

## The Play of Logic, The Logic of Play

By Peter Frank

Geometricism is probably the least well-understood idiom in modern and contemporary art. Viewers assume that it is ruled by logic, if not by mathematics, and is thus devoid of human feeling absent of humor, and resistant to the involvement of spectators. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Artists reliant on a geometric formal language have produced some of the wittiest and most genial, even endearing art of our time. Indeed, most artists who employ vocabularies of simplified shapes exploit the very simplicity of those shapes – and accompanying colorful palette – as a means of allowing ready visual comprehension, while playing cleverly against the supposed austerity of the geometric forms they use. The humor is as much architectural, or even musical, as it is purely visual. In any case, it is widespread, thoroughgoing, and very charming – but not at all superficial.

This in a nutshell describes Moshé Elimelech's oeuvre. A designer by trade and in spirit, Elimelech is driven by visual and structural imagination (although his work engages a remarkable amount of personal expression, evident most readily but not exclusively, in his watercolors). His paintings – which dramatically engage certain sculptural qualities – are, if anything, toys, devices to share play with his audience. Elimelech's installations extend the principles of his paintings into the realm of spectacle. And his flat works – watercolors in particular – remain suspended between the seen world and the imagined, drawing in the eye by bridging idiosyncratic conditions of pure structure and observed reality.

A sense of elegance suffuses throughout Elimelech's work, to be sure a unifying earmark of his sensibility; but this elegance is a given, not a goal, a tool towards elucidating his broader purpose. It almost serves as a "secret identity," the cool clarity of a painting masking the sense – indeed, the guiding principle – of play that reveals itself on closer inspection. His installations, with their reliance on reflection and their goal of at-least partial spectator disorientation, make more evident Elimelech's devotion to the ludic, but their minimalist aspects also assure a certain initial distance between them and the viewer. Even the watercolors, rendered in a medium whose gentle colors and silky texture (not to mention the sensuousness of their paper) Elimelech fully exploits, do not reach out to us with any great extravagance. Small, quietly rendered, and dependent on patterns of striation that are as rigorous as they are rhythmic, the watercolors' seduction of the viewer's eye is no less gradual than the other, larger works'. Nothing is as rigid or minimal or decorative as it first sees – not nearly.

Astute viewers will observe that, for all the brittle modernity that apparently attends to Elimelech's work, he is in fact something of a traditionalist. The "modernity" he practices is rooted not in latter-day stylistic indulgences, but in the integral concepts of design we associate with a modernity older than we are. He upholds and re-energizes the classic modern tradition – making him, if anything, a "neo-modernist." His lucid, elemental sense of form and composition hark back a good century, but in practice it roots itself more in the concepts and structures prevalent in the 1950s and '60s, notably those associated with Op and Kinetic Art. Also mindful of hard-edge painting and Minimalism, Elimelech pares away the elaborateness of so much Op and Kinetic work, focusing instead on its basic structural clarity. He thus seeks to surprise rather than to bedazzle. Elimelech also draws on the ready, rather than spectacular, involvement of the audience in the process of discovery and play into which Op and Kinetic Art characteristically bring us. His installations, for instance, rely on no optical tricks, at least none we don't or can't anticipate; rather, they elaborate on easily comprehended visual anomalies, elemental enough in their arrangement to explain themselves to anyone while still delighting everyone's eye. There is magic to these artworks, to be sure; but Elimelech the magician relies on the compliance and even assistance of his audience – and assures it with his uncluttered style.

Only the watercolors rely on a "magic" for which the viewer does not share such responsibility. Even in the most minimal of the works on paper, Elimelech's handwork is pictorial rather than purely constructive. In the watercolors he presents us with visual information notably more varied and detailed than his paintings or installations – refined and even restrained information, to be sure, but interpretive and whimsical in their reliance on imagery rather than logical and structured. The spectators' role here is physically more passive than it is in the paintings – the arrangement of whose elements we manually determine – or the installations – whose effects on us change (profoundly) depending on where and how we position ourselves. The watercolors present us with the familiar, non-relational condition of traditional pictoriality. But all art is relational; the circumstances of any artwork affect variously depending on who we are and how we approach it. As Duchamp insisted, the viewer completes the work of art. In his other work Elimelech makes this eminently apparent, even (with the viewer's physical engagement) the heart of the matter; in the watercolors the viewer's vantage is imagined into the images themselves, reflected in Elimelech's own delicate fantasies.

If the watercolors are built up of fixed elements, safe as it were, from the intervention of the audience, the paintings' mutability is echoed and even magnified by their immutable factors: the shapes and colors with which Elimelech has invested the. No matter how stolid or symmetrical their array, those shapes and colors are vibrant and active – vibrant and active, that is, in a manner that does not depend on our intervention, but plays off it even while benefiting from it. When we rearrange the elements in an Elimelech painting-structure, we are engaged with a visual presence as active as we are; having projected his visual spirit into the structure, Elimelech invited us to do the same, and thus propagates the game through more than just its rules. It may be his game, but everyone wins. It's thus appropriate to call these paintings "arrangements," underscoring the conditionality of their appearance: dependent on the active handling of many people, not just one, their abiding arrangeability is as important as is their arrangement at any given time.

The installations propose the most unstable of all Elimelech's circumstances, one in which, at least within their boundaries, there is no fixity whatsoever. They do not build upon or even imply chaos, but they do rely on continual fluid variation. The compositional principle at work here is not ludic so much as choreographic, its fixed elements functioning not as formative ingredients but de-formative ingredients amidst which the main formative ingredient – you – loses and re-finds itself.

The three realms of Moshé Elimelech's current artistic investigation, then, distinguish themselves one from another not simply in their shape and function, but in their sense and meaning. They are philosophically as well as experientially diverse. The continuity they display between one another is a continuity of sensibility, a neo-modernist sense of design and play – not just playful design, or even playful modernism, but playful perception, a spirit that values active engagement, hands-on or no, even as it relies on and champions geometry, structure and logic. Elimelech may draw a hard line, but he does so with a wink.

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