

Raw and Cooked – Tasting Offer

Ruti Direktor

The pair "raw and cooked" was borrowed from French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who studied Native-American mythology. His studies were published in the 1960s under the umbrella title, *Mythologiques*, and the first of the four volumes was entitled *The Raw and the Cooked*.^{*} The book focuses on myths pertaining to hunting and cooking, and the major insight arising from it is the perception of the transition from raw food to cooked food as a symbolic transition from nature to culture, as a formative phase toward civilization.

Among the many, intricate details comprising Native American myths, one of the most surprising is that man learned the secrets of fire and meat roasting from the wild jaguar. It was only then, we learn, once man has appropriated this knowledge, that the customary division formed: raw food is identified with animals or an underdeveloped tribal civilization, a culture of hunting and gathering, whereas civilized human beings cook their food.

In recent decades, however, the status of the raw and the cooked has been undermined as binary concepts contrasting the wild and the domesticated: the popularity of raw food in the new urban culinary culture has violated stigmas and dissolved prejudice. The new raw (sushi of sorts, raw fish, carpaccio...) is a challenging, sophisticated, trendy raw, requiring a highly-refined, up-to-date palate. The new, minimalist raw offers the diner a new experience in flavor and a new aesthetics. The new raw is an adventure for experienced trekkers. And already at this point, a pause is called for: are we still discussing food?

The exhibition whose title has been extracted from the kitchen, sets out to serve the terms "raw" and "cooked" as a proposal for art observation. It strives to isolate qualities of raw and cooked in art – to isolate, identify and characterize – only to later undermine them and reveal how the raw merges with the cooked, as expected in contemporary manifestations of art that reject dialectic thought patterns. But even if the symbolical dichotomy introduced by Lévi-Strauss between raw and cooked seems far less hermetic today, their beauty nevertheless remains intact and their metaphorical nature still tempts us to shift them to other fields; to examine them in relation to the art world, and see where such a move leads: to speak in culinary terms while observing art.

In art jargon the term "raw art" is usually mentioned in one breath with two others: art brut and outsider art. All three terms refer to art created by individuals who do not necessarily define themselves as artists, or by people who create art outside an artistic frame. The raw to which the current exhibition is oriented, on the other hand, refers to art whose identity and creators are unmistakable. It is a self-conscious raw, embodied in art objects in a manner that may be described as unpolished, crude and unprocessed, and certainly also uncooked. Yet its very existence as a wise, conscious raw – as distinct from "raw art" – makes it clear that the terms must now be slightly shifted from the places where they were fixed, and juxtaposed as a pair of opposites whose opposition indeed defines artistic qualities, yet gradually dissolves and expires; like any binary pair whose definitions dissolve vis-à-vis a changing, fluid (artistic, but not only) reality.

An ostensibly crude presence, unprocessed aesthetics, not done and not baked, as it were – the emphasis of the ostensibility, the "as-it-wereness," indicates that things are more complex than first meets the eye. The rawest – a gouache painting by Orna Bromberg, for example, which appears entirely child-like – clings to the raw with full awareness. The qualities of the raw – unmediatedness, primitivism, crudeness – are the qualities to which the painting strives in a desire to shed off layers of knowledge and "cultivation," and start from scratch, so to speak, in order to touch upon the nucleus of painting, upon the core of things, and bring the most brittle and profound to the surface. The artistic process of peeling cultural layers demands an effort of the viewer, in turn: to appreciate the plainest is not at all a simple observation task, and the manifestations of the "raw" are often embodied by minimalist, frugal means, devoid of any visible artistic intervention. In art, as in the culinary context, it takes a refined and skilled palate, or possibly curiosity and readiness for new experiences, to identify and value the unique qualities of the raw.

While the artistic raw confronts its viewers with a challenging viewing bar, in other respects the raw seems to characterize an aesthetics that has readily become naturalized in the taste of the art community – the modernist in general, and the Israeli in particular: clear preference for art that evades an all too artistic appearance, a tendency to prefer the wild and ostensibly childlike, a distinctive appreciation for the hesitant and unraveled. In the landscape of Israeli art, it is cooked art that appears deviant. The well-done may be perceived almost immediately as a foreign taste, imported aesthetics. As American, rather than local. Thus, for example, the well-done objects by Reuven Israel – polished and foppish, in industrial ice-cream colors – exemplify an atypical local artistic presence; cooked through lengthy boiling. At first sight they seem to have come off a production line. Later it turns out that their real well-doneness lies in their masquerade quality: the industrial appearance conceals cheap, processed wood and prolonged manual labor.

Beyond all these, the concepts raw and cooked strive to generate reflexivity with regard to the exhibition itself – (yet another) group exhibition that sets out to propose a prism for observation. They wink at its very essence as (yet another) group exhibition that takes such and such components – this time, five – mixes them this way or another, sprinkles them with this or that spice, trying to concoct a new dish. In our culinary context, the called-for images with regard to a thematic group exhibition will be salad or casserole. Just as any chef concocts his own stew, with his own personal touches, so the curatorial act emerges as an act of gathering and mixing, the exhibition emerges as a totality striving to be more than the sum of its constituent elements, and the viewing experience emerges as a type of gestalt. In its extreme raw state an exhibition will let its participating artists be presented as they are, unstirred; in its more cooked state – an exhibition will strive to fuse its ingredients into a whole that will speak for itself.

Five Instances

The five artists participating in the exhibition present a wide spectrum of raw and cooked – through all degrees of fluidity and liquidness extending in between them. The schematic division will distinguish Orna Bromberg's paintings and Barak Ravitz's videos and objects as examples of art with "raw" qualities, from more differentiated cases of "well-done" art – Tal Shochat's processed, staged photographs, and their particular hanging mode; Reuven Israel's scrupulously-processed sculptural objects; and Sima Meir's Formica plates with the embroidery patterns meticulously painted in marker. Schematic, as aforesaid. Later it will turn out that the cleanliness of the binary pair has already been soiled by mid-tones; the qualities in their pure state have been diluted with antithetical traits.

Still and all, as an initial identification phase, the binary opposition is helpful. The works by **Barak Ravitz** – a young artist, a recent graduate of the Midrasha School of Art – convey a sense of quivering, fluttering, "not done" art materials. In his videos he employs music as a ready-made, opting for popular music of sorts: Shlomo Artzi's *Ballad of Baruch Jemili*, an American country song about New Orleans (familiar to the Israeli ear through Yehoram Gaon's Hebrew version, "Shalom Lakh Eretz Nehederet"), and a Eurovision song in French. The films in which he performs and sings in person call to mind home videos or video-clips.

In all these cases, Ravitz's intervention is minimal: it appears as though he hardly does anything we may call "artistic." An old clip from the Eurovision Song Contest 1977 (before Ravitz was even born...) is screened on a monitor, featuring French singer Marie Myriam, singing *L'oiseau et l'enfant* ("The Bird and the Child"), the winning song for that year. Ravitz's barely-felt touch amounts to an arrow, pointing at the Israeli flag within a rotating structure of flags situated on stage. Another monitor features a clip of the same song, in the same rendition, only this time Marie Myriam is seen standing in a Paris square, singing to an audience standing around her in a circle. In this instance, the diffident intervention takes the form of blue and red flickers of police cars and an ambulance emerging every now and then at the bottom of the picture. So diffident, that until our attention is explicitly drawn to it, it is doubtful whether one notices it at all, or whether one realizes that the intermittently flickering lights are not part of the original clip. Once our attention has been drawn, the frailest of means and the most delicate of touches acquire the full meaning of their barely-existent presence. The police and ambulance lights convey messages of imminent dread, a fear of something

threatening spoils Marie Myriam's sweet smiles, with the rose in her hand and the amiable Parisian audience around her. "Love is you, love is me," she sings, "The bird is you, the child is me." The song itself is the epitome of formulaic sweetness: love, war, nostalgia. But also, if one is willing to take them seriously, these are words that strive for the simplest essences: love, you, me, bird, child.

Barak Ravitz's objects possess a similar quality to the videos. For example: a diagonal line, comprised of white electrical sockets plugged into one another, or a checkered tea towel covering a fluorescent lamp, or cardboard disassembled from packages of water skis, installed next to one another, or a chain made of paper flags bearing the inscription "[HaTahbivada](#)" (=The Hobbyad).

Raw. Barely processed. The processing or manipulation strives to assimilate in that which is anyway existent. Ravitz attests to his art work as an act of hunting. His gathering and hunting fields are the Internet, television, radio, the mall or the street. In these loci he lies in wait for the right prey, and then attacks it, leaving it virtually raw, with minimal touches. His main artistic activity focuses on prowling and gathering the particular, exact thing, its very isolation from the context in which it transpires and shifting it to the art world. Gathering, shifting, replication, signification, soft touch, prolonged gaze – a process that may be defined as devoid of thermal intervention, as Aharoni defines the difference between raw and cooked and yet, the result is art. The chunk of hunted prey is, in itself, a highly processed cultural product: a Eurovision song, traces of consumer goods. But once it has been wholly plucked from its context and shifted to the arena of artistic objects, it becomes a raw entity.

Orna Bromberg's paintings offer a very different type of raw: they are colorful, overflowing, dense and congested. Their "raw" quality is conveyed both by the "how" – a painting technique and style identified with children's drawings, and by the "what" – a recurring reservoir of images that includes little girls, crowns and flowers, butterflies, birds, trees, and clowns. The painting preserves the childlike touch – repeated painterly schemes, densely filling the painting surface, use of vivid colors and juxtaposition of ostensibly incongruent colors: red next to orange, orange next to pink. For many years Bromberg painted in pastels on large sheets of paper. In the last year she has reverted to gouache. The return to gouache is, for her, a return to a more primal, less "artistic" phase of painting. The paradox is that the appearance of her gouache paintings indeed creates the illusion of primitivism and crudeness; on the other hand, one cannot ignore the transparent qualities of the gouache layers, the proficient application of the paint, the psychological compactness, great beauty alongside distress and horror. For a moment one may become confused: is it a child's drawing or a Matisse? Raw or pretending to be raw? The confusion is part of the complexity of the viewing experience, and the raw cannot be other than a painterly tactic. Successful, convincing, authentic; and involving great effort intended to strip the painting of layers of knowledge, mannerism, convention, do's and don'ts. The great effort and the great daring involve its presentation bare, as it is: gouache on paper, a girl with a crown, flower and bird, in its initial form, as painting once was, when each of us held a paintbrush for the first time. The bird is you, the girl is me.

Tal Shochat's photographs feature similar motifs: women, flowers, trees, birds. Their quality, however, is as cooked and processed as possible. The photographs are meticulously staged; the figures, location, colors, backdrop, composition – everything is artificial and domesticated. The trees are photographed in their natural environment, but a studio set is erected around them, and the background of colorful fabrics is stretched behind them. Thus they are forthwith bereft of their innocence, becoming décor. Their naturalness is denied, and they undergo a process of domestication and enculturation. The naked women depicted by Shochat ostensibly perpetuate their role in the age-old equation woman=nature. They become *nature morte*: vegetal patterns are sketched on the body of one of the photographed women, rendering her an extension of the Persian carpet behind her. Another woman lies on her back on a bench, a bird, which turns out to be stuffed, hovers over her. Floral print fabric is cut into narrow strips and printed in five stories, one above the other – its "natural" quality (which is, at any event, artificial) is expropriated. Flower vases are shot with utmost drama and sensuality, the petals are scattered with deliberate observance. But since the nature is artificial as well – a combination of effects and "authenticity" scraps – the radicalization of the unnaturalness undermines the aforementioned equation, eliminating it. Nature is culture, and culture is

nature, and the woman refuses to yield to definitions. Each element in the photographs is extracted from its natural setting, becoming an element in a new, suggestive array that conceals its true nature.

True? In the current exhibition Shochat decided to concoct a new installation from existing photographs: she gathered photographs she has created in recent years, printed them in relatively small formats, and hung them in a dense composition on the wall. Each photograph is framed, becoming a jewel of sorts, or, if you will – a chocolate, a delicacy; together they look like a box of pralines: appetizing, luring, promising a wealth of flavors. Indian cuisine, Shochat's favorite, may offer another angle – a profusion of spices and flavors, all concocted together to the point of the loss of senses; until the ingredients cannot be told apart.

Just as an ordinary diner cannot identify the ingredients in a good casserole, so Sima Meir's embroideries or Reuven Israel's perfectly finished, smooth objects do not surrender their true essence – Xs drawn in permanent marker on Formica (Meir), persevering manual processing of MDF coated with industrial paints (Israel). The existence of any "real" whatsoever is questionable.

Reuven Israel's sculptures offer "cookedness" as a pretext for the art work itself; cookedness as masquerade, disguise, pretense and playfulness. Observation of the colorful, enigmatic objects calls to mind furniture pieces or architectural details in food colors. Some are made of MDF (an industrial material made of compressed wood particles) covered with automobile or domestic paints. The final effect is deceiving: they appear like industrial design items with an unnatural finish, while in fact they are the product of diligent, assiduous handiwork; each sculpture is a one-off item. They are alluring, but also repugnant or suspicious: each touch may interfere with the perfection of the surface. The food coloring coloration appears more poisonous than enticing. Each sculpture maintains an attraction-alienation flirtation with the viewer: a gate-like sculpture in pastel hues of grayish green, for example, perplexes the viewer with the enigmatic title *P.D.T.*, whose interpretation – Please Don't Touch – only generates further alienation. Especially elusive are the objects which appear as if they are made of corrugated asbestos. In fact, it is thick cardboard dipped in water that has undergone a certain hardening process, until it incarnated into the appearance of corrugated asbestos. As long as you don't touch it, it is hard to believe this is not genuine asbestos. On the other hand, who wants to touch a material reputed for its hazardousness? The process is cyclical: a complex process of masquerade whose results are so convincing, that at its termination the material appears like a ready-made.

And back to Lévi-Strauss: in the stories about the discovery of fire, as recounted in the volume *The Raw and the Cooked*, the young Indian returns from the jaguar with roast meat, burning embers, bow and arrows. The jaguar's wife is human, and some versions emphasize that she excelled in spinning. The context is clear: spinning is one of the acquired civilizational skills.

Sima Meir's works are linked with this basic female skill of needlework, and femininity in this context is entirely identified with culture. All needlecrafts are based on the processing of a natural material, and transforming it into something associated with various aspects of culture and refinement: dress, decoration, beauty. Once again we may fall back on terms coined by Lévi-Strauss: the second volume of his *Mythologiques, From Honey to Ashes*, discusses myths pertaining to the distinction between honey, which is a product extracted from nature as is, and tobacco, which requires certain processing (albeit not yet cooking as such). Sima Meir's practice appears essentially tied with processing upon processing: on a Formica surface – a material that has long forgotten its relation with wood, she draws little Xs in Artline markers that generate grand embroidery surfaces. At times the result is an illusion of faded, loose or torn fabric, as if the drawn Xs have managed to melt the woody Formica, as if the painterly act of cooking indeed softened, dissolved and crumbled the original ingredients. An additional layer of Xs can always be added, and thereby thicken the embroidery and perfect the deception. Whether she paints according to patterns of East European, Bedouin or Arab embroidery, Meir preserves yet another level of estrangement and mediation: she paints from observation of patterns from embroidery instruction books, rather than observation of actual needlework samplers.

The masquerading as something else appears to be the common denominator of all the works in the exhibition – those that in the aforementioned schematic division were perceived as either raw or cooked; in fact, it may be deemed a quality disrupting the binary opposition of raw and cooked. The raw masquerades as the simple, even though it is not at all such; the wood masquerades as metal, Formica – as an embroidered fabric, nature as culture, and culture – as nature.

* Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques, Vol. I: The Raw and the Cooked*, trans.: John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).