

CONVERSATION, 2014

Arnon Ben-David and David Reeb

- David Reeb: Usually, people write about my work and give it all kinds of interpretations. I regard this conversation as an opportunity for me to say what I think, specifically with regard to politics. It is an opportunity that I wouldn't want to miss.
- Arnon Ben-David: There was something in our talk in 1989 that may serve as an introduction to this conversation. You said there, in reference to the series "Deportees" (1988-89),^{p. 195} that you choose the photographs not so much because of the political situation they reflect, but because they are central in our range of vision. This may also account for your choice of the political subject, which is such a central part of our field of vision that cannot be overlooked. It is something that constantly occupies our thoughts.
- D.R.: Since I live in Israel, and the Israeli control of the Territories is very central to the lives of people here, something which becomes increasingly more acute instead of disappearing, and since all those things that we hoped would disappear have become even more central—it is hard not to present it in my work.
- A.B.D.: It is quite striking that so many people in Israel who engage in culture and art succeed in operating at the margins of all this and, in fact, avoid mentioning it. As a society, as a type of organism, the natural inclination is to avoid

painful subjects or issues which may infringe on the system's wholeness.

D.R.: I think the problem is trying to engage with these issues consistently; to do so sensitively, in an orderly manner, using metaphor, and not using a simplistic artistic language. Therefore it is hard to touch upon these subjects in a decisive way. As I see it, the situation calls for a different course of action. There are artists and cultural figures here who take critical positions. The problem is that one gets the sense that this is a very democratic country where anyone can say what he pleases; that the United States and Western Europe can only learn from us...

A.B.D.: "A light unto the nations"...

D.R.: Freedom of expression, tolerance, and openness to the other in Israeli society—all this is going on while half the people living here have no state, they have no real civil rights. Half of the subjects of the State of Israel have no vote; they have no real way of expressing their views, they are denied many freedoms, and we live with that on a daily basis. We exploit them economically, and all the while we continue to build a little more in the Occupied Territories, and move more people there.

A.B.D.: Note that you, too, use a language intended for an Israeli audience. It is a very elegant language. You speak about infringing on their rights, that they have no civil rights. In reality, however, not only do they have no civil rights, but the army systematically abuses them, in their homes, villages, and towns, with various methods with which we are all too familiar, and they also shoot and injure their children when they go out to protest. On top of that, the government has been systematically stealing the property and land of the Palestinian population for decades in collaboration with all the government ministries. The problem is that even the language that you and I use is a-priori a "whitewashed" language, because we know it is intended for general consumption in Israel; like this interview, for instance.

D.R.: The main problem is that we think in terms of "us" and "them." When I say "we do this and they are in this and that situation," it's wrong. The problem may be solved only when people start saying "us," which includes both the Jews and the Arabs living in these territories. This is true for both the Israelis and the Palestinians. As I see it, some of "us" disregard the rights of another part of "us" and steal from another part of "us." Until this is solved, there is no point in talking about a society that greatly values freedom and culture. As long as this is the situation, art making remains a very limited act, and it must constantly be performed while indicating and stressing this situation.

This is problematic, I think, if you work here.

A.B.D.: I agree. When I arrived in Israel in the 1980s, after a long time abroad, it made me create works which I call “grotesque,” abstract or conceptual works which included all kinds of odd allusions to the situation.

D.R.: But there is no reason for artworks to be entirely consistent; there is no reason why they shouldn’t contain contradictions. I think contradictions generate the tension in the work.

A.B.D.: In one of the interviews you did you said that you paint in different styles: a lot of abstract painting, painting from observation, painting after photographs, painting after video stills, and painting of texts or from books. You mentioned these as five distinct categories. I feel that in the sequence of our everyday activity there are always gaps between the various categories of art making.

D.R.: But there are also intersections between them. Abstract painting is not really all that abstract; it is also somehow representational and concrete and inevitably referential, whereas figurative painting, when you look at a detail or turn the picture upside down, you notice that its patterns resemble those of the abstract painting made by the same artist.

A.B.D.: True, but my emphasis in this question is not on the things which trickle from one field to another, but rather on the gaps. I am interested in the gap that occurs when you shift from a series of abstract paintings of a flower...

D.R.: Anemone...

A.B.D.: ... from abstract paintings of anemones (“Anemones,” 2013) to painting from photographs of the rural area with that flower (Anemones #2, Anemones #3, 2013), pp. 142, 143. When we talked about two of the photographs from the rural area, I think they were from Nabi Saleh, you told me that they depicted the same flower as the one appearing in the abstract paintings.

D.R.: Yes.

A.B.D.: I am interested in this gap between a subject or a motif which emerges once as abstract and once as non-abstract; not in terms of the specific case, but in terms of the feeling. Aren’t you sometimes intimidated by this gap, by the abyss you are facing when you finish an abstract painting and shift to painting after stills from a demonstration?

D.R.: First of all, the titles I usually give the works are not related to the major thing represented in them; rather, they are something on which I can pin the work. If I depict construction workers on a site, and next to the building, at street level, there is a bicycle; I may call the painting “Bicycle.”

A.B.D.: These marginal associations which sometimes spawn the titles may, in fact, express the fear we all have about lack of meaning. What does it mean when we paint something so abstract and then we paint something associated with it?

D.R.: I can elaborate on the anemone pieces, the figurative ones. What I liked, on the one hand, was this image of the young man throwing stones, whom the authorities regard as a kind of small-scale terrorist, and he too feels that he is engaging in an act of resistance which is, at least, meaningful. On the other hand, the young man sees the flowers and thinks: "I must pick them, I must pick them and bring them to my mother, to my girlfriend..."

A.B.D.: So the flowers become a type of hook on which you "hang" the title of the work?

D.R.: Yes. But this work deals with other things too. Even in abstract painting, in some cases, such as the anemones, they present an opportunity, they animate the landscape; still, the most significant aspect is the landscape.

A.B.D.: Forgive my insistence, but I'm trying to clarify a point. In the past, there were cameras with such lenses, that when you manipulated a lever, it would shift from one lens size to another, as if you switched lenses. It is somewhat like what happens when you shift from painting after stills from a demonstration in the village of the flower-holding youth to an abstract painting of the flower, made after the same flower, more or less. This switch is like changing lenses in a camera. It's something that happens in the brain.

D.R.: It's liberating. It helps me work when I don't do the same thing for too long.¹

A.B.D.: You once said in an interview that you don't interfere with the still photographs or process them. You don't combine excerpts from two different photographs. Rather, you use the photograph, or a part of it, as is.

D.R.: That's usually the case. There is the drama of the everyday, there is interest in every thing, and that interest is inherent to the thing itself. If I try to introduce order, I find it artificial. The photograph is a gift in the sense that it is a documentation of what happened. Obviously there is no such thing as objective photography etc., but a photograph is much more objective than memory or any representation via drawing or narrative. It is very detailed, and I have an opportunity to use this material to construct a scene. Even if the scene consists only of a few rocks, it is always interesting. I try not to build a hierarchy of importance within this.

A.B.D.: You respect the way photography works.

D.R.: Yes.

- A.B.D.: I like the fact that you respect the tools with which you work, especially in the case of photography; that you don't interfere with photography's ability to create its own hierarchy. You operate in the sense of choosing where to shoot and sometimes what to shoot, but you don't interfere with the way in which the lens sees the things at which you point the camera.
- D.R.: I think that reality is always much more interesting than its representation. Representation cannot compete with reality. Even a Rembrandt self-portrait, which is marvelous, is not as interesting as the face itself.
- A.B.D.: In another interview you said that time is, essentially, the subjective time of the viewer who tries to follow the action or operation of the painting itself.
- D.R.: Time in a painting, as far as I am concerned, refers primarily to the subjective time of the viewer who follows the actions that make up the painting.
- A.B.D.: I would like to ask about the gap or discrepancy derived from the viewer's different sense of time, not necessarily the gap between reality and the work (modes of representation).
- D.R.: Ideally, I would like the viewer to reconstruct, to some extent, the sequence of actions I performed while painting. If, for instance, I began with a line in the middle, and continued left. I make a thousand movements while painting, and when I perform them, my body operates in a certain manner, and I think of what I do in a certain sequence. This is a mental activity common to most people who engage in painting, and I guess they all share these thoughts.
- A.B.D.: So you expect the viewer to trace your actions?
- D.R.: I expect the viewer to follow the actions I performed while working on the painting. This is ideally what I would like to happen, therefore I also need to work systematically, and that is one of the reasons why I prefer paintings on which I work only once, without many corrections and layers.
- A.B.D.: That is exactly what I meant. I am somewhat familiar with your work process. I know that you tend to return to the same painting again and again, and paint a different version of practically the same painting on it. Sometimes you cover your initial contact with the canvas by means of these repetitions. I remember there were a few times when we worked together, and I would stop you from returning and correcting the painting, do you remember that?
- D.R.: Yes. I know that additional work has its advantages, too, but then the painting loses the visible succession of actions, which is important to me.
- A.B.D.: Do you regard the preservation of the sequence of actions performed in the painting as a means to convey the subject better, to communicate what you are painting?

- D.R.: Each painting resembles all the others in that it features the traces of a sequence of actions. I think it is impossible to arrive at a perfect representation of something, so there is no point in trying.
- A.B.D.: What I meant was that you connect between your actions in the painting and what the viewer undergoes, emotionally too. His ability to identify all sorts of things is associated with the fact that you introduce him to a sequence of actions rather than an accurate depiction of an object in reality.
- D.R.: Yes, I am more interested in that.
- A.B.D.: This links to what we mentioned in our previous conversation about your work on the surface. In fact you entrench yourself very intensely. Perhaps entrench is not quite the right word. You constantly operate within the surface of the painting. You don't even make too big of an effort to describe, to create an illusion of three-dimensionality; rather, you sometimes create it in an almost humorous manner. You are so conscious of the way in which the illusion of three-dimensionality is created in the painting, that you sometimes absent yourself from the surface of the painting and create visual hints of depth.
- D.R.: I also find that, if you make a more or less accurate representation in a part of the picture, it reflects on its other parts as well.
- A.B.D.: That's true.
- D.R.: Ultimately, what is represented in the painting is perhaps more real this way than when everything is represented as in a photograph. Because in reality, when we observe a landscape, we don't see it all at once; we don't look at it all at once. Our attention moves along it.
- A.B.D.: True. To wrap things up, I want to go back to the viewer's sense of time. In fact, this leads me to the conclusion that the act of painting creates a link between this very specific type of time in the painting and the work, and the time in which we live, the sequence of everyday occurrences.

¹ According to Reeb, in the "Anemone" series, the abstract works were created first and only later—the works after demonstration photographs [A.B.D.].