

SEAMS

The wall, the body, the land

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Abstract

The world is full of seams. Seams that split and bind our society, open and stitch up gaps between us. Borders that are transient and enduring, able to be minimized and expanded, mobile and static. They can be ripped, re sewn in a new composition, and ripped yet again. Reduced in both color and shape, yet bearing texture and density: the wall, the body and the land—the black, the pink, and the white. My mind is preoccupied by the Israeli reality: living on the edge of continuous war, opposite ideologies and military culture. In my current work, I call attention to complex issues underlying the “Seamline” separation barrier, created to separate two nations in constant war.

My thesis explores my interest in materiality and alchemy, history and process, color choice and use, composition, and the essential and overriding dialogue between these. To a great extent I have been intuitively practicing these elements for some time now. Yet, while researching for my thesis and discovering works of artists such as Alberto Burri (1915-1995) and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), I have been pulled towards articulating connections between their works and mine, highlighting certain of their practices as I sense their relationship to mine. The concrete research deriving from these artists has inspired me in my own work and process, pushing me not only to make further connections in my experience and paintings, but pushing me also to continue experimenting with the styles I have been intuitively leaning towards. My thesis argument is that art is life. I mean this in the sense that one’s life and experiences influence one’s creative journey and particular sensitivities: specific experiences shape the ways we live in this world, and therefore shape, too, the ways we create in this world.

To this end, Part I of my thesis focuses on Burri and Morandi, their lives and their creative choices, highlighting the ways in which they are of direct artistic interest to me. Part II of my thesis focuses on my own work, pulling connecting threads and pushing the boundaries of those threads to their present potential.

Part I

Introduction

A few artists inform my current work. Alberto Burri's life and work teaches me about material (as the object itself, rather than its image), technique (simultaneously innovative and traditional), color (their substance and application), and composition (created by seams and stitches). Giorgio Morandi's work, particularly as connected to Burri's, inspires a relationship between variations of tone (indicative of dust, flesh) and experiences of history and home; furthermore inspiring a contemplation of the ways in which one's experiences of war lead to a degree of abstraction. I further touch on Morandi's reducing tendencies, his ability to create forms that are minimal yet conceptually and visually attainable, all while giving objects new meanings that transcend their assumed functions. These are elements I explore and aspire to grow in my own work. The physical and metaphorical elements of materiality, through a specifically abstract lens; the process of working with different material and its alchemy; how material, shape and color begin to take a role and shift my work on both physical and underlying metaphorical levels.

Alberto Burri, born in 1915 in Italy, began creating art while at a Prisoners of War (POW) internment camp in Texas. A trained surgeon who volunteered to serve in the military, he was captured and given art supplies by the British in prison. In terms of recognition for his art, it has been said that his "significance has been understated" (Guggenheim 73). This was so for various reasons, such as his dislike of speaking about his work with the press; the obvious lack of credit given by other artists who benefitted from his work (i.e. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns), for ideas they took from him; and because his work was not easily categorized.

With this, Burri was undoubtedly a shaper of the path that allowed for what may be termed “a New-Dada anti-aesthetic,” creating a new focus: “medium-specific model of painting” (Guggenheim 76, 75). In truth, “Burri was a pioneer of new means and processes, including tearing and repairing... material monochromes; supports made of patchwork fabrics and plastic sheeting; and color fields painted without brush or palette knife” (Guggenheim 80). Within the visual and tangible elements of his creations, Burri “treated material as color and color as material. After delving into the earthy qualities of pigments in his early work, he took up fabric, wood, iron, and plastics, repurposing monochromatic industrial products and turning the generic readymade into art” (Guggenheim 61). Furthermore, his material constructions “blurred the boundaries between painting and relief sculpture” (Guggenheim 42). For these and other reasons, critics for some time questioned whether Burri’s work can be considered, technically speaking, paintings.

Critics and art historians have argued that Burri’s work stems from a place of trauma and pain. Proponents of this idea raise details such as Burri’s use of “bleeding reds,” his use of burlap sacks as canvas (which he found and used while in prison), and his practice of lacerating and stitching (often reminiscent of human wounds) (Guggenheim 62, see also Calvesi). As critic James Johnson Sweeney wrote, Burri “sews up the wounds evocatively and as sensuously as he made them” (Guggenheim 55). In considering how he began to paint in prison, Burri recalls: “I painted every day. It was a way of not having to think about the war and everything around me” (Guggenheim 30). The notion of image-making as contributing to one’s wellbeing falls in line with “current theories on art therapy for combat veterans” (Guggenheim 30). With this, “no evidence suggests that he suffered from combat neurosis or what is today diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder” (Guggenheim 34).



Sacco H-8, Alberto Burri, 1953, artobserved.com

Burri: why stitches?

While becoming curious about Burri's use of stitches in his works, a few potential hypotheses come to mind. When we read about Burri's concern with self-preservation (i.e. in his regulative practices of buying back his own work he was concerned about and in his creating his own museum), we can perhaps predict that for Burri, stitching his work was a form of stitching his life back together, a visual expression of a constant internal process (Guggenheim 36). We may

also say that his decision to (lacerate and then) stitch up his material of choice is simply a symptom of his past profession: being a trained surgeon, stitching is a form of handiwork that he was trained in, easily accessible and therefore utilized. The same, one may argue, is true of his use of burlap sack as canvas. We could say, as the artist himself suggests, that his choice of material was based on “what was close at hand” (Guggenheim 39). But the burlap contains in it metaphors, and its continued use after Burri’s internment cannot simply be brushed away as random. Out of prison context, Burri’s choice of material evolved, carrying with it new and underlying metaphors. Out of medicinal context, Burri’s choice of methodology (i.e. stitching) evolved as well—carrying with it, too, new and underlying metaphors.

Composition

Stitches, though they figure as metaphors and potential substance for psychoanalysis, also have very practical, tangible purposes. Though essentially metaphorical, they are also essentially compositional. In considering Burri’s technique, Calvesi writes:

The rips and stitches came more and more to resemble wounds sewn up in real flesh, and the materials were subjected to infinite lacerations and unraveling... the act of lacerating, cauterizing, opening up the wound, piercing it, and stitching it back together with the needle, was always integrated in the overall tension of an artistic composition. p. 16.

The intentional use of stitches creates boundaries in the work they are embedded in: clear lines that shape the composition of the work itself. As Guggenheim suggests, “The assemblages form abstract compositions: preexisting whipstitched structural seams, hand-sewn to withstand heavy use, *function as partitions*” (158, emphasis mine). Burri’s stitches define the outlines of the

planes of his work. This concept is reminiscent of Henri Matisse's cutout, in which he created planes that separated colors.

Here we arrive at a duality, allowed by the seams. A “relational positive and negative,” so to speak (Hauptman 23). Burri's stitching both creates boundaries, as well as brings pieces together into a whole; cutting out paper shapes (see Matisse's Cut-Outs) offers the artist two options with which to work. The cut (or stitch) creates a “positive and a negative, each offering equal potential to the user. In their making, the negative and opposite of each shape can be perceived, launching an iterative vocabulary of forms” (Hauptman 17).



Sacco e Rosso, Alberto Burri, 1959, news.artnet.com

Color & layers

In a significant body of his work, Burri's choice of color tended towards the limited use of red, black and white. Many have hypothesized that the colors point to Burri's pain and trauma, a palpable underlying color symbolism. Yet, in his own words he says, "I never had 'flashbacks' of any type [with images] of gauze, blood, wounds or the like" (Guggenheim 33). Just as Burri's less-conventional use of a flat-edged trowel to apply his white paint, his tendency for these three colors represented, too, a shift from more traditional ways of painting. Burri offered a new lens with which to view the monochrome, and his "bleeding reds, tarry blacks and impudent whites force a rethinking of the monochrome as it has been defined by the reductive categories of modernist formalism" (Guggenheim 62).

By laying colors, Burri allowed dialogue in his work. His use of color, then, always had both symbolic and compositional elements, which "always interwind with references to the history of painting and to pigments that are buried but still vital. The whites, for example, prevail over revolts of seeping black, but in the end *the later enhance the qualities of the former*" (Guggenheim 61, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the whites Burri used were never a "homogeneous, flat white; that would have been a monologue, not a dialogue" (Guggenheim 66). These elements of dialogue between layers and colors are ones to be sought and practiced.



Muffe, Alberto Burri, 1952, Guggenheim website

Body, land

In his consideration of Burri's color choices, Calvesi speaks beyond Burri's true innovation, consisting of "presenting the object itself rather than its image" (14). Calvesi ventures to draw parallels between Burri and Giorgio Morandi, with particular interest in the symbolic and actual tones in their works. In his words, "Those veils and glazes of dirt that Morandi then translated into variations of tone are also found in Burri, and with something very like tonal value" (Calvesi 14). The use of these tones is symbolic in ways that arouse our consideration of the artists' histories, their experiences (i.e. war) and their land (i.e. Italy). In Calvesi's words, "Behind the fundamental stylistic solution there is a love for dust, for the used-up and worn-out, for the patina of time... disdainful secession seemingly motivated by personal reaction to a political situation and by a latent, bitter love of homeland" (Calvesi 14). The colors we see indicate not only dust, but also flesh; layering and arousing experiences of history, war and home.

It is a curious thing, too, to consider both artists experiences of war. Burri's time serving, as well as his time captive as a POW, deeply shaped his work. Morandi, joining the army in 1915, soon suffered a breakdown and was sent home (Calvesi 57). Some have observed that Morandi's still-lives during World War I, "became more reduced in their compositional elements and purer in form" (Cowling and Mundy 191). Perhaps we can make the connection somehow that one (war) is related to another (abstraction).

Abstraction

Beyond Morandi's reducing tendencies—that is, his ability to create forms that are minimal yet conceptually and visually attainable—we see too that he was able to take objects from one context and transcend them into something else. Janet Abramowicz, who has worked as

Morandi's assistant, expressed that "Morandi's goal was to liberate the objects he painted from their everyday reality: he was uninterested in imitating nature or in describing the object per se" (Abramowicz 59). In the words of Italian artist and writer Giorgio de Chirico, in terms of Morandi's work, "The purpose of perfecting technique is not for getting closer to the representation of the object, but, to the contrary to detach it as far as possible to make of it—its own object—a thing onto itself" (Abramowicz 59). This reshaping of the object, reframing the image, echoes (if not moves beyond) abstraction. In Abramowicz's words, "Morandi's bottles and containers are not to be seen or understood as bottles and containers, but as objects that have been given new meanings that transcend their primary or explicit functional use" (60). Taking an object from one context into another and giving it new life and meaning—that is what Morandi succeeded in accomplishing, and that is something I have discovered in my own work as well.

Part II

Seams

After the U.S. presidential election in January 2017, while visiting my home in Jerusalem, I found myself pulled into research about borders and barriers. I soon discovered its connection to my most current work, as well as ways in which it enhances and can perhaps shape my current work that I have been doing abroad. My interest in seams brought me to the research, and the research in turn emphasized physical and metaphorical elements of seams and stitches, which I may have otherwise overlooked.

Seams and stitches contain polarities: they split, but they also bind. Seams open gaps, but they also stitch them up. Seamlines, stitches, borders: they are both transient and enduring, permanent and temporary, mobile and static. I intend these contradistinctions in both physical and metaphorical ways. On a physical level, these seams create texture: they add physicality and dimension to the surface of the work. In my current work, these seams are part of the composition itself. They invite the viewer to take a step closer and discover the stitches themselves, as well as what is held by and within them. Each strand of ripped canvas, each fray, contains paint information deeply saturated into its edges. The stitches create two juxtaposing representations: stability (i.e. balance in form) and boundaries (i.e. dictating limits). These representations are implied on physical and metaphorical levels as one. It is these accumulated elements of materiality in my work that inspire viewers with a sense that my paintings are more than just pictures or images, they are perhaps also sculptures. This is not dissimilar to comments echoed regarding others' works, Burri and Ryman included.



Box Tank, M.Ozeri, graphite, flashe, oil paint on stitched canvas, 58x72 inches, 2017

Materiality

The use of various materials in my works add to the substance of my paintings. Vinyl, velvet, threads, and so forth, emphasize a sense element. Though in many ways my paintings are

visually minimal (in shape, color, substrate and structure), combining vinyl or velvet with canvas brings complexity and weight. The texture, material and total physicality of the works make the intention behind the minimalism clear. It brings a texture of determination to the work: it is both simple and clear in its message. As Sauer suggests in discussion of Robert Ryman's work, the use of various "support materials" and technical application of paint, "offer challenges [to the process of painting] and bring about unconventional pictorial solutions" (Sauer 5). This can be said of my process and support materials, as well.



Untitled, M.Ozeri, oil paint on canvas with stitched patent leather vinyl and velvet
8x8 inches, 2017

I research texture within the framework of material and its transformation. The physical or visual *texture* of my works—of my canvas paintings, ceramic sculptures, monotype prints—contain its own history, layers, visual representations and abstractions. The use of specific textured elements and their underlying process (such as ripped and stitched canvas) can actually begin to take a role in the work itself—shifting both the theoretical intentions and physical methodologies of my work. As Elkins (1999) suggests, art “is something that is worked out in the making, and the work and its maker exchange ideas and change one another” (78). The practice of ripping canvas into strips and stitching them into paintings has become one such example of a philosophical and physical exchange between artist and artwork.



Part of a New Machine, M.Ozeri, oil paint on stitched patent leather vinyl and canvas
44x44 inches, 2017

I posit that much of my interest in materiality stems from my background in ceramics, which influences my approach to painting. When I first began painting with oils, my love for texture trickled into my paintings, as I threw gravel and oxides onto the surface of paintings. Because the alchemy of the materials is at the heart of my curiosity in my art, it is transposed across everything I work on: whether my paintings, my clay works, or my monotypes. There is no perceived concept of what is “traditional” or “classic,” and one is therefore able to be intuitive and experimental, leading to paths of discovery. As in Burri’s case, when he was given a paint brush and paint in his jail cell, a doctor with no education in the arts whatsoever: he found freedom between his prison cell, as he began experimenting and exploring with color, concept and material.

Underlying dialogue

Once I begin to paint, the painting begins to evolve, growing with its own new atmosphere, texture and marks. I must be in tune with what happens on the canvas and respond to the process by making decisions, such as adding or removing paint, mending or cutting off pieces of canvas. Depending on the alchemy and composition, a painting can be resolved and finished within several days, or it might require a few months to complete. I have already explored Burri’s use of color (and both its symbolic and compositional elements), and have identified his application and layering of those colors as essentially dialogical. In my past work as well as my current work I have intuitively sought dialogue through my use of paint, my choice of its application, technique and layering. Of particular interest to me in this regard are the physicality, history and underlying alchemy of the paint. Working with oils allows me to create surfaces and images that either reveal or cover the paint’s history. The layers of paint applied to the canvas become a physical

embodiment of its own history. My process is therefore essentially dialogical, between the background and foreground of the canvas. If, for example, I first paint the image and then work on the background, the freshly painted background informs the image. In response, I return to the image and perhaps change it with an additional layer of paint. In this dialogical manner, I go back and forth between the two, until the painting is complete.

Another example is my intentional decision of lines; their style and composition. Whether a line is drawn curved or straight actively changes the entire work. An intentional decision to elongate or shorten a line creates new boundaries that shift the work itself. My decision to draw a corner at a certain angle or another could decide the whole feel and composition of a painting. Before and during painting, then, I remain aware of the ways in which my decisions shift the work, and the ways in which the work shifts my decisions—I am conscious of the ways my paintings respond to my technique, and I respond to them in return.



Mirage III, M.Ozeri, graphite, oil paint on wood panel, 40x40 inches, 2016

Color & composition

In my current body of work, I use the colors pink, black and white. The power of light and dark creates intensity, and there is a push-and-pull feeling when the painting is made with these contrasting colors. The softness of the pink juxtaposes with the dominance of the black, creating tension and suggesting humor. Light pink proposes femininity, babies, a safe place, and innocence. It is romantic, nurturing, affectionate and inspiring. Deeper pinks, achieved by mixing more red than white, propose passion. The black, on the other hand, is associated with formality, power and control. It is a color of discipline, independence and strong will. Black relates to the hidden and can cover all other colors. Sometimes the use of pink hints at flesh tones, and the image becomes a reference to figurative subjects. When pink is painted over a darker surface it appears darker and rougher without any sweetness to it.

The composition itself changes and moves during painting sessions: just when the large areas of black might become overwhelming I introduce pink to suggest a calmer, balanced atmosphere. With this, pink adjacent to black is not always peaceful. Both colors have potential to work very well together to create the tension I seek. Black can cover any other color and white can uncover it. I seek to both create and release tension in my work through my specific use of color and texture. For instance, even though the softness of the pink meets the hardness of the stitches, this material variation can simultaneously become a balancing element to the tension of the piece itself.



Tank, M.Ozeri, oil paint on stitched canvas, 44x44 inches, 2016



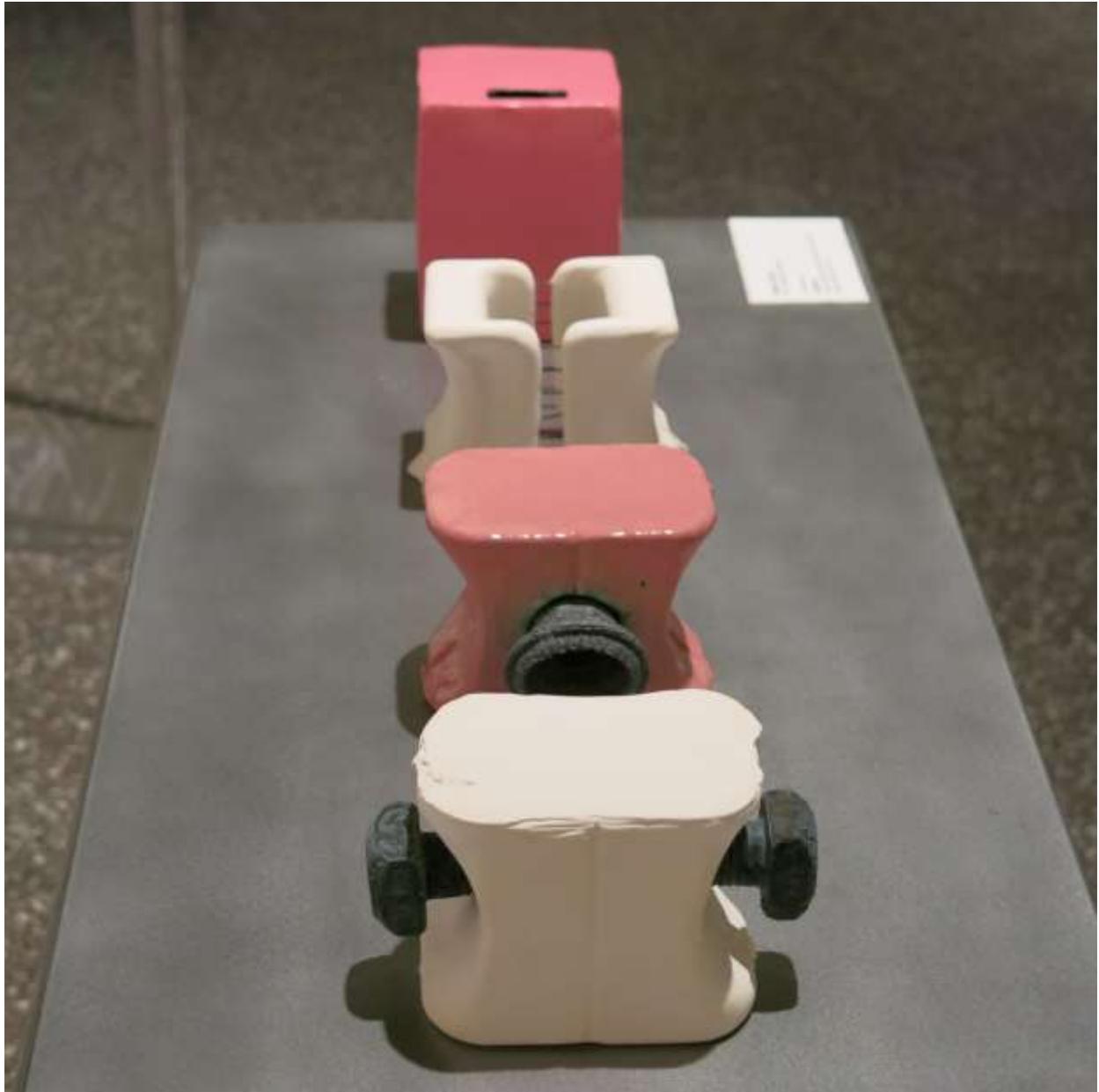
Tank on the Seamline, M.Ozeri, graphite, oil paint on canvas, 58x72 inches, 2017

My work has been described as not quite fitting within the style of modernist abstraction, with elements of abstract expressionism/action painting. I paint stripped-down, minimal enigmatic shapes that resemble industrial, organic or domestic images. I contemplate how much

information is necessary in a drawing and how much information is best to keep out, while allowing enough space for the image to exist. The tension created by the ambiguity of the image engages the viewer to find greater context for the shape for themselves. Perhaps this context is of their own mind. My paintings look as though they are going “towards” something, but then there is a rip or a form—something entering or dividing something else.

Clay works

In working with clay, I explore “stitching” clay with metals and merging it with my paintings. By using 3D clay pieces, steel, copper and nickel wire, underglazes, glazes and texture. The specific techniques I use for these projects include, slip casting, hand building, glazing and multi-firing. Just as I stitch strips of canvas and vinyl as part of my paintings, I introduce (and sometimes stitch) pieces of steel into my clay pieces. These pieces of steel contain their own history: sometimes they are whole and sometimes they are broken pieces, sometimes they are from railroads and sometimes they are parts of machines. I take these pieces out of their context and bring them into a new, sculptural one. As images in my paintings are visually simple and minimal, so too my clay shapes are solid and square. In the manner in which I introduce complexity to my paintings with texture and materiality, so too I introduce complexity to my square clay pieces with juxtaposing metal rods. As the oil paint seeps into the texture of the canvas, so too the glazes I create seep into the pores of the clay. As the canvas of my paintings shrink after they are painted (a matter to consider in its stretching and preparation), so too the clay shrinks in the firing process (a matter to consider particularly as it holds and is held by steel pieces that do not shrink along with it). This work is calculative, it is process-oriented in essence, and is a full embodiment of my love and curiosity of the alchemy of the materials.



Untitled, M.Ozeri, clay, steel, copper, nickel wire, glaze, multiple firings, enamel paint, approximately 4.5x4.5x3.3/4 inches, 2017



Untitled, M.Ozeri, clay, steel, copper, nickel wire, glaze, multiple firings, enamel paint, approximately 9x6x9 inches, 2017



Untitled, M.Ozeri, detail, 2017

Conclusion

Art is life. I mean this in the sense that one's life and experiences influence their creative journey. Even if, after our in-depth investigation into Alberto Burri's life, we can say that Burri's paintings are not a reflection of some form of a post-traumatic response, we can also say that his

specific experiences shaped the way he lived in this world, and therefore the ways in which he created in this world. The particular textures, smells, noise and the isolation he experienced, brought his sensitivities to a place that other artists would never be able to arrive at. He saw things in art and in creation that others did not and could not see. He experienced life in a specific way—and thereby his art developed in a certain way.

Giorgio Morandi, on the other hand, was born into an aristocratic lifestyle, with cooks and cleaners taking care of his needs his entire life. In way, this is visible and sensed in his work too, because there is something very classical in his work. He does not leave the environment of the home. He is a maker: he returns to the same vase and flowers, on the same desk, in the same manner and in the same routine.

I feel similarly about myself and my own work. My own set of eyes, the Israeli culture that I grew up in, *is* everyday life. It is not just one's life during one's military service—it is every citizen's life in the *every day*. I here am not making any political statement, nor am I ascribing to any political stance. But it is inescapable: the things I grew up with, the desert Judean hills, the experience of several wars: these all contribute to my life, and therefore to my art.

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