



Story– Stare– Store

Hard to explain, indescribable, highly elusive — artworks, especially contemporary artworks, are like oysters that conceal "pearls of wisdom." We look at a work of art and understand how to live our lives better, in a deeper, loftier, or simply more interesting way. Specifically, with regard to Hilla Toony Navok's works, we understand something fundamental about human behavior in large portions of this planet, after what we call "capitalism" — a dream to some, a nightmare to others, and in both cases a reality — came into our lives. Molding "ruminations" about the human condition in the extra-territory of art, Navok is a master of minimal compositions. Within them, colors and shapes are the results of numerous wanderings. Wandering is at the core of her practice; it is the *modus operandi* and primary research tool.

These wanderings, however, take place in home décor and hardware stores, not in the modern wing of some prestigious art museum, in some post-war exhibition, or in a contemporary art biennial. Navok spends her time in warehouses, retail shops, and between the aisles of department stores in which endless varieties of consumer goods are displayed according to type, shape, weight, and color.

"Type, shape, weight, and color" — aren't we talking about post-minimalism? Isn't this an exhibition featuring the likes of Nahum Tevet, Jessica Stockholder, and Richard Tuttle? Is Richard Serra a relevant name? No! This is the gardening area of some store in Ramat Gan, where the artist looks at differently colored garden hoses, checks how they roll into themselves, how the staff at the store presents them, how they "fall," ever so beautifully... pure poetry. Or maybe we are in the cleaning section of a supermarket, stunned by the endless range of sponges, their pristine colors, their various textures, their shapes and thicknesses... this is heaven. Pushing your cart from aisle to aisle, you realize that God is not in the details, God is waiting for you at the next shelf arrangement.

If you grasp such truth, when it reveals itself to you, then Navok appears to be the prophet we have all been waiting for. Her sculptures, installations, and performative videos are compositions of colored objects in space, which encapsulate and simultaneously celebrate — but also critically lay bare — the way humanity deals, beautifully and faithfully, with serial mass production. Twisting the assumption that all sponges are identical, all garden hoses are rolled the same way, all carpets are similar (ah carpets, flying carpets!), Navok highlights the impossibility of ignoring the power of mundane objects, and in doing so, she adds a unique chapter to the history of sculpture. Some may link her art to a local sensibility, or rather an attraction for frugal materials in Israeli art. Others will tie it to Pop Art and consumerism, and charge it with political meaning, peppering it with some post-socialist critique imbued with heavy-weight philosophy. I would like to argue that Navok's art has nothing to do with any of these, not even with color composition per se, or color composition as we perceive it, from Goethe through the Bauhaus to Abstract Expressionism. Navok transforms her fascination with mass-produced objects into powerful works of art which are ever so unique, and at the same time, completely related to what we do, whether we are the few who arrange such objects daily on the shelves of department stores, or the many who fill their carts with them, full of excitement.

In Navok's world, the reality of life in the age of Late Capitalism may be construed as a dream rather than a nightmare, although ultimately, for Navok it is a mere "tool to discuss complexity," just as she uses the forms and colors of objects (whether products or buildings) to introduce existential reflections on the notion of display. Such notion should be understood as the way living and non-living forms present themselves and are presented to the world. Within this realm, the artist strives to extract a more complex, fragile, and "gloomy" (her term) gaze.

My last conversation with Navok in her studio, during which I realized that the exhibition was all about windows, finally validated my conjectures. The artist revealed her obsession for these places where one object comes in endless varieties of colors and shapes. She told me how, full of excitement, she speaks on the phone with her "providers," and how, after several phone calls, they understand that what they are requested to provide her will have a life that is loftier (or different; after all, the store is a temple!) than what it was made for. Once we become aware of such a scenario, and therefore embrace the essence of Navok's practice, everything else starts to make sense: from the affordable garden designs surrounding Yehiel Shemi's outdoor metal sculptures ("Extensions," curated by Smadar Schindler at Atelier Shemi, Kibbutz Cabri, 2018) to the largest and most beautiful exhibition space in Israel turned into an indoor "empty garden" of pergolas enriched by materials that manifest their own will and desire to roll and unroll ("Waiting for the Sun," curated by Aya Lurie at Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2021); from a family of kinetic sculptures that make us realize something about office work and labor in general ("Rounding Up the Hours," curated by Chen Tamir at CCA, Tel Aviv, 2015), to the emancipation of the suburb (in this case Petach Tikva), which becomes the "primary theater" of a post-Johannes Itten sensual and yet goofy choreography of yellow plastic (pulled by the artist), blue inflatable rubber (rolled and pushed by the artist), and red fabric (worn by the artist) (*With the Wind, With the Water*, a video work featured in the exhibition "The Crystal Palace & The Temple of Doom" curated by Hila Cohen-Schneiderman at Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2015). With such premises, we need only to start fantasizing about windows, their shapes, materials, subdivisions, and multiple fixtures. Sooner or later, it will be time to look through them.