pattern in the *Keffiyeh* paintings. The lattices are not just frames or windows, they also become an object of aesthetic contemplation. They also make reference to the notion of boundaries or barriers and can obscure meaning, both literally and figuratively, depending on whether they're installed outside or inside. For example, I did an installation at Hagar Art Gallery in Jaffa in 2002, which usually shows Palestinian artists. I was the first Jew that showed there and I did a site-specific installation of lattices with patterns that included local symbols (such as the Star of David) and modernist abstract geometric images, which surrounded the gallery's balcony. If you were inside the gallery you looked at them as sculpture. But if you stepped outside to the balcony, they were just transparent lattices, which people from the street could see through; you were in a cage, so to speak. Of course, I was also rethinking the whole Modernist history of structure and patterns, like Sol LeWitt's systems for example: the vertical, horizontal, 45-degree, and how the grid moves in such an organic way. Or Mondrian's "Composition No. 6," from the *Plus-Minus* series, which was a perfect reduction of cubist space. My intention was to push and pull the image from pattern to pattern, so that each brings a different association. Each is a paradigm through which you look at reality, which is of course the complex reality of Israeli and Arab co-existence.



Tsibi Geva, "Untitled," diptych, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.

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Neil: So it's as much about a system that implies a political situation without partial politics as it is about ways of seeing.

Bui: Similar to the function of your tire installation, which you had once mentioned as having emerged from the images of burning tires or making barricades out of them.

Geva: Actually, I started to collect tires already when I was student, without knowing why. But in 1978 I did a piece where I burned a group of tires right in the middle of the Midrasha School of Art in Israel, which directly referred to Palestinian demonstrations of those times. I did it in the middle of the day and the smell was very strong, so people would notice. In 1999, I was invited to make an installation for Art Focus 3, a kind of biennial in Jerusalem. The installation was called *Notes on the Days of Awe II*. I invited an Arab friend, the artist Kher Fodi, who is an amazing calligrapher, to work with me and collaborate together on this project, which consisted of wall paintings and a wall lined with tires. We included Arabic lines from poetry by Muslim writers, like Mahmoud Darwish and others. I painted on the wall a blackbird and Fodi said to me, "There

is an Arabic version of Icarus, a story about a bird that flies too high and her wings are burned by the sun"—so eventually this story was inscribed in the painting, inside the bird's head. The installation was part of a joint exhibition, *Phantom*, with José Bedia, a Cuban artist who lives in Miami, curated by Tami Katz-Freiman. It was a wonderful dialogue between Bedia, Fodi, and myself.

Bui: So mixing the Arabic texts and the Hebrew texts is another important element in your work!

Geva: Yes. For the catalogue of my retrospective exhibition *Mound of Things* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, curated by Hadas Maor in 2008, we decided, in addition to the English text, to include Hebrew and Arabic in the captions and catalogue. It's part of my history as well as part of my ambition as an artist to broaden the context and meaning of what and why I do what I do. In some of my early work, for example, I used to inscribe in Hebrew letters the Arabic words "Biladi, Biladi" as in a song that has become an informal Palestinian national anthem (which has an Egyptian version, a Syrian version, and so on). The lyrics say "My homeland, my homeland, for you my love." They were seen as very provocative then in Israel, and it was forbidden to sing them. "Biladi, Biladi" sounds like "blood" and reminds one of the conceptual connections between blood, man, and land—which have an

interesting etymologic relationship in Hebrew (*dam, adam, adama*). It's like a political haiku poem that was written by different sources and evokes different readings.



Tsibi Geva, "Biladi Biladi Yafa," 1985. Mixed media on canvas, 218x132 cm. Courtesy of the Ron Pundak Collection.

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Neil: Do you think your work is being equally understood for its content as well as its formal attributes?

Geva: I think political interpretation tends to outweigh my interest in the history of abstract painting. It is an unresolved issue that has become part of my work.

I believe the political tension resonates the formalistic one—and this tension should remain unresolved. Different levels of interpretation—the subjective/psychological, the political, and the aesthetic—coexist. I believe these three registers supplement and dialectically reflect one another.

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