

HILLA TOONY NAVOK: ON DISPLAY

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Hilla Toony Navok uses local materials that are often versions of materials that have made their way to virtually every corner of the earth, or at least the “developed” world. She presents cheap industrial or consumer products that have been standardized through a devolution of late capitalist design that has its roots equally in Modernism and utilitarianism. Presenting them in sculptural form bypasses their utilitarian value and they shine as imprints of a complex, globalized world whose products are emblems of a rich and complicated set of social, financial, and cultural relationships.

At the heart of Navok’s practice is her inquiry into modernism and abstraction’s influence on consumer products. Common everyday objects are put on display to highlight their design principles and be made strange and eerie in the process. Her repertoire includes everything from plastic awnings to used erasers, shower doors to bike locks, plants to rolls of receipt paper, and binders to pizza trays. Infused with a wry humor, these objects can take on a threatening, menacing air when placed within the environments that Navok sets up for them. The materials of consumer culture are rendered useless, or rather move beyond the rationale of use value, surpassing what seems like their ultimate goal to push further and ask what else do these objects have besides their “job”? What other value can they hold beyond utility?

These ideas come through most clearly in a suite of exhibitions that can be situated between sculpture and installation, though their process originates in highly abstract drawings: *Origins* at Noga Gallery in 2013, *Panorama* at the Haifa Museum of Art in 2010, and *Tuxedo*, Navok’s 2009 graduate exhibition at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design’s MFA program. Culminating with *Rounding Up the Hours*, Navok’s 2015 exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, these exhibitions are outlined below, interspersed with discussions about display, choreography through absence, and abstraction.

Panorama comprised of works based on architectural display cases. Formed out of drywall, they melded with the architecture of the gallery, and incorporated shades of Plexiglas and banisters in staircase-shaped arrangements. In some sections, Navok’s signature drawings and

collages are on display in the vitrines, while in others banisters, railings, and bicycle locks come together to form decorative barriers that seem to be themselves on display. The contrast between two-dimensional works embedded within three-dimensional architectural “reliefs” lends the work a tension that vacillates between the two. What is on display seems to carry equal weight to the display structure itself, as if the act of delineating and displaying something was itself on show.

The aesthetics of display were even more pronounced in *Tuxedo*, an exhibition that looked like a 1980s housing ware showroom. In the highly contrasting palette of black and white, the works featured cheap, geometric dining tables that are presented as display surfaces. They are set within staging areas demarcated by lighting fixtures, metal shelf brackets and rods, and window frames perched perfectly alongside neutral indoor plants of the kind found in the lobbies of office buildings or doctors’ waiting rooms. Disjointed and awkward, the sculptures reference the commercial display of domestic goods, creating an eerie atmosphere akin to both a 1980s home setting attempting the allure of slick industrial design or a store that is simulating the ultimate destination of its housing ware products. The domestic-style retail aesthetics are the foil to industrial-style domestic aesthetics, with the two cleaved together by a shared design vocabulary.

Similar in structure to *Tuxedo* and *Panorama*, *Origins* included several sculptural pieces paired with associated drawings. The sculptural suites included garden hoses, shelving systems, and synthetic cleaning products such as dish scrubbers and fabric softener that were configured



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into finely arranged abstract formations. These compositions seemed a stone's throw away from early abstraction works such as by Piet Mondrian, but in a consumerist pop palette of baby blue, bubblegum pink, and pale yellow wrapped in cobalt blue. This color scheme also referenced 1980s domestic and retail design, especially the colors used in hygiene and cleaning products to reference the sterile and non-organic. Often teetering on the brink of collapse, many of the objects were presented on supports that also reference industrialized platforms, like shelving units or display nooks. The elements in these sculptures were

suspended by the sheer physics of their composition, their delicate balance seemed on the brink of collapse, yet at the same time the objects' industrial "posture" lent them a resolute stability.

The four main sculptures in *Origins* were each compositions that grew out of abstract drawings that had seemingly manifested in industrial materials. A four-part blue shelving unit titled *Re-Arrange*, featured brass and aluminum poles held together via hoses that ran through them. Their linear composition is echoed in *A Hose* wherein a similar technique of running a hose through pieces of

pipe holds together a composition on brass shelves. The lines that feature so prominently in these two pieces can be considered "drawing in space," and point to a playful animation of these objects, almost a dance, or a moment of movement frozen in space. Nearby, also part of the *Origins* exhibition, *Horizon* uses the same idea of an aluminum platform for the display of household materials, however here they are mostly dish scrubbers and sponges. These materials are echoed in *Temple*, another blue aluminum display area, this time featuring color-coordinated kitchen rags, cotton balls, and fabric softener. Rather than referencing a supermarket display designed to sell these products, the work feels more like a shrine to a perfect harmony between consumer products and spiritual abstraction.

In all three exhibitions, *Tuxedo*, *Panorama*, and *Origins*, Navok channels the look and feel of spaces that make up a collective unconscious of material history. The neutral arenas of the consumer spaces of our not-so-distant past become the foreground in these installations. What comprises the "invisible" background takes center stage for a choreography of forms and objects. These ideas are further developed in *Rounding Up the Hours*, Navok's solo exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art. Whereas in the past Navok hinted at movement and objects "coming to life," here she choreographs a setting quite literally using mechanically kinetic movement to animate her sculptures. The room-sized installation comprises office equipment, mainly aluminum shelving units, and a large kinetic aluminum construction that slowly moves office chairs in a complex assemblage of raw industrial material and office wares. Three sculptural suites are presented in assemblages of blue, red, and black,

each with two chairs, one moving on an aluminum base on the floor carrying aluminum rods while another holds up an aluminum construct. The aluminum constructs frame each setting while tubes and rods run through them like drawings in space. Abstraction is again represented through commercial, consumerist products, with color-coordinated ashtrays and plastic cups interspersed in each assembly.

Despite these small details, *Rounding Up the Hours* is overwhelmingly comprised of large, cold, aluminum set against a grey backdrop, under dim fluorescent lights of the kind used at night when nobody is around. The harsh setting is made even more alienating by the droning sound of the small engines monotonously moving the chairs slowly in their tracks. Occasionally, one chair's rods, with packing fabric sullied by the aluminum resting peacefully on it, passes under an electric hand dryer and sets it off, adding to the abounding white noise.

In this antagonistic setting, each of the three sculptural suites can be thought of as little cubicles, with a "boss" holding up the structure while a worker moves things on the floor. But perhaps it's the other way around and the worker is the one holding up the system? The hierarchies are unclear, and although we know we are far from a domestic setting, we're not quite sure if we're in a storage space, a factory, or an office. Like the thin line between retail and domestic space in her earlier installations, Navok here vacillates between two related kinds of spaces: "blue collar" and "white collar."

These two poles of labor cultures uphold a system so refined that it seems to function all on its own. But to what end? The work being done is unclear. The labor itself is disappeared,

and only its material culture remains. The work itself is secondary, much like the mindless tasks Navok was given as a child while visiting her father's aluminum factory. *Rounding Up the Hours* is devoid of human presence.

The sculptural elements are closed off with bars blocking our approach; they cannot be entered, only viewed from a distance. They are set on stage – but for whom? Gone are the office workers, there are only ghosts in this machine and the eerie remnants of their movement on the chairs. Instead, objects such as chairs, molded to the human body, are anthropomorphized and move through a choreography that seems to be dictated by the materials

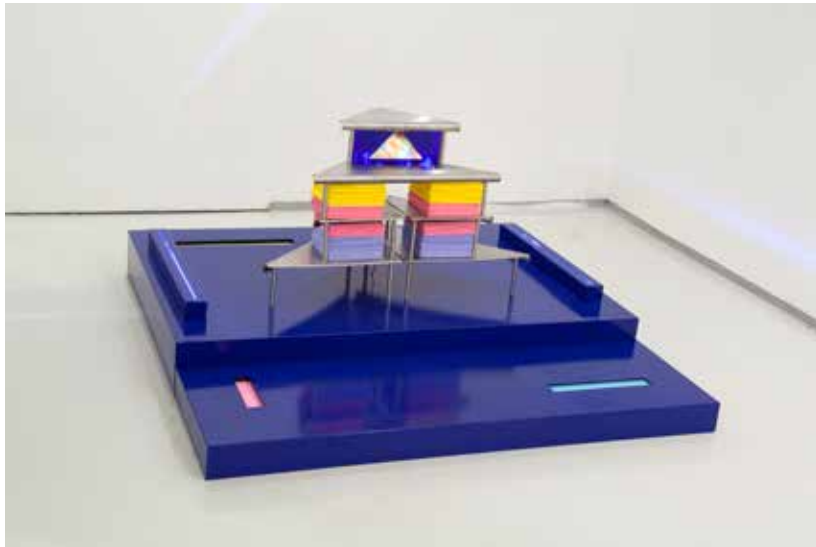
themselves. The objects are the ones at work, toiling away without us, yet on display, always keeping in mind their status as art objects.

Navok's interest in workspace and the materials of office life are not new. From 2006 to 2009 her practice revolved around smaller works, many of which used workplace objects in abstract ways. For example, *Shelf Life* (2007) was simply an arrangement of binders typical in Israeli offices, piled together and lying on their sides on a shelf, fanning out like a peacock. *Right From the Start* (2008) used rolls of receipt paper and shelf-like planks of wood arranged around a drawing and toy car racetrack, leaning

against the wall, always in dialogue with the architecture around it, like all of Navok's works. There is a precise consistency to her practice. Navok constantly examines the support structures of the objects in our lives, symbolized by the shelving units often incorporated in her work, which point at larger systems in which they exist.

In these works, like in *Rounding Up the Hours*, as well as Navok's other large installations, the people have gone and work has stopped. With all the cleaning products and hoses in *Origins*, there is barely a trace of a cleaning lady or a gardener. The lighting fixture salesman isn't around in *Tuxedo*. The workers have left their office chairs spinning in *Rounding Up the Hours*. Perhaps they are all out to lunch. Or on strike. Or perhaps they are already there, part of the objects

and environments. After all, Karl Marx saw the commodity as a "social relation" more than an economic one. For Navok, those relations are already embedded in everything around us. Design, architecture, and the very material of our built environment are a reflection of our culture and system of values. Through them Navok points to the undergirding of modern life to ask how these materials have transformed contemporary life and what they say about us as a society. What values are communicated through design? What is the "inheritance" bequeathed by Modernism to contemporary cycles of consumption and production? How do the mechanics of movement, its control by design forces, goad us to be subjects of that same control? These and other loaded questions are raised by Navok and embodied in her complex works of art.



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01	מקורות	05	מזנון (פנורמה)	10	צינור
	ספוגי רחצה, סקוצ'ים לכלים, מוטות פליז, 2013		קירות גבס, פנסי תאורה, רישומים, 2010		צינור גינה, מדפי מתכת, מוטות אלומיניום, חישוקי מתכת, סקוצ'ים לכלים, שימשונית, 2013
02	אופק (מקורות)	06	סידור מחדש (מקורות), (פרט)	11	חיי מדף
	רשתות מתכת, מוטות אלומיניום, יריעות שימשונית, מתכת, ספוגי רחצה, סקוצ'ים לכלים, 2013		מדפי מתכת, מוטות אלומיניום ופליז, צינורות גומי, ספריי לניקוי חלונות, 2013		מדפי פלסטיק, קלסרים, ניירות, 2007
03	זריחה (מקורות)	07	סידור מחדש (מקורות)	12	מקדש (מקורות)
	דלתות זכוכית למקלחת, מתכת, תאורה, 2013		מדפי מתכת, מוטות אלומיניום ופליז, צינורות גומי, ספריי לניקוי חלונות, 2013		מתכת, מדפי נירוסטה, מרכיבי כביסה, מטליות אבק, כדורי צמר גפן, קופסת פרספקס, תאורה, 2013
04	שוב מההתחלה	08	פינה (טוקסידו)	13	שולחן ספינה (טוקסידו)
	עץ צבוע, מטילת משחק למכוניות מרוץ, ניירות קופה רושמת, פלסטלינה, רישום, 2008		קיר גב, לבני זכוכית, מעקה, תאורת גן, חצץ, עציצי משרד, 2009		שולחן א.ד.א, מחזיקי מדף, מוטות מתכת, זכוכית, עץ, עציץ, 2009
		09	פנורמה (מראה הצבה)		
			2010		
01	<i>Origins</i>	05	<i>Sideboard (Panorama)</i>	10	<i>A Hose</i>
	Bath sponges, dish scrubbers, brass rods, 2013		Drywall structure, spotlights, drawings, 2010		Garden hose, shelves, brass and aluminum pipes, metal, PVC fabric, dish scrubbers, 2013
02	<i>Horizon (Origins)</i>	06	<i>Re-Arrange (Origins), (detail)</i>	11	<i>Shelf Life</i>
	Metal round grids, aluminum rods, PVC fabric, metal, bath sponges, scrubbers, 2013		Metal shelving unit, brass and aluminum rods, plastic pipes, window cleaner, 2013		Plastic shelves, binders, paper, 2007
03	<i>Rise (Origins)</i>	07	<i>Re-Arrange (Origins)</i>	12	<i>Temple (Origins)</i>
	Glass shower door, metal, lights, 2013		Metal shelving unit, brass and aluminum rods, plastic pipes, window cleaner, 2013		Metal bases, stainless steel shelves, fabric softeners, dusters, cotton balls, plexiglas box, light, 2013
04	<i>Right From the Start</i>	08	<i>A Corner (Tuxedo)</i>	13	<i>Ship Table (Tuxedo)</i>
	Colored wood plates, toy car race track, receipt paper, cut drawing, plasticine, 2008		Cornered graded drywall, glass bricks, banister, garden lights, office plants, 2009		MDF coffee table, shelves holders, glass, metal rods, wooden podium, plant, 2009
		09	<i>Panorama (Installation view)</i>		
			2010		