

Tal Frank

Tie Break

Herzeliya Museum for Contemporary Art, Herzeliya  
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Tie Break, a solo exhibition by Tal Frank, draws its inspiration from the paraphernalia of competitive sports while offering the image of an elusive parallel world. Consisting of three autonomous installations, Tie Break encompasses a shared iconography that forms a sequence of narrative episodes in between the mundane and the fantastical. A fictive reality, it draws on the realm of sports as a marker of a contemporary leisure culture – a repertoire of imagery that includes ping pong rackets, baseball bats, a tennis ground and more – objects that are introduced into staged sculptural mise-en-scènes evocative of natural landscapes. Yet once integrated into these new environments, these items are denied their primary functionality as sports gear; in a new narrative and formal context, there is no room for the competitiveness and rivalry of the sports from which they came. The trace of the former physical impact attached to them is re-inscribed into a new sculptural process, one where it is for the artist to set the rules and exert power.

The act of re-appropriating an existing object is at the center of the ambiguous world found in Tie Break, whether through the reworking of actual ready-mades or the formal representation of an existing object. Either way, once dislocated, Frank pushes the material, formal and thematic limits of the object by way of the subtle sculptural shifts she applies. These transformations, which alter the object's usual visual configuration, call attention to a larger state of things: A horizontal alignment of baseball bats becomes evocative of an Israeli forest consumed by fire; clusters of ping pong rackets emulate the fallen leaves of autumn; and a tennis court is turned into a decorative carpet overgrown with wild vegetation.

Both alluring and disturbing, the parallel world that Frank creates invites the

viewer to dive in and succumb to its compelling beauty. Yet under the surface, bellow the lure of beauty, there lies a muted violence, bringing about solitude and alienation. This universe, which seems governed by an unlikely logic, manifests itself in a number of isolated episodes, like separate instances frozen in time. Each of these sculptural constructs unveils the three-dimensional frame of a nature engineered, where the strange and familiar coexist. They possess the awe and disorientation proper of the fictive world of animated films – not incidentally, as Frank’s work process often conflates the real and the virtual. Each of these sculptural *mise-en-scènes* began as a digital simulation of the object using 3-dimensional imaging. With digital rendering as the first stage, the familiar object is unleashed of its real-life connotations, allowing for unlimited freedom towards the construction of a new reality. Away from the constraint of physicality, reality and use value, the virtual images are re-translated into an art object, this time by the actual manipulation of matter.

Frank’s sculptural environments are platforms for simulation and imitation, scenes that follow from a supposedly concrete reality. And yet, in every such creative process, the artist leaves a conspicuous flaw in the work itself, a mark that exposes the medial failure inherent in realizing the mimetic project. It is a crucial moment in the work, since the traces of failure equally constitute, paradoxically, the mark of success. It is a moment where the viewer realizes that the sculptural environment they behold is, in fact, an assortment of objects, a visual construct through which the artist formulates questions that go beyond, pertaining to concepts of beauty and aesthetics, domination and force, and life and death.

First Set features a large bed of synthetic grass simulating a tennis court in a scale of 1:2. Somewhat like a carpet, the grass surface is slightly rolled at one end, making the tennis court a portable item that can be easily rolled up and transported. However, the surface of the ground is overgrown with vegetation – myriad offshoots that would render any attempt at conducting a match impossible. These offshoots, as synthetic as the field itself, lend it the equivocal look of a peaceful, well-regulated ecological garden on the one

hand, and that of a deserted no man's land on the other, where unruly weeds and wild vegetation have taken over.

The double meaning of the installation encompasses the contradictory implications of life and death. The wild vegetation points to a process of regeneration, growth and vitality, yet the unregulated pattern of the growth suggests downfall, ruin, and dereliction – whether at some point in the past or as an imminent eventuality. In this sense, First Set upholds a metaphoric vision of our present times, of a world of immediate supply and availability, fluid geographical borders, and the semblance of surplus and bounty meant to encourage compulsive consumption without end. Frank's tennis field operates as a monument both to an obscure past and a futuristic, post-apocalyptic reality where the synthesized beauty of fake vegetation supplants organic growth. It is a place where the ephemeral and timeless reside side by side.

Second Set consists of a multitude of ping pong rackets scattered across the exhibition space, their formation emulating clusters of fallen leaves in autumn. There are hundreds of them, all hand-made by the artist, and they are lying around motionless and passive, recalling the image of an ephemeral nature, of a stop on the passage of time. This autumnal tableau occupies a state of in-between, a transitory stage locked between the memory of a thing past and a future about to unfold. As with the two-sided rivalry of tennis, the game of professional ping pong also harbors a struggle for domination, which here too is converted into a material manipulation as exerted upon the object. Each of the many rackets scattered on the floor underwent a slight bending, which turned them from sports gear into fallen leaves – a brittle organism that succumbs to the cyclical laws of nature, and, when its time comes, withers and exfoliates.

However, the sheer multitude of rackets lends these objects a force of a different kind, such that accrues into a presence in space that defines a time and a place. This multitude is itself two-sided, highlighting both the individual handiwork put into each racket as pièce unique while bringing to mind the endless repetition of a mass-produced object. The crisp aesthetics of computer animation, of a 3-dimensional rendering where everything is

possible – including a ping pong racket turned into an autumn leaf – produces an elusive image that blends the real with the imaginary, the spiritual with the earthly. Wandering in this autumnal, and supposedly pastoral, scene of autumn leaves conveys a charged and melancholy emotional experience not without overtones of critique and irony.

Third Set presents a collection of baseball bats that seem to be floating in a row, one by one, in a large glass display. At the top end of each bat we perceive a blackened offshoot, a flourish resembling branches or roots that spring from the bat's head, but are carved, in fact, in the very wood of the bat. The glass case that contains them recall a museal display of rare exemplars salvaged from a ravaged zone; it is scientific in character, referencing the display mode of science and ethnography museums. The unique carving at each head preserves the trace of a thicket consumed by fire. Now, at its post-traumatic stage, it commemorates the indomitable balance of power in nature.

The wood carving undertaken by the artist is applied to an existing object – a readymade – to the effect of a hybrid object that harbors an array of conflicts and inner contradictions. The baseball bat, originally the product of mass production, seeks to reclaim its primary, organic properties, to grow branches once more and return to the raw materiality of the wood. At the same time, as the familiar shape of the baseball bat remains largely intact, it maintains the various cultural connotations to a field sport so quintessentially American. Third Set operates the appropriation of an emblematic item from popular American culture, an object that harbors the impact of the stroke for which it was made, which, nonetheless, attempts to grow from within the traces of a post-apocalyptic landscape. The resulting image assumes the poetic dimension of a lamentation over nature's devastating power.