



Eternal Sunshine
of the Spotless
Mind, or How
does one Speak in
Abstract

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"We may not be present at its creation, so an art work may begin for us as we approach it,"¹ and there is always a degree of apprehension at the first encounter: a young artist, an unfamiliar name; we are threatened by ways of thinking that differ from our own, by deviating, alienated worlds.

I first came across Hilla Toony Navok's work in the exhibition "Origins" at Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, in 2013, although she has had several exhibitions beforehand. Therefore, for me it will be the point of departure, which is also supported by the title of the exhibition. Even if the feeling of apprehension was indeed justified in this case, as what was revealed to me did not resemble anything I knew — neither in terms of the materials, nor in their installation mode and combinations, or the temperature of the display ("cold, elegant beauty," in the words of Ouzi Zur) — I warm up and immediately identify points of closeness through the affinity of us both with early 20th century abstract artists. I was living in Haifa at the time, working on paintings whose orientation was abstract, which I later called *The New Haifa Modernism*. On a closer look, I am fascinated by the spectacle of ever-so-familiar, mundane, nondescript materials that usually go unnoticed; by the way they have been exalted here and given great respect bordering on worship; the irony is extremely subtle and does not take over, and I begin to recognize the workings of the clear mind behind the things, as it walks the tightrope between beauty and meaning, between freedom and arbitrariness on one hand, and discipline on the other. I believe that the exhibition "Origins" is a solid skeleton and a repository of ideas consolidated in thought and action, providing nourishment for years.

The exhibition, which featured sculptures and drawings rather than a spatial installation, demonstrates, perhaps more than all the exhibitions that preceded and followed it, what I regard as the artist's work principle, her enterprise, namely — the aspiration to present a two- and three-dimensional model

of the workings of the mind. Apparatuses that dock in space and become a part of it naturally belong more to reality than to the mind, whereas the model must be constructed by abstract means, while making sure that no element falls from the grid of alert thought into seductive, soft and snug, trite places.

Surprisingly, however, her abstract is made, as aforesaid, of familiar objects which do not belong in a gallery, such as dust cloths, kitchen and bath sponges, colorful cotton balls, plastic detergent bottles, liquid fabric softener, garden hoses, plastic-coated cables, display accessories, etc. Many of the objects are related to cleanliness and order, because that is what she was determined to do — to clean the mind of affinities, words, stories, memories; to fold and organize her thoughts and arrange them in a meticulously straight pile (which she makes sure to disarrange and disrupt), until the content of thought is almost identical to its own *modus operandi*. The critics were right when they wrote about "a whole plumbing array that leads nowhere" (Yonatan Amir) and about "senseless machines" (Ouzi Zur), and this is also due to the fact, that the materials of the exhibition relate to maintenance and service rather than to production; a closed circuit of sharpening and purifying the tools. At the same time, paradoxically and fortunately, the path to the transparency of the mind passes here through a spectacular, careful layout of colors and shapes that forcefully announce their presence, as the three wonderful paintings, or rather colored pencil drawings, which hang next to the sculptures, seem to demonstrate through the all-absorbing paper; how the process of abstraction may be applied to the entire world.

As someone with a strong penchant for confessions, for airing the dirty laundry, which is accompanied by an appetite for the full range of substances that life, and especially art, summon; as someone who has fallen to every possible pitfall along the way — I wonder: how does one give up the "self"

and the multitude of possibilities in favor of the refined clarity of language? Where does the willingness to identify with the abstract in such a way come from? And the answer is: from music.

Whereas I come to visual art from words, Toony comes from music. Her brother is musician Lior Navok, and at home, she says, there was always a piano playing in the background. In the past she played keyboards, accordion, and bass guitar. But to complete the picture, she also comes from her father's aluminum workshop, where she spent long hours as a child. One of the sculptures in the exhibition reminds me of an organ of sorts, made of tiers of painted aluminum shelves, with straight and twisted metal and plastic pipes of different lengths and thicknesses threaded between them (the heads of colorful plastic spray bottles, whose transparent tubes are stuck in holes in the shelves, create a captivating image of perched birds: one of the methods of abstraction employed in the exhibition is dissociation, short circuiting, via disassembly. In other words, the materials she knew as a child — frames, aluminum window profiles, shutters, and their constituent elements — already had the anonymous, faceless character to which nothing sticks, like the objects in her works, which renders them ultimately suitable to take part in abstraction.

The connection between music and metalworkers is ancient. It is said about Pythagoras — yes, the same Pythagoras who gave us both his triangles — that he developed his musical theories after hearing four blacksmiths hitting with hammers of different sizes, one after the other. In the book of Genesis, Jubal, "the father of all such as handle the harp and organ," is the brother of Tubalcain, "an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron." When she says in a conversation that she once wanted to be a singer, I can't help but recall the sentence concluding the text of a 1980 work, which I consider to be my first (the origin),

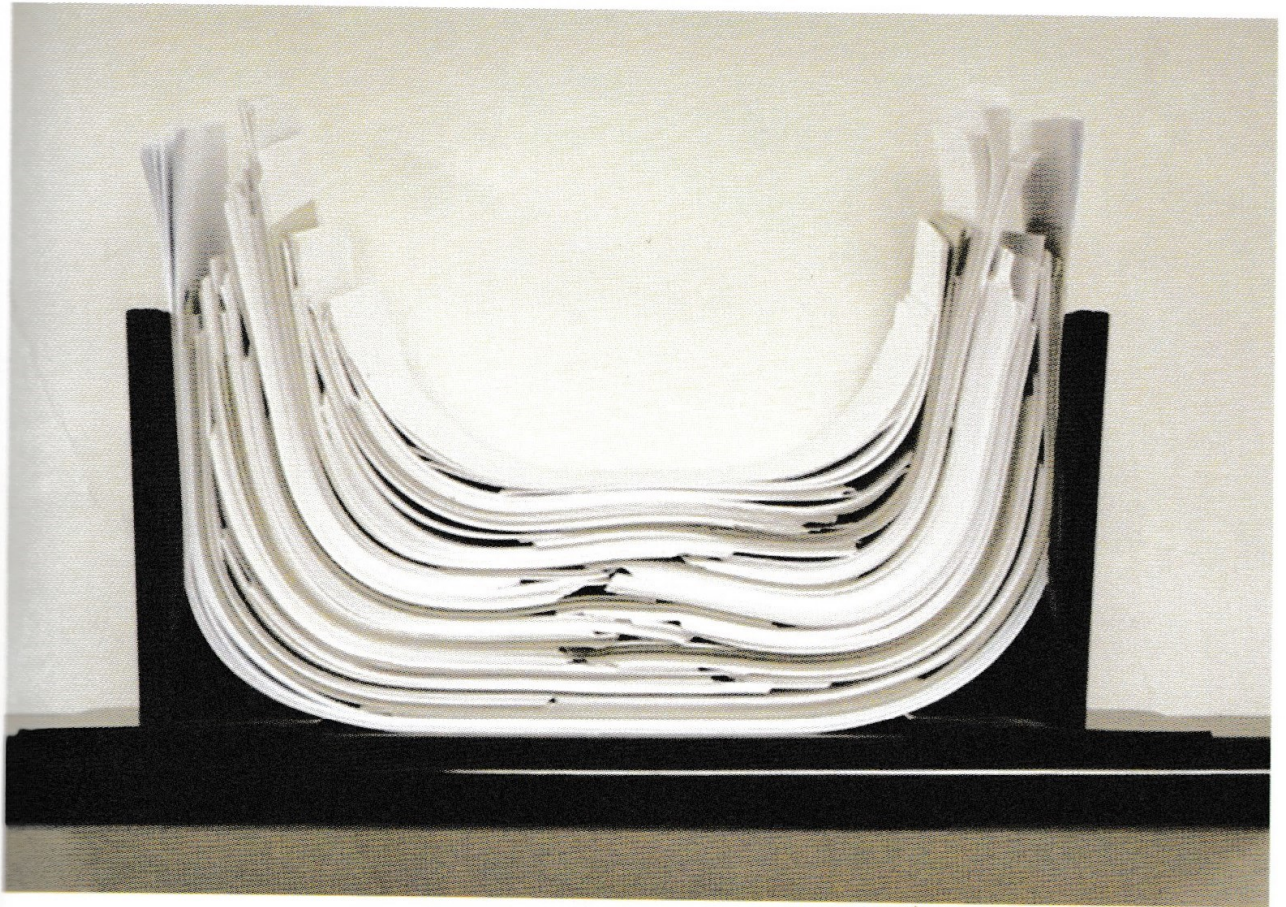
I was born Chinese, in which singing is interwoven with iron:
"There, on the eternal railing, I stretch my arms; I want to be a singer, and stretch this desire on the iron bars from above and from the outside in, between the bars."

At the intersection, where the aluminum workshop meets the appetite for cleaning, organizing and arranging, stands the "office." A possible translation of her works into words would have yielded a list such as this: folder, binder, organizer, divider, aluminum shelving, storage compartments, office equipment, installing, office managing, piping, drywall, cable, transmitter, freeing up space, maintenance, hygiene, sanitation, decoration, acoustic ceiling, wall-to-wall carpeting, display accessories. If the works are not meant to point at anything beyond their process of conception, then the office is the optimal embodiment of this cyclical efficacy.

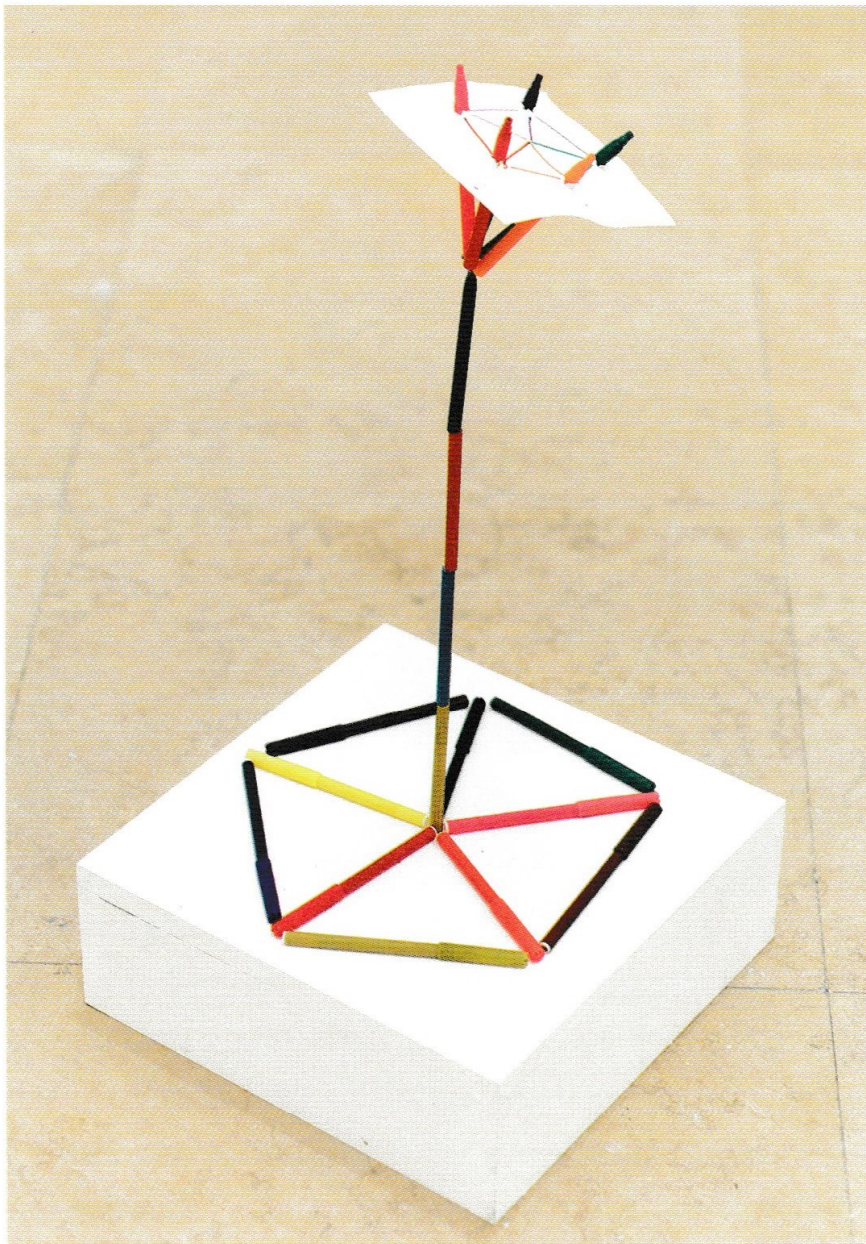
In the exhibition "Origins," however, the closed circuit is drawn upward, ascending toward the metaphysical with the three circles cut from colored metal plates (three cold suns), which take part in the spectacle of changing light in the work *Rise* — the works, albeit senseless, produce a sunrise on the gallery's second floor. Amid the metal panels standing behind each other on small platforms, there are transparent shower doors with a striped pattern, which flicker slightly as the lights change.

So that's it, the eyes, it seems, were looking upward to the sun from the very beginning (several years later, "Waiting for the Sun" would be the title of Navok's exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art). Helios, the Greek god of the sun, is called *Panoptes*, "the all-seeing," the one for whom everything is visible. The aspiration is for maximum transparency and permeability, free passage of light, without any stains.

Therefore, the ideal of the polished, spotless mind
I will call Sun.



Shelf Life, 2007, plastic shelf, book holders, paper
חיי מדף, 2007, מדף פלסטיק, מחזיקי ספרים, ניירות



Charlie Kaufman and Michel Gondry's film — whose title I borrowed for this essay, and which describes the cyclicity of memory erasure by way of drawing a map of the mind and turning consciousness into a clean slate, in a process that repeats itself in never-ending cyclicity, in a constant desire for a fresh new start — quotes the following four lines from Alexander Pope's (1688-1744) poem "Eloisa to Abelard":

How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot:
Eternal sun-shine of the spotless mind!
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd;²

But in Navok's road map, for the mind to reach the sun, it must pass through the office. The articulation of the sun, its adaption to a working process, its transformation into a material that contains divisions and combinations, building blocks, is done through the office equipment, its furniture, and accessories.

The office is the servant of the sun. The sun pulls up, and the office pulls down, toward irony and belittling, toward the low (only in the 2015 exhibition "Rounding Up the Hours" did the office expand, its heart becoming proud, envious of allegorical offices from high literature, such as Melville's or Kafka's). The aspiration for a spotless mind thus gains perspective, sporting humor and self-irony.

The shading materials she uses, such as the PVC fabrics, touch on both, located in-between the two, between the sun and the office, although not always in the correct order and expected function. In the installation *Marquee*, an awning is placed close to the ground outside a large window, covering its lower half. Instead of hiding the sun, the awning itself imprisons a spectacle of fire (alternating lighting). When observed from the outside in the dark, it shines from within, calling to mind the workshop

of Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths and fire, the patron of sculptors and artisans. Opposite the awning, on its other side, the one facing the exhibition hall, there is a table frame, a kiln lined with stones, filled with metal products that stand upright. In some of the installations, the awnings are placed on the floor; some are particularly small, oblivious of the sun, instead emphasizing their ability to contain.

As a representative of the sun in the surrounding natural array, the PVC sheets touch on the sublime in the exhibition "Extensions" at Atelier Shemi, Kibbutz Cabri. The apertures created by the material's folding and the transparent windows covered with a grid, create what seems to be a silent Aeolian harp, on which the airy nature extending into the distance strums, in close proximity to Yehiel Shemi's sculptures, the iron smith whom the artist adopts here as a father.

When I turned to write about Toony's work, I had been absorbed in reading about American poetry for several months. During the process of thinking and writing, a poem by Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961) was constantly on my mind, persistently demanding to be paired with the exhibition "Origins." Upon the very first reading, it stunned me with its abstract accuracy, its impersonality, the introduction of a perfect product that has parted with its maker, qualities which I also identified in Toony's exhibition. Like the poem, the exhibition, too, summons a cool breeze.

The title of the video, *With the Wind, With the Water*, and the beautiful, albeit somewhat obscure, words of Hila Cohen-Schneiderman — "When Navok tries to take control of an enormous blue ball, or stretch a yellow plastic sheet into a line, another, unexpected variable comes into play: the weather, which creates a scene of struggle between the artist and the modernist spirit and formalist element it has carried with it" — allow me to include the poem here. Perhaps I wouldn't dare put it this way,

but yes, what truly blows in the poem is the modernist spirit, its refreshing, cooling wind.

Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air —
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat —
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path.³

1 Lewis Eugene Rowell, *Thinking about Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 26.

2 Alexander Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard* (Glasgow: R. and A. Foulis, 1751), p. 8.

3 Hilda Doolittle, "Heat," in Louis L. Martz (ed.), *H.D. Collected Poems, 1912-1944* (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 25.