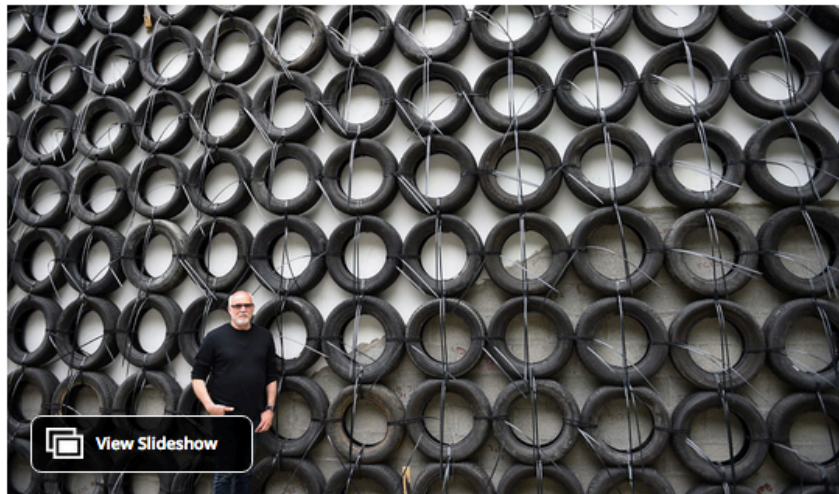


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A Broken Home: Inside Tsibi Geva's Israel Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

BY NOELLE BODICK | SEPTEMBER 04, 2015



Tsibi Geva poses in front of the Israeli pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. (GABRIEL BOUYS/AFP/Getty Images)

When the protestors came to the Venice Biennale on August 2, they occupied Tsibi Geva's Israel pavilion for only an hour.

It was a corrective measure, according to members of [Gulf Labor Coalition](#) and G.U.L.F., official participants in the Biennale, who employ [headline-grabbing](#) tactics to [speak out](#) against the working conditions on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi and elsewhere. "Political art is everywhere we look at this year's Biennale," their [statement](#) reads. "But Palestine does not appear significantly on anyone's radar."

An overt reference to Palestine, however, hangs inside the Israel pavilion at a point visible from the group's meeting spot. A long scroll carries the word "GAZZAA," a play on the words "Gaza" and "gauze," and a painted [keffiyeh](#), whose intersecting lines resemble a metal, chain-linked fence. Nearby, an actual cage contains a sign that reads, with no small dose of irony: "WONDERLAND."

Geva, 64, was aplomb amidst the news of the occupation of the national pavilion. "I am happy that they chose to hold a 'public meeting' at the heart of my project," he wrote in an email to ARTINFO, referring to the discussion the protestors initiated about the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (known as [BDS](#)) — which bans the support of Israeli companies and cultural institutions — and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (known as [PACBI](#)). "They are more than welcome."

In his Venice presentation, Geva has created a house of sorts within the 1952 modernist structure. “But the parts of the house are very broken somehow — it is falling apart,” Geva said of the project. “I take the backyard and bring it to the front. I show all the denied things, the things we don’t want to show to the ‘other.’”

Geva is not a political artist in a punishingly didactic way. He does not respond to whatever event made headlines last week. Nor does he have self-aggrandizing airs of positioning himself as an intercessor on behalf of disenfranchised masses, unlike some self-stylized artists-activists. He is political only in that he stages vigorous formal dialectic — between materials and ideas — across his work.

At Venice, the artist works through these ideas concretely by means of, well, junk. Geva trawled the streets of Yaffo, the Tel Aviv neighborhood where his studio is located, for thrown away items for his installation, which includes ripped clothing, old televisions, bedframes, and tires. The latter cover the expanse of the entire two-story Venice pavilion, creating a modernist-like grid hoisted together with cable ties and makeshift wedges. As a symbol, the tires flicker between representing the possibly of shelter, like a bunker, and objects of protest, famously burned in Palestinian demonstrations. Approaching the pavilion, the smell of rubber assails the viewer.

Inside the pavilion, one sees a long stretch of a glassed off *boidem* — the Yiddish word for an attic or crawl space found in a corridor or kitchen, used to store things: broken TVs, ladders, bed springs, a naked light bulb, dinged up pots, a cat litter box. They are things kept around, just in case. “Which is very Jewish behavior. It somehow describes the Jewish anxiety,” Geva said.

That existential register sounds across the entire pavilion. Though the presentation is assiduously curated by Hadas Maor, the quality of the many architectural elements creates an impermanent, thrown-together atmosphere. Even the paintings in the next room, depicting orgies and domination, are rendered with a flurry of strokes. Geva was not quick to over-explain these figurative works. The birds might be witnesses, he suggested, shrugging and pointing at a raven in an upstairs painting. He was more eager to talk about the inky black lines that feature prominently on each canvas: “My black is very colorful, somehow. I think the whole atmosphere touches on my existential feeling of anxiety, the pressure of living in a place of unstable feeling, temporality, immigration.”

Born on Kibbutz Ein Shemer, Geva said his work at Venice was in part inspired by his architect father, who built some 300 minimalist, post-Bauhaus structures across Israel during his career. He was also the first Jew to design a mosque in Israel, near their kibbutz. That was before the 1967 Six Day War, Geva recalled, when he could still accompany his father to the Arab villages.

But any high modernist ideals Geva has borrowed from his father are made “dirty,” he said, in his variation. “Tsibi is well educated in the principle modernist notions of what art is,” said Maor, the pavilion curator. At Venice, he has reinterpreted the grid of Mondrian or Sol LeWitt with the pattern of the window lattices to evoke a culturally specific context of defense.

The Israel Ministry of Culture and Sport and the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs backs the Venice presentation — which is why the Gulf protestors came in the first place. Cultural workers who receive state funding are bound “to promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art, including contributing to creating a positive image for Israel” in a signed contract. A “positive image” here, however, seems less a cheery propagandistic statement of affection than one that observes the crippling force of occupation. “It is important that people outside of Israel see that there is resistance,” Geva said. In this particular protest at Venice, the Gulf Labor Coalition’s efforts might have been misplaced.