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BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

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An Artist Who Is Not a Capitalist Minimalist By John Yau

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Nahum Tevet was born in Israel in 1946, and began making his “Works on Glass” in 1972 while he was living on a kibbutz. These modest assemblages of paper, tape, cardboard, and glass didn’t start out as a series. Rather, Tevet embarked on them as an inexpensive way to frame a drawing and bring it from the studio to a room where he could sit and ponder it. I don’t think you need to know a lot more about the process because — by looking at Tevet’s “Works on Glass” — you will learn the story of what it takes for a selection of found objects to become a work of art, or what Donald Judd called a “specific object,” which he declared “needs only to be interesting.” That is one of the many fascinating features of the exhibition Nahum Tevet: Works on Glass 1972-1975, currently on view at Hunter College’s Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Gallery (September 22-November 20, 2016).

Curated by Thierry de Duve, who is the Evelyn Kranes Kossack Professor of Art History at Hunter College, this exhibition, which is the first public appearance of these works since 1975, when 13 of them were shown at Galerie Schmela in Dusseldorf, Germany, is also the first time the entire series has been seen together. The paperback catalogue raisonné, Nahum Tevet: Works on Glass 1972-1975, which accompanies the exhibition, has an illuminating essay by de Duve and a useful conversation between Tevet and Sarah Watson.

Although Tevet’s original intention was to hold a drawing between two pieces of glass, he soon realized that this minor technique could turn into a larger project, one that exists for no other purpose than its material being. The premise is straightforward: What do you need to temporarily preserve and mount a drawing on the wall? If “Untitled #1”



(1972) offers a clue, you need two pieces of glass and binder clips and whatever you choose to be kept between the transparent panes. You may also need some masking tape, transparent tape, and marker. In his essay, de Duve cites Tevet:

It was an inexpensive, common way to show paper works, avoiding the trouble of “framing” them. After a while, I perceived the whole as an object with which I could work.

In “Untitled #1,” it is the placement of the binder clips — how they align with the paper held between the glass — that makes you aware that everything in the work is important, that you have to get out of your hierarchical mindset of looking. Once Tevet perceived that he was looking at a “specific object,” something that was neither a painting nor a sculpture, at least by modernism’s definitions, he made thirty-five more “Works on Glass,” some of which, as the catalogue inform us, are lost. In each work, he pushed the work as far as he could within the material constraints that he more-or-less inadvertently set for himself in the first piece.

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Some ingenious things happen. Tevet threads the binder clips with string or wire, which enables him to hang the work on a wall. Meanwhile, the twine forms a pentagon stretched across the glass panes, as in "Untitled #3 (1972), or an inverted triangle, as documented in the photograph of "Untitled #4" (1972) reproduced in the catalogue. We look through the glass, which reveals what holds together the drawing before our eyes. Instead of lamenting that art cannot offer transcendence or sanctuary, Tevet celebrates it with wry humor.

His attention to the placement of the binder clips, as well as the twine, wire, or string he uses to suspend the work on the wall, is every bit as meticulous as Robert Ryman's build-up of the surface of a painting. The difference is that Tevet uses ordinary, even homely materials that are inexpensive and available. They are not things you need to go to an art supply store to find.

Knowing that the "Works on Glass" were made in Israel, I thought about their material existence while walking around the exhibition. There was a sense of the provisional — not in the arty way defined by Raphael Rubinstein, but one that arose out of necessity. This feeling



of necessity bears thinking about, since it calls into account the need for availability (or surplus) and fabrication. Tevet might have been influenced by Minimalism and Conceptual Art, but he didn't buy the whole package because, in a very real sense, he couldn't afford to.

It was this sense of necessity that made me think another way about what I was looking at. What did it mean to look at a white wall through pieces of glass whose edges might be chipped or covered with tape? For me, it evoked the desert and closure, a sense that open space was an illusion. In some sense you will always be bumping up against something. In other works, Tevet included the drawing of a simple table. Was this something that would be manufactured, or would it be made by a skilled carpenter? When Tevet used a marker to draw a circle on the glass, I was reminded of tabletops protected by a piece of cut glass. The works seemed domestic, about plain living in the desert, which is evoked by the cardboard and brown paper. Tevet's make-do aesthetic shares something with Bruce Conner's use of markers and preexisting film — a rejection of the 1%.

The "Works on Glass" are dry and absurd. When Tevet uses a lot of

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duct tape to secure the binders to the glass, you get the sense that these materials sometimes required the artist to take the long way around to do the simplest things. When I encountered pieces in which I could not look through the glass to the wall because much of it was blocked by cardboard, paper, or tape, I wondered how much this sense of overprotection, as it were, had to do with living on a kibbutz in a perilous situation. What about borders — the visible and invisible ones we all have to negotiate? How, for example, did these works justify their existence without relying on older historical models of painting and sculpture? Doesn't this sui generis concept evoke the state of Israel's existence? Doesn't the tape, both large and small, which is used as a means to simultaneously secure and obscure, suggest as well as deny the dangers that lie ahead? Equally important, these works get you to think about what you can and cannot see.

In the interview with Watson, Tevet says:

I saw international art only through reproductions until 1975, and I was seeing it while being in a completely different context. You could not live in a relatively poor socialist kibbutz and pretend to be Donald Judd or Richard Serra. This offered a great sense of freedom: you



could respond to models coming from the "center" with an outside eye. You could manipulate the language — create your own interpretations, sometimes the result of potentially fruitful misunderstandings; you could play the game differently, and not obey the rules.

Tevet's willingness to manipulate the language helped him transcend the local, as well as resist "the triumph of American art." After years of classic Minimalism — from Carl Andre to Dan Flavin to Donald Judd, and their unquestioning embrace of availability and surplus — it was a pleasure to learn about someone who rejected the material premises of that aesthetic.

<http://hyperallergic.com/337493/nahum-tevet-works-on-glass-1972-1975-hunter-college-2016/>

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