

PAINTING & TIME:

TWO COMMENTS

ON DAVID REEB'S

WORK

Ellen Ginton

I

David Reeb has a website (www.davidreeb.com).^{p. 21} Apart from one informative sentence and several references, its home page consists of a list of the years in which he has been active as an artist, from 1977 to 2014,¹ arranged in a type of time-table—geometrically, in rows and columns of numbers, just as in his number paintings. It is a simple, succinct home page whose appearance is embodied in time, and which is, in fact, an image of time. The site's chronological arrangement, year after year and painting after painting in each year, enables one to experience all the paintings in the website in a sequence of a journey through the history of Reeb's work. Not all of his paintings are featured there. In fact, many of them, mainly from the distant past, are not included. Nevertheless, there are still entire sequences which may be viewed according or close to their order of making. The paintings fill the time. Time is filled by paintings.

Observation of the sequence provides insight into Reeb's patterns of movement from painting to painting and from one group of paintings to another. (The painterly act is never the discrete painting alone; it always consists of the whole and the interrelations between its parts). At times, one may liken observation of the orderly series in the website to observation of

1 The website was designed by artist Nir Harel. It went online in 2007. Two years are omitted from the sequence: 1979 and 1984.

slides documenting a journey, at others—to looking into a kaleidoscope in which figurative images similarly switch. In a conversation held before the exhibition between Reeb and Arnon Ben-David (one year his senior at the Bezalel Academy of Art), Reeb says he would have liked the viewer to follow his sequence of actions in each painting: "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 think of what I do in a certain sequence. [...] I expect the viewer to follow the actions I performed while working on the painting."² This may be too big a wish, but it can teach us about the centrality and significance of the forward progression in time in Reeb's painterly practice, movement which generates the signs of the painting, and ultimately—the whole image.

Reeb's website is presented as a picture of time, just as the number 60— included in the title of the exhibition—is the title of a painting which features, as in a table, the sequence of numbers from 1 to 60, indicating Reeb's age at the time it was painted.^{p. 3} The time-filling sequence of paintings presented on the website, unfolding almost like a film, elicits the question, how is one to think of time in the context of Reeb's work?³

Two black-and-white paintings from 2012 have an identical title: *Cuffs and Time*.^{pp. 1, 37} With symbolism deeply rooted in local associations, Reeb depicts the link between time and limitation.⁴ This is the link connecting time to the ethical. Moshe Kupferman, an abstract artist, wrote a sentence which links painting with time: "I am an artisan-painter who does not choose his subjects. I have no subjects. There is time. What happens in it and what happens to us in it must be embedded in everything."⁵ This assertion binds life and art, existence and time and the process of painting, inseparably. Kupferman thus formulates a stance which does not distinguish between the aesthetic and the ethical, a position of ethical commitment to painting as an act within life.⁶

Despite the vast difference between Kupferman's painting and Reeb's painting, the affinity between the work of these two artists is associated with their perception of the ethical commitment of the work of art. The affinity between art which intensely engages with time, and an ethical stance, is discernible in the case of renowned artists, among them On Kawara in his date paintings, committed to be created on the same day indicated in them, and which include a newspaper item from the place in which they were painted, and in his postcards and calendars; Roman Opalka in his number paintings

2 "Conversation, 2014: Arnon Ben-David and David Reeb," in this catalogue, pp. 201-196.

3 The title of the exhibition, "300 60 48" combines the titles of three of Reeb's number paintings (pp. 3, 8, 249).

4 The paintings were created in response to an event which took place in October 2007. Mohammad Ashqar, a Palestinian prisoner who was shot and fatally wounded during a prisoner revolt at the Ketziot prison facility, died of his wounds at the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheva handcuffed to his bed and with legs cuffed together. "I was exposed to the testimony about him precisely when I was engaging with the theme of time in my work. In this painting I depicted a pair of handcuffs flanked by numerals indicating the passage of time, time which is running out," as Reeb told me in a conversation before the exhibition. See the website of the Public Committee against Torture in Israel: www.stoptorture.org.il. The paintings were featured in the exhibition "And We Were Tortured" at the Artists' House, Tel Aviv, 2012.

5. From a text written by Kupferman for his exhibition at the Kibbutz Art Gallery, Tel Aviv, March 1975, in: cat. *Moshe Kupferman: Paintings, Works on Paper, 1963-1984* (curator: Yona Fischer) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: The Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum, 1984-85), p. 12 [Hebrew]. The time to which Kupferman refers is not the narrative time represented in the painting, which was rejected by purist modernism as foreign to the medium, but rather the time of the work of art, of the act of painting.

6. For a discussion of Reeb as an ethical artist, see Doreet LeVitte Harten's essay "Saving Grace" in this catalogue, pp. 140-135.

created from 1965 until his passing; and Luc Tuymans, who is committed to finishing a painting in one sitting.

One may also learn about the connection of time and ethics from John Dalton's interview with David Wood, an English philosopher and artist, entitled "The Art of Time." According to Dalton: "One of the features of the philosophy of time is that time has been thought alongside ethics, and from the beginning. The Anaximander fragment talks of time and justice. From Plato to Aristotle, from Augustine to Kant, Hegel certainly, and then, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, all think time according to some expression of an ethos and a Good"; to which Wood replies: "As I see, it, the central questions of this relation between time and ethics, the reason that those two are so intimately connected, have to do with first of all death, the fact of mortality—not just 'my death,' as Heidegger thinks, but the death of others, and which generalizes not just a death but the vulnerability and the fragility of the human condition. Here, time gets commuted into questions about mortality, which then immediately have ethical implications."⁷ He later goes on to add aspects of finitude and human limits which are unrelated to mortality: the need to choose under conditions of relative ignorance; the irreversibility of time and the inability to undo or correct things we have done; and the gravitational pull of everyday life toward degeneration, toward blind repetition. Philosophy, like art, he stresses, has a role in preventing, or at least moderating, that blind repetition.

II

One may describe Reeb's work, at virtually any given moment, as a type of conceptual space with three bi-directional axes:^{p. 22} black and white vs. color, figurative vs. abstract, and the public-political vs. the private sphere.⁸ There are paintings in black-and-white and paintings in color, from monochrome to a numbered or unnumbered multiplicity of colors. There are figurative paintings based on documentary photographs, and there are abstract paintings which may be called decorative, or allusions to historical abstract. There are paintings which represent the public sphere, primarily those depicting the Israeli Occupation, but also those which present the banks or the Kirya towers or the public auctions and galleries of the art world, and there are the paintings of the studio, of house plants and its surroundings. In-between these binary poles

7. David Wood and John Dalton, "The Art of Time: An Interview with David Wood," *Contretemps* 3 (July 2002), pp. 18-20.

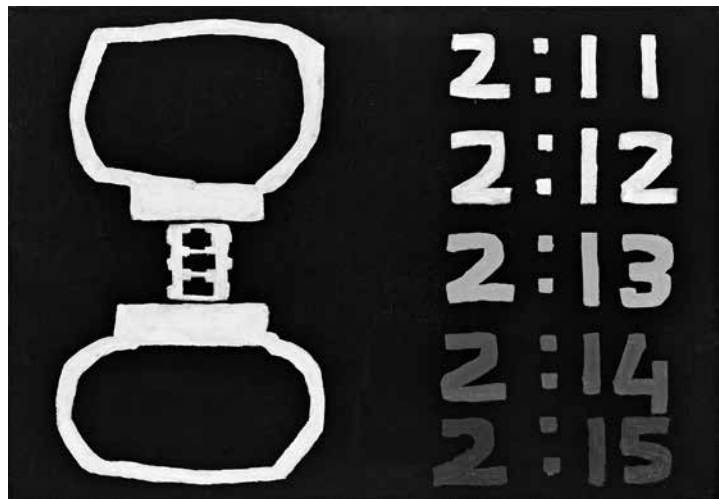
8. The dichotomous pattern of black-and-white vs. color, figurative vs. abstract, and possibly also public vs. private, is typical of the work of German artist Gerhard Richter. The painting of both Richter and Reeb is closely linked with photography, where a distinction is sustained between black-and-white and color. In his conversation with Ben-David, Reeb says that "the photograph is a gift." In other respects, such as the relationship between art and ethics or the attitude to the painting itself, Reeb and Richter differ greatly.



there are obviously numerous intermediate states, in which black-and-white and color, the figurative and the abstract, and public and the private blend. The groups of word and number paintings, for instance, may be located between the figurative and the abstract.⁹

To this rich game of variations, which changes over time, one should add another element of the paintings—the titles which Reeb gives them and their interrelations with the paintings. These titles are associated with Reeb's work logic, and sometimes seem to present little riddles to the viewer. Thus, for example, Reeb has a series of paintings entitled "73" (2012).^{pp. 2, 38} In the Israeli context, '73 is the name of the war that took place that year (1973, aka the Yom Kipper War). Reeb's age group experienced that war as soldiers on compulsory duty. The painting is constructed as a table with six columns and ten rows, namely—60 squares. The count on the top row begins with the number 52, whereas in the bottom row it begins with the number 7—numbers to which it is hard to ascribe any specific meaning. The last two rows create a sequence from 1 to 12, but this sequence is not continued in the rows above them. Returning to the top row, which begins with 52, however, one realizes that the numbers are consecutive, reaching the place marked oo instead of 100 at the end of the 8th row. The two bottom rows may now be read as a continuation of the count from 100 on. The resulting picture is thus a count from 52 to 112—from Reeb's year of birth to the year in which the painting was created. In that year Reeb turned 60, as the number of squares in the table. Counting from the year '52 to 2012, however, there are, in fact, 61 numbers. So one year had to be omitted. A closer look reveals the missing year to be '73, the year of the war. This is the year which disappeared from the life order, the absent-present year, the one pushed out of the list, which nonetheless returns in the title. Reeb created here, as elsewhere, a pattern, where the title materially complements the work.

9. Just as the number paintings sometimes portray time, the word paintings sometimes portray a landscape or still life (pp. 6-7).



Six different colors were used in this painting, as the number of columns. These six colors were used to color the squares in each row, and to color the numbers in each square. Every color appears twice in each row, once in the number and once in its background, but never together. The six colors are introduced as three fixed pairs: for example, against a yellow background the number will always be written in blue and vice versa—on a blue background, the number will appear in yellow.

Viewing Reeb's website in chronological order provides yet another insight into the structure of his time-related corpus. This modus operandi is revealed, for instance, in comparing a very early work, *Ink Drawing #2* from 1977 to a later painting, *Black and White Abstract #1* from 2014.^{pp. 23, 252} Not only do both surrender a similar perception of black-and-white painting, but the pattern itself is also very similar.

Another example may be found when shifting to the other end of the figurative-abstract axis. One of Reeb's early figurative prints, from 1977, is *Tiger and Kangaroo*: one beast devours another. According to Reeb, this image originated in a memory of a picture he saw in a book by German-Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas, considered the father of American anthropology.¹⁰ In this context one should note the affinity of Reeb's work to "primitive art," a link well congruent with his aesthetic perception which regards art not as an autonomous act, but as one performed in a social and political context, combining the descriptive, the symbolic, and the mythological with the decorative.

Two additional screenprints from the same year (1977) are *Soldier and Civilian* and *Wolf and Lamb*.^{pp. 29, 35} Stylistically, both images in these works resemble images created by either amateurs or children. Like the previous image, they too belong to the category of "outsider art," the art of the others. On the later, current chronological end one may find *Dog and Cat*.^{p. 24} from 2012, one in a group of paintings, mostly black-and-white, which revisits the same motif of two animals (albeit this time in an urban setting) that maintain



10 If Reeb encountered the book at the library of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, where he studied at the time, this was probably Franz Boas's *Primitive Art* (1927).

a relationship of persecutor and victim, metaphorizing the political context. In this painting too, as in many others, one may discern the affinity with "popular" painting, with graffiti.

On the one hand, we are progressing in time—both the historical time of the Occupation and the biographical time of Reeb and his artistic development. On the other, we encounter a high level of likeness within this sequence, experiencing a return to all of the aforementioned variables: the public and the private, the figurative and the abstract, etc. Characteristic of Reeb's entire oeuvre, this recurrence or revisiting occurs in a type of cyclicity which is unpredictable, since it is not fixed and does not follow any rules, and also because it evolves over time. One may describe this structure as a spiral, a type of screw which grows with time, whose upper curves feature subjects which often set the painting in motion in the past. Now, however, they reemerge fresh and innovative, in a manner which elicits surprise and joy, sensuality and intellectuality.



In Reeb's aforesaid conversation with Ben-David (2014), the latter asks: "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?" Reeb skirts the question. He shifts to discussion of the titles of the paintings, which he calls "fake names." Ben-David refers to the viewer's surprise when, from time to time, after a sequence of engagement with one painterly subject or motif, what appears in his field of vision transforms abruptly. A sudden interruption of the studio process—from color to black-and-white paintings, from figuration to abstraction, from domestic to political themes—is one pattern characteristic of the painterly progression in the space within which Reeb's painting has transpired for more than three decades now.

Reeb's work, as described above, has a spatial cyclic structure. Groups

of images visit the same or similar themes and painting patterns repeatedly, while a new element, a new structure, a new theme, or a new type of title emerges on occasion, and the cyclicity goes on. This structure, which spins with great wealth, while being rooted at fixed points, occurs in a visual and conceptual imaginary time and space, like a movie, like a musical score, which counts, structures, and colors time.