

Zeft on Canvas

STELLA: Well, you have a brush and you've got paint on the brush, and you ask yourself why you're doing whatever it is you're doing, what inflection you're actually going to make with the brush and with the paint that's on the end of the brush. It's like handwriting. And I found out that I just didn't have anything to say in those terms. I didn't want to make variations; I didn't want to record a path. I wanted to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas. I knew a wise guy who used to make fun of my painting, but he didn't like the Abstract Expressionists either. He said they would be good painters if they could only keep the paint as good as it is in the can. And that's what I tried to do. I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can.¹

“Je ne sais si j'ai raison, puisque je ne sais rien en fait de peinture” [I can't be certain that I am right as I actually don't know anything about painting]² warned the young Baudelaire in a letter to his stepfather General Aupick where he enthusiastically commented on the work of Delacroix anticipating a lifelong admiration for the painter and a future significant contribution to art criticism.

Nearly two centuries after Baudelaire's early confession of humility, I am making the same statement here. Still a schoolboy, Baudelaire had first encountered and experienced the art of Delacroix through the words of another budding French poet Théophile Gautier. Not only do I claim that I don't know anything about painting, but as I am writing these opening words to an essay that accompanies Hani Zurob's exhibition's *Zeft*, I have only “seen” digital reproductions of this series of paintings.

Defeated by the Greenbergian essentialist principle of physically witnessing and experiencing the materiality of painting³, I am nevertheless encouraged by art historian David Joselit in attempting to integrate Zurob's painterly works into a wider contemporary intellectual and social framework and network of ideas. “In every work of art there is an irreducible singularity; a fund of affect and visual stimuli that is inexhaustible. Here is a strange fact, which is both so obvious and so threatening to art-historical analysis that it is habitually overlooked: every artwork is indescribable.”⁴

I am positioning myself metaphorically from the point of view of the “hors-champ” [out-of-field], literally the spatio-temporal universe that the viewer doesn't see and that escapes the frame (or the canvas)⁵. This posture was intended as a strategy to circumvent the essentialist approach of the medium-specificity of art and my ignorance of painterly practices in general and Zurob's very personal terminology/vocabulary in particular, by retracing the genealogy of his paintings. “And since we can neither grasp a painting in language nor exhaust it in experience, how can we assign a meaning?”⁶ Therefore, in addition to several phone conversations with the artist, I requested he send me pictures of his studio,

¹ Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd”, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 157.

² *Correspondance*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois avec la collaboration de Jean Ziegler, 2 vols, Paris: Gallimard, 1973; 17 juillet 1838, p. 57. English translation by Yasmina Reggad.

³ “It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. [...] For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.” Clement Greenberg, “Toward a Newer Laocoon.” (1040), in *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, Ed. J. O'Brian, 4 vols, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; V. 1, p. 32.

⁴ David Joselit, ‘Marking, Scoring, Storing and Speculating (on Time)’, in *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, Eds. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, p. 11.

⁵ It doesn't mean though that what is not seen doesn't exist and that it doesn't reappear inside the frame. What is not seen exists in the viewer's idea and interpretation of a scene or narrative. See Louis Seguin, *L'espace du cinéma (Hors-champ, hors d'oeuvre, hors-jeu)*, Toulouse: Ombres, 1999.

⁶ From a text written in Paris in 2008 provided by Hani Zurob. English translation by Yasmina Reggad.

equipment and materials as well as to post me an arbitrary selection of “residue”⁷ left after the process of producing this new series of paintings.

In 2008, with the *Standby* series, Zurob started to “paint” with black-tinted tar⁸ as his principal medium where he had previously used oil, mixed-media and acrylic; he would use henna and various pigments by way of colours. The initial intention for this body of work was to paint 60 canvases that would register almost imperceptible movements of a man in his 60s sitting on a chair “on stand-by”. “The title *Standby* refers to my personal experience of the whole Palestinian people being placed in a forced, lengthy stand-by situation [...] for nearly 60 years, since 1948”⁹ explains the artist. Very quickly the series resolved itself into the very essential, a close up on the faces of seemingly motionless men (*Standby #10 to #19*, 2008) where the black tar predominates over colour. Thereafter the artist occasionally used tar in his work until a turning point in 2015 when he abandoned the brush the paint and its methods of application.

The series *Zeft* consists of *Zeft #01 to Zeft #25*, *Zeft Ala Qemash #01 and #02* and *Zeft on Canvas*, and *Sea of Memories*. One can obviously trace the descent of this new body of work from the earlier series *Standby*, yet it marks a rupture in Zurob’s painterly practice as it exposes new processes revolving around tar as a primary medium applied on the canvas ignoring traditional painting tools¹⁰ and techniques. In its commercial use, tar is sticky and viscous. The artist created his own recipe by diluting tar with acrylic binder medium that probably lends its silky, shiny and waxy quality to the finished works at the same time as it allows the tar to adopt a wide range of textures.

With the series *Standby*, Zurob also changed his bodily posture in relation to his work. Instead of sitting in front of the canvas, he now stands above it and paints on the floor; his physical movements shifted from the vertical back and forth to the horizontal up and down¹¹. This horizontal method is certainly a challenging way to create portraits, such as the series *Zeft*, that are intended to be appreciated by the viewer hanging on the wall, ascending back to its verticality. Does the liquid tar “running” over the canvas show any trace of uncanny “flatness”? Does the ghostly hand of the artist challenge the viewer’s perception of gravity? Art historian Isabelle Graw, who argues for an expanded notion of painting, proposes that if “we conceive of painting not as a medium, but as a production of signs that is experienced as highly personalised [...] we will be able to grasp one of its main characteristics: it is able to suggest a strong bond between the product and the (absent) person of its

⁷ The envelope I received contained: one wooden stick, small pieces of cardboard covered with a dry mixture of tar, acrylic binder medium and traces of green pigment, and three thick malleable coatings of this same mixture which seem to have peeled off one of the canvas.

⁸ More precisely it is a bituminous waterproofing systems used to protect residential and commercial buildings, a mixed substance made up of organic liquids that are highly sticky, viscous, and waterproof. Writer and painter Kamal Boullata informed Hani Zurob that before him, another Palestinian artist, the celebrated cartoonist Naji Salim Al-Ali also had made use of tar in his work.

⁹ Hani Zurob, *ibid.* For a thorough study of the series *Standby*, see the compelling monograph Kamal Boullata, *Between Exits: Paintings by Hani Zurob*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012, pp. 90-101.

¹⁰ The pictures sent by Hani Zurob of his studio show wooden sticks, and pieces of cardboard and wooden boards in various dimensions and shapes.

¹¹ According to Walter Benjamin “The level of drawing is horizontal: that of painting vertical.” See, Walter Benjamin, “Painting and Graphic Arts” in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, Eds. M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 82.

maker.”¹² The latent presence of the artist indeed leaves a trace. It appears through bodily movements or imperfections in Jackson Pollock’s toppling of the horizontal canvas, or through the use of technical and mechanical devices by Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol. Zurob not only subverts the verticality and adds a performative element to painting like his predecessors but also expands the territory of the canvas. The concept of pictorial hors-champ is an essential element of the artist’s practice, which acts as a methodology of construction of the work. The hors-champ is the realm of production of signs that are “indexical insofar as they can be read as traces of the producing person”¹³ The subjects of Zurob’s paintings escape the frame and expand into the whole studio (in terms of codes, gestures and materiality), starting or ending on the canvas and traveling onto the floor, the furniture and the walls. The whole series *Zeft* belongs to one same universe and entity. Zurob sometimes collects residue of the medium that have escaped one painting in order to “attach” it to another one where it is organically absorbed as if it had always belonged¹⁴.

The use of tar wasn’t a choice for Zurob; it was imposed on him by traumatic events in his youth that have continued to haunt him: “dark and grey colours were always present not only in my childhood and my home in Rafah refugee camp, but also during the years of the First Intifada (1987-1993) and the lengthy waiting for the lifting of the curfew imposed by the Israeli occupation. [...]. I will never forget that very morning, after 40 consecutive days of curfew, when I discovered that outside, Israeli soldiers had covered everything in asphalt. The streets, shop windows, façades of houses, everything was “bitumed”, including the proud palm tree in my neighbourhood.”¹⁵

According to the artist, the early meaning of *zeft* in Arabic is asphalt. *Zeft* it also commonly used as a pejorative term that expresses a wide range of feelings from a disheartened state of mind to revulsion, or a curse when applied to a situation, and sometimes it refers to misfortune. It is well known that Israel’s national interests and colonial project demand acquiring the language of the enemy, and the Israeli soldiers were certainly aware of the negative nuances of the word *zeft* when they covered the streets with asphalt. Besides, we must remember that in Gaza, with the circulation of political leaflets being as restricted as the mobility of people, messages and statements are transmitted through graffiti or inscriptions on houses and walls in public spaces.

Both the works *Zeft Ala Qemash #02* and *Zeft on Canvas* (they share the same meaning in English and Arabic) act as revenge for the “blackout” and censorship imposed on Palestinians that morning. They are voicing and performing the very expression inscribed on them that recalls the action of the artist. The paintings also strangely seem to borrow from the language of photographic processing: being concurrently a negative and a positive monochrome of the apparent what appears to be the same image or inscription. If *Zeft on Canvas* is a the record of the “scene”, Hani Zurob has canceled, erased with a “graffiti”, the memory of the *zeft* on the

¹² Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Person” in *Thinking Through Painting. Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, Eds Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum and Nikolaus Hirsch, Berlin: Sternberg, 2012, p. 50.

¹³ Isabelle Graw, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Strangely, Hani Zurob used the expression “cut and paste” for this process which belongs to computer-human interaction and discarded the concept of collage.

¹⁵ Hani Zurob, *ibid.*

walls authored by the Israeli army on the streets of his childhood. It is perhaps a coincidence but no less worthy of mention that in 1822, the use of “Bitumen of Judea” (Judea being the ancient Southern area of Palestine, corresponding to the former kingdom of Judah) or “Syrian asphalt” was essential in the success of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce’s to invent the first successful form of photomechanical reproduction, heliography.

In March 2002, during the Second Intifada, The Israel Defense Forces launched Operation "Defensive Shield", the largest military operation in the West Bank since the Six-Day War in 1967. Like many Palestinian civilians, Hani Zurob was arbitrarily arrested in Ramallah and placed in a detention centre: “We were quartered here for three days, sharing a few coarse blankets by way of mattresses on a freshly asphalted ground (one can easily imagine the smell!). On the 45th day, [...] the judge of the Israeli military tribunal decided that I “wasn’t a threat to the Israeli State” and released me. [...] Back to Ramallah, I discovered with stupefaction how much the street had been churned up by the tanks and armoured vehicles. Our streets had eventually found the raw material they deserved: concrete, sands, and again, tar.”¹⁶ Tar again encapsulates (or embodies?) the memories of Zurob.

Art Theorist Peter Geimer presents a useful set of open-ended questions about reflexivity and the transfer of intentionality and subjectivity from people to artefacts and vice versa. In the response to Isabelle Graw’s questions following his excellent paper “In Painting and Atrocity: The Tuymans Strategy”¹⁷, he writes:

*“What distinguishes self-reflexivity from mere self-reference? And foremost, who or what is actually the subject or the actor of this reflexivity? Is it the artist, who materializes his thoughts and actions, so to speak, and stores them in his work? Or is it the work “itself”? Can paintings, sculptures, or installations “think”?”*¹⁸

This might help us to shed light (or not) on the issue of the aesthetic, intellectual and political meaning and value that tar as a medium may add to *Zeft* as a body of work.

Is tar able to “act” as an archive of Zurob’s memory or does it simply activate it? Can it be considered a record of the First and Second Intifadas in the same way as a photograph? Or is it a manifestation of the re-mediatization of the work, or when “the painting contaminates the alleged purity of its medium by drawing on different formats”¹⁹ – and in this case does tar act as the readymade?

Painters have long taken historical and political events as the subject of their work, drawing on direct observation, written and verbal descriptions or photographs for material. Geimer discusses the work of the Polish painter Wilhelm Sasnal, who used press photographs of Muammar Gaddafi’s death on 20 October 2011 that were widely circulated. By using a contemporary transmitted experience to produce the oil paintings (a traditional genre of art) *Gaddafi* (2011) and *Gaddafi 3* (2011), Sasnal

¹⁶ Hani Zurob, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Peter Geimer, “Painting and Atrocity: The Tuymans Strategy”, in *Thinking Through Painting. Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, Eds Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum and Nikolaus Hirsch, Berlin: Sternberg, 2012, pp. 15-36.

¹⁸ Peter Geimer, *op. cit.*, in Answer to Isabelle Graw, p. 41

¹⁹ Isabelle Graw, *op. cit.*, p. 49

“consciously superimposes an anachronism, both in terms of medium and iconography”. Whereas the work of the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans isolates images from highly political subjects such as Holocaust, memories of World War II or colonialism, and raises, in Geimer’s words, the compelling question “of painting’s competence in light of themes of contemporary history [...] because the images of today (and of the last 150 years), which are meant to represent daily events, are precisely not circulated as oil on canvas.”²⁰ Both Wilhelm Sasnal and Luc Tuymans are the “recipients” of an immediate or historical imagery that is the source material of their work. In contrast, Hani Zurob has been a firsthand witness to recent critical events that have shaped his subjectivity. He eschews widely circulated media imagery in favour of using the medium of tar that is *per se* highly charged with contemporary narratives on atrocity that go beyond the personal experience of the artist in Palestine. Besides serving to interrogate the medium of painting, the tar could be the “piece of evidence” that provides “a reservoir of the real”²¹ for the viewers to activate their personal archive of imagery. The portrait in dark hues *Zeft #21* then becomes the Madonna of Bentalha, the iconic photograph of the Algerian Civil War that in return, refers back to an iconic figure in the history of painting.

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²⁰ Peter Geimer, *op. cit.*, p. 25

²¹ Peter Geimer, *op. cit.*, p. 31