

Carriages to Or Akiva

Nurit David

I. Or Akiva

On a gray February afternoon, at my request, Yitzhak Golombek takes me in his car to Or Akiva. On the way, in answer to my questions, he tells me that as a youth, being the class painter, he was invited to decorate summer camps, and was even given a certain payment in return. He recalls how his father painted a wall in their Or Akiva home with colorful geometrical shapes and announced: "It's a Picasso!". He goes on to tell me about the Omanut La'am exhibitions which left a profound impression on him (he still preserves the catalogues, with black-and-white reproductions of modernist paintings which he cut from daily papers kept between their pages), and especially painter Michael Argov in whose work he encountered smears of raw, coarse, unrefined paint. In the aptitude test at the end of primary school his parents were told he should study art—having been told so, they enrolled him in the WIZO-France arts high school in Tel Aviv, where he studied with Moshe Rosenthalis, Samuel Tepler, Alexander Bogen, and others, to his great enjoyment. From there to the Midrasha School of Art the path was short.

His parents' home in Or Akiva—to which he arrived in 1965 at the age of eight, a newcomer from Poland—was engulfed by gloomy silence which imprisoned a hidden anger. The trials and tribulations of his parents during the war and thereafter have never been discussed openly to this day. Golombek remembers none of his classmates, except one, Hanna, with whom he was in love from afar. He says that many of the children were

violent, that they even threw stones at the headmaster and shouted "Nazi!" behind his back. He remembers Or Akiva and the apartment block in which they lived as "nothing."

Leafing through Elisha Efrat's book Development Towns in Israel: Past or Future? (Tel Aviv: Ahiasaf, 1987 [Hebrew]), Or Akiva takes shape as a failure, as one of the most underdeveloped development towns. According to the book: "The town has remained at a very low level of development, showing economic and social regression. It is typified by great population turnover due to its poor conditions and limited employment opportunities. When it was built, no work places were prepared in town, as it was intended as a service town for its well-established agricultural surroundings. Its inhabitants were employed in the households of the villa-suburb of Caesarea, in agriculture in neighboring locales, and in industrial plants in the city of Hadera" (p. 94). Efrat further notes that "the town suffers in particular from its educational system; many of its children drop out at an early stage; it also suffers from continuous unemployment, in addition to great cultural distress. The adults in town, as well, stand little chance of improvement. They have become apathetic to their surroundings, and even to their own lives" (p. 168).

I find it hard to understand how can there be such "nothingness" and silence and anger and terrible poverty, and at the same time—such a paved, natural path to art? How come within the wretchedness and dreariness, the child Marek (as he was called at home) took the time to notice and like Argov's crude brushstrokes? It is not that, by inversion, he coveted the glamour and aura of art, which would have been easier to understand. It would be misleading to say that art pulled him out, that it rescued him from Or Akiva, because for Golombek art was there just as well, in the shallow waters of Or Akiva. What he liked about art was precisely its faithfulness to truth, its bluntness, its being low and close to the bottom

like life itself, or possibly always elevating it a notch, no more. Golombek suspects anything that aims too high. He knows nothing about mountains, and the only fortresses he acknowledges are the gray, elongated three-story blocks with multiple entrances in Or Akiva. The one in which they used to live stands even now, in winter 2011, especially long and gray. The only carriages fit to deliver passengers to its doorstep are made of inflated plywood teardrops which close in on nothing, and a blown-up plywood comb with curved teeth topped by a grotesque yet delicate drawing of his father's face.

Even if Golombek's work appears well congruent with the spirit of the Midrasha, I believe that its origins are different. The Want of Matter here is literal; it is not the rebellion of an insolent, headstrong youth against his bourgeois parents, as was the case of Raffi Lavie. On the contrary, Golombek took care not to distance himself from his parents and from Or Akiva; this is a strict ethical command for him. He takes pains not to talk about anything with which he is not closely familiar, and his greatness, already as a youth, was the ability to perceive even the low and frugal as materials with nuances and hues, ready and yielding to be used. It is precisely these restrictions which he took upon himself that call for a flight of the imagination and great daring: how to remain low and faithful, and still create a metamorphosis? How to take into account the lowliness and oppressive conditions of life, yet refrain from settling accounts, from loathing, complaining, or turning his back? For here I stand, in front of this apartment block in Or Akiva, realizing to what extent it dictated the nature and atmosphere of the sculptures, their coloration, and even the proportions.

At the same time, the sculptures' shapes are invented and entirely new, very precise, conducting clear thought through utmost attention to the language of sculpture.

Always warm, the forms appear as though they have emerged through dense contact between people, within the family; at the same time, they differentiate themselves, marking an essential inner logic, articulating their message sharply and clearly; they are a moment of alert, focused poetic thought.

I would like to stress the uniqueness of Golombek's position in the local culture. Here is an excerpt from Aharon Shabtai's wonderful poem "Kibbutz," which employs images used in Golombek's work too: "I like the convenience / of egg cartons // a broken egg in one of the thirty / depressions constructed of pulp // a can with the crumbs of cookies // garbage doesn't repulse me / I like the concept "eating" / ... / I like all kinds of materials / ... / wood's exploited to make a large spoon / the haft of a knife / ... / I like gas // I like electricity // I like cooking salt" (Love & Selected Poems by Aharon Shabtai, New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1997, tr. Peter Cole). To all appearances, the point of departure is similar, so why do I get the impression that Shabtai makes a conscious effort to descend to the level of the egg cartons and the can with the cookie crumbs, and secretly pats himself on the shoulder for so doing? For him, it is an ideological stance, whereas for Golombek, this is the way art is: it is inseparable from daily cares; it is not antithetical to waste; it pops up on every corner and in every condition. By his very nature, he does not acknowledge the gap between beautiful and ugly, clean and dirty. That which is here, now, awakens him to work, and he is free to change its contexts, to transform it. My mother used to say that you don't have to utter words of love to your children, that it is obvious, self-evident. I can only guess this was also the East-European atmosphere in which Golombek was raised.

What I am trying to say is that whoever listens carefully will be able to hear a rare voice here, devoid of sentimentality; a sober voice, punctilious and yet poetic, that without making a fuss about itself and without feeling meritorious, speaks out for invisible, silent, anonymous marginal populations. Golombek draws a history of the Israeli experience which deviates from the prevalent tone of speech reacting to collective events. His work is associated with late trends in the science of history, such as "microhistory," which regard it as a non-heroic narrative of the individual's way of life. Wikipedia likens it to a "peek through the keyhole onto a given society at a given point in time," an image which Golombek would have readily embraced (in the past he sculpted keyholes). It goes on to say that the "uniqueness of microhistory lies in writing History from below," and to this assertion he would have concurred just as readily.

Poverty, for Golombek, flickers with great potential, a new wealth is born from the limitations it poses. It is clear to me that had he chanced upon a goldmine, he would have shrunken and fallen into silence. His art thrives and his thought becomes fertile within the ethics and aesthetics of poverty; this is what he really likes; this is where he feels at home.

Nevertheless, it ought to be stressed that his work has nothing to do with contemporary academic trends in art, which convert it into sociology, and under a radical guise, while relinquishing the art object, serve as a mouthpiece for political correctness. A fashion paradoxically, as it were, favored by the artistic establishment, albeit that establishment may have long eschewed art's differentiated, twisted paths, and may have, possibly, always wanted to subordinate it to "common sense." It is the object which, by the resistance of its physical existence in space, is most capable of conveying nuances. Via attention to its minutest details we come upon new, surprising paths of thought that foster

an awareness of our personal freedom, which is also the cornerstone and guarantee for a better society.

II. Carriages

When I met Golombek, in the early 1980s, his studio floor, in his private home between Plonit Alley and Almonit Alley in Tel Aviv, was occupied by several double-sided plywood waves, which he later exhibited at the Artists' House, Tel Aviv. Dry wooden water, these were knee-high waves—rather than dangerous breakers—whose motion was frozen, three-dimensional hieroglyphs economically embodying the essence of a "wave." A slight rocking movement, roundish, which would later characterize all the built plywood sculptures, the hills with the green-hair pillows, the cow, the mattress—and, of course, the various inflated drops which also star in the current exhibition.

The undulant movement is also the slight motion of walking in one's close vicinity; a slow movement, wavering, which enables attention to detail; it is also the motion of the artist's walking, wandering, in the markets of the city's south to gather the objects to be used in his later installations—in the exhibitions "The Road to Lod " curated by Irit Segoli at the Rachel and Israel Pollak Gallery, Kalisher School of Art, in 2002; "Gaya" at Dvir Gallery, 2003; and "The Shnitzim" at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.

Even before the waves, close to his graduation from the Midrasha, Golombek created markedly low works in which photographic negatives placed on the floor delineated puddle-like forms. From puddle to wave to drop—"small waters" is a prolific, much loved and fruitful subject matter. Water opens the world to movement, melting it, and sailing on. Motion substitutes one thing for another. Here, however, one does not sail away to distant

realms; it is cruising in the neighborhood, by the roadside. Motion embodied in an object is the gist of the work of art. One of the most immanent features of Golombek's sculptures is that, even in their final, finished manifestation, they reflect the thought process that spawned them, thereby expressing their full identification with the modern.

Compiled vehicles are the conductors of the current show, in which Golombek presents, for the first time, framed drawings as part of sculptures. The drawings are incorporated into three-dimensional structures, carried upon them. Each such carriage consists of two plywood drops which function as wheels, another drop which is the body of the carriage (much like the pumpkin in Cinderella), with a simple shaft made of two planks, and a framed sheet-size drawing suspended over them, fluttering lightly. In some instances, a plywood comb of the type created by Golombek in the past is attached to the back of the painting, but this time the comb itself seems to have grown unkempt hair, for the edges of its teeth were not sawn off, and they remain curved and curled, in varying lengths. On the whole, unlike previous works, all plywood shapes have marginal oddments, overt traces of the work process, brims which infuse the forms with the potential of growth and change, like hems to a garment. The act of sewing is explicitly embodied by the large safety pins, also made of plywood, placed over two drops narrower than the others. Golombek stitches together wood and water to launch a mental vehicle whose components are surprisingly simple.

The curly line is also typical of the drawings, which finely depict, in layers of chalk, pastel and pencil, a grotesque portrait of the artist's father who passed away several years ago. It serves to portray a face with multiple noses, cockscombs, and double chins. The father floats over the paper as an eccentric bird, stuporous and lost (rather than

threatening) vis-à-vis the world, wriggling like a question mark. His vacillations, awkward gestures, speech difficulties, send forth strange growths and inflorescences onto his face. In a gesture of reconciliation and identification, Golombek lifts and elevates this father above the entire exhibition, letting him ride the winged wooden horses; "a king of sorts," he says, giggling with embarrassment.

The exhibition is interspersed by plaster casts of paper envelopes, like those used to send large postal items. They were created simply, by casting liquid plaster into envelopes and extracting it after it dries. When Golombek toys with casts, these are always minute aura-less objects, like potatoes and cucumbers which he cast in the dozens. The plaster casts for him are not a stage in the work process; they are the end product. White and shamefully fragile, they cast no spell whatsoever. Mimicking the formless, the haphazard, these should give rise to a Kingdom.