

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the horse's tail is also used for making paintbrushes

Avi Lubin

translated by Safra Nimrod, October 2017

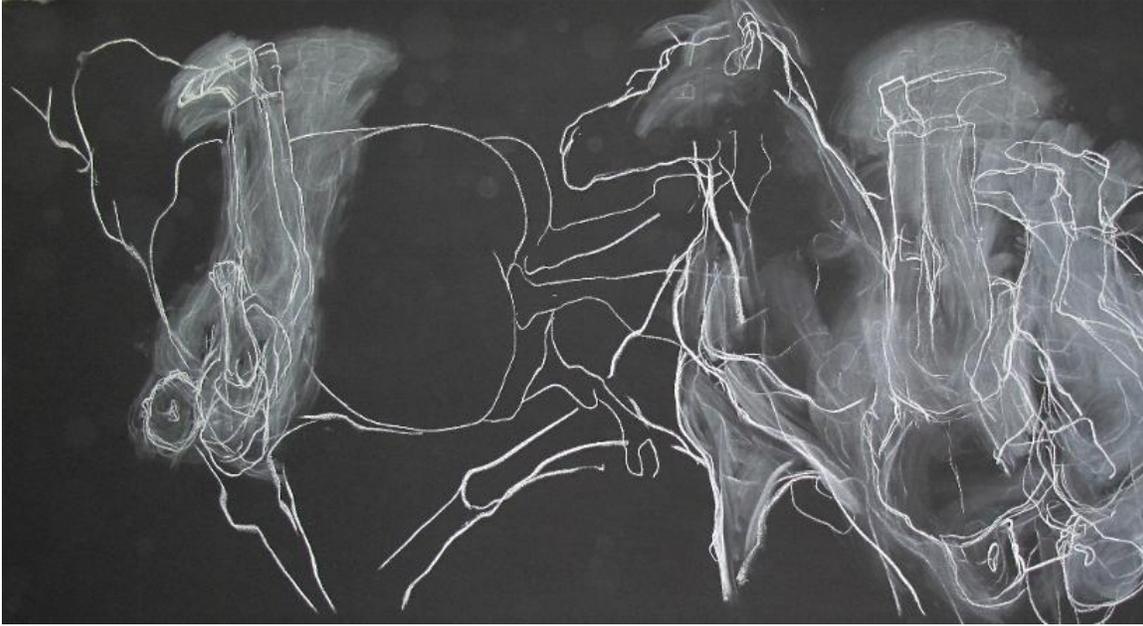
1.

A horse fell on the stairs." It was spurred upward at a dizzying speed, as if it were flying up the entire stairway in one or two leaps, sight unseen, and on the first platform up on the wall it suddenly stumbled and flipped backward." This line appears in the beginning of the story *A horse fell*, written by Tamar Getter in 2015, just before she started working on her show *Hēliotropion* (facing the sun). It is neither the first horse to appear in Getter's work nor the last. In fact, she has been preoccupied with horses for a long time. Already in 2012, five years before *Hēliotropion*, she showed the work *Horse's Tail* at the Art Institute Gallery of Oranim College, a site-specific work encompassing the entire space, in which she has painted kind of arena (or field), showing melded units of horse and upside-down rider doing shoulder-stands. The title of the work, *Horse's Tail* - and perhaps it is no coincidence that the horse's tail is also used for making paintbrushes – was, in fact, a huge painting/drawing, eight meters long, of a splendid, curved,



meandering, splitting horse's tail, painted with a broom and rags dipped in slightly whitened water. For this work Getter has watched numerous videos showing how Cossacks, on the backs of speeding horses, manage to lift their bodies into an upside-down position, like in a shoulder-stand, hanging from the horse's side, jack-knifing and slinking under its belly, up the other side and back into the saddle, racing the whole time. Getter sought to delve into this seconds-long episode to try to understand the particular composition of a rider doing such shoulder-stands while hanging on to a moving body. She made hundreds of fast drawings to figure out how to unite the two separate skeletal systems, the different musculatures, the two types of motion. In her investigation, her goal was not to learn how to draw horses "correctly." It was neither about



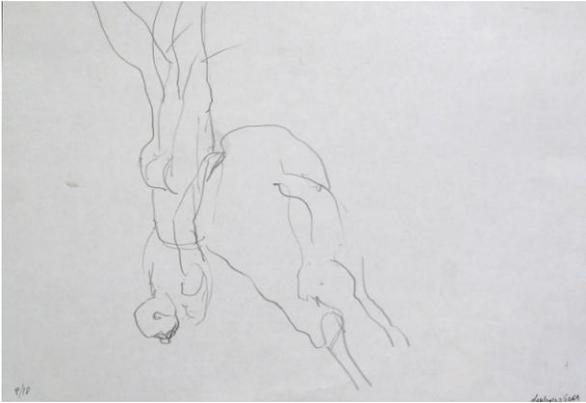


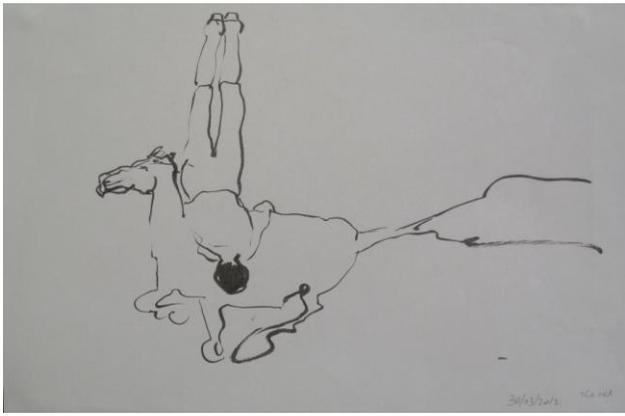
realism nor a poetic attempt to paint the iconic "horse-and-rider," but rather a move concerning issues of drawing and memory, drawing and body of the one who does it, drawing of an event; complex, fast, transient. Getter sought to "memorize" the joined bodies of the horse and upside-down rider until she gained full control, simplified it, and could execute her drawing in a fast-line manner, and also with her eyes covered.

The control she has been seeking would allow her to work out the unified bodies, the horse's and the rider's, by way of physical "internalization," as if by simulating touching, drawing from 'within' the event, ignoring the stunt effect of the acrobatic act. It meant to draw as if from the standpoint of the horse-and-rider, rather than that of a viewer, thus, to perform the movement of the drawing itself with spontaneity, "any which way," in her words, along with the errors, the wrong scale, the deviations, without erasing or correcting. It seems that these choices, together with the

giant tail and the comedy of the upside-down riders, allow her to work without being sucked into the remarkable, well-known symmetry of the horse that has preoccupied so many painters.

Getter has used images of horses before, also in her attempt to understand the making of art. For example, in one of her essays, she mentioned Dürer's *Chinese Vase*. She described Dürer as one who "draws like an Indian speeding through the Pampas, riding bareback, being one with his







horse."¹ At another time, in an interview with Yoni Livne, on the occasion of the publication of *Rogatka* (Slingshot),² her collection of short stories, she spoke of art as a wild, breathing thing, "like a horse racing in the wind."

The show *Hēliotropion* comes after the tail, the racing, the upside-down riders, and the fall on the stairs. Now it appears to have arrived at a turning point, to the horse's relaxation. For over two years Getter has investigated the way a horse rolls on its back, its relaxation-roll. Here too she began with videos, freezing instants of relaxation, those moments of freedom when the horse is rolling over and wallowing in the sand. She then made hundreds of drawings, using various implements, until she achieved perfect control of the motion and could draw the rolling horse in a fast line, with her eyes closed. Although the work has started with video images, soon one drawing led to the next, one series to another, until the original image mostly lost its validity. Some of the drawings were done with closed eyes and some from memory. For the show, in addition to the many drawings, Getter created a long strip-painting, like an imaginary orbit that hugs a rectangular structure and includes twelve imaginary clusters of horse, writing table, and sunflower (all on their 'backs'). Unlike the quick drawings, Getter's painting is fragmentary, slow, and deliberate. The horses – because of their size – are not drawn in a continuous line; it breaks up into segments. The tables and the sunflowers are done by dragging a squeegee through paint, stamping planks of wood with stencils, corks, and by sniping a length of cord dipped in dry pigment, a particularly long and slow process. These "painting stoppages," as Getter has often called them, created huge barriers of sorts, life and still-life mutations, on the imaginary orbit.

And yet it is hard to avoid the obvious question – why horses? Choosing a horse as a painting subject creates a challenge, perhaps even a stumbling block, because of the many associations it evokes from within art and without, especially when Getter seeks to address the formal aspect of painting, the fundamental question of the Beautiful, and to avoid poetic interpretations, myths, and pathos. Why then focus on this cultural icon, whose place in the history of art is so secure? In particular when Getter wants to start from point zero, to understand how to paint from the position of negation, Painting that accepts the critique of the death of Painting. The choice of a horse appears to be simultaneously understandable and illogical, raises an eyebrow, but is also self-evidencing and inevitable.

2.

Horses have been present in Western art from its early beginnings. The noble beast, with its remarkable speed, musculature, high spirits, and fancy tail appeared in pre-historic paintings in the Lascaux caves, in the Dordogne region in south-west France, and found later expression in Egyptian and Greek art. In the Middle Ages the status of the horse as a subject had decreased, because of the focus on religious themes and Christian symbolism, but during the Renaissance, the horse has regained its important position. The high point, which might also be the ultimate moment of crisis, is described in the story of Leonardo's horse:

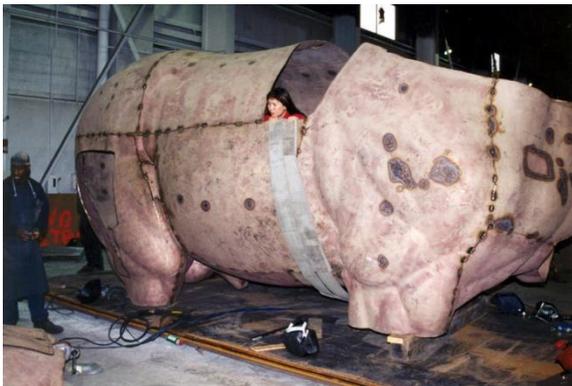
¹ Tamar Getter, Thoughts about Zur Kotzer, Ma'arav, September 1, 2008

² Published in 2014 as part of "Hama'abada" (the laboratory), a series of Israeli experimental literature, by Resling Publishing.

In 1492, after a decade of planning, Leonardo Da Vinci completed the preparations for the casting of a huge bronze equestrian statue, 7.3 meters tall, a memorial for Francesco Sforza, the father of Leonardo's patron, Duke Ludovico Sforza. It was to be the largest equestrian sculpture in the world, the horse to end all horse statues. There are numerous anatomical studies of horses in Leonardo's notebooks, made for this work. Drawings of horses' heads, hooves, and various angles and proportions of horses rearing on their hind legs. He even made a full-size clay model of the statue.

But the plans did not come to fruition. Following the French invasion of Milan, Sforza decided to use the bronze set aside for the statue (70 tons of it) to cast cannon instead, or perhaps it went to pay back his debt to the Duke of Ferrara. Later on, in 1499, invading French soldiers destroyed Leonardo's clay model. And that was the end of it. As with many other works, Leonardo did not complete the horse statue. Much has been written about his inability to complete works. Even Freud gave it substantial consideration in an essay about him, titled "Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood." However, it seems that the story of the unrealized statue has gained a special standing even among all other stories of Leonardo's unfinished works, acquiring a mythical aspect. In the Florentine gossip it was part of the on-going skirmish between Leonardo and Michelangelo (as told by a Florentine writer called Magliabecchiano):

"As Leonardo, accompanied by [his friend] Giovanni di Gavina, was passing the Spini Bank, near the church of Santa Trinità, several notables were assembled who were discussing a passage in Dante and seeing Leonardo, they asked him to come and explain it to them. At the same moment Michelangelo passed and, one of the crowd calling to him, Leonardo said: Michelangelo will be able to tell you what it means. To which Michelangelo, thinking this had been said to entrap him, replied: No, explain it yourself, horse-modeller that you are, who, unable to cast a statue in bronze, were forced to give up the attempt in shame. So saying, he turned his back on them and left. Leonardo remained silent and blushed at these words."³



But the story of this horse had a surprising second act. In 1978 Charles Dent, an American pilot and sculpture buff, came across an article describing the history of this horse. Dent decided to reconstruct the horse and donate it to the citizens of Milan. He founded an association, raised large funds, and invited Nina Akamu, a Japanese-American sculptor, to re-create Leonardo's horse. Akamu studied Leonardo's drawings and techniques, as well as other equestrian statues of that period. After twenty years and

endless drafts and preliminary models, when Dent was no longer among the living, finally, in 1999, five hundred years after the French invasion of Milan that had caused the destruction of the clay model, *Leonardo's Horse* was inaugurated in Milan's Hippodrome. As in Leonardo's design, the sculpture was 7.3 meters tall. It stood on a Carrara marble platform resting on a wide granite base.

³ There is only this story from an anonymous manuscript called the *Codice Magliabecchiano*, quoted in *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Oxford University Press, 1952, trans. Irma A. Richter, p.356



Leonardo's notes were not systematic, and there were no sketches or exact drawings showing his design. Akamu did not realize his vision or acted on his instructions; rather, she created a sculpture that is more an homage than a recreation of the original, regardless of the tourists flocking to see *Leonardo's Horse* and the fact that one of its numerous copies stands not too far from the Da Vinci Museum in his hometown. More importantly, perhaps the difficulty to sculpt the ultimate horse is

more primary. In this sense the technical problems that had prevented Leonardo from completing the statue dwarf in the face of the fundamental problem – the problem of the Beautiful, which the study of aesthetics has been fretting over for hundreds of years. This problem has been



formulated most accurately only three hundred years after Leonardo, in Kant's *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* following the scientific revolution and after the demise of the image of the universe as a cosmos and of art as a microcosmos, as an illustration, or a model of the great cosmic harmony. In the Old World, the horse's familiar and impressive symmetry is a self-evident object. In the world after Kant's *Critique*, it is not. And what about Leonardo? Perhaps he had understood that the ultimate equestrian statue might not be the most

splendid, accurate, symmetrical presentation of a horse. Perhaps (as with Getter) the study of the horse's anatomy and motion were not intended to enable the creation of a "correct" horse, but to

"learn to look," which was what he had demanded of art.



Either way, between *Leonardo's Horse* and Getter's horses some have still insisted on the horse as the object of the artwork, even though in modern art, and maybe even more so in contemporary art, horses were losing their position. To a certain extent, this was because technology had affected their centrality in

the life of people, and in a deeper sense it was a direct consequence of the changing perception of the role of art, of the artistic act. Yet years after *Leonardo's Horse* there had still been artists who wanted to deal with this difficulty, with the problem of the Beautiful, while insisting on the horse. Delacroix, for example, had done so when he painted *Horse Frightened by Lightning*, or *Horse*

Being Attacked and Eaten by a Tiger. In the studies done for the work *Lion Attacking Horse*, he drew defeated, collapsing, devastated horses. In Picasso's *Guernica*, too, the horse is the one opening its mouth in a silent scream, the ultimate representative of the horror (in might be interesting to compare it with Picasso's early *Boy Leading Horse* from 1906).

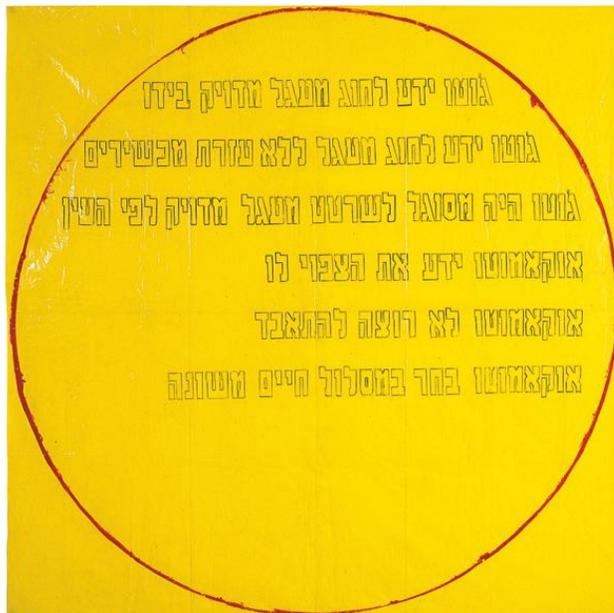
Delacroix and Picasso elaborated different attitudes with respect to the idea of the Beautiful, and it seemed they could not have done otherwise, once its conception in terms of harmony and symmetry had collapsed, and as it had been recognized that it was no longer possible to formulate consensual, universal rules to address it.

In this sense, Getter horse paintings relate to this modern tradition. In the present show - much like in the Delacroix or Picasso examples - it is indeed the horse image by which she posits this question. It is that horse whose older history in regard to the question of the Beautiful, the pre-Kantian era, the time before the scientific revolution, was so profoundly significant, but it is important to understand Getter's move not only within this partial story of modern and contemporary horse paintings but by taking into consideration her large body of work over many years.

3.

Already in her early work Getter has pointed out the inability to maintain harmony between the modernist program and the vernacular of local images. The general problem of the Beautiful is augmented by the fact that Israel is a place of modernity and innovation, with no history and no tradition of art history.

In 1975, in one of the *Tel-Hai Cycle* works (created between 1974-1978) Getter set side by side

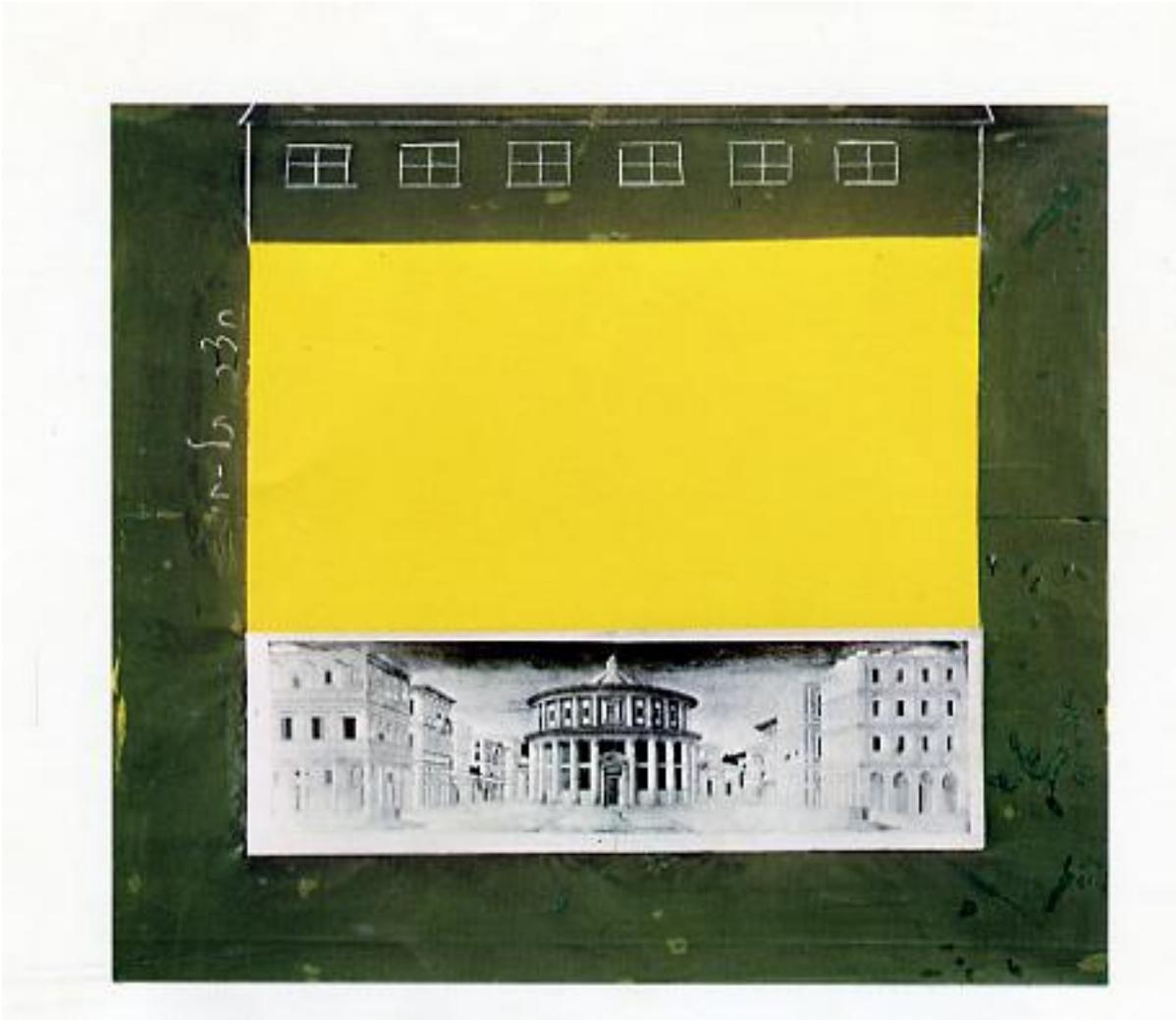


the story of the Renaissance artist Giotto, who allegedly could draw a perfect circle (as told in Vasari's *Lives of The Artists*), and the story of the terrorist Kōzō Okamoto, the head of the group that executed the terrorist attack at Ben Gurion Airport in 1972. She drew a perfect circle, in red over a yellow vinyl square, and in it wrote the words:

*Giotto knew how to round a circle freehand
Giotto knew how to round a circle without tools
Giotto knew how to round a circle by the eye
Okamoto knew what awaited him
Okamoto does not want to kill himself
Okamoto chose a weird walk of life*

Getter physically placed a Renaissance sensibility next to a wished-for perfection of the terrorist act, the rational and the grotesque, to quote Naomi Aviv in the catalog for *GO 2*— the comprehensive Getter exhibition she curated at the Tel Aviv Museum in 2010. In another work from the *Tel Hai Cycle* Getter associated the Tel Hai yard with the linear

perspective and *View of the Ideal City* (circa 1470), previously attributed to Piero della Francesca. Although the story of Tel Hai holds a central place in the Zionist ethos of heroism, the courtyard, and the surrounding buildings have never been given the status of an Image in Israeli society. The total neutrality of the courtyard in the collective memory and its perfect symmetry allowed Getter to turn the focus on it into a perspective issue, pushed aside and even severed from



the combat legend and the myth of Trumpeldor. Still, the decision to show it adjacent to the *Ideal City*, with only a yellow rectangle separating the two, set off the distance between the symmetry of the Renaissance geometric perspective painting and that of her frontal rendering of the building and the yard of Tel Hai, between utopia and catastrophe.

Nevertheless, Getter's recognition of the distance between Renaissance Europe, with its peaks of perspective discoveries and notions of ideal cities, and the local reality did not try to create hierarchy and to assert, as had often been claimed in the 1970s art discourse, that the local ("here") is "empty" or "insignificant" compared to "there." On the contrary, Getter wanted to examine the complexity of the relationship between "here" and "there." In this spirit, in 1978, as



part of that same cycle, she drew a very large head, slanted, its eyes closed, above a chalk scheme of Tel Hai yard. This figure was based on one of the four sleeping guards in Piero della Francesca's painting *The Resurrection of Christ*, from 1463. With *her* sleeping guard, Getter revisited a seminal moment in the history of art, which raised questions about perspective that reached beyond the problem of foreshortening. In a conversation with Naomi Aviv, Getter mentioned the Christian appropriation project of revealing and re-writing Old Testament stories and theological tenets, the way it is manifested in the response of della Francesca's work to the Jewish precept "Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." Thus, a Christian painter appropriates Jewish theology and Getter, an Israeli artist, re-appropriates from the Christian painting.⁴

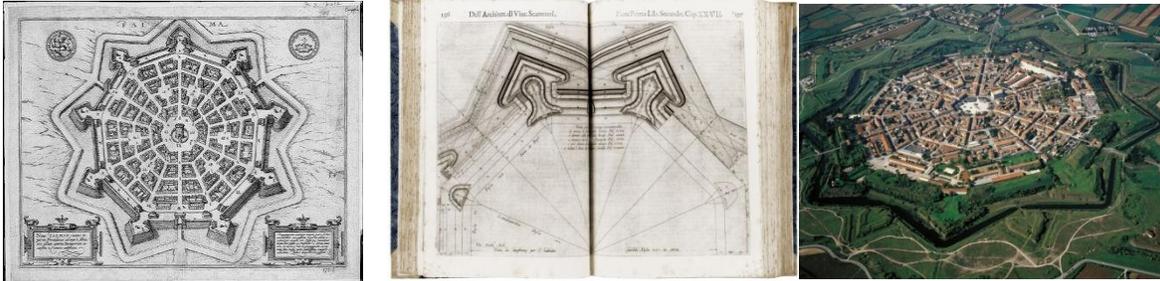
This insight is very significant for Getter's extensive body of work. For instance, in her 1993 installation in Strasbourg, *Susanna's Cities*, she drew on one wall a linear scheme of the star-shaped city Palma Nova, after the planimetric drawings by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1552-1616) for an Ideal City (which was built later in Northern Italy), and on the adjacent wall, a letter written in chalk, its lines 11 meters long. In the letter, the narrator, named Suzanna, tells about a stormy romance she is having with a new immigrant from Georgia, who hates the local Israeli climate and landscape and is planning to emigrate to America. Getter addressed a symmetrical drawing dealing with a fantasy of an ideal city once again in her installation *Boulevard Central* (2002), based on the 1920 *Nordau*



Garden-City, by the architect Alexander Baerwald. Getter extracted from this scheme the central boulevard of that imaginary city, and drew it seven times on the wall in chalk; one of these was sniped in detail with the mason plummet she often uses. The other boulevards she drew with her eyes shut after she "bodily" memorized the extreme symmetry of Baerwald's boulevard. At the bottom of each boulevard, she added a drawing of a feminine torso whose throat is filled with a

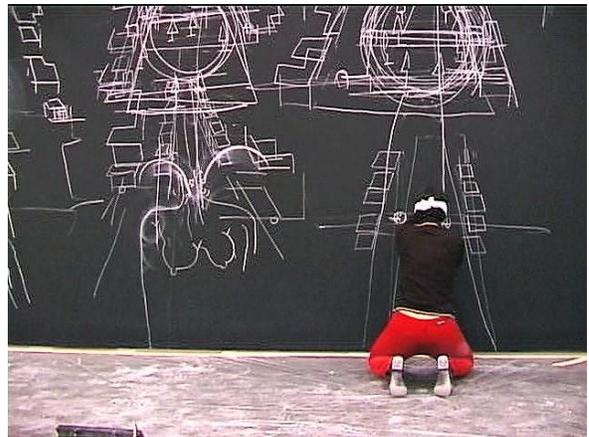
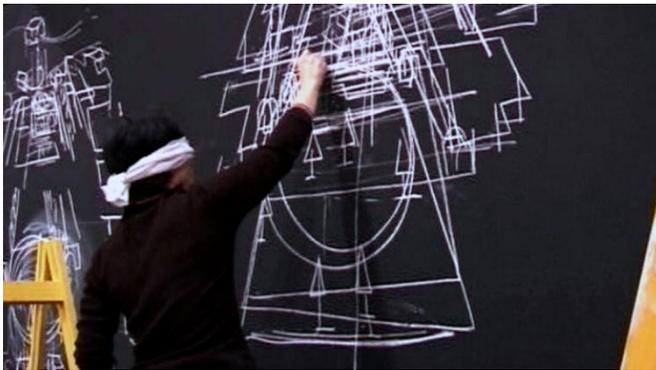
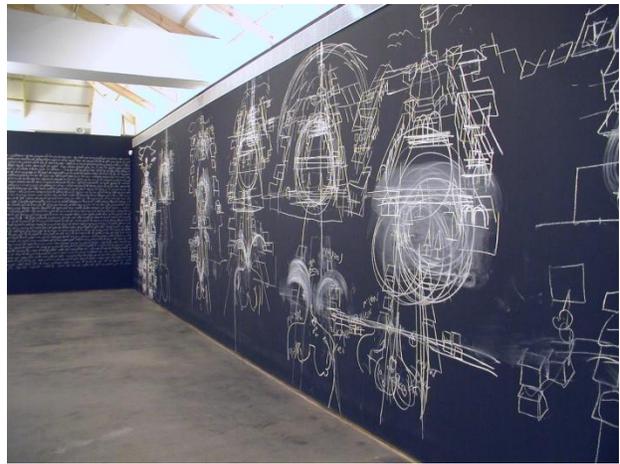
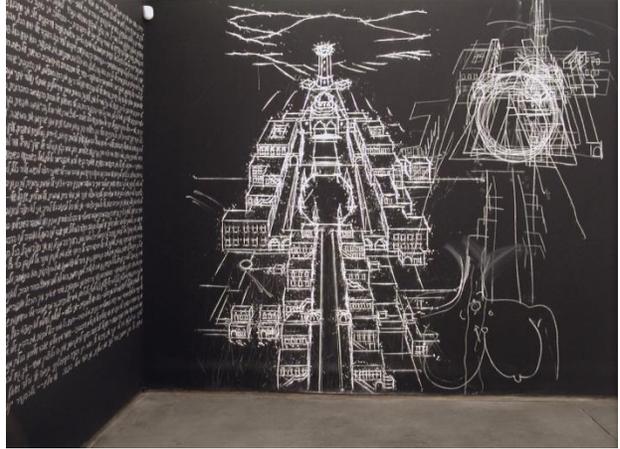
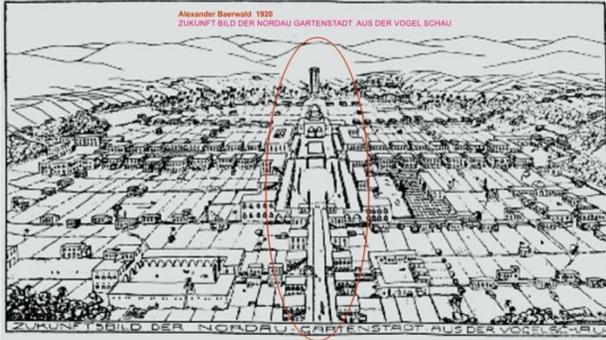
⁴ This conversation is recorded in Aviv's essay in the GO2 catalogue, *Tamar Getter, GO 2/Works 1974-2010*, (Tel Aviv Museum of Art), page 22

dismembered watch, a detail related to a news story about a complicated operation to remove parts of a watch from the throat of a woman who had been injured in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. Again, a complex encounter between the rational and the grotesque, the utopian and the catastrophic, the ideal and the local.



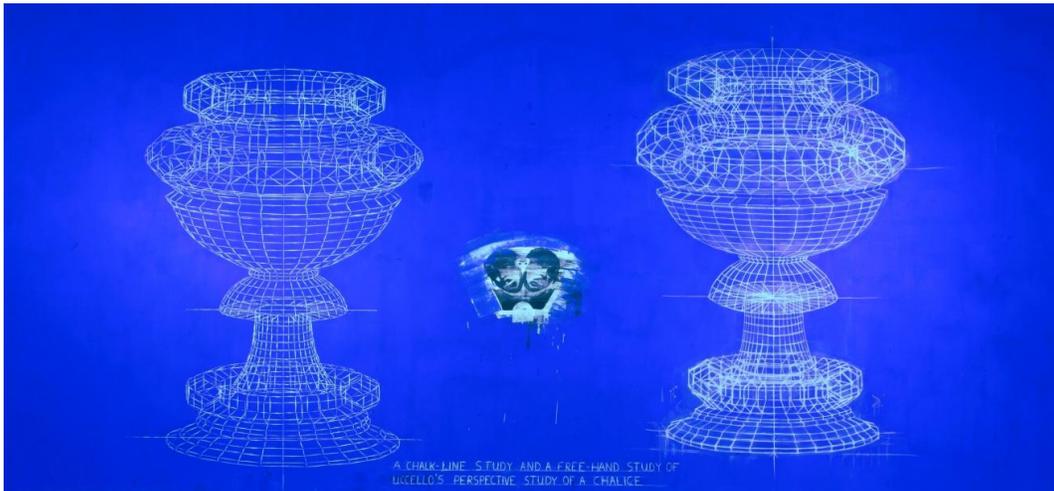
Getter's art inhabits neither the post-modern sensuality, nor the modern intellectualism, the local, or the universal, but blends all of these together. Kant called it the ability to think the particular in relation to the universal.⁵ The object for him is not a particular example of something universal, but an exemplary case – a particular that rests in its particularity, revealing from within its particularity that which is the Universal, and could not be defined otherwise (For instance, freedom is like a horse rolling on its back). For Kant, aesthetic objects are characterized by a lack of purposiveness, or more precisely, by "purposiveness without a purpose. According to this approach, the judgment of beauty cannot be based on *a priori* ideas and principles or the idea of the Good; consequently, it cannot be subject

⁵See the introduction by Sandrovitch and Friedlander to *The Art of Judging – Beauty, Sublimity and Purposiveness* in Kant's *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, eds. Yaron Sandrovitch and Eli Friedlander (Mif'alim Universitaim, 1999), p.1 6



solely to an individual's sensual pleasure. In fact, when we judge an object as "beautiful," we expect others to agree with our judgment.

In the work *Double Monster*, which was shown in Tokyo in 1996, Getter drew two versions of Paolo Uccello's iconic *Perspective Study of a Chalice* – a small, highly intricate drawing of a symmetrical structure on paper: one chalice, (floor to ceiling in size) executed by her assistants, was based on computerized model ,of Uccello's study, sniped at the wall with the plummet; the other one (also floor to ceiling) was drawn freehand in chalk, Getter's own body serving as its sole device for measuring and scale. The first chalice is precise, calculated, free of erasures. The other is full of deletions and corrections - it is in fact *made* of errors, the traces of the freehand work. Getter found the freehand, imprecise, and asymmetrical chalice to be more beautiful, more sublime.



4.

In the current show, Getter not only faces the challenge of the horse figure, as discussed in Part 1, but she also creates a synthetic triangular structure holding imaginary clusters comprising horse, writing table, and sunflower (all flipped on their 'backs'). The clusters and the set of internal rules Getter has imposed on them create a regularity of sorts, or an order. But the objective remains obscure. Getter creates a strict, organized composition, but a sense of order is evaded.

From the many Getter yards of Tel Hai to *Hēliotropion*, Getter's work is preoccupied with the question of the Beautiful. She challenges herself when she picks the objects deeply rooted in art's history (Uccello's Chalice, the Ideal city, horses), and at the same time places stumbling blocks in her viewers' path, raising questions that force them to apply aesthetic judgment. Where does beauty reside, in the perfectly symmetrical Chalice or the freehand, imperfect one? Is there a purpose to the Ideal City designs? And what about the *Tel Hai Yard*? Is Giotto's perfect circle the embodiment of the Beautiful? And Kōzō Okamoto's terrorist act, was it done for a purpose? Does an image become beautiful because of the story behind it, a watch removed from the throat of a woman injured in a terrorist attack? And what about the *Tel Hai Yard* without battle stories and Trumpeldor's myth?