

# Shulamit Nazarian

## Los Angeles

### Tales of Love and Deception

By Lilly Wei

Reuven Israel, while regarding his new work, paused for a moment, then said: “What is important—and what I want my sculptures to create—is a space for fantasy, for imagination.” Too much of today’s art is literal, he continued. Art and life may be proximate, but they are not the same.

In *As Above, So Below*, Israel continues to explore abstract form with unabated avidity and sophistication. He is deeply interested in codes of representation without the figure; the elegance of geometry is his preferred language. Each body of work is generated by the one that preceded it, with the addition of something new to the mix. While these changes might seem minor at times (he prefers evolution to upheavals), there is ultimately a notable, even immense difference, sometimes surprisingly so in relationship to the matter-of-fact nature of the shifts. For instance, the antecedents to this show consist of stacked pieces, often larger, horizontal in orientation, resting on the floor, or angled against a wall and braced by it. In the present project, the palette and some of the components are similar, still threaded on a thin copper rod, but the sculpture has been pared down to three essential designations: base, shaft, and finial, or feet, body, head, reminding us that sculpture, for most of its history, has been figurative. Furthermore, these nine recent sculptures, emphasizing the top and bottom, are freestanding, underscoring their association with the body, as does his increasing engagement with the base as he progressed. Israel constantly adjusts the ratio between elements, tinkering with placement, always fine-tuning their visual and psychological impact, the top “launched” by the bottom. The tension between top and bottom has been ratcheted up in this series as they contend with one another, attracted and repelled, energized by the confrontation, pushed apart and pulled together.

Israel is greatly drawn to extravagant interpretations of geometric shapes that are capacious enough for fantasy to flourish. Minimalism and Pop, Modernist design and architecture (with its belief in ideal environments that are socially and spiritually affective), Islamic mosques, Buddhist stupas, and Russian Orthodox cathedrals all provide him with visual stimulation. Playing on this tension, Israel infuses the work with the language of science fiction and its vision of future worlds ironically derived, in his eyes, from an aesthetic vocabulary rooted in the past. His references are intentionally open-ended and difficult to pin down—spaceships, javelins, ski poles, ceramic vessels, and more come to mind as viewers contemplate the work.

Israel’s forms are impeccably crafted. What you might notice first is the extraordinary refinement of his production, the surfaces approaching some platonic ideal of what surface and form should be. All are made of painted MDF (medium density fibreboard) replicating wood, metal, and plastic, demonstrating the artist’s delight in his virtuosity and in *trompe l’oeil*; his credo is that deception is central to art. In this contemporary version of *trompe l’oeil*, what seem to be precise, mass-produced objects are illusions. In reality, everything (except the copper rods) is painstakingly, delicately wrought by hand—cut, laminated, sanded, colored with industrial paint and lacquer, then polished to an immaculate finish, aglow with a potent visual allure.

His titles, prompting discourse, are idiomatic expressions based on color, giving them a new context, their meanings recharged, rebooted. They stress the role of color in works that are as much about painting as they are about sculpture (similar in certain ways to the Californian minimalist John McCracken). *Black and Blue* (2016) usually refers to the bruising of the skin but Israel, typically, sees it another way, as something more descriptive and visual, at the same time appreciating its denotation. The work is more accurately described as black and white (a phrase that itself denotes clarity and the unequivocal—the latter a notion the artist might debate as an impossibility) rather than black and blue, if considered quantitatively. The title is inexact, he points out approvingly. It is also about the “mirroring” of forms, although that mirroring, too, is inexact, and linked to his sense of rupture and play. Additionally, its upright poles, like double antennae, seem to signal the cosmos. *Yellow Belly* (2016), meaning coward, a kind of snake, and more, is named for its lemony cuplike form presented on a two-tiered base fitted to its diameter, the piece culminating in a small, glossy black cone that suggests a hat or perhaps another attempt at cosmic outreach. *At First Blush* (2016) features a plump, beguiling shape that toggles between identities; perhaps it’s a stupa or, further afield, something deliciously edible. In *Red Neck* (2016) and *White Collar* (2016), two of the newest works, the base has become more expansive. Red Neck’s tilted support—its copper rod at a diagonal—consists of mostly red-toned stripes. It appears to be constructed from separate bands but is not. Israel goes to great lengths to persuade the viewer that it is, especially in his detailing of the edges, which seem slightly misaligned. White Collar’s fan-shaped base also suggests multiple parts like a pieced-together puzzle. However, it is made from just two joined sections and is the most assertive in the series; it might be read as an abstract painting or as a black tie on the grey ground of a shirtfront.

Israel is a formalist, but his brand of formalism hovers over specific things in the world without coming to a standstill. Fluidity of meaning is inherent to his practice, full of associative riffs and speculations that are serious, strange, humorous, the range of possible readings crucial to its richness, urging viewers to let their responses wander. Labors of lavish, stubborn love, these utopian objects are steeped in contingency and a kind of magical thinking, mischievous talismans for an uneasy era.

