

LOS ANGELES

Shulamit Nazarian

REUVEN ISRAEL

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

Consisting of simple, graphic shapes, the minimal sculptures of Israel-born, Brooklyn-based artist Reuven Israel accommodate rich references and layered associations. In an exhibition titled “As Above, So Below,” Israel’s latest works, shown at Shulamit Nazarian gallery, resemble totem poles, each comprised of a geometric base that anchors a skyward-pointing rod. The title also references the mystical belief that Jerusalem was created as a mirror image of its heavenly counterpart. Amusing and colorful, the sculptures possess an unexpected art historical rigor.

At first glance, the slick, seamless finishes of Israel’s creations resemble plastic or steel. In a manner that would have pleased Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd, Israel’s materials convincingly look like machine-manufactured adornments. However, aside from the copper-coated steel rods in his creations, the pieces are completely hand-hewn. Israel assiduously sands, polishes and spray-paints medium density fiberboard (MDF)—his material of choice since 2007 for its lightweight and pliant, chameleonic qualities. Since this was Israel’s first show in Los Angeles, it was impossible to avoid comparisons between his art and creations by 1960s Los Angeles finish fetish artists such as John McCracken, Larry Bell and De Wain Valentine, whose innovation were an aesthetic movement obsessed with painstakingly pristine surfaces.

With its planked base and color choices, *Black and Blue* (2016) is more than Israel’s titular homage to McCracken’s leaning sculptures, *Black Plank* (1972) and *Blue Plank* (1969). The two artists share an affinity with the supernatural. McCracken frequently spoke of UFOs, and in a 1998 interview with *Art in America* magazine, he decoded his planks as “a bridge between the two worlds” of physical and mental space. Similarly, Israel strives for his creations to be intermediaries between the tangible and the conceptual realms. With their bright colors and bold structures, the pieces have an undeniable presence, yet the shapes are just elusive enough to conjure a multitude of unlikely or random references—ancient pottery, circus props, even ornithology. In particular, the disc-like finials in Israel’s sculptures evoke something otherworldly, perhaps outer space, spaceships or heavenly Jerusalem.

Manmade structures, especially those built for religious worship, influence Israel’s designs. *At First Blush* (2016) echoes architectural forms found in the City of Peace. The sculpture’s base swells to mimic the Dome of the Rock’s gold-plated roof. Layers of unassuming, mundane MDF are visible under the clear finish applied by Israel, though the highly lacquered sheen almost rivals the Dome’s golden glow under the sublimest sunset. Finished with bobbles at their

tops, *Green* (2016) and *Red Head* (2015) take their cues from other sacred structural features like minarets, columns and forms found in mosques and churches.

Though still utilizing the vertical copper rod, two of Israel’s newest sculptures are much flatter. The MDF base of *White Collar* (2016) fans out across the floor; the artist’s material trickery leads us to think it is the outcome of fitting a dozen or more shards together, when in actuality it is a single expansive sheet of MDF that has been carved and meticulously painted to look otherwise. *Red Neck* (2016) features a large rectangular board painted in shades of deep purple and red, with the copper rod impaling it like an oversized hors d’oeuvre. This whimsical association would surely be welcomed by Israel, who states in the exhibition catalog, “What is important—and what I want my sculptures to create—is a space for fantasy, for imagination.”

Yet for all their playfulness, the sculptor also imbues his totemic creations with compelling canonical references. The striking shard of black in *White Collar* is uncannily reminiscent of Franz Kline’s strident, gestural brushstrokes. The shades of eggplant and scarlet in *Red Neck* radiate a subtle tension, bringing to mind Mark Rothko’s use of color in his many Color Field works. With myriad, dense connotations, Israel has created a rich and diverse lexicon within his pared-down towers. “As Above, So Below” seems to take on yet another meaning, one that references the creativity of both the artist and the viewer: the sky and the mind are the only limits for Israel’s sculptural creations.

JENNIFER S. LI

REUVEN ISRAEL

*Red Neck*

2016

Copper-coated steel rod and painted

MDF, 204.5 x 167 x 120 cm.

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Courtesy Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

