

**Tsibi Geva: Internalizing the Struggle**



*Installation view, courtesy of albertz benda*

*Tsibi Geva: Jolt*

October 12 - November 18, 2017

albertz benda

515 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001

**By ROBERT C. MORGAN, NOV. 2017**

Given the ongoing trend toward art and globalization, we are led to believe that art has separated from culture only to exist as a free-floating entity within an infinitely progressive economic universe. For many, the rules of conduct that drive this universe are perfunctory. This concurs with the subjective endorsements administered by those who display outrageous sums of digital cash ready to invest

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in whatever suits their fancy. We all know it is now possible for art of any kind to exist “freely” without the troubling intervention of art criticism – the exception being a notable brand of identity politics, which tends to by-pass migratory refugees and victims of poverty in favor of the familiar theoretical issues that occur within the distant and privileged domain of art writing.



*Tsibi Geva, Untitled, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 37 1/2 x 74 1/2 inches (95 x 190 cm), courtesy of  
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Of course there is a logic to this not-so-recent trajectory that appeared gratuitously during the late 1980s when the quest for art turned away from significance toward a more commercial desire symptomatic of what appears today as a type of mediated non-culture. Advertisements for fakery have miraculously transformed indigenous culture into a circus of varied performances accompanied by editioned larger-than-life toys and trinkets bound for investment. Over the years, many have wondered how art got this way when, in fact, there is no real mystery. Things began moving fast, then faster and faster, to the point where what used to be visible eventually became invisible. This is where we are today.

But there are still areas of committed involvement where artists have begun to recognize the need to re-envision what has been visibly lost to the realm of the virtual. It is now coming back into a fiercely tactile parlance. Here I refer to the work of the Israeli painter, Tsibi Geva, who approach to the visible that goes

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beyond the tolerance of formal dictates. This is to suggest that Geva's paintings are rugged and bare-boned. They hit at the core of existence and of what existence means in relation to art. But Geva is neither Sartre nor Genet. His paintings are less about a discourse than a consummate discourse unto themselves. Geva's bestial marks, spatters, and hard-boiled gestures, whether figurative or non-figurative – more typically, a conflation of both – constitute the works of a quick-witted, intelligent, yet raging raconteur. These paintings go eons beyond any commonplace representation of humanity or latency that holds prejudice from the past. Having followed the paintings of Geva since my initial visit to Israeli in 1995, months before the assassination of Rabin, the artist was still deeply involved in painting Arabic headwear called *keffiyeh*. There was little doubt that his thoughtful and liberal position as an Israeli citizen carried over into his role as a painter, and that his paintings were concerned with restructuring visibility in an invisible world of perennial consumption.



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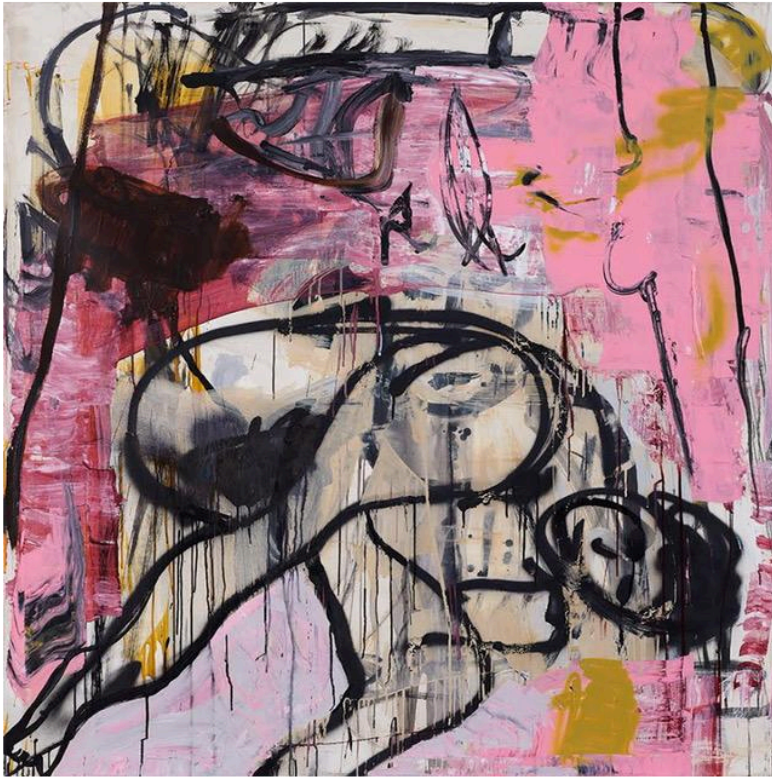
I was struck by the comment made by Geva for a questionnaire at the time he was making preparations for his exhibition at the Israeli Pavilion for the Venice Biennial in 2015. According to John Yau's essay in the exhibition catalog for

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Tsibi Geva, *Untitled*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 59 x 59 inches (150 x 150 cm), courtesy of  
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Albertz Benda, Geva was asked whether it was “an honor or problematic” to represent his country at the Biennial. Here is an excerpt from his response: “Except for a few years here and there I have lived in Israel all my life; my art is in a way the product of, and a reflection on this place, which I love and which tears me apart in its radical political and ethical conflict.”

There is little doubt that Tsibi Geva has endured his share of criticism over the years in the process of becoming one of Israeli’s foremost artists. To

come to terms with the force and rage that seethe openly, yet symbolically in his recent paintings is to understand the nature of his liberation, his fixed point in time, where memory releases its grip on the unconscious and brings disparate images to the forefront of the artist’s attention without having to be ordained or qualified or reasoned beyond the scope of what painting means.

While some of the works included in this scrupulously curated exhibition at Albertz Benda were previously shown in the Israeli Pavilion at the Venice Biennale two years ago, this version – re-titled *Jolt* – also contains more recent *Untitled* paintings in which roughly contoured nude bodies are configured in relation to one another or turned in various orgiastic directions, and occasionally accompanied by blackbirds or ravens. Thematically, the exhibition holds together in a way that posits a uniquely interior struggle. Yet the struggle felt in these paintings – particularly in the large three-panel *Untitled Triptych* (2011), shown in Venice – suggests the kind of fictional interior found in contemporary allegory. In this case, the allegory contains conflicting remnants from the artist’s earlier terrazzo theme along with graffiti-style sexuality and

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traces of a lost landscape. For Geva, the emptiness within this violent allegory negates the need for making a surreptitious confession. Rather the subtle intelligence found in this painting belongs within the realm of an epic. This being the case, one cannot easily avoid entering into Geva's *Untitled Triptych* as one might consider entry into Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950). Both hold the power and invitational allure of large-scale paintings that awaken a timeless journey, an epic fraught with isolation and conflict that heightens the allure and delay of the jolt.



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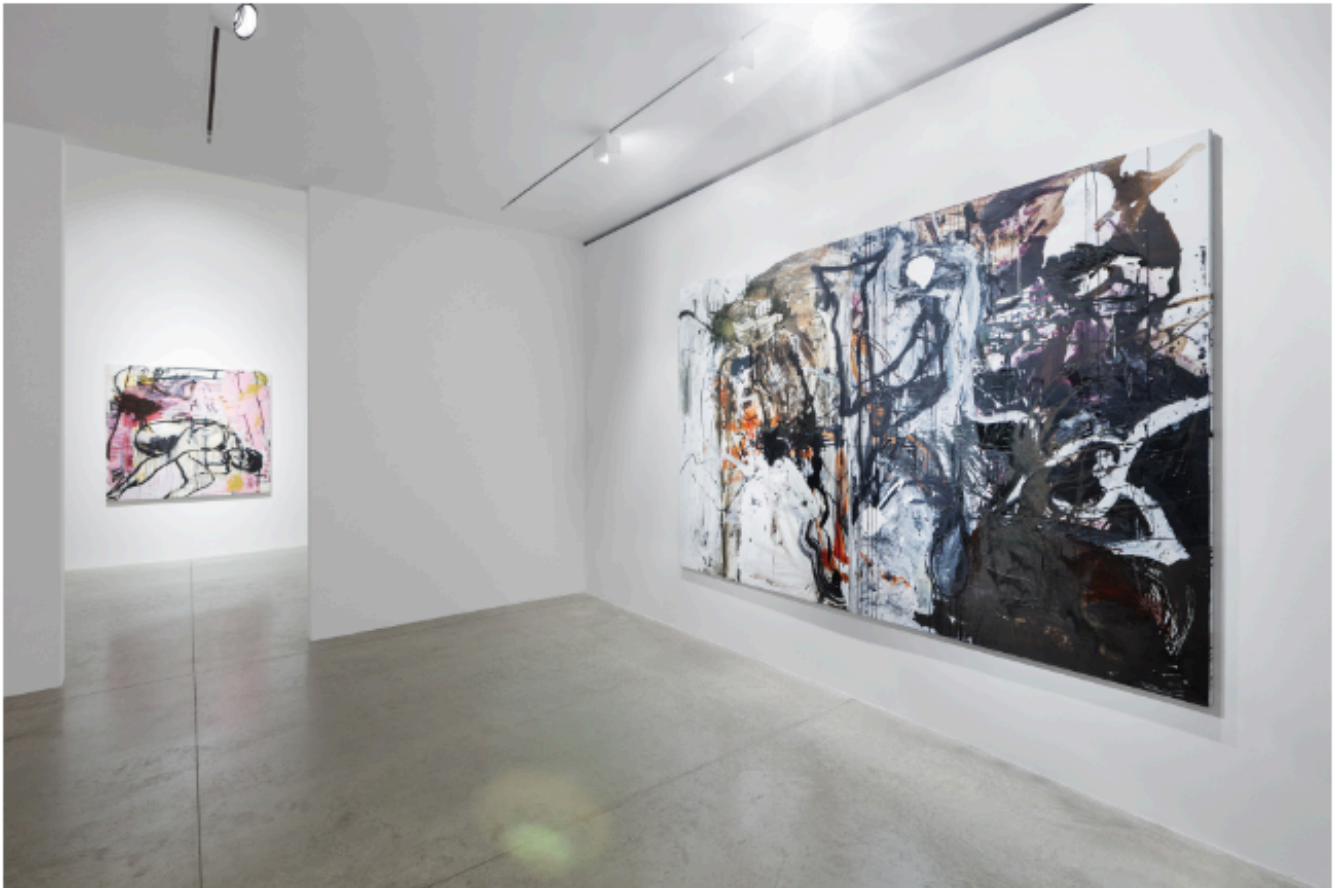
There is little doubt that Geva's work is uniformly expressionist, often revealing bold erotic themes as seen in *Untitled* (1916) and *Untitled* (2017). Even so, the theatrical drive given to the surface that encompasses these works occurs by distancing the space through abstraction. Again, this is masterfully shown in Geva's large painting in the rear

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gallery, *Untitled*(2014), and in other works as well. I would cite *Black Raven* (2011), a painting where the only visible image is the bird perched on a wire possibly above a figure reaching toward a group of Rorschach splatters that appear to negate other spaces where forms may have come and gone in the process of the painting becoming a painting.



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A rather different and distinct work comes to the foreground in *Untitled*(2014) where a standing figure possibly wearing a *keffiyeh* holds another painfully activated human form struggling to stay alive. The two figures are visually bound together. They are openly painted in black against a terrain of expressionist brushwork that resembles a desert. I noticed that the version photographed in the catalog is different from the final finished version now on display. Apparently, the artist added a second panel with the same expressionist brushwork above the figures suggesting the presence of

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an extended desert space, which clearly lends a heightened emotional impact to the painting. Within this minimal abstract narrative, there is a certain rigor as one figure unites poignantly with another. The painting portrays the solitude of existence at a moment in which the forces of life and death struggle to define their purpose in the making of history. **WM**



#### ROBERT C. MORGAN

**Robert C. Morgan** is an artist, scholar, poet, teacher, and author. Considered an authority on early Conceptual Art, Dr. Morgan has lectured widely, written literally hundreds of critical essays (translated into twenty languages), published several books, and curated numerous exhibitions. In 1992, he was appointed as the first critic-in-residence at Art Omi International Artists Residency, where in 2016, he was honored as Critic Emeritus. In 1999, he was awarded the first ARCALE prize in International Art Criticism in Salamanca (Spain), and the same year served on the UNESCO jury at the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Venezia. In 2002, he gave the keynote speech in the House of Commons, London on the occasion of Shane Cullen's exhibition celebrating the acceptance of "The Agreement" by the UK. In 2003, Dr. Morgan was appointed Professor Emeritus in art history at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and, in 2005, became a Senior Fulbright Scholar in the Republic of Korea. In 2011, he

was inducted into the European Academy of Sciences and Arts in Salzburg; and, in 2016, the Department of Special Collections at the Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame, purchased *The Robert C. Morgan Collection of Conceptual Art*. Much of his work since the late 1990s has focused on art outside the West in the Middle East and East Asia where his books have been translated and published into Farsi (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2010), Korean (Seoul: JRM, 2007), and Chinese (Beijing: Hebei, 2013). Dr. Morgan has worked extensively in China with contemporary ink artists and has authored many catalogs and monographs on Chinese artists. In addition to his scholarly, he continues a parallel involvement as an artist and abstract painter (since 1970) with a major survey exhibition at Proyectos Monclova in Mexico City (March 23 – April 29, 2017). His work has appeared in numerous exhibitions and is included in several important collections.

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