

Could there be two more diametrically opposed poles than Yehiel Shemi, one of the fathers of the local strain of powerful, erect modernist sculpture – and Hilla Toony Navok, an artist whose work centers, in large part, on an amused, playful and subversive response to various manifestations of modernism?

The requisite chart of apparent contrasts between the two structures a perfectly binary relationship between his and her defining characteristics: Shemi lived on a kibbutz, welded exposed iron, and gave rise to sculptures that were destined to survive all that iron knows how to survive, while Navok lives in Tel Aviv and works with cheap, store-bought, synthetic materials that have no artistic aura, and whose lifespan is as long as that of the exhibition in which they are shown; Shemi's art-making is identified with the physical effort involved in welding, with sweat and muscles, while Navok's work is identified with wandering and gathering materials in stores located in the south of Tel Aviv. Her gathering process is carefully focused, and involves selecting specific products and raw materials for each exhibition from among the plethora of available consumer objects: advertising materials, furniture items, kitchen appliances, cleaning agents, or textiles – all in a range of colors. In a local context, one could describe Shemi as one of the last artists motivated by the Zionist ethos – artists who experienced no boundary between their ideological motivation and their art-making. This motivation, however, was not expressed by means of figurative representation, but rather by means of profound sculptural values: abstraction, commitment, stability, and solemnity. Navok's art, by contrast, comes close to making fun of the very definition of sculpture.

Opposing poles, then, from any possible perspective. Or perhaps only seemingly opposed? For as the exhibition "Extensions" – which Navok created in Yehiel Shemi's sculpture workshop on Kibbutz Cabri – makes clear, a first glance is likely to miss more complex, unexpected, subterranean layers and interrelationships. This exhibition is a stunning example of how a tribute and patricide can coalesce, and in doing so overturn an artistic genealogy, shaking up stable artistic dynasties and infusing them with new life. It is possible that this meeting has been made possible because, from a generational perspective, Shemi is not a father figure for Navok. Rather, he is a grandfather, or even a great-grandfather – for the two are separated by several sculptural stages in the local field: the first intermediate link following the heroic, ideological strain of modernism was represented by two individual artists, who each constituted a one-man school of art-making: Yaacov Dorchin, who created lyrical, Romantic steel sculptures (which are nevertheless heavy and massive), and Igaël Tumarkin, whose figurative, combative, declarative sculpture was suffused with cultural allusions. They were followed by the generation of artists who became active in the 1980s – Uri Katzenstein, Philip Rantzer, Itzhak Golombek, Drora Dominey and Zvika Kantor – who created theatrical, narrative, biographical sculptures based on readymades, which were lightweight and easily transportable. The younger artists of the next generation have affiliated themselves with anti-sculpture and the non-monumental, have assimilated their sculptural work into installations, and move between the highly personal, the political, and formalist values. In the second decade of the 21st century, Hilla Toony Navok is thus in fact in no need of engaging in patricide; her post-postmodernism observes

Hilla Toony Navok at Cabri – Learning from Yehiel Shemi

Ruth Direktor

Shemi from a safe distance that is neither threatened nor threatening, examining him instead as if for the first time.

What She Sees

What does she see? She sees a sculpture garden at the entrance to Kibbutz Cabri, in the vicinity of the studio that had served Shemi for many years. It is now known as “Atelier Shemi.” The use of the French term atelier defines a period in which the collective gaze of Israeli art was still directed to Paris, or at least preserves the vestiges of that gaze; at the very least, it commemorates the years in which Shemi lived in Paris (1960–1963), although he was not necessarily inspired by French sculpture. She sees exposed, rusted iron sculptures of different sizes and heights, works that have survived rain, wind, and blazing sun. Fifteen years have passed since Shemi’s death, in 2003.

Among the sculptures located in the garden, Navok chose five iron sculptures created in the years 1980–2000, all of which are generic works typical of Shemi. Her strategy in relation to these works already announced itself in the exhibition title: “Extensions.” The abstract title points to the very attempt to extend Shemi’s sculpture both physically and conceptually, while also alluding to the relatively recent phenomenon of building extensions on Israel’s kibbutzim and moshavim. Moreover, the exhibition’s Hebrew title, *Harhavot*, involves a phonetic extension of Shemi’s *Havarot* (Syllables), the title of the series of sculptures that is most strongly associated with him, and which in many ways constitutes the high point of his oeuvre. Shemi’s “Syllables” distill the essence of his sculpture into a grammatical syntax



Sculpture garden, Atelier Shemi
Kibbutz Cabri

composed of formal and material parts. And just as syllables do not necessarily form coherent words, so the sculptures in this series by Shemi – in Ginosar, Nayot, Tefen, and Cabri – remain as abstract components. Navok adds to these “syllables” sheets of PVC nylon, plastic chairs, an aluminium scaffolding and the Hebrew letter het (ח).

What She Does

The sculpture *Syllables* (1980) is located at one end of the sculpture garden, and its iron arm extends forward and out, filled with pathos and daring. In Navok’s hands, it has become a “yard”: an aluminum structure in the shape of the Hebrew letter resh (ר) thwarts the momentum of the iron arm, and serves as a frame for two triangles composed of



Extensio No. 01 - *Awning*,
Winter Enclosure

Yehiel Shemi,
Iron Sculpture, 1990

green PVC nylon. One of the triangles folds into a shutter that can be rolled up, and a green plastic chair is positioned at the end of this circumscribed area.

Shemi's *Iron Sculpture* (1990) was given a "winter enclosure": Navok attached a stretch of red PVC nylon to the central tongue among the three towering iron tongues, forming a sort of canopy under which she positioned two red plastic stools. A transparent rectangle at the top of this canopy elevates the improvised shelter to the status of a roof with a skylight, projecting onto the sculpture associations from the world of real estate and nouveau-riche design.

Navok strips *Syllables* and *Iron Sculpture* of their monumentality. The sheets of PVC nylon and the colorful plastic chairs relate them to everyday, domestic concepts such as invitation, hospitality, and gathering, as well as to

concepts from the world of DIY and Home Depot: addition, improvisation, the parasitical reliance on an existing structure, or decoration – all concepts that are questionable in a purist architectural context, yet are nevertheless effective. The transformation of the sculptures into a "yard" or the attachment of a "winter enclosure" invite the viewer to enter, take a seat, and linger within them. This experience of lingering within "extended" sculptures by Shemi is at once instructive and amusing: the elements listed above as a series of binary oppositions are all combined to the point of losing their meaning: the hardest element (iron) is wed to softness (PVC nylon); the quintessential manifestation of modernism (a grid composed of squares) is embodied by an aluminum scaffolding; the principled is appropriated in favor of the decorative; abstraction is rejected in favor of functionalism; rigid substances explore the possibility of being enveloped or shaded.

The second sculpture titled *Syllables* (2000) became an "observatory": this is one of Shemi's sculptures that are strongly reminiscent of works by Richard Serra, with iron plates arranged in parallel or vertically in relation to one another. Navok surrounded the sculpture with a stretch of blue PVC nylon, transforming the Serra-inspired *Syllables* into a gate leading to an area from which one could observe the landscape.

Fact III (1995) is a low horizontal sculpture composed of a row of iron panels that are placed on the ground, some of them tilted slightly upwards; together, they form a nearly flat surface, an iron carpet reminiscent of works by Carl Andre. Navok placed a yellow PVC nylon triangle over one of the sculpture's corners, stretching it close to the ground, and called this work *Awning*. What is she shielding

Fact III from? After all, it appears as strong as they come. Yet the very act of covering the low sculpture expropriated its resilience and concreteness, extricating from it qualities that we would never have ascribed to sculptures by Shemi: needy of protection, succumbing to shading, responsive to compassion. There is, obviously, nothing more absurd than this: an artist arrives from the city with colorful sheets of PVC nylon, and dots the rusted, monochromatic sculpture garden with primary colors, imposing upon the tough iron constructions a series of seemingly unnecessary actions: shading, covering, circumscribing, closing, protecting, domesticating, decorating. *Fact III*, *Syllables* and *Iron Sculpture* are in no need of these actions.

Yet is that indeed the case? For, as noted, Navok's actions penetrate beneath the surface, revealing a system of intergenerational connections and relations that cannot be taken for granted. These actions are by no means performed as an attempt at ridicule. They point to what is both fragile and human about Shemi's iron sculptures, which can indeed withstand rain, sun and wind, and to the best of our knowledge are capable of remaining eternally outdoors, and most certainly in a closed space. Their vulnerability is of the immaterial kind: it is related to time and memory. How long will they survive in our consciousness, how long will they remain etched in cultural memory, which is so painfully short, and at what point does the term "canonical" become needy of revival, of another gaze, of a reminder?

In this context, it is befitting to recall an action performed in the 1990s by the Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury in relation to Carl Andre: Fleury invited women in high-heeled ankle boots bearing a pattern of red-and-blue squares and black lines against a white ground, which resembled a



Waiting, Tel Aviv, 2015

Mondrian painting, to walk back and forth upon a floor work by Andre that was on display at the Stadtmuseum Esslingen in Germany. Andre viewed the action *Walking on Carl Andre* as an assault on his work, forbid its performance, and even ensured that photographs of it would be removed from the exhibition catalogue. A short time later, however, Fleury found another floor sculpture by Andre in a private collection in Geneva, and used a video camera to document women walking on it with high heels. *Walking on Carl Andre* clearly embodied a form of female protest against male sculpture. Yet by the time Navok directed her gaze at Shemi's sculpture in 2018, female protest had already become part of the history of art, like all other forms of subversion directed at modernism and its various permutations. Navok's attitude

toward sculpture can be characterized as an internalization of unintentionally created sculptural events. In this context, it is fitting to mention Gabriel Orozco, who has been photographing such events since the late 1980s: a folded futon mattress in the street, scraps placed on the ground like a memorial – or creating such occurrences himself: oranges on a window sill, a deflated football containing water, potatoes placed on notebooks in a stationary store. Navok's gaze, like that of Orozco on sculpture-without-an-artist, identifies sculptural events in the least expected places: a book she published together with Yonatan Raz-Portugali (*If What You're Craving for Right Now is Pilates, That's What You Should Focus On*), features photographs that she took while wandering around the streets of different cities – images that capture precisely such random, incidental sculptural events that only a sculptor's eye can identify. For instance, a roll of some red material standing upright by an elevator door: seen through Navok's eyes, one cannot fail to identify it as a sculpture and appreciate its impressive formal qualities, even though it is obvious that whoever placed it there, by the elevator, was not thinking of creating a sculpture.

The Ethics of PVC Nylon

One cannot detach the "Extensions" from the context of Kibbutz Cabri, and thus from their deep embeddedness in a larger Israeli context, which is little more than a footnote in an artistic epic whose narrative was structured far from here. When Navok turned to gaze at Shemi's sculpture in 2018, she put the spotlight on him once again as a local father, and in doing so also conjured up the spirit of Shemi's

own fathers: Serra, Andre, David Smith. "Extensions" can almost be described as an art-history lesson for a generation unfamiliar with Shemi, as well as a significant moment in the artistic narrative of Navok herself, who presents the various sources of inspiration with which, in parallel to, and against which she makes art: formalism, primary colors, kiosks, housing developments, back-yard aesthetics, the tension between sculpture and installation, the "truth to materials."

"The truth to materials" is an unexpected point of confluence between Navok's art-making and that of Shemi, and one of the lenses through which one can detect the hidden affinities between them. This ground rule of modernism is reincarnated in Navok's ready-made sculptures: she is forever faithful to the truth of the stretches of PVC nylon, plastic chairs, shelves, various containers and cleaning agents. If these sheets are produced in shades of red, blue, yellow and green, she will never paint them. Plastic chairs will only appear in her works in the colors chosen by their producer. This integrity concerning a material world that seems to expect no respect gives rise to a surprising material ethos, albeit one familiar from other contexts: it is obvious to us that Shemi would not paint the rusted iron – this stance is rooted in his world of values. Navok applies the same ethical stance to the materials with which she works, and in doing so (once again) questions the apparent gaps and contrasts between her world and Shemi's world.

In order to produce this range of extensions – awning, shading, sitting area, enclosure, yard – one must have recourse to aluminum. The colorful PVC nylon and plastic chairs stand out and attract our gaze, yet the aluminum scaffolding is the foundation on which the extensions are built. In the context of the intergenerational relations created at Cabri between

Shemi and Navok, on the spectrum between adoption, acceptance and protest, it is not superfluous to note that Navok has long been familiar with aluminum, and that this familiarity originates in her father's aluminum factory. This is a material that she is closely familiar with from her own family, and she has brought it into the "art family" through her contact with Shemi's sculptures.

At the entrance to Shemi's studio, Navok hung a large print of a photograph in which Shemi is seen against the background of his sculptures *Ginosar Syllables*. This photograph was taken from Adam Baruch's book about Shemi, *Secular Sculpture*, which was published in 1989, three years after Shemi received the Israel Prize. The book and the prize were central elements in the crowning of Shemi as the father of Israeli modernism, and in the identification of his art-making with the pioneering, secular ethos of Zionism.

Navok cut into the photograph forms that respond, in a way, to the forms in *Ginosar Syllables*, and pasted the cut photograph on a stretch of green PVC, so that the building blocks of these two artistic languages – which are less oppositional than one might think – coalesce into a single collage. The collage thus becomes a parable for the essence of Navok's actions in relation to Shemi: cutting and pasting, or rather cutting and healing, reduction for the sake of extension.

Inside the studio, Navok set up an entire wall of collages: a row of large collages created by Shemi in the 1970s and 1980s – black paper on brown cardboard – are interspersed with small collages of her own, which she created in 2013. The wall of collages reveals the essence of her action at Cabri as being, above all, a curatorial action. This is curatorship in its most basic sense – the removal of works

from storage and their presentation – as well as curatorship as a cultural act of creating a dialogue. The rectangular wall becomes a horizontal page of text composed of syllables upon syllables, Shemi's syllables and Toony's syllables (a first name seems in order here). Navok's colorful collages, a stunning display of formalism after the end of postmodernism, fill the empty spaces left on the wall by Shemi's large collages, functioning as punctuation marks within the larger text. The curatorial act smilingly accepts its own status as a flower arrangement, a pretty wall hanging, a form of decoration.

Decoration

Shemi's Joint is the title, at once ridiculous and touching, of another work in one of the studio spaces. This title, the name of a kiosk or informal steak joint, refers to an iron sculpture created by Shemi in 1996, which Navok enclosed: three of its sides are surrounded by transparent nylon, while its fourth side is composed of sheets of PVC nylon that form a Mondrian-inspired painting in red, blue and white. Like the red sheets used to form a "winter enclosure," the sheets in this work are decorated on their margins with an undulating pattern. This ornamental pattern clearly contrasts with the straight lines of a Mondrian composition or of any grid whatsoever – an undulating line that proclaims in the simplest manner, without apologies or embarrassment: I am a decoration. I am here in order to decorate, ornament, beautify, please. The legitimate question that follows upon this proclamation is: Is it indeed beautiful?

When Shemi displayed his first iron sculptures in the 1950s and 1960s, they clearly challenged everything that was considered “beautiful.” Today, several decades later, after the formation of genealogies of rusty, exposed metal sculpture, the eye, or at least the collective eye of art, easily takes them in. The PVC nylon and colorful plastic chairs, whose aesthetic points to steak joints and family picnics, are now the ones that introduce the discourse on the definition of the beautiful and its limits into a sphere that has already been marked as an artistic territory.

Navok arrives in Cabri with her arsenal of materials and artistic tactics, and meets Shemi there: the phrasing “A Joint Meeting with Shemi” – a possible title for a conference or academic article – is reincarnated, following a slight yet dramatic change, as *Shemi’s Joint*. The paraphrase on *Learning from Las Vegas* in the title of the current article seeks to introduce another inversion concerning the essence of this meeting, which is also central to the debate on the conception of what is beautiful, good, and right. When Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour left in 1972 for Las Vegas and collected their impressions in the book that become the opening shot of postmodernism, they shocked the worlds of architecture and design by suggesting that one could study any values from a place identified with kitsch and a total lack of taste and aesthetics. The very act of turning their gaze towards Las Vegas constituted a protest against the lessons of modernism. Hilla Toony Navok grew up into

the postmodern revolution, and her art-making is entirely based on values of fragmentation and marginality, on the absence of an aura and on the aesthetic of the minor and the insignificant. At the same time, her work is predicated upon a system of values that is no less ordered or consistent than that of Donald Judd, Carl Andre or Yehiel Shemi: the truth of the material, rigid formal arrangements, primary colors, the adoption of Constructivist principles, an affinity with architecture and design, as well as – without any dissonance – a love of the decorative, the incidental and the non-artistic.

When Navok “learns from Shemi,” she is in fact using him to point anew to a history of values that are usually identified with formalism and modernism, as well as to the tumult that this history has undergone. These values, which are anchored deep within her art-making, are accompanied by a humorous wink, even though the joke is on them. Her physical and conceptual contact with Shemi’s sculptures enables Navok to shed light on his artistic language as well as on her own, while reorganizing old forms of order and disrupting a binary division that is no longer relevant: the distance between Las Vegas and Cabri has been reduced to the dimensions of a yard, a winter enclosure or an extension.



Extension No. 06 –
Shemi's intersection,
2018

Yehiel Shemi,
Iron Sculpture, 1996