

No Place like Home

Nadav Weissman – catalogue text

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Nadav Weissman's installations are marked by a coherent language and unique aesthetics. They generate an sealed, distinct world of images, teeming with recurring motifs, which have been undergoing transformations over the years: human figures with a large-scale head and a small, child-like body, as well as horses, dogs, pianos, boats, bones, cogwheels, fences, trucks and trees. All these are fashioned in a child-like, colourful, seductive style, together creating some dreamy and horrific situations. Yet of all these, the home constitutes the ultimate starting point. It recurs in different configurations, whether as an immaculate home icon – four walls topped by a triangular roof – as a simple child scribble, or as serial apartment blocks. It is from this home that the hero, the artist, the man, that distended head, sets out on non-linear journeys, embarking on dissembled narratives, obscure states of consciousness.

The home interior appears as early as Weissman's initial painting series. In *Lover's House* (2000-2001), a series of paintings on plywood, single perspective lines mark a barrier between the floor and wall. The home's walls and ceilings are in fact painted on individual pieces of plywood, joined together to turn the sheltering home space into a dissembled patchwork structure. In *Flooding*, 2001, a series of paintings depicting the interior of a home from an overhead view, the perspective is reminiscent of architectural plans, but the aesthetics are altogether different. In a depthless drawing, Weissman depicts furniture and assorted objects: a toilet seat, toilet paper holder, a bed, a radiator, a sink, a shower curtain, piano and table – all seen at the frame's margins. Taking over the picture, over the living space, is a flat background, its colour a phosphorous, almost toxic kind of green. The inside of the home, its evisceration and the architectural perspective are to prove a leitmotif in Weissman's works.

Even the titles of these works are sometimes evocative of architectonic elements. For instance, a 2007 installation where Weissman took over the entire gallery space is called *Ground Floor*, a term combining the "floor" and "ground" elements. Multi-story buildings are a recurring theme in this installation, but it is actually the solid ground that can nowhere be found in it: one white building is carried in a red wheelbarrow by one of the naked figures, trying to find himself a permanent spot among cruising bone-laden boats and railway tracks. Another figure lies in the pink boat skeleton, brandishing a green building and a bone mast. A ship carrying a grey building was frozen in an enlarged snowball, just before sinking down to the bottom of an ocean.

“The privileged role of the home”, declares Emmanuel Levinas in his masterpiece *Totality and Infinity*, “does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement.”¹ He goes on to state that “With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence, steeped in a medium where its enjoyment, without security, on edge, was being inverted into care. Circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one's home, one's corner, one's tent, or one's cave is the vestibule. The primordial function of the home does not consist in orienting being by the architecture of the building and in discovering a site, but in breaking the plenum of the element, in opening in it the Utopia in which the ‘I’ recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself. But separation does not isolate me, as though I were simply extracted from these elements. It makes labour and property possible.”² Levinas refers here to an optimal, almost bourgeois state of affairs, where one has a home, a full, sheltering, containing – functioning kind of home. From this place one can go out into the world, yet Weissman’s homes are the complete opposite of this state. They go up in flames, drowning, eviscerated, exposed and distorted; they are mobile and vulnerable.

Mobility is a key point, not just because it undermines the home as a steady, permanent place, but also because it turns it into an object, a portable one. As far as Levinas is concerned, “Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling.”³ That is, the separation between the dwelling and objects in this world is essential if the subject is to function. Weissman obsessively disrupts this separation. The private home becomes the familiar two walls-and-roof icon, while the building becomes a mobile cube. One way or the other, both become distorted objects, devoid of roots and affiliation, like the other objects in the artist’s nightmare-haunted worlds.

One particularly nightmarish Weissmanian environment is undoubtedly *Black Lawn* from 2005, featuring a whole neighbourhood. White knee-high apartment blocks protrude from a black vegetation, in the midst of cistern-like, green puddles. Ferns, designed to drop from the house’s balconies, dangle from the gallery’s ceiling, threatening to swallow the neighbourhood and illustrating the distorted scale. Weissman crushes the securest of all spaces – the residential neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is abandoned, while the residents themselves feature as absent-present entities. The child-adult figures, a trademark of Weissman’s art, have become a different kind of hybridization in this work, huge brown pupae with pinkish human heads, lying

helplessly on the floor. Projected on the wall, the animation film features people, or rather mere heads, swept away in a muddy river, and suggests an impending or actual disaster.

Most of Weissman's environments can be said to be universal, a-local, exploring psychic states of consciousness, but here and there the private and specific rears its head, in the form of the artist's home – images of Israeli architecture. For instance, the buildings that feature in *Black Lawn* are propped up on posts, their interior decorated with spray plaster while their exterior is painted with Polysid coating, a pronouncedly 1970's Israel architectural style. The artist in fact created the buildings as a cross between those he grew up in in 1970's Haifa and the Tel Aviv buildings that serve as his current dwellings. The construction on poles and the similarities shared by the homes evoke modern architecture's aspiration for a universalism devoid of local identity, specifically Le Corbusier's five points of modern architecture. Yet the fact that the buildings can be easily traced to an Israeli housing project neighbourhood attests to modern architecture's failure to realise its universal aspiration. Similarly to modern architecture, Weissman's installations too seem to aspire for a universal appearance, yet succumb to the power of concreteness.

Hebrew too makes the occasional appearance in these installations. *Behind the Fence*, 2003, one of Weissman's early installations, features a doghouse, in itself a scaled-down house topped by a triangular roof, a home for humans-turned-the stronghold of the beast, whose name stars over the entrance in childish letters: "Spitz". Spitz the dog himself is nowhere to be found, but his name and being are present in the enlarged, pointy pick-up sticks, the toy weapons used by the male figures for diversion, as well as in the triangular genitalia and pointy stilettos of their female counterparts. All these become aggressive, cultural and universal sexual characteristics, donned by adults who are trapped in children's physiques. Yet the "spitz" (Hebrew colloquial for sharp point) remains Hebrew, a decidedly Israel slang. The installation titled *Riding Lesson* features a structure inscribed with the hand-written, oh-so-Israeli name, "Yossi and Sons". Red trucks carrying a load of bones are deployed around the gallery floor, seemingly going in and out of the building. Under the Hebrew inscription, the red trucks, reminiscent of fire engines, are evocative of a certain Israeli emergency experience, and yet it is also a personal, specific address, and its alternative existence sparks the same tension between local and universal.

This very tension also plays out in the installation titled *Ground Floor*, which features a scaled-down, wine-coloured structure, inscribed with the name Haifa in Hebrew and Latin letters, with rounded arches and a railway truck passing through. The structure is modelled after Haifa's first railways station, built in the city's downtown during the early 1900's by the Ottoman rule

(today's Haifa East station, no longer in service). The structure has an Arabic architectonic design, including regal, rounded arches. Little bone-carrying boats, similarly to the emergency truck in *Riding Lesson*, cruise towards the structure. Thus Weissman combines the Haifa railway station with its nearby port, turning it into an architectonic hybrid of sorts. Here too you can find a local trauma, the trauma of building Haifa's downtown on the ruins of Arab homes, present in the mixed architectonic style. Extremely alien to Weissman's world as it may seem, it is this style, like the Hebrew inscriptions, that represents his home more than anything else.

A further reading suggests that the same tension between local and universal found in the installations is by no means played out between contradictions in term, but rather stands for a process of relative construction. That is, history repeats itself, patterns are being reproduced, and thus the national and local become universal and general. The universal is forever relative, forever existing in a concrete space, and thus the specific and national that make the occasional appearance in Weissman's works stem from a general humanist motivation, rather than being sparked by pure political impulse.

The concrete appears yet again in *Wind/Spirits* (2009), where for the first time in Weissman's corpus, the iconic image of the home features in a real-life 1:1 scale. The skeleton of a home, its contour lines made of bone sculptures, is positioned in an olive plantation. Locality is present in the Hebrew title of the work '*Ruchot*', which means in English 'winds', 'spirits' and 'ghosts'. This multiplicity of meanings is lost in translation. It is also present in the work's situation at a settlement that during the mid-1950's, turned from the Arab village of Ein Hawd to the Jewish artist village of Ein Hod. Moreover, the immaculate home, a square topped by a triangular roof, is made of bones, calling to mind the place's former residents and the previous incarnations of the land that it stands upon. Weissman added a couple of floor tiles to the structure, made of bones as well, over the exposed earth inside the home, just like those bone contour lines, as if the tiling work were interrupted midway through. The choice of bones as building materials means the home acquires personal attributes and is therefore a mortal too. The viewers enter the house of spirits. The house encompasses them, yet deprives them of the most essential function of any home: protection and hiding. On the contrary – it strips the viewer of his/her skin. The viewer thus undergoes a tactile, phenomenological experience.

In this sense, one can read the home in light of the phenomenological concept, *Genius Loci*, "the wisdom of the place", coined by architectural theoretician, Christian Norberg-Schultz.⁴ Originally, in the ancient Roman religion, the term signified a spirit of sorts, protecting the place, just like the ghosts in Weissman's house of spirits. Norberg-Schultz employed the concept to define architecture that sprouts organically from the earth on which it is founded, while the

matter of which it is made belongs to the place wherein it stands. It is only thus that the visitor can have a physical experience of the structure. Here too Weissman's home grows on the seam line between national local trauma on the one hand, and phenomenological universal experience on the other. This projection of the artist's subjective identity on the environments he builds, as well as the personalisation of the structure through the body organs, can also be read through another concept that subsists in the connection between man and his environment. Theodor Adorno, in an article dedicated to architecture, argues that the living being equates himself with his built surroundings by means of the mimetic impulse. Mimesis in this sense does not signify imitation down to the last detail, but rather a creative connection of subject and object, the same connection relied upon by artistic representation.⁵ A living being can "feel at home" by means of mimetically equating himself with the building in which he lives. The bone house offers an extreme illustration of this mimetic impulse.

The same bone house recurs in *Late Excavations* (2011), one of Weissman's most ambitious installations. It is displayed on the wall as a big relief, alongside another relief that traces the architectural plan of a vague structure, from the same bony contour lines. Here Weissman employs again the overhead view, for the first time incorporating numbers, as if to signify measures and calculations in architectural blueprints or rather archaeological dates. Similarly to the proportion that forms between architectural blueprint and the construction of the three-dimensional building, Weissman too operates in the gap between the blue print, relief and space. In the house of spirits that features in *Late Excavations*, for instance, life is breathed in as he breaches the relief's boundaries. One of the home's contour lines, the bone string, detaches from the wall and breaks into the gallery space. Once there, it joins a little ship, wherein two rows of teeth are lined, like a virtual open jaw cruising through the gallery's floor. Teeth double as the building blocks of the home's balcony and there, just like in the perfect children's painting, a little puppy stands. The cogwheels too, made of human teeth, are a constant theme in this exhibition, appearing to be in perpetual motion. It is actually the archaeological excavations, from the past, that give rise to movement, and a journey commences. *Late Excavations* sustains in fact a life after death – the remains come to life, allowing creation out of the post-trauma. While in Weissman's early works, a dissonance forms between the tempting colourfulness and the nightmarish content, here the tension is played out between a catastrophe and its restored movement.

As in many of Weissman's installations, here too a short animation footage is included, where the journey develops in a time-based medium. For the first time, the same human head, synonymous with the artist, emerges concretely and subjectively – displayed as a profile photograph of the artist's face itself. The artist builds himself a home, the same iconic house of spirits, while the

building blocks are bones issued from his ear. Cue the female figure – emitting teeth from her mouth and becoming a human cogwheel herself. The images and sounds alike are marked by a commanding tactility – the popping noises accompanying the emitted bones, as well as the noises of teeth emitted from the woman’s mouth. But these are in fact produced by the artist himself. The cogwheel that the woman formed around her initializes movement, prompting the man to set out of the home on a journey. He puts together a bony boat, which falls apart to become a tail of sorts, a disassembled body, and joins a community of tadpoles – fellow floating heads, facing a vague direction. It is later the man, rather than the women, that issues children from his mouth, and together they build a conventional cogwheel – a father, a mother and three children, boys. The building, the quest, the journey, the family – all these are created from within the body itself, from raw matter of bones and teeth. A mythical family structure is suggested here as a genesis story, an inherent physiological part of the human being.

This is the culmination of Weissman’s exploration of the man from the gender perspective. The video portrays the male construct of embarking on a journey versus settling down, domestication and starting a family. The house of spirits is no mere image, but rather a work of art made by Weissman, issued here from his mouth, organically, delivery-fashion. That is, delivery and home-building are mediated here as a male work of art, while the man is portrayed as an artist, creator, procreator. According to Levinas, the feminine aspect is essential for the existence of a home: “And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.”⁶ It could be that Weissman engages here with the feminine space within man himself, just as he has engaged in the past with the child-like space within the adult.

Similarly to previous video art by Weissman, the film is displayed in a loop. The loop is critical, as the short film represents a clear-cut narrative, with a beginning and end, while the loop renders the archetypal family-starting story a never-ending, nightmarish process, a continuing journey, where ongoing existential impulses stand in one’s way of reaching the proverbial rest and inheritance. The bones constructing the story compound the sense of loss, as the journey commences with death to begin with. The film’s title, *Home as Will and Representation*, highlights the artist’s present yearn for a classic home representation, a vacant construct, a mythical passion- turned-nightmare. In addition, the home, the same iconic home, is presented as an evolutionary machine, representation all the more reinforced by the endless loop. This is Le Corbusier’s *Machine d’Habitation* (habitation machine), where it is not only the home that seems to have been assembled on a conveyor belt; even the family inhabiting it is a product of industrial seriality.

This process, where the body itself becomes a focus of construction, an architectural eventuation, culminates in Weissman's latest installation, from 2015, paradoxically titled, *There is No Such Place*. Buildings and ladders towering above, willowy, with a figure that seems to have been pulled up and down to expose its skeleton, while the crumbling plaster reveals the sculpture's wooden construction. Inside a human head, a stairwell is carved and his facial features are replaced by the face of a horse, protruding as if it were taken over the inside of the human figure. A ladder towers from his ear and a track painted black, with a boat carrying a scaled-down figure inside, is launched thereof. Brown horses recur in Weissman's works. Like the boats and trucks, they too subsist in a space of male journey, an allegory of sort on a coming-of-age process. Another human sculpture stands in the centre of a square at a crossroads, as a monumental public sculpture. It is covered with a patchwork of quadrangles, as if it were a residential building too, replete with standard equidistant windows. All these elements are both linked together and unlinked. Bridges and tracks join them together, yet are interrupted abruptly. The up and down, the sea, land and air, are inverted here: a yellow apartment block, its foundation posts elongated, towers up to heaven, serving as a container for a large, airborne rock. Tall ladders, made of discordant beams, retracting gradually. The installation as a whole looks like a playground gone awry, a human luna park built in a space of magic realism.

The link between body and building in Weissman's last installation is reminiscent of works by Dutch sculptor Mark Manders. Manders' sculptures, mostly made of rough-hewn clay, ceramics or wood, combine together human figures, body parts and animals on the one hand, and furniture, tables, chairs and lanterns on the other. Many of his figure are halved by wooden boards or furniture and his sculptures as a whole are part of an ongoing series titled *Self Portrait as a Building*. In the connections formed between the different components in Manders' installations and in the corresponding development of objects and people in his works, a dream-like, surreal quality prevails. It is safe to say that Weissman, like Manders, strikes a delicate balance between surrealism and realism, though in a different manner. Weissman's sculptures, particularly those featuring in his latest project, call to mind surrealistic images where human bodies whirl inside drawers, tables, chairs and animals. But a surrealistic reading of his work may prove too reductive. Realistic staples are necessary if surrealism is to be generated. For reality to be challenged, reality itself must exist. On the scale of mimetic imitation, Manders' figures, reminiscent of Egyptian or classic Greek sculptures, are more realistic than Weissman's, indeed, and therefore they too can be diagnosed with surrealistic qualities. In Weissman, on the other hand, images exist in another sphere to begin with. They are suggestive, rather than realistic. Even when evoking reality, they are marked by a decidedly proportional or aesthetical distortion, as evident in all the other hybridisations he produces.

Weissman typically creates whole environments, where the viewer enters and walks around, though in fact watching them from above, as the artist's figures and structures mostly remain knee-high. That is, a clear proportional ratio is maintained between figures, structures and viewers. The link between body and architecture is set in a proportional system, as buildings and objects are after all made directly relative to human proportions – another mimetic equating of sorts, deeply set in our understanding of built environment from as early as Renaissance times. Yet in *There is No Such Place*, the non-existent place, normal proportions are distorted, while the mimetic impulse reaches an extreme: the figures and buildings receive the same size, the same representational translation. The body merges with the building, the track, the road and the staircase; man becomes a construction site. As soon as the home merges with its resident, the same separation cited by Levinas cannot persist, hence no functioning takes place. The home owner cannot set out to the world, as he is already inside it. Equating with still objects, with an environment, means turning still, coming to a full-stop. And indeed, the mimetic impulse incorporates within the death impulse as well. The bones image and archaeological theme reinforce this reading.

Nevertheless, it seems Weissman's latest installations have withdrawn altogether from a static, full-stop kind of state. In *Late Excavations*, the home and journey began from the body or from the archaeological tomb, of all places, while in *There is no Such Place* everything grows, towering up to heaven, and a perpetual motion is present in the tracks and flying ways, reminiscent of utopic architecture simulations. Here, the a-linear, aimless journey of the Weissmanian hero is already inherent in his body, his home, himself. He does not venture far out, but rather digs deep down, inside his distended head.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Infinity and Totality*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2011, p. 152.

² *Ibid*, p. 156.

³ *Ibid*, p. 153.

⁴ Christian, Norberg-Schultz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Rizzoli, New York, 1980.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Functionalism Today*, <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1412058.files/Week%201/AdornoFT.pdf>, p. 7.

⁶ Levinas, *Infinity and Totality*, 2011, p. 155.