

TSIBI GEVA: JOLT

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The paintings on view in Israeli artist Tsibi Geva's first solo exhibition at Albertz Benda embody the tumultuousness of his homeland. They evoke displacement, belonging, and demise through narratives that range from intimate to commonplace. Born on a Kibbutz in 1951, Geva has maintained a dedicated painting practice over the decades while living between the Middle East and New York, where he moved in the mid '80s on a scholarship. The works in this exhibition date as far back as 2011, however, they continue to expand on themes about the body in the face of trauma that have concerned the artist since his early years. 2015 was a big year for the Geva: he was selected to represent Israel in the 56th Venice Biennale and an exhibition of his most recent and early works opened in Mönchehaus Museum of Modern Art in Goslar, Germany. For his current show, a selection from those two projects are joined by a series of newer works in similar vein. Throughout the years, Geva's fervent brushstrokes and complex compositions have conveyed an ample range of concerns that foremost divide into two categories: political unrest and existential paradox. *Untitled, triptych* (2011) accompanied the artist's immersive installation at his Venice Biennale presentation, *Archeology of the Present*. Here, Geva's massive painting spearheads

Jolt, encapsulating corporal and sociopolitical threads that determine Geva's painterly gestures. Carnality occupies the center stage where ambiguously illustrated figures engage in sexual acts; elsewhere, outcry prevails in slaps of paint in the form of fiery abstraction. The painter excellently harmonizes proportions of ethereal and evident narratives on canvases in varying scales. Fluid lines morph into complex juxtapositions on the verge of abstraction and representation; his figures contain atrocities of the mankind as well as its most carnal desires. Thick paint marks form silhouettes of people—lamenting in agony or exuberantly making love, while they intervene into chaotic backgrounds occupied by lands that death, separation, and uncertainty agitate. Either building anarchic settings or completing voluptuous nudes, his brushstrokes tap the canvas with equal precision and intuitiveness. The paintings contain bodies in abundant forms: a couple at the peak of their intercourse, a mourning woman holding a lifeless body or an oversized bird perching on a dying tree. In relation to these bodies are environments the artist illustrates as trapped between catastrophic and barren. At times, his sceneries approach abstraction, confusing an architectural line with an ecstatic gesture of color. In *Untitled* (2017), a nude female figure poses distressed, reclining over a slab of cold grey surface on which she seems fatigued. Her alarmingly pink flesh contributes to her vulnerable position trapped between repose and estrangement.

Fences remain a recurring theme for Geva, who in the '90s painted a series of small scale paintings comparing their pattern to motifs on keffiyehs worn by Arab men. Here, fences appear on a canvas corner, reminding us the borders that separate bodies or ideas. *Untitled* from 2014 is a large scale four-panel painting in which the curvy repetition of fences blankets a large portion of the painting like a shroud. Geva accentuates the painting with a portion of wooden shutters that

he placed on top left corner of the painting where fences prevail. Both shutters and fences constitute a typical scenery of his homeland. Shutters are utilized by locals seeking extra security for their windows; fences separate millions of Palestinians from the rest of the world. Amidst such futility appear birds, either on a crumbling branch or resting on a woman's back staring at the man she's having intercourse with (both paintings are *Untitled* and from 2017). In both cases, the bird is bleak and otherworldly, posing misplaced and inquisitive, daunted by its dismal surrounding.

In addition to his exploration into bestial and carnal corners of the human nature, Geva is the painter of agony that permeates the border between Palestine and Israel. Suffering caused by the occupation and living in uncertainty about times to come revive in his uncompromisingly grim compositions. In *Untitled* (2016), an unclothed figure lies defeated in front of daringly pink smears of paint, legs pulled toward the chest and head resting tired and appalled. Sex, in Geva's portrayal, seems alarming, not unlike death captured in a moment of fury and anguish in the arms of a wailing mother. Arguably the strongest piece in the exhibition, *Untitled* (2014) places a Mary-like woman carrying in her arms a lifeless body. Her niqab is adorned by circular abstract patterns recalling Arabic letters; her posture is in full dignity, yet her loss is evident. Figures disperse around Geva's tumult universe, which in reality is no different than the one surrounding us. They roam desolate corners and decaying margins in search of a sign for a meaning; they are immersed in bundles of pleasure or captured by misery. ☹

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