

To Generate a Shemi

My search for Yechiel Shemi's sculptures started in a library. Of all the different books and images, I was drawn to one incredibly heavy and exceptional sculpture.

Later, I discovered that the sculpture appears in another book, but there it looks somewhat different - in one photo, the sculpture is painted gray and in the other - orange-red. This gave me pause. For a moment, I thought these were perhaps two different sculptures, but the caption only further increased my confusion, since it was identical: "Sculpture. 1986. Painted metal. Haifa Technion."

I wondered what to make of the sculpture's different hues: Is it possible that one of the images has been digitally altered? Or maybe, it so happens that someone decided to paint the sculpture that same year? And if it was indeed painted - why would anyone do that? And which of the two photos depicts the original sculpture? My inquiries turned up that there is no conclusive answer and it is impossible to determine that Shemi authorized the painting of the sculpture. One option is that the Technion's custodian painted it to protect it from rust or wear. But the matter remained a mystery. This was my starting point.

In recent years, I have been making small architectural models and photographing them. These are not necessarily concrete places, but rather experiences that take place around me and express an associative world of places that are familiar yet foreign. Tracing Shemi's footsteps allowed me to experiment with the thought process of a sculptor through the material that became synonymous with him.

The works To Generate a Shemi are based on a model I built using construction paper, while looking at an image of the sculpture in one of the books. I later painted the model with metal paint and iron oxide that generates rust in a chemical process, illuminated it with studio lighting, and took photographs.

The choice of rust in the model alludes to the possible reason for painting the original sculpture - meaning, the aging of the metal, material fatigue. On the other hand, the excessive use of rust blurred the boundaries of the work, in terms of medium as well as material, to the point that you can no longer distinguish the sculpture from the background or the photograph from the frame. It seems that the more I tried to come closer to Shemi, the more I drifted away.

Careful examination of the sculpture's reproduction in the book revealed why I was so drawn to it in the first place - in itself, it looked a bit like cardboard. My decision to respond to the image was central to my action. In fact, I wanted to react to the photograph just as much as to the sculpture.

With these actions, I wished to explore the fundamental principles of photography - its ability to preserve, mediate, and represent and to examine how these principles impact our perception of "what was there" through its representation.

The various transformations and reiterations in the work have left me with general questions about the world of sculptures and photographs: Why do sculptures need photographs? Can we look at a photo of a sculpture without dwelling on the image?

When I went back to the studio, I packed the lighting equipment and threw away all the cardboards.

Liat Elbling